Managing Intra-Party Democracy: Comparing the French Socialist and British Labour Party Conferences

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The French Socialists and British Labour consider intra-party democracy as a central tenet of their philosophies. It is a core value that orientates their political attitudes and defines their identity. Traditionally, they have privileged a particular type of decision-making, based on the sovereignty of the party conference. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, these meetings projected a damaging image of division and chaos. Confronted with the intense scrutiny of their internal debates by the media, the two parties had to find a better balance between their culture and practices, and the need to promote an image of unity and efficiency. They introduced a number of reforms that, they claim, have expanded the possibilities for individual members to participate while at the same time giving the two leaderships a firmer grip on decision-making. Based on qualitative research conducted over many years, this paper explores the parties' new attitudes to internal democracy and analyses the process of power redistribution within the organizations.
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The French Socialists and British Labour consider intra-party democracy as a central tenet of their philosophies. It is a core value that orientates their political attitudes and defines their identity. They believe it is paramount that their organizations adopt *hic et nunc* the form of organization they wish to implement in society. Traditionally, they have privileged a particular type of decision-making, based on a multi-layered system of mandates. The party conference, or congress of delegates, thus embodied the sovereign and was the keystone of their internal democracy. It allowed delegates from the membership to meet at regular intervals in order to discuss and decide on policies and strategies. The constitution of the Parti socialiste (PS), largely inherited from its *de facto* predecessor, the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), mentions that 'the direction of the party belongs to itself, that is to say

to the congress.[1]' Between two congresses, the role is assumed by the *Conseil National* and the '*bureau*' while the *Premier secrétaire* 'animates and co-ordinates'. In Britain, conference decisions have been presented as 'instructions', to be interpreted and implemented by the Parliamentary Party and the National Executive (Minkin, 1980, 5). In both parties, the importance of this meeting can hardly be overstated: it sets policy agendas and the party strategy; it monitors the leadership, it builds party cohesion and motivates activists. It is also a shop window for party activities and values and a platform for its key politicians.

In the 1990s, both the PS and Labour underwent important changes: they elected new leaders, updated their policies and reformed their organization. These developments were mainly brought about by devastating electoral defeats (Harmel and Janda, 1994). The leader of the Labour party, Neil Kinnock, resigned in 1992 and his successors pursued his modernizing agenda. John Smith negotiated with the unions a reduction of their weight at conference as well as the end of the block vote. The reforms were accelerated by Tony Blair from 1994. In France, the party faced the difficult task of finding a successor to François Mitterrand. Successive electoral setbacks in 1992, 1993 and 1994 punctuated the aborted attempts by several *Premiers secrétaires* to rebuild the party. Arguing that improved intra-party democracy would help reconnect the organization with its supporters, they introduced direct balloting of members for the election of the leadership and on some policy issues.

In this paper, we analyse how the Labour and Socialist party conferences have changed. We compare what these evolutions reveal about the parties' attitudes to intra-party democracy and explore how the transformations relate to the particular trajectory of each party, and the influence of their institutional and cultural environment. Although the primary focus is on Labour's Annual Conference and the Socialists' Congress, less publicized meetings — such as Spring conferences and *Conventions* — are also taken into account. The paper is based on qualitative research conducted in both countries since 1993.[2] During this time, we observed national gatherings and followed closely the preparatory phase of the conferences. We conducted formal and informal interviews with rank-and-file members, authors of conference motions as well as conference delegates. We also interviewed about 20 party officials and staff involved in the preparation of the meeting, its practical organization or its 'fixing'.

A New Approach to Intra-party Democracy?

The fundamental role of the conference in the party life was a reflection of mass party organization (Duverger, 1951). It primarily rested on a particular

understanding of democracy, based on the appointment of mandated delegates by constituent organization, be they local parties or trade unions. This type of organization thrived in the first half of the century, when these two parties were founded. But transformations in political and technological environments have led parties to try to attract support across the social spectrum (Kirchheimer, 1966) and beyond their *classe gardée* (Panebianco, 1988, 263). They have adapted to these new challenges and now rely increasingly on professionals and experts rather than on activists.

As parties have moved away from the mass party to an electoral-professional organization (Panebianco, 1988) or a cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995), conferences stand out as the remnants of an old era. Although their traditional role in decision-making has been challenged, they nevertheless remain central to the life of these parties. Their primary focus has evolved, as they have become opportunities to broadcast programmes and politicians. They provide arenas where valence issues are promoted, making policies is no longer their main function, while they are also a potent symbol of intra-party democracy for party members as well as outsiders.

The argument of democracy has been widely used to legitimize changes in intra-party policy-making processes as well as procedures to select the leadership, but the model of democracy used as a reference has evolved. In the 1970s and early 1980s, intra-party democracy was often equated with activists' influence. In Britain, for instance, such democratic procedures involved mandatory reselection of Members of Parliament and the creation of an electoral college for the selection of the party Leader. Only recently has it been presented as empowering the rank-and-file, in particular through the introduction of regular ballots of the entire membership. Such changes seem to indicate an evolution in the democratic references of these parties. Indeed, the introduction of 'One-Member-One-Vote' (OMOV) means that the Socialists and the Labour party have moved away from a model of delegate democracy as well as abandoning their resistance to plebiscitary democracy (Sadoun, 1993, 236).

