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The Party Paradox: Political Parties Between Irrelevance and Omnipotence. A View From the Netherlands

There are two tales about party politics. In the first, political parties are moribund, if not on their last legs. Parties are said to have been in crisis or decline for decades and are believed to have lost virtually all their functions to the courts, the bureaucracy, the media, or powerful social organizations. Parties supposedly no longer matter in actual agenda setting and policy making. They have become marginal institutions. Following the de-ideologization and the rise of the floating voter, parties no longer stand for anything or anybody. Nor do they provide principled politicians or edifying programmes and innovative political ideas. The party is over: consider the ongoing decline in voter turnout, the diminishing party loyalty, the declining membership, the loss of ideological identity, and the decreasing social concern among parties and their representatives. The social, electoral, and ideological weakening of parties suggests that the concrete pillars of democracy are crumbling (Koole 2002). At best, parties continue to function as campaign organizations and become empty shells, driven purely by mediagenic party leaders and mediagenic ideas.

According to the second tale, the “established” political parties run the show. They have formed a “state cartel” and are turning a country such as the Netherlands into a society of regents, where “a very limited and in fact diminishing number of citizens is believed to wield a disproportionate political influence that is no longer justified (Van Holsteyn / Mudde 2003: 11; see also van Westerloo 2003). Political parties are supposedly dividing up the offices and deliberately blocking public opinion (“never speak your mind”). They monopolize the government administration. While they lose their social roots, parties are becoming increasingly prominent in public administration. Parties serve as exclusive gates of access to public offices and bureaucracy and have many high-ranking officials, advisors, and the like among their members. Parties are also crucial as information thoroughfares, channels of influence, and cohesive forces in the political inner circle of parliament, government, and bureaucracy. In the Netherlands, confessional parties were regarded as the

cog in the wheel of public administration for decades. In recent years, however, the Dutch Labour Party has taken over this role, thanks to its longstanding participation in the government. That is why the Dutch Labour Party a few years ago was labelled the ‘Party of Omnipotence’. In the 1990s, a critical journalist wrote, the Dutch Labour Party had not only governed but had also appointed quite a few people to office. Moreover, it was as well-represented in formal positions as in informal ones, such as in transition management and consulting (Kranenburg 2001). From this perspective, parties are an oligarchy of policy makers and decision makers.

Some time ago, *The Economist* addressed these two divergent tales of political parties with a note of concern. “Is it really comforting that parties lose their members, abandon their ideas, become disengaged from a broader social movement, motivate ever fewer voters, and nonetheless maintain an iron grip on politics?” (Quoted by Koole 2000: 52) This ambiguous, ambivalent image of political parties – parties are both irrelevant and omnipotent; parties are marginal institutions as well as powerhouses – is one of the core themes in this article. We will call it the party paradox.

The minor and major crises of party democracy

The paradox of party politics has become more alarming. After all, both accounts of political parties, however seemingly contradictory, are used to substantiate the thesis of a democracy in crisis, decline, or trouble. In one case, the weakness and marginality of political parties as traditional pillars of representative democracy jeopardize the entire bulwark of politics and democracy. As public administration experts Bovens and Michels have written: “The disintegration of the political parties is compromising the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy. Who do the members of parliament really represent, and why are they the exclusive voice of the people?” (Bovens / Michels 2002: 56-57) Are political parties more representative than bodies such as large environmental organizations or the media?

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In the other case, the oligarchic nature of political parties undermines the democratic content of our political system and turns democracy into a façade.¹ In both cases, parties operate as components of the “parliamentary party democracy” and are held chiefly responsible for the current democratic unease. Whether powerless or omnipotent, parties are to blame. Is it possible to overcome and transcend the paradoxical positioning between powerless marginality and omnipotence? Can parties be liberated from the dilemma of their role as fall guys?

Aside from what we refer to as the minor crisis of political parties, there is also a major crisis of party politics. The minor crisis is about declining membership; “condensation” to a select group of activists and officials; decreased social rooting; faded ideological profile. The major crisis of the party democracy is about the representation and legitimacy problems of the system as a whole; the purported seclusion of the parties cartel; the erosion of the democratic party system through changes such as de-ideologization, the ‘displacement of politics’, internationalisation of decision making, and economic globalization.²

First, we will analyse what is known as the party debate – the debate in political science about the condition, functions, and future of political parties. How do people in other countries view the paradox of party politics and the minor and major crises of political parties? Which views prevail within and outside social-democratic circles in the Netherlands about these changes, and how have they figured in efforts to innovate the parties? Next, we will examine the minor crisis. Which trends lead political parties to become marginalized and exhibit regent-style conduct at the same time? How disconcerting are these trends, and what can be done about them? We will then move on to the major crisis: the increasingly heated debate about the political-democratic system as a whole. How do political parties figure in the debate? Are they only the source of the problem, or will they provide a solution as well?