In his discussion of contemporary party organizations, Peter Mair underlines how the shifts in power balance have played against activists, while ordinary members have been the main beneficiaries. They are important sources of legitimization and they also provide crucial material and financial resources. In recent years, serious efforts have been made to boost the membership by offering new members more powers in return for their support. One of the reasons why the leadership accepts such concessions is the conviction that these traditionally passive members would be less radical than activists,[3] less adept at arguing with the parliamentary line and generally more docile (Mair, 1997, 114). Thus, argues Peter Mair, what is presented as democratization and decentralization in reality amounts to covert centraliza-

tion. The reforms radically transformed the Labour party and Eric Shaw concurs with this analysis when he writes: by 1990 'the highly pluralistic, deeply polarised party characterised by the institutionalised dispersal of power and weak central authority (…) had been replaced by a powerful central authority exercising tight control over all aspects of organizational life' (Shaw, 2000, 133).

However, the previous procedures left a lot to be desired in terms of the control of the party by its members, and centralizing tendencies are by no means a new phenomenon. Roberto Michels demonstrated as early as 1911 the extent to which social-democratic organizations were open to domination by party elites. In Britain, his thesis was confirmed by McKenzie (1963), who highlighted the similarities between Labour and the Conservatives. If the traditional model of delegatory democracy is challenged, this may indicate the emergence of a new type of internal decision-making rather than the abandonment of the principle *per se*. In this context, the centralization of the organization can also be seen as the adaptation of political parties in the context of a move from a '*démocratie des partis*' to a '*démocratie du public*' (Manin, 1995).

What has been the impact of the reforms on party conferences? In the past, these large gatherings presented members with opportunities to raise issues by submitting resolutions for inclusion in the agenda. The texts were then publicly discussed, sometimes amidst acrimonious ideological debates, widely reported by the media. Repeated defeats for the leadership on the floor of conference contributed to the image of the Labour party as dominated by extremists. In France, the objective of the Congress is to open up space for debate before the unity of the party is restored through the final adoption of a single text, called a *synthèse*,[4] co-written by the various factions. Hence, the failure of the 1990 party *Congrès* at Rennes to reach such an agreement as the meeting drew to a close remains in the memory of party members as well as observers as the apex of internal strife. Building on organizational reforms, party leaderships have now refined their handling of the internal public space: from the elaboration of the motions and reports that form the agenda to the selection of speakers, the expression of dissenting voices and decision-making are carefully monitored.

Setting the Agenda

The preparation of the conference is one of the busiest phases in the life of the Socialist and Labour parties. Contributions and motions are carefully written and submitted. This process, which has traditionally offered activists ways of becoming involved in the policy and strategy discussions, was neither efficient nor democratically flawless. When they reformed their organizations in the

1990s, the Socialists and Labour used two different methods for solving some of the problems they identified: individual members ballots and policy forums.

Motion writing as policy-making

Labour and the Socialists have long claimed that intra-party democracy is synonymous with input from below, that is, the opportunity for the rank-and-file to submit motions to the conference and, thus, indirectly take part in policy-making.

Old Labour's motion writing

The structure of the Labour party is a product of the heritage of the historical coalition of trade unions and socialist societies in 1900. 'The traditional theory of Labour's intra-party democracy focused upon the input from below by which resolutions were submitted from affiliated organizations, debated at the sovereign Party Conference and then became party policy as a result of the votes of mandated delegates' (Minkin, 1991, 398). In order to prevent the conference agenda being submerged with individual submissions, local parties and affiliated organizations could send a maximum of one motion. The rule related to the indirect nature of a party that, until 1918, had no individual members. Only constituency parties, trade unions and socialist societies could join and they only could submit resolutions to the Annual Conference. Thus, although individual members could strongly influence the content of such resolutions, they needed to receive the backing of the General Management Committee. An average of 500 resolutions were submitted each year. They were circulated to constituent organizations for discussions at branch meetings. Eventually, the motions and their amendments were approved by the Conference Arrangement Committee (CAC) and published as the conference agenda. In 1996, the Labour Conference agenda, which was published two weeks before the conference, contained 575 motions and, with their amendments, filled up 104 pages in (very) small font. They were divided in five main sections. The whole process has always been extremely sensitive as interference by the bureaucracy could distort the free expression of the grassroots (Minkin, 1980).

While this first phase tried to foster contributions, the second endeavours to create the conditions for a reasonable debate at conference. So many documents were regularly submitted that their numbers had to be drastically reduced if only to save time and avoid too much dispersion. The majority of the motions submitted dealt with specific policy areas. As several branches could submit texts on similar topics, the conference would in theory have to spend hours debating redundant texts. To bypass the problem, 'compositing'

meetings were convened on the eve of the conference, where the authors of the various motions[5] could cut and paste them into a manageable number of composites. These private meetings were generally dominated — and manipulated — by party and union officials used to backroom negotiations. 'Informal consultations' and various tactics were used to cajole, or bully, novice delegates into accepting compromises. At the opening session on the Monday morning, delegates discovered on their seat the 20–30 composites to be discussed and balloted. One of the main problems of the system was that delegates, mandated to vote on motions and amendments, had to adjust their instructions to the new composites they were presented with. The process was both controversial and ineffective: 'conflicting and contradictory composites' could still reach conference and the number of texts tabled remained too high for the conference to consider them all adequately.[6] It privileged meeting attenders as well as party or union officials. In the 1990s, modernizers had little difficulty in convincing party members that this opaque and undemocratic system of policy-making needed to be radically altered.

The delegate-democracy enshrined in the 1918 constitution was associated, through the influence of the unions, with a culture of distrust of intellectuals (Minkin, 1980, 7–8). This particular atmosphere may partly explain the style of the majority of resolutions. Today, they still appear concise and to the point, with little attempt at literary elegance. The philosophical background is rarely explicit in the text itself (Bell, 2000, 74), which is focused on policy proposals. Placing Labour's annual gathering in the context of the British political conference season can also shed light on the narrow topical nature of these motions. Conference debates are framed by the boundaries of governmental portfolios and they generally address specific policy areas. In a competitive two-party system, strengthened by first-past-the-post and a clear class structure, political and electoral strategies never needed to be discussed in detail. The issue only arose when the Labour party decided to target social groups beyond its traditional constituency.

The Socialists' texts as pretexts

Although Socialist and Labour members take part in the preparation of the conference agenda, the two parties differ in the nature of the contributions as well as their purpose. In France, the main objective of the Congress is to decide the party strategy for the next 3 years and elect a *Conseil National* (CN). The new dominant coalition is selected on the basis of a '*motion générale*' that is put to the vote of party members. Two types of texts are solicited during the 'phase of democratic expression',[7] which precedes the congress. The first category comprises topical contributions. These have little or no bearing on the party's policy orientation, but they flag the interest or the position of individuals

regarding specific problems and solutions. Although they are published, they are not, as such, part of the conference agenda. More important to the party's organization are the general contributions. They combine policy proposals and strategy orientations for the following 3 years.[8] They are the basis for the majority of the party.

In the PS, the expression of party democracy has increasingly taken the form of written contributions and, when a debate is called, members are asked to submit written texts. All contributions are received and registered by the Congress Committee. They are then printed, circulated, discussed and amended: in 2000, over 300 pages had to be dispatched to members through two special issues of *l'Hebdo des socialistes*. The congress makes great use of the power of the written word and it is difficult for the Socialists to imagine a debate without supporting material. 'If we want to ask questions to activists, we have to organise the debate so that it actually raises questions, we need issues we can vote on, that is to say: we need texts'[9] declared the first signatory of one of the three 2000 motions. In a sense, a congress is an invitation to start writing and, indeed, socialist activists can be said to be '*scripto-maniacs*'[10]. Seven general contributions were submitted to the *Conseil National* during the preparatory phase of the 2000 Congress along with 120 topical or federal[11] ones. Although most resolutions are submitted by *courants* (factions) and local branches, some are put forward by policy commissions — which thus justify their work and existence.

The socialists' reliance on the written text appears in the nature of individual contributions to the debate. In many ways, a debate takes place always through the written medium: congresses and *conventions thématiques* are decentralized literary institutions. The texts submitted follow a style specific for such a peculiar exercise in partisan literature. They respond to the mood of the party at the time. In 1997, motions concentrated on the challenge posed by the new type of cohabitation imposed by the recent legislative victory. They were entitled 'succeeding together', 'On the Left in order to succeed', 'renewing socialist thought in order to prepare for the 21st century', 'successful change through reform', 'let's move together on the path to justice and progress'.[12] Stereotypical references are used over and over again. Contributions are long and at time philosophical, often verbose: a poor literature. However, in 2000, the Socialist Left faction[13] adopted an unusual formula. They published a novel, *Sept jours dans la vie d'Attika*, which was sold in bookshops as well as circulated within the party. For the first time, an overt attempt was made to renew the stiff style of the motion and transform it into a narrative.

The objective of the congress is the election of a new leadership on the basis of its programme, that is, its *motion générale*. The electoral system consistently used by the PS since 1971 is proportional representation with lists and these are made up of supporters of the respective motions. Activists express support for

motions by signing one or several of them at the section or the *fédération* meetings were they are discussed (Rey *et al.*, 1999). Often written by anonymous parliamentary assistants,[14] the texts bearing the signature of members of the *Conseil national* or other national bodies will receive maximum attention.[15] Paradoxically, their content is of little importance despite the lively debates they provoke. What matters is not what the text says but how it is being used by activists[16] and in practice, they are just pretexts. They are lists of supporters[17] and thus precious resources for those looking to further their career. Indeed these texts are used by *courants*, would-be or already existing, to cluster around a few individuals who act as opinion leaders. The number of supporters, their geographical distribution and their status,[18] has an effect not only on the *courants*' standing within the party, but also on their patronage potential.

   The process of motionwriting facilitates the expression of internal pluralism, but the French socialists like to see their party as a living organism (Sadoun, 1993, 222). The search for unity or synthesis also promoted by the organization of the congress contributes to this imagery. Compromises between *courants* are sought at several stages. The first attempt occurs during the ultimate meeting of the *Conseil national* prior to the Congress. The *Premier Secrétaire* tries to merge several general contributions into a single '*motion de synthèse*'. Since 1990, more efforts have been put to secure broad coalitions. As a result, only three motions competed in 2000.[19] Further discussions take place during the congress itself, as we will see in the second part of this article.

The expression of the grassroots

In their approach to conferences, the two parties try to balance pluralism and unity, input from below and efficient policy-making. However, increasing media scrutiny forces them to pay as much attention to the image projected as to the outcome of the meeting. Such preoccupations have influenced the ways in which organizational reforms have affected the main party conference. The Socialists have been concerned with the stifling nature of factional competition, while the Labour party has looked at ways to rationalize a long and outdated policy-making process. In both cases, the argument of improving democracy was used to legitimize the changes. It also focused the attention on the role of the individual member.