We will conclude this article by discussing the relationship between the minor crisis of the parties and

the major crisis of the party democracy. Is this weakened condition of the parties or the oligarchic party power mechanism going to challenge the legitimacy of the party democracy? Conversely, could the minor crisis of parties be the outcome of more fundamental social transformations?

The debate within and about parties

In June 2002, in Paris *La République des Idées* was established as a new French think tank for the reformist left. In recognition of the event, a trans-Atlantic seminar was organized on the theme *Europe-United States – Continents drifting apart?*³ The French sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon noted an ongoing discrepancy between the American and European models of democratic modernity. He asserted that American democracy based on Tocqueville’s ideas was headed for trouble because of the anti-democratic tendencies concealed behind the hyperpower position of the U.S. and because of new ties between religion and politics in domestic politics undermining the liberal constitutional state there. The Americans Mark Lilla (University of Chicago) and Suzanne Berger (MIT) refuted this analysis. They observed an entirely different trend: the decline of classical democratic institutions in Europe, including the political parties. They argued that European democracies were undergoing the same social changes as their American counterpart, but that institutional responses varied. The development towards an audience and media democracy in Europe appears to be coinciding with signs of political and institutional crisis and instability.

Are our American friends right that European parties are losing ground as core institutions of democratic politics? Are our parties indeed afflicted with institutional sclerosis? Something is certainly amiss. The crisis of the political parties has been a subject of debate for years for good reason and has given rise to extended party innovation with varying degrees of success among virtually all parties in Europe. The party system and the democratic system as a whole are bearing the brunt of *Parteiverdrossenheit* [party apathy] and *Politikverdrossenheit* [political apathy]. These terms figure in the very heated German debate about the state of the parties. In their book *Die Heimatlosigkeit der Macht. Wie die Politik in Deutschland ihren Boden verlor*, the German political scientists Franz Walter and

1 The first thesis concerns the likelihood that the Dutch Labour Party will participate in the government (only if no other option is available), while the second refers to the characterization of the Dutch political system: no parliamentary democracy, but rule by regents. Cf. Daudt 2001: 35-53.

2 The terms minor crisis and major crisis are derived from de Jonge 1968. According to Van Dale’s Dutch dictionary, the term crisis may reflect a period of serious disorder, as well as a “turning point or change” or, better yet: “a state in which the old customs prove inadequate to achieve a harmonious solution to problems that arise.” This last definition matches the use of the term in this article.

3 *La République des Idées*, International Seminar. Democracy and Globalization: Transatlantic perspectives, 14/15 June 2002 – Paris.

Tobias Dürrenberg has observed that this state means a far-reaching “disengagement from the rest of society” by the political parties. Social democracy in particular serves as a representative of the other parties: “The parties have exhausted their social resources and have lost their foundations and their social roots. [...] Social democrats are no longer the home base in German society; home is losing its basic role as the existence and experience of a socially industrialized collectivity.” In its place a “tele-plebiscite public society” is emerging, according to Walter and Dürrenberg (2000: 21 and 215 and 242).

Parties and party democracy is not only under debate elsewhere. The debate about party innovation within and outside social democratic circles has been going on in the Netherlands for quite a while as well. Remarkably, earlier waves of party innovation in the 1940s and 1960s addressed the party system as a whole and were more externally oriented. In the past two decades, party innovation has become far more limited. The main objective has been to reorient the internal program and to reallocate and shift the power within the confines of the party, for example from the member organization toward the electoral-professional parliamentary group.

Since the 1970s, the Dutch Labour Party has pursued party innovation almost continuously. In the 1980s the primary focus was to come to terms with the radicalism and the expressive politics of the previous decade. Party innovation became a vehicle to overcome the social-electoral isolation during the desert years as an opposition party (see Dutch Labour Party, 1987, 1988 and 1991). In the 1990s, on the other hand, party innovation was intended to offset the overly bureaucratic and technocratic image of the social democrats in power (De Boer Report 2002, Andersson Report 2002).

In recent decades the party innovation theme has continuously figured on the agenda. The concept has by now become more worn-down and overused than any other. The Dutch Labour Party has been innovating for over two decades in an unabated flood of reports, memoranda, and notes. Labels such as “new” or “innovated” lost their strategic significance a long time ago. One wonders how much innovation a party can sustain. Or has this pursuit become more hypothetical than real? How well do parties function in this respect?

What was this party innovation really about? Which themes were covered in the analysis and the debate?