Balloting members

Electoral suffrage has become the main symbol of democracy. Accordingly, it has gained importance in party processes to the extent that it has become one of the most important activities for Socialist party members. The activist is

balloted in her section to choose a '*motion générale*' that will determine the balance of power between the various factions for the next 3 years. She will also elect delegates to the federal and the national congresses. The Parti Socialiste now organizes smaller-scale policy-focused gatherings, called *conventions thématiques*. They also involve a preparatory phase culminating with ballots of the membership on alternative motions and amendments. Through these votes, the activist becomes the indirect author of a variety of documents.[20]

The multiplication of ballots has a number of implications. It transformed the traditional local party meeting, making it less formal. Second, thanks to the secrecy of the vote, it contributed to partially lifting the overbearing control of the *courants*. Their competition bred suspicion towards unaffiliated members and had a Malthusian effect on recruitment.[21] After the *Congrès* at Rennes, it led to the party being portrayed as ridden with ideological and personal rivalries. Sections often had a tradition of voting nearly unanimously, filing behind the local leaders. Members are now freer from peer pressure and can more easily dissociate national votes from local issues. Efforts have also been made to promote an early *synthèse*[22] and in 2000, the dominant motion gained 73 per cent of the vote.[23] Finally, internal ballots blur the distinction between active and passive membership. The problem is particularly acute when members can vote by post, but the French have included a rule that makes it necessary to go to the polling station, that is, the *ad hoc* local meeting. This reflects national practices of general elections and the fear that postal ballots would encourage cheating in cases of close competition between rival *courants*. Moreover, the ideal socialist member remains, probably more so than in Britain, an activist. In 1998, only 19 per cent described themselves as 'mere members' and declared giving less than 1 h per month for the party (Rey *et al.*, 1999, 24).

Paradoxically, the more widespread form of mobilization is now synonymous with non-involvement as ballots create the possibility of a form of participation that involves a minimum amount of time and commitment. This is akin to the 'massive but passive' membership that was discussed by the modernizers of the Labour party and has influenced some of the most recent organizational reforms on the other side of the Channel. What distinguishes today a party member from a supporter is the right to vote in internal ballots, but what distinguishes the activist is his participation in the vote. In fact, the internal ballots are usually characterized by low turnouts. Over a third of potential voters did not take part in the vote on the motions for the 2000 Grenoble Congress. Turnout figures for the *Conventions* show limited levels of mobilization: 46 per cent of members voted on Business and on Europe, 35 per cent on *Territories*. Abstention in internal ballots has dashed hopes that they could provide incentives to join the party, thanks to new input in policy-making. Ballots are unlikely to be the solution to the 'de-energization' of

parties (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 202). Although 84 per cent of Labour members approved of the use of national ballots according to Seyd (1999, 395) and another 61 per cent took part in the 1996 referendum on the draft electoral manifesto, there have been too few examples to assess whether Labour would be more successful than the PS.

New Labour's forums

While the French have shown a preference for the vote, the British can claim they have taken on board some of the innovations of the counterculture.[24] Although Labour have not rejected votes altogether — they still dominate the conference — they have created a system of small meetings where the search for consensus is promoted over what is described as divisive procedures. In the late 1980s, the party set the objective of reforming its policy-making process in order to make it more open and accountable (Faucher, 1999). Several ideas were floated to replace the complex and discredited 'compositing' system. The National Executive Committee (NEC) had been reluctant to abandon policy initiative and the trade unions were keen on preserving the right to comment on Government's decisions. In the mid-1990s, internal reform was made possible by the new balance of power at the top. Moreover, members overwhelmingly shared the desire not to endanger the new Labour government. An experiment with forums had been conducted successfully and *Partnership in power* sought to build on the experiment. It replaced the redundant, slow and convoluted policy process with a two-year rolling programme, structured by meetings of a new National Policy Forum (NPF).

The NPF is composed of 175 members, elected for 2 years.[25] Its steering group, the Joint Policy Committee, is chaired by the Prime Minister and composed of an equal number of ministers and members of the NEC. Twice a year, the NPF examines policy documents drafted by the Policy Commissions as well as contributions received from local forums, constituents' branches, or individuals. The documents are first discussed in small groups settings. The facilitator helps the workshop to reach a consensus on amendments or suggestions to incorporate, reject or withdraw. In the final plenary meeting, hundreds of alternative proposals are put to the vote. The amendments obtaining between 30 and 50 per cent of the votes are considered a 'minority position'. They are published alongside the Final report that, since 1998, is the main document on the Annual Conference agenda. 'It was ridiculous to make policies in the spotlight,' explains a member of the NPF who welcomed the fact that its meetings are closed to journalists. This new privacy makes it easier for the leadership to allow representatives to voice dissent without fear of weakening their position or appearing split.

Given that the Annual Conference is seen as the main mechanism for intra-party democracy, any attempt to reduce the scope of its powers was bound to be condemned as an attack on democracy. The reluctance to abandon direct submissions was overcome through the promise that emergency resolutions could include issues not substantially addressed by the NPF. Moreover, members are urged to contribute throughout the year to local policy forums or by sending submissions directly to the NPF. Local forums were presented as a way to empower the rank-and-file and to replace the 'dull, boring and confrontational' branch meetings. More importantly, these meetings provide a two-way communication system: members can comment on policy documents, and the leadership can make a case for their policies. Thus, the new process allows the party to bypass mid-level elites often suspected of being potential Old Labour extremists. It has not only given the leadership a firmer grasp on the conference agenda than it had in the past, but it has also smoothened and rationalized policy-making. The Labour conference's timetable is still structured around policy issues, but the grassroots can no longer claim they are the authors of these documents.

The Stage-management of Intra-party Democracy

In an age dominated by information technology and 24-h news programmes, it is paramount that parties use their main conference as an opportunity to project a positive image and to promote their key politicians. Intra-party democracy is thus increasingly stage-managed with careful selection of speakers and orchestration of decision-making.

Staging a democratic debate

The party conference is *par excellence* a forum for debate and confrontation of ideas and therefore one of the most important place where commitments to intra-party democracy can be staged for the wider public as well as for the benefit of members. Thus, the organization of a mature debate is essential. While the socialists' view the proportional representation of *courants* as a guarantee of freedom of expression,[26] the Labour party has placed more emphasis on the right for ordinary delegates to speak from the rostrum.