The state political parties are in: The minor crisis

In the section above we identified the minor and the major crisis of political parties, relating to the more restricted functioning of parties on the one hand, the general operation of the democratic party system on the other. The first perspective primarily concerns the functions that parties perform and the way they do so. The social-democratic self-reflection of recent decades largely paralleled the debate about parties in political science and revolved around the following themes: the organizational weakness of parties; members, voters and politicians; campaign party or ideological party; campaign party or governing party; recruitment and quality of politicians; internal party democracy; the ideological profile; governmental orientation vs. social rooting. These themes relate to the transition from a classical emancipation party to a professional-electoral party and beyond.

The organizational weakness of parties

In virtually all countries in Europe, membership of political parties has declined in recent decades in both absolute and relative terms. The Netherlands is no exception, and the large parties were affected most by this trend. In the Netherlands, about 2 % of the electorate is now member of a political party. On 1 June 2003 the Dutch Labour Party had 62,600 members. Newspapers have reported continuous membership declines for years. Since 2002, however, the year of pronounced political polarization, this trend has reversed, and membership of political parties – even the larger ones – is finally rising again, at least a little bit.

Amid the polarization of 2002, party membership was analysed as having the value of a statement. Nonetheless, experts do not expect the major political parties to retain their members over the long term. “In the long run, people stop needing old social organizations, such as churches, trade unions, or political parties,” explained Gerrit Voerman, an expert on political parties in the Netherlands. “Only as long as politics politicises, it will offset the underlying individualization.” (De Volkskrant, 14 June 2003). The aging membership of the large parties, however, makes additional membership declines likely. Whether new generations will guarantee a “change of the guard” is far from certain.

The relatively small membership severely curtails the financial means in a country where neither the state nor private organizations provide substantial funding for party activities. Parties in the Netherlands continue

to rely heavily on their members for financial revenues, especially for election campaign funding. The rapidly rising costs of the current type of campaigns are a growing financial burden (see van Praag 2000).

The organizational base of parties has been shrinking in quantitative terms. Qualitative organizational strength is harder to determine, due to the lack of comparable empirical data. Well-informed observers have the distinct impression, however, that involvement in party politics is declining, especially locally, and that some parties are experiencing increasing difficulty finding suitable candidates for representative offices, such as membership of the city council. Local party branches are sometimes run by less than a half dozen members.

Opinions vary on how alarming the membership erosion is. Some believe that their diminishing level of organization is jeopardizing the very legitimacy of parties. Others relativize the danger and believe that as long as parties mobilize enough political representatives in the field, there is no cause for alarm. According to party researcher Ruud Koole, Dutch political parties are not parties without partisans:⁴ "The membership of all Dutch parties combined still exceeds the number of political offices to be allocated." (Koole 2002:61).

The legitimacy problem would obviously appear less acute, if parties had the same number of members as the consumer league or the trade unions (with the stipulation that countries with massive party memberships usually have a culture of "particratic" clientelism).

The very minimal level of party organization raises the question as to what level is critical. Has it already dropped below this level a long time ago? Who deserves the greatest blame: the unappealing parties or the calculating citizens, who expect to exercise their rights and political-social influence without parties? Do citizens have the parties they deserve, or do parties act deliberately as oligarchic closed shops?

Members, voters, and politicians

During the heyday of mass parties, active party members and politicians were characteristic of their party electorate. The traditional emancipation parties had a fairly homogeneous support base with specific social or religious features; they represented social collectivities. In the case of social heterogeneity, such as with the Christian democrats, each social group had its own po-

litical representatives. In a rather authoritative political culture, the political "regents" were the undisputed representatives of their constituencies. In the 1960s and 70s, this situation changed drastically. Parties became cadre parties, where political leadership needed to be justified. The activists, politicians and party executive were no longer obviously representative of the members or voters. In *Strategie en illusie*, Philip van Praag has provided a compelling account of this trend in the Dutch Labour Party (van Praag 1990).

The decline in party membership has made the representation issue more urgent: does the small group of active members still adequately reflect the views of the voters? Research on the backgrounds and views among members of parties in the Netherlands indicates that the social composition of the Dutch Labour Party membership deviates from that of the electorate: "There are, for example, proportionately fewer female party members than female voters. Party members are also significantly better educated, are more likely to pertain to the upper-middle or upper classes, and are on average somewhat older than the voters." (van Holsteyn / Koole: 2000). The election results of 2002, when the Dutch Labour Party lost nearly half its support, might suggest that larger portions of the potential Labour electorate had become estranged from this party, and that this trend had gone virtually unnoticed, even among the members.

Politicians, i.e. representatives of the people, have become increasingly prominent within parties compared with the members. They no longer take their party support for granted as a frame of reference and will increasingly reach out to their voters. As Dutch Labour Party leader Wouter Bos mentioned: "If I want to shock people, I always say I will never attend another party meeting. We need to connect with people who are not party members." (NRC Handelsblad, 5 June 2003).

Dedicated to campaigns or to principles?

Especially during the election period, politicians need to reach beyond their own, small party backing to get in touch with the general electorate. Even if they do not seize the opportunity to seek out their potential voters, the media will force them into doing so, sometimes in a merciless setting. Now that parties no longer have a fixed electoral base, and floating voters dominate the electoral market, campaigns – also in financial terms – are growing ever more important in party life.

The Dutch Labour Party has become a campaign party: "a party where the financial resources are fo-

4 The expression "parties without partisans" comes from R.J. Dalton.

cused on the election campaigns; where campaigns are regarded as the ultimate contact with voters-cum-citizens, preferably in focus groups. Election campaigns are considered to be the sole remaining function of the party." (De Boer Report 2002: 21). From this perspective, the election campaign is the perfect opportunity for party innovation (cf. Monasch 2002). While the professionalism of the Dutch Labour Party in this respect is debatable, the trend is unmistakable.

This trend may conflict with a party's programme, which includes focusing on principles, organizing debate, and formulating an ideological course. If the campaign party model prevails, principles and programmatic profile will soon fall by the wayside.⁵ In the course of the 1990s, according to the committee that analysed Labour's defeat in the 2002 elections against Pim Fortuyn, fear of offending voters gained the upper hand; campaigning increasingly became synonymous with adopting the positions of one's opponent to neutralize them ("the immunization or cuckoo strategy"). In addition, an apolitical, programmatically-neutral campaign language was devised: the lingo of universal political appeal (De Boer Report 2002: 21).

Campaign party or governing party

The other field of tension in this context is the gap separating a campaign party from a governing party. The pitfalls of transforming a party from one that plays a substantive role in government to a campaign party with electoral appeal has affected other parties besides the Dutch Labour Party in 2002 with its un-mediagenic leader Ad Melkert. The French socialists, led by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, suffered the same fate that year. Jospin was defeated by Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections. In addition to Chirac's election as president by an overwhelming majority, the French socialists were wiped out in the next parliamentary elections as well.

In the Netherlands Fortuyn demonstrated that in an era of floating voters and extensive media exposure, given the right conditions, winning elections out of the blue or getting a lot of votes is not impossible for a newcomer. Without a noteworthy party organization – his Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) was in fact a one-man's political movement, featuring Fortuyn as the "politician without a party" – the post-modern populist Fortuyn managed to call the shots in the elections (Cuperus

2003a). This case alone deeply relativizes the importance of well-organized political cadre parties in today's television and personality election campaigns. Media logic does not necessarily favour "established" parties.

Whether such loosely organized political structures have enough substance and coherence for the long run and can survive the transition from a campaign party to a government party is another matter. Both the vicissitudes of the "Fortuyn Revolt" and the governing LPF and the participation in the government of Haider's FPÖ demonstrate that populist parties – even though the LPF and the FPÖ defy comparison in many respects – encounter problems in this respect. In this context, Paul Taggart rightly speaks of "the institutional problems of populism." Because of the populist aversion to institutions and representation and the allergy to traditional party formation, populism does not make for powerful political parties, dedicated to fostering a cadre and programmatic continuity and consistency. Instead, these parties often rely on charismatic or authoritarian leadership:

"the empty heart of populism, the lack of key values, means that it is particularly liable to the politics of personality. [...] Populism prefers the simple solution of leadership itself over the complex process of politics to resolve problems [...] Populism has problems with institutions. This makes it necessarily short-lived." (Taggart 2000: 101-106)

Recruitment and quality of politicians

In the era of the traditional emancipation parties, the emancipation process gave rise to new elites that represented social groups and classes in political office. The liberals and conservatives recruited this political elite from the existing social upper class. Emancipation movements such as social democracy recruited their politicians from other layers of the population. They recruited the best in the field to represent them in politics. The broadly-based people's parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) consistently brought in people from their socially-organized hinterland such as trade unions and other civil organizations, with a strong sense of social commitment.

Since the 1960s, however, this type of representation has been driven to the sidelines. Especially for the Dutch Labour Party, the recruitment field has narrowed, due primarily to the shrinking core of active members. Accordingly, the Dutch Labour Party has for some time recruited its national and European repre-

⁵ For a critique of the rise of the campaign party and an argument in favour of a party based on social-democratic principles, cf. Tromp 2002 and Tromp 2003.

sentatives through a central open application procedure and an applications committee. Nonetheless, social-democratic politicians – even the local ones – come from a limited circle. Most are well-educated and are professionals in the collective sector. They closely resemble their counterparts in other parties as far as their education is concerned but differ from them in terms of their professional backgrounds (cf. van Westerlo 2003). They are often well-suited for civil service and the policy-based, bureaucratically-oriented decision-making process and are at ease in the small inner circle of politics.