Casting the play

Ordinary Labour or socialist delegates have little chance of speaking at the rostrum: time is limited and there is intense competition between hundreds of would-be speakers. As the public, inside or outside the hall, is mainly interested in hearing key politicians, orators have to be carefully selected. In the Labour

party, open debates last between 5 and 50 min, and only a few delegates are normally called for 3-minute-long interventions. Helped by a specialized team, the Chair looks for potentially good speakers — 'people with a story to tell' and a good will to deliver a positive speech — and distributes turns. Since conference needs to project the image of a 'real debate', 'constructive' criticism is welcome, explain officials. Ministers or shadow ministers are on the other hand given a platform to make policy announcements in their area.

Although conferences are by definition a high place for an oratorical joust, they often turn out to be dull and predictable debates. The difficulty lies in defining what is understood as a good conference speech. Convinced that amateur politicians look terrible on television, Labour party officials decided in the 1990s to provide support to activists wishing to speak: facilities were introduced to help delegates prepare their interventions.[27] These efforts are not new, but they are more systematic, relying on a network of regional officers (Faucher, 2000). Up to a few years ago, none of the delegates were known by the party, but because the trade unions dominated the votes, individual speakers had little importance so long as the leadership could rely on a handful of key unions.

In the two parties, there are implicit rhetorical rules that are bound up with national political culture and the history of the two movements. To caricature: the French quote Blum with pomposity, the British crack a joke. The former try literary panache. They prepare carefully a text, the delivery of which is often disappointing. They follow a written style, a rhetoric usually abandoned when dealing with the wider public and the press. Here, references to the glorious founders of the French socialist movement are compulsory. Ministers show off their oratorical talents.[28] All praise the unity of the party, vow to strive to reach a synthesis, but warn that socialist ideas and principles cannot be compromised.[29] Although delegates do not always seem to be thrilled by the orators, there appears to be a high demand for the reproduction of these speeches in the internal press. The members' weekly magazine print extensive abstracts of the interventions of key politicians not only at the congress, but also at various *conventions* or *universités d'été*. The increasing use of the Internet has led to the publication on the net of most of the keynote speeches and an archive is available on the official party site.[30] Compared to the French, British conference speeches tend to be dryer and less historical, but more pragmatic and funnier. Rather than general interventions arguing in favour of a consensus on a motion, they focus on specific announcements and Ministers take the opportunity to launch policies. They respond to, or anticipate, speeches made at the Liberal Democrats and Conservative conferences, and are delivered for a TV audience with the help of prompts and screens.[31] The conference season is a constant reminder of the parliamentary competition and their relative position.[32]

The French congress is like a 'puff pastry' involving discussions and votes at the local (*sections*) and regional (*fédérations*) levels before reaching the national stage. This lengthy process operates as a sieve, eliminating ordinary members as branches elect delegates to the federal meeting where delegates to the national congress are then elected. On the other hand, the system might be seen as a way to ensure that deserving activists are selected and rewarded with such an enviable role. Although *députés* and *sénateurs* can avoid such screening, national officers are up for renewal, and therefore can only attend as ordinary delegates.[33] Following the devastating 1993 legislative defeat, the socialists organized a new type of meeting open to all supporters, the *Etats Généraux des Socialistes*. For the first time activists were asked to speak as individuals, without the intermediary of a delegate. This gave way to a litany of complaints and commiserations, both unstructured and unfocused, which was described as 'group therapy'. The experiment has never been renewed.

Finding the tune

Parties must find the right balance between unity and pluralism, a visible consensus that however, allows for dissenting minority voices to be expressed. In the PS, democracy is not measured by the possibility for ordinary member to contribute to the debate, but by the proportional allocation of time to the various motions. In 2000, for instance, three general motions were presented. The conference organizers divided the time they had for the debate according to the share of the vote received by the three motions. Then, each courant was free to split the allotted time between its members. Motion 3 had received 14 per cent of the vote and was thus granted 1 h of speaking time. The group decided to give 20 min to the leader (Emmanuelli), 15 min to his second and 10 or 5 min to the other sub-leaders. Over the two-and-a-half day congress, 72 ministers, *députés* and national secretaries or federal secretaries succeeded each other on the rostrum. No ordinary delegate spoke[34] but they consoled themselves with the thought that such an important responsibility rests with 'those who know' and can better than themselves represent their views. *Courants* contribute to structuring debates throughout the year by providing arguments, figures or speech blueprints. In 1993, while activists were preparing for the *Etats Généraux*, followers of Fabius received extensive documentation to help them construct their position (Treille, 2000, 56–59). Although ordinary activists were given an opportunity to speak, some were merely repeating the arguments formulated for their benefit at the national level.

New Labour has been actively trying to improve conference's role as a shop window. They want to demonstrate that the party has become closer to the public and were envious of the smooth running of the Conservative conference. As they have realized how important it is for ordinary members to interact and

meet the party stars, time is set aside for such encounters at local forums as well as at the conference. Question-and-answer sessions and workshops were first introduced in 1997, and are distinct from the fringe meetings organized by a variety of pressure groups. The idea was developed alongside the implementation of *Partnership in Power* in order to provide more opportunities for dialogue between delegates, ministers and party officials. In a sense, non-decision making — the extinction of challenges to the *status quo* before it can even be voiced (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970, 44) — is just as crucial. As these meetings are held behind closed doors, activists can raise issues away from the attention of the media: disagreements in public are replaced by behind-the-scenes negotiations. Small meetings are also welcomed by delegates whose chances of asking questions are enhanced: the chair of the session cannot rely on the sitting seating plan of delegates or on his aids to assess the desirability of members' interventions. The minister present explains the position of the government, the policy currently implemented and how it will affect the problem submitted. In other cases, he/she diligently takes notes and promises to look into the matter in due course. The consensual atmosphere of conference seems to have permeated these new sessions and they are rarely confrontational. Observers and delegates often complain that debates have lost their bite because the leadership, systematically shying away from criticism, now fully controls the proceedings. In 2000, the PS similarly created four thematic seminars. However, unlike in the Labour party, they were not used to provide opportunities for ordinary delegates to express themselves. Indeed, speaking-time was distributed along the same lines as during the main debate, that is, according to the relative weight of each motion. Thus, more MEPs, federal secretaries and members of the CN who could not be accommodated within the plenary timetable got to the microphones.

Directing the play

The organization of a good debate is only one dimension of the stage-management of intra-party democracy that takes place at conference. Careful direction of the cast and preparation of the plot also contribute to the success of the meeting. While Labour focuses on voting procedures, the PS relies on an opaque system of backstage negotiations to preserve the fragile balance between forced unity and democratic pluralism.

Votes

The Labour party and the French socialists consider the Annual Conference and the Congress as the prime decision-making body of their organization. Accordingly, one would expect key decisions to be taken and accountability of

the leadership. However, the powers of these meetings have often been overestimated as activists and observers alike share a myth of conference sovereignty. In recent years, the multiplication of ballots has reduced the role of the delegate. Policy debates increasingly take place in smaller and more private settings such as forums and conventions, while the conference is becoming a public relations exercise. But, constitutionally, the Annual Conference remains the policy and decision-making body of the Labour party. It hears reports from the parliamentary party, the NEC and the party treasurer. It debates and votes on resolutions and policy documents.[35] As a result of its centrality in the imagery of intra-party democracy, it was inconceivable to abolish it and difficult to change its periodicity to once every other year. Instead, *Partnership in Power* focused on changing the agenda. The reform was adopted with the condition that Conference would remain the ultimate arbiter. Despite the increased controls over its proceedings, its role is more than vestigial: the results of the votes, especially when they highlight splits between the Platform and Floor, are symbolically important and gain attention among the wider public.

Although New Labour has emphasized 'constructive' debates and consensus building, voting is the pivot of the Annual conference. Key reforms of the voting system were adopted before New Labour. In 1993, John Smith obtained a considerable concession from the unions: the bloc vote was abolished and results were to be announced as percentage of the vote rather than in numbers. Moreover, the share of the unions was reduced from 90 per cent of the votes to 70 per cent, with an agreement that a further reduction to 50 per cent would be implemented when direct membership would rise beyond 300,000. This was achieved in 1995. In a couple of years, the balance of conference shifted away from the all-powerful union barons who had often in the past been instrumental in assuring the victory of the Platform. Since CLPs delegates cannot anymore be counted as 'insignificant marginality' (Minkin, 1980, 234), debates have more impact on the outcome of the votes than when the block vote tipped the balance. We have seen how suspicion towards activists influenced reforms empowering members. Similar measures were introduced to impose the selection of more women and more newcomers as delegates who were seen as more likely to tow the party line than traditional Old Labour activists. Tony Blair's first government has benefited from an unprecedented performance at conference, being defeated for the first time on pensions in 2000. Such a record can be attributed to the skills of the leadership or to the desire of delegates to support for the Labour government.[36] According to Shaw (1996, 220), the new atmosphere is related to the enhanced sensitivity of delegates to the effects of their behaviour on Labour's image.

Although monitoring the leadership remains, in principle, one of the central attribution of the Annual Conference, it plays a limited role in the election of

administrative and political leadership. The Leader, who was until 1981chosen by the Parliamentary Labour Party, is now elected by a college of MPs, unions and CLPs. The voting used to take place at Conference, but, since the introduction of OMOV for the trade unions and CLPs sections, only the results are announced there. The 'administrative authority', that is, the NEC, is mostly elected at conference.[37] Thus, the majority of the ballots of conference delegates concern rules changes and policy documents: composites and amendments before 1998, NPF reports, and minority positions and contemporary issues since then.

There are relatively few opportunities for delegates to vote at the Socialist Congress. Party members have already determined which general motion will shape the party's future. In any case, ballots hold little suspense: delegates are mandated by a *courant* and tow their group's line when it comes to voting on what has been negotiated during the conference itself. The Socialist party has been characterized by its pyramidal structure: the National Council proceeded from the Congress and elected the executive, which then chose the First Secretary. But, in order to strengthen his position, Rocard decided in 1993 that he should be directly elected by the delegates. Two years later, this power was transferred to the membership. The objective of the reform was not only to increase the legitimacy of the leader, but also to try and erode the supremacy of the *courants*. Since 1995, the First Secretary and local secretaries are elected after the Congress by a universal ballot of members. It is therefore possible for members to dissociate the election of officials from the choice of the party strategy.[38] Through this reform, the socialists have adopted a definition of democracy that is in tune with the general perception of the contemporary French public: a direct link has been created between the leader and the members. This is consistent with the institutions of the Fifth Republic, but contrasts with their earlier opposition to the direct election of the President.[39] However, they have yet to relent on the tradition that only one candidate stands for election. Indeed, members were given the choice between two candidates for the first time in 1995 when Jospin and Emmanuelli competed to be selected as the party's presidential candidate. To the surprise of many, they voted for the outsider rather than the First Secretary.

Backstage negotiations

Voting at conference does not have the same significance on either side of the Channel. When socialist delegates arrive at the Congress or at the convention, the important decisions have already been taken! Moreover, they have been elected as supporters of a motion and they are bound by this commitment. It limits the chance they have to speak, frames what they would say and dictates which general motion meeting they will attend.