Despite scouting and application procedures, a quality problem is imminent and is sometimes already acute locally. The sociologist Van Doorn has described the contrast between the old and new politicians as follows. The old political elites were selected

“because they had social standing, and they derived their standing from their leadership of certain social groups and core institutions: employers’ federations and employee organizations, leagues of farmers and small businessmen, dailies, broadcasting associations, and universities. In the 1960s these double of-fices became suspect and gradually disappeared. The “regents” were replaced by political professionals, who often had more ambition than experience. They became significant thanks to their election. A self-perpetuating cycle began: the inflow of professional politicians eroded the standing of being a member of parliament, and this diminished standing compromised the quality of the MP’s. They were selected from the crowd and lacked any competence beyond that of a low-prestige board. They almost exclusively represented their party and consequently became isolated from a society that is rapidly becoming disaffected with party politics.” (van Doorn 2002: 44).

Admittedly, some exceptions occur, and the good ones among them deserve their due.

The internal party democracy

These professionals have now become the core of the parties and are highly influential in determining the face, the course, and the organization of their parties. This raises a few questions. How do their position and performance relate to the party’s organization? What role remains for grass root members and activists in their party’s constitutional order, if politicians receive all media attention and are therefore deeply inclined to regard internal political debates in their party as a risk?

In the complex policy considerations that officials face, their grass root support is of little use other than as nuisance value. Politicians thus tend to explain their policies to the party membership. They don’t account for them, let alone that they would let the party members decide their policies.

As an organization of grass root membership, the party has lost much of its relevance as an independent source for new ideas, as a forum for debate and deliberation, and as a platform for justifying the choices made. Ideological pluralism and the party as a countervailing power with respect to the administrative policy mechanism are hardly compatible with current political practice, which highlights management and control. Moreover, why should party members take precedence in this respect over the – far more important – voters? What role remains for a party, now that the complexity of decision making processes confuses even the policymakers? This theme has become the focus of analysis and controversy more than any other in the Dutch Labour Party. During the 1990s the exercise of power within the party became more centralized and informal, putting party democracy under pressure, with broader ramifications for the democratic system as a whole. Ruud Koole, a scholar specialized in the field of political parties and elected party chairman in 2001, made restoration of party democracy and the role of party members the central issue in his election campaign and has since introduced direct member consultation about party leadership.

The erosion of ideology

Back in the 1950s, Bell, Lipset, Aron, and others spoke about the “end of ideology,” meaning, according to Lipset’s retrospective, that politics had ceased to symbolize the struggle between isolated, contained, and therefore mutually exclusive ideologies, such as the traditional class struggle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Lipset 1959).

While the radicalization and politicization of the 1960s and 70s appeared to prove them wrong, their views have once again become current. In a more modern version, Francis Fukuyama argued that the “end-of-ideology” school was right. Exogenous circumstances have reduced essential ideological differences between parties. The post-World War II consensus of democracy and welfare state subdued the conflict between left and right, capitalism and socialism. Next, the post-1989 consensus further defused longstanding ideological conflicts: the project of the left project as an alternative to capitalism has virtually disappeared.

While the dispute over different “types of capitalism” continues, neither liberal democracy nor the social intervention state faces fundamental challenges in the West. In this period of widespread consensus, politics is often reduced to matters of management and administrative fine-tuning, highlighting “placebo rivalry” between political parties.

As a result, the ideological profile of the large parties has become bleaker again. Differences within parties often exceed those between parties. A party such as the Dutch Labour Party is divided on several crucial issues and consequently has a diffuse programme. For voters it isn’t so clear anymore, which choices are being offered by parties. The large parties specifically have been drawn to the centre, which is where the electoral gains lie. As they sacrifice their political-ideological profile, the ideological left-right dimension has become less important for explaining electoral conduct, and political issues matter less in how people vote. The declining importance of both the ideological orientations of voters and their views on specific issues is attributable to the diminishing differences between the large parties, argues the political scientist Thomassen in his review of voting patterns between 1971 and 1998 (Thomassen 2000: 206). The sharp polarization that Fortuyn achieved in 2002 between himself and the “established” parties has already subsided again. A new consensus is even arising in the sensitive field of immigration and integration.

In recent decades the question has regularly been considered as to whether new social and political themes might restructure and realign the political landscape. While new, post-materialist issues have surfaced in the political arena (e.g. environmental policy), parties have not yet realigned along new cleavages.

European unification may of course eventually bring about political realignment in the Netherlands and give rise to a progressive and a conservative political formation. Moreover, new cleavages may gain relevance, where the old, fundamental divisions along class and religious lines appear increasingly artificial in a virtually secular middle class society. How long can a Christian-Democratic party survive without compromising its position in a highly secularized society such as the Netherlands? How elastic is the old Dutch Labour Party of workers? Is it not by definition adrift in a classless, post-industrial knowledge economy?

Policy making versus civic orientation

Ever since they originated, political parties have served as vehicles to express social aspirations in politics. Par-

ties have been an essential link in the interaction between state and society, thanks to their ability to aggregate social and political desires, mobilize and integrate voters in the political community, and transform their programmes into policy measures. With the rise and expansion of the welfare state, the social organizations of the past, rooted in society, have become increasingly dedicated to policy and public administration (see Kalma 2001: 101-113). While parties have lost most of their anchorage in society, they have consolidated and strengthened their ties with the state.⁶

Parties and politicians have come to focus increasingly on policy making. Politicians are like mechanics, tinkering at the engine of society by means of policy, without ever getting away from under the hood, as Anton Hemerijck put it at a conference of the Institute for Public Policy Research in London in 2000.⁷ Parties, having lost their social footing, do not appear to have replaced it with new alliances with civil society organizations (cf. Kalma 2002).

The isolation of the political parties is the predominant theme in the analysis of the Dutch Labour Party’s defeat in the 2002 elections. In the successful election campaign in 2003, Wouter Bos overcame this isolation and restored the electoral position of the Dutch Labour Party. Both a drastic change of the party culture and more structural ties with social organizations have been suggested as remedies to achieve sustained reinforcement of the party’s position.

Score to date

The assessment of the trends and dilemmas described cannot possibly be straightforward. Nor do parties rest on their laurels. They respond to new circumstances and formulate strategies to adapt to them. Reactions from concerned observers range from relativizing complacency to deep concern. Some believe that this decline of political parties justifies a state of alert for democracy. Among them, the world-renowned Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart views the declining voter turnout and the dwindling membership of political parties as signs that “democratic culture is disappea-

6 In a series in *Die Zeit*, this trend, which is stronger in Germany, is deplored under the motto: ways out of the party state. “The problem is exactly our current party state, which is gaining ever greater acceptance but is not growing more effective. It is continuously expanding and growing blurred at the same time. [...] The only way to moderate the party state’s dominance of politics is to curtail the influence of the state.” Robert Leicht, *Die Zeit*, 13 June 2002.

7 IPPR/Policy Network Conference, Social Justice in the New Economy, 9-11 November 2000, London.

ring." He advocates making voting compulsory again and strengthening political parties.

"I see no viable alternative to political parties. In a representative democracy, they are crucial for recruiting representatives of the people and formulating views about the general interest. [...] Why not make party dues tax deductible to emphasize the social value of party membership? We need to demonstrate that political parties are not on the verge of extinction and must not give up hope." (Elsevier, 3 June 2000).

Others, such as the public administration experts Paul Frissen and Bas Denters, consider the changes of political party organizations beneficial to democracy as a whole. Denters, for example, questions the added value to democracy, if parties grant the party members greater control over the parliamentary party. "On what grounds should party members have the opportunity to rebuke elected officials through a party referendum?" (Denters 2000: 580; see also Frissen 2000).

This is complicated both by different stories and valuations of parties and by the rather complex entities that political parties inherently are. Parties have several faces. Richard Katz and Peter Mair (Katz / Mair 1993: 602 ff.) once identified three faces of party organization: the party as part of the public administration, the party leadership with professional staff, and the party as an organization of members.

Political parties are in fact a rather labyrinthine "party conglomerate," comprising a multiplicity of somewhat disjointed components, such as: political leadership (with a campaign team, electoral analysts and media advisors); cabinet members (if they are governing); the parliamentary faction complex (parliamentary faction, staff, advisory structure); senate faction, delegation in European Parliament; those elected in local and provincial office; the party as an association (the party chairman, the party board, the organization of members, local branches, a coordinating and organizational party agency, think tanks, special target groups or theme organizations for young adults, women, the Third World, and the like); the party as a network of local officials; the party as a network of officials, civil servants, professionals, social organizations.

Not all these components are influenced in the same manner and affected by these social trends and patterns of crisis. The debate about parties and the party crisis largely concerns power shifts within this party conglomerate. Different observers value these shifts differently. In order to draw a picture of the different stands in the debate about the role and position

of the political parties, two prevailing dimensions will be of use.