The congress provides the context in which the different groups negotiate their position for the next 3 years. After the reception at the City Hall, the supporters of each motion gather in private to discuss whether they are prepared to reach a compromise. At the same meeting, the motion delegates appoint representatives to the *Commission des resolutions* (CdR). Plenary debates have little impact on the outcome of the congress, and most of what really happens, happens backstage during the lengthy meeting of the CdR. Rank-and-file then conjecture in restaurants on the prospects of a final synthesis, while negotiations between the *courants* drag on sometimes until the small hours of the Sunday morning (Rey *et al.*, 1991, 1999).

The task of the *Commission des Résolutions* is two-fold: it discusses and integrates, whenever possible, amendments submitted by *the federations*; it looks for a compromise, '*la synthèse*', on which the contending motions can agree. The text then constitutes the basis for the formation of the executive coalition. It is customary for the congress to display vivacious debates and ideological disagreements only to close on the very different note of renewed unity. In a sense, the *synthèse* can be seen as a healing process whereby the order of things is restored and the 'social drama' comes to a happy conclusion.[40] In 1990 in Rennes, no compromise was found. To the shock and horror of party members and supporters, and to the delight of the media, the gathering ended without finding the expected resolution. In the age of the mass media, political parties are constrained by the need to appear transparent while smoothing away internal disagreements. François Mitterrand, the President of the Republic and *de facto* leader of the PS, was forced to intervene and impose a compromise. The *courants* were held responsible for the party's disarray and their role reduced.

Most socialist delegates consider the moment when the First Secretary reads out the list of members of the new *Conseil National* as the most important of the weekend. Those wishing to sit on the national council have previously endeavoured to convince the leaders of their group to put their name forward. The number each group can send is proportional to the result obtained by each *motion* in the ballot preceding the congress. The distribution of positions between *courants* is made more complicated when, as is customary since Rennes, the components of the dominant coalition have little means of knowing what their relative weight is. The decision escapes ordinary delegates who are merely invited to ratify the choices. In 2000, the appearance of democratic pressure was saved when the grumbling and disapproval of the delegates forced the *Commission* to go back to the negotiation table and appoint more women, in line with the party's internal rules. But, as an official admitted, the protest itself was to an extent stage-managed. The *Commission* came back with a slightly improved proposal that was dutifully approved; the leadership was then able to claim it had imposed a renewal of the internal elite.

Paradoxically, reaching the ultimate consensus has lost its importance: although the three motions competing in Grenoble failed to agree on a *synthèse*, representatives from the minority were nevertheless given seats on the executive (*Secrétariat National*).[41]

There is no equivalent in the British Labour party: the official work of the conference finishes at 5 pm every evening. Fringe meetings and social event keep delegates busy late at night. In many cases, discussions take place before the start of the week: during the compositing meetings or at the NPF, at the Trade Union Congress, or earlier in the year at the conferences of the main unions (Minkin, 1980, 157). Moreover, given the nature of the conference agenda, last minute appeals are specific to one vote rather than ideological, whether they involve an amendment being withdrawn by its authors or a large union supporting the leaderships' position.

Conclusion

Conferences, these large-scale gatherings of party delegates, are often today seen as the archaic remnants of mass-party organizations. In the last 10 years, reforms in the British Labour and the French Socialist parties have indeed transformed these institutions. Their function as policy-making bodies have been challenged. Some of the powers traditionally held by delegates have been transferred to ordinary members through the organization of direct ballots. Both their agenda and their debates are tightly controlled and tailored to satisfy the need to project a consensual and professional image. Inspired by a myth of foregone conference sovereignty, many activists mourn the time when 'real debate' enflamed the plenary sessions. Their claims concur with those made by party theorists who consider that the reforms of the 1990s have strengthened the positions of the party leaderships at the expense of the middle-level elites (Judge, 1999).

We have explored how the Parti Socialiste and the Labour Party have adopted and adapted what Peter Mair has described as an ambiguous process combining the concentration of power in favour of the leadership and the enfranchisement of members (Mair, 1997). In both cases, the conference was central to intra-party democracy and thus directly affected by the reforms. Changes can be found at each stage, from the preparatory phase to policy debates and the final decision-making. They can be linked to the need for contemporary political parties to compete for audience and support in an environment where a sceptical and volatile electorate receives information from an increasing number of diverse and fragmented media outlets.

In this context, the two parties have resorted to similar but distinctive strategies, in line with their institutional background — for instance, the British

conference season — and the organizational background — such as the PS commitment to proportional representation — Labour and the PS thus exemplify two versions of democratic debate: in both cases, few ordinary delegates speak, but, while it is criticized by Labour delegates as a proof that the party is selling out to public relations experts, many French delegates consider that what is important is the fact that representatives of their *courant* have spoken and expressed their views. Labour and the Socialists have moved away from a strict conception of delegate democracy and introduced procedures that can be associated with plebiscitary — membership ballots — or even deliberative — forums — democracy. Without always acknowledging it, the two parties have changed their democratic references and attitudes to power have evolved according to a new style of representative government (Manin, 1995). Finally, in the last decade, the two parties have shifted around the internal power balance. The leadership is the overall beneficiary of an evolution that has largely eliminated the intermediary level of the delegate, but there is space for dissensus, provided it is off the main conference stage.

Notes

1 *Bulletin intérieur*, 70, April 1954.

2 Cf. Treille, Eric (2000), *Parti de campagnes. Candidatures socialistes et élections législatives 1993–1997*, PhD thesis, Rennes. Florence Faucher is currently working on a monograph, *Managing Change in Political Parties. British party conferences in comparative perspective*, for Palgrave–Macmillan.

3 This was particularly true in the case of the Labour party, which identified 'Old Labour', that is, activists, as being responsible for the electoral misfortune of the party throughout the 1980s. The theoretical grounds for such an approach can be found in John D. May (1973), 'Opinion Structure of Political Parties: the Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity', *Political Studies* 21(2): 135–151.