The first concerns the *external functions* parties perform in the democratic system. Virtually all observers agree that parties are losing ground in this respect. Opinions vary, however, regarding the extent of this loss and the resulting damage to democracy. Some note that parties are shrinking but argue that this process does not or should not affect the essential and classical party functions, such as their representative and programme-oriented roles. At the other end of the spectrum, people argue that the present circumstances have rendered parties entirely superfluous. The middle ground is that parties have lost some functions (e.g. as grass root organizations) but have retained others (e.g. their campaign and recruitment function) and therefore risk becoming unbalanced (see Koole 2000 and also Mair 2000).

The second dimension concerns the *internal party organization*: the role of members and voters, the extent of party democracy, receptiveness to party innovation, and the like. Some party watchers believe in the revival of the nineteenth-century voting association, where contact between voters and elected individuals involves as little interference as possible from parties (of which the modern version would be the campaign party in its most extreme form). Others favour the model of a socially rooted members' party, where the members are in control and determine the programme and strategy. Appreciation for the situation of political parties and its significance for our democracy ranges from cheerful optimism to gloomy pessimism. The same holds true for the opportunities envisaged for parties to respond to trends with some discretionary leeway. Both dimensions jointly determine the future vision of the role and position of party organizations in the political system.

Parties have formulated various strategies in response to the dilemmas described. Generally, efforts to revitalize the party involve:

- promoting what is known as the network party, where more informal networks are formed with people from within and outside the party to nurture the party organization, the programme-oriented debate, and policy elaboration;⁸
- promoting the involvement of party members by increasing democratic rights, for example by introducing plebiscite elements, emphasizing the consti-

8 This approach is modelled after Castells's views about the network society. It emphasizes the role of new information technology in contacts between the party, members, and concerned individuals. Cf. Jonk / van Velzen 2002 and Leggewie 2001.

tutional role of the party as an association, setting up new advisory bodies, and enabling participation based on interest and expertise;

- promoting a stronger focus on society: send members of parliament across the country, set up advisory boards of workers and experts in different fields, reach out to a variety of civic organizations;
- offering other types of membership or relativizing party membership as access to party participation;
- strengthening the political profile by encouraging debate, setting the political agenda, reformulating principles, and identifying tough political issues;
- improving financial backing through government grants;
- encouraging greater openness.

In addition, there is a growing concern to bridge the gap between government and elected officials on one side, and citizens and voters on the other by changing the voting system or democratic institutions (e.g. greater dualism in local government), which would bypass the parties. The debate includes issues like the district system, the combined German system, referendums, direct election of legal representatives, and the like.

Most of these ideas have been discussed for years; some are conflicting. Fairly convincing documents have been drafted, but the results are modest. Sometimes old situations are restored after previous changes. Party innovation is a matter of zigzags and yoyo effects. The lack of convincing results is due to at least two types of causes. First, the tenacity of the embedded culture, the complexity of volunteer organizations, weak and short-lived party management, resistance from established positions, and the arrogance of power. Second, the strength of external social changes, which party innovators rarely seriously take into account (cf. Becker / Cuperus 2000) These exogenous changes in particular deeply influence the position and function of political parties. Such exogenous changes affect and challenge the functions and institutional continuity both of political parties and of the parliament or national state – institutions of which political parties are merely derivatives or supply channels. The problems confronting political parties thus figure within a broader context.

The major crisis of the party democracy: Three transformations

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, sweeping changes affected the political system. Such changes are not to be regarded as a minor slump in democracy as we know it. Combined, they constitute a

“system leap.” (Van Doorn 2002: 29) They will have a major impact on the positions and operation of political parties but have not yet sufficiently penetrated the debate on party innovation. There have been three crucial transformations.

From political representation to politics as a theatre

Political parties are usually regarded as representatives of social currents, movements, and interests. Political parties have served as links between society and the state from the outset. Sociological perspectives are important in reflections about the origins of political parties and their performance in the twentieth century: which social cleavages were decisive for the political system, and which parties represented which groups? At first, social democracy represented the non-religious working class – workers in agriculture and industry alike – but derived from the outset from a combination of proletarians and intellectuals. In the 1930s and 40s most social-democratic parties in Europe tried to achieve a broader coalition of the working class with the middle classes. This sociological coalition – also represented by Christian democracy in politics – became the foundation for establishing the broadly-based welfare state that arose following World War II.