4 The elaboration of this single text is analysed in the following sections.

5 When the representative for the motion failed to turn up, the submission was simply be dropped.

6 For instance, in 1996, motion 568 was incorporated within composite 52, thoroughly rephrased. Tabled for debate on the Friday morning, it was not even discussed because of lack of time and lack of support from the NEC which recommendation was to remit.

7 www.parti-socialiste.fr/ps_national/vie_ps/congres/grenoble/phases.htm

8 An annual meeting until 1961, the Congress was subsequently organized every other year until the early 1990s. The party eventually decided to extend the term of the executive to 3 years. However, the party organized a Congress nearly every year in response to its internal agenda as new First secretaries were eager to confirm their legitimacy: Rennes (1990), Bordeaux (1992), Le Bourget (1993), Liévin (1994), Brest (1997), Grenoble (2000).

9 Henri Emmanuelli, *Conseil National*, September 30th, 2000.

10 Interview of Henri Weber, *Libération*, 6/9/2000.

11 Submitted by a departmental federation of *sections* (branches).

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12 '*Réussir ensemble*'; '*à gauche pour réussir*'; '*rénover la pensée socialiste pour préparer le 21 ème siècle*'; '*réussir le changement par la réforme*'; '*pour franchir ensemble une nouvelle étape sur le chemin de la justice et du progrès*'.

13 '*Gauche Socialiste*' or motion 2 in Grenoble (2000).

14 This challenges the view that motions are written by rank-and-file and therefore the true expression of the grassroots.

15 Eventually, the wider public will recognize the motions according to the name of the leading politician who signed it. Thus, '*l'aspiration égalitaire*' was known in Grenoble as Emmanuelli's.

16 '*Dans cette affaire, le contenu des textes n'a pas grande importance*', says a national secretary, Libération, 6/9/2000.

17 There can be exceptions such as Emmanuelli being the sole signatory of his motion (Grenoble, 2000).

18 In Grenoble, the majority motion was signed by the First Secretary and, in this particular order, by national secretaries and members of the executive (*bureau*), national officers, ministers, by members of the CN and federal secretaries, by deputies, by presidents of regional and general councils or mayors of big cities. No rank and file member's name appeared. On the other hand, *Attika* was ostentatiously signed by the '*Gauche Socialiste*' with a few prominent members and four pages of rank and files.

19 It is not always in the interest of *courants* to count their members and they may prefer to join forces with others to form the majority motion. In 2000, followers of Fabius supported several topical motions, but their leader's name only appeared on the motion lead by Hollande. Thus, a topical motion can assert intellectual leadership and shape, without risk, *sub-courants* within the majority.

20 The process is even more intricate for Conventions as the text, which is the basis for the discussion and is designed to frame party policy, is written by party officials before being sent for discussion and amendments to local sections.

21 Successive recruitment campaigns have been rendered ineffective by the resistance of factions at the local level.

22 Seven motions were in competition at the Rennes Congress in 1990. Since then efforts have been made to limit the competition to three motions, one of them being led by the Premier Secrétaire. The first motions gained, respectively, 26% in 1990, 81% in 1991, 87.27% in 1993, 92.15% in 1994 and 84.07% in 1997. Even though the 2000 result is the worst in nearly a decade, it does not reflect the fact that the three factions were represented in Jospin's government as well as in the party executive.

23 The winning motion, conducted by François Hollande, was a composite of several *courants* including followers of Jospin, Fabius and Aubry. Results of previous congresses were thus used to guesstimate their individual support and distribute the seats secured by the majority.

24 The women movement in particular. Similar influence can be found in the Green Party (cf. Faucher (1999), *Les habits verts de la politique*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po).

25 In all, 54 members are elected by CLPs, 18 by regional parties, 30 by trade unions, nine by the Parliamentary party, six by the MEPs, eight by the government, nine by local government, nine by socialist societies. Members of the NEC are ex-officio.

26 The use of proportional representation was enshrined as early as 1907 as a guarantee of freedom for the expression of *courants* (Sadoun, 1993, 237).

27 Delegates now have access to a word-processor, can get more information to enhance the quality of their speeches or can give mock presentation in front of a communication adviser. On occasion, the text is largely written with, or even for, the delegate (Faucher, 1999).

28 For instance, Fabius' speech at the 2000 Congress quoted Jean Lacouture and Pierre Mendès-France, and had little to do with his portfolio as Finance minister.

29 Cf. Bergounioux and Grunberg (1992) on the importance of doctrine in the French socialist movement.

30 http://www.parti-socialiste.fr

31 By comparison, the *congrès* is a private event.

32 This may explain why the Labour party refrain from the absolutist positions sometimes adopted by the PS.

33 Indeed, in 2000 Hollande or Jospin sat throughout the congress with fellow delegates from their *fédération.*

34 In 1950, a third of speakers were ordinary delegates, but then the congress was held every year (Anizan, 1998, 83).

35 Until 1997, any proposal receiving a two-thirds majority at conference was included in the party programme. The manifesto is a distinct document, drafted by the NEC and the Cabinet or Committee of the PLP.

36 The differences between old and new members have often been overestimated (cf. Seyd and Whiteley, 2002).

37 Out of 30 members, 24 are elected by five sections: trade unions, socialist and cooperative societies, CLPs, local government, PLP. The members of the CLP division are elected by an OMOV ballot of all paid up members; the others are elected during the conference. The NEC choice for General Secretary is ratified by the conference.

38 This has occasionally happened at local level.

39 François Mitterrand theorized this position in *Le coup d'Etat permanent*, Paris: Plon, 1965.

40 Cf. Turner (1974).

41 It was argued that they were represented in Jospin's government and thus already closely associated to executive decisions. They left the party executive when the Left lost the 2002 legislative elections.

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