Over the past three decades, this situation has ended. The well-ordered relationship between state and society – which in the Netherlands consisted of the nearly stereotypical ‘pillarization’, as Lijphart analyses in his classical study about pillarization and consensus building in Dutch democracy between 1920 and 1965 – made way for a highly diverse and diffuse, deeply professionalized field of countless subordinate interests, which all taxed the manpower and financial resources of the full-fledged welfare state. At the same time, the relationship between the party and the electorate changed dramatically as well. The identity, identification, and interests of the electorate became more heterogeneous. The idea of collective identity made way for an individual one (except at sports events). As the Dutch political scientist Jos de Beus wrote: “Sixteen million divided individualists are far harder to represent than two classes or three pillars.” (de Beus 2001: 24) The bonds of parties with their voters weakened accordingly. Many voters decide at each single election how they will vote. Shifting across the political spectrum is far from unusual these days. The floating voter has become the standard. In the case of the Dutch Labour Party, this means that its electorate and backing have become so heterogeneous and floating that the

party no longer represents carefully defined sociological groups or social interests (cf. Ornstein / van Weezel 1992).

Parties have thus become political enterprises competing with one another on a relatively open electoral market, including all the corresponding uncertainties. Their political leaders are more decisive than ever for their electoral fate. Citizens keenly watch their every move, as if the political leaders were lead actors in a play. The result is an audience democracy. In *The principles of representative government*, Manin (1997) presents a challenging formulation of these sweeping changes in democratic development. Manin argues that representative democracy has entered a new stage. Following the liberal parliamentary democracy of the nineteenth century and the “parties democracy” of the twentieth century, we are at the threshold of a new form: the audience democracy (de Beus 2000). In this audience democracy, Manin believes that voters are starting to resemble a theatre audience. Just as the actors are assessed after the show – a standing ovation, a demure round of applause, or boos – the electorate today shares a retrospective opinion on the performance of governments, parties, and politicians. As a consequence, election programmes have forfeited much of their importance, political parties are increasingly associated with their leaders, and parties are focused virtually exclusively on media communication.

Not everybody, however, visits the theatre of politics. As parties lose their social foundations, and political operations professionalize, political representation is turning into a problem. We do not yet have an underclass that is totally ignored and has lost all contact with politics, as Galbraith has argued with respect to the situation in the United States. Undeniably, however, substantial groups have drifted away from mainstream politics, which has become a middle class affair (cf. Bovens et al. 1995: 45-49). The disengaged are far from a homogeneous group (cf. Cuperus 2003b). The left may have more trouble forming successful, robust alliances between the uneducated and the educated, rich and poor, middle class and underprivileged groups – of native and migrant origins alike (cf. Becker / Cuperus 2002).

Some French analysts of the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections, in which the French socialists suffered such a crushing defeat, reached a similar conclusion. They argued that while the Parti Socialiste was in office, Jospin had lost touch with the classes populaires and had apparently been insensitive to voter priorities, such as neighbourhood safety (see Becker 2002).

The displacement of politics

The second factor that political parties will need to consider seriously has been labelled *the displacement of politics* in a publication by the Dutch Labour think tank, the Wiardi Beckman Foundation, in 1995. Parties aim increasingly to exercise their influence in the conventional power hubs: the parliamentary and administrative decision-making systems. Since World War II, when centralization gained the upper hand, the parties have focused their attention and energies on the national state. This power hub is now being eroded, however, as decision-making has shifted to other arenas. Citizens have become less submissive and obedient. They have become partners in decision-making who have to be taken seriously. Major elements of political decision-making have shifted to international forums, especially European ones, to the corridors of power of the bureaucracy, to courts of law, to local authorities, and to corporations, laboratories, and social institutions. Some refer to a democracy without a centre or an “empty or virtual state” and believe that politicians have turned any pretence of central steering into a hopeless anachronism (Frissen 2000).

In a lecture at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation in 2002, Mark Bovens, one of the authors of the aforementioned publication and expert in the field of public administration, asserted that progressive erosion of the conventional democratic institutions and displacement of political decision-making toward arenas lacking democratic legitimacy have continued. Moreover, internationalization is more than a shift to Brussels or Strasbourg. Bovens demonstrated how at a conference of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (an inter-governmental organization dedicated to protecting the world’s intellectual property) negotiations take place about draft conventions to be enforced in our country but hardly involving representatives of the people or democratically elected officials, to say nothing about the voters (Bovens 2002).

While political parties have hardly responded to this trend yet, they are focusing more than ever on the traditional centre of national political power, which is the Binnenhof at The Hague in the Netherlands. Locally, they have lost ground considerably. A recent report about innovation of municipal administrations documents this erosion and expresses serious concern about the local presence of political parties. On the other hand, purely local parties unaffiliated with national political movements are ascending. European party formation is merely rudimentary. The European Socialist Party (PES), while theoretically a truly new party that transcends nationalities, is in fact little more than

a poorly equipped secretariat. (see van der Eijk 2000). Parties have responded to the other types of political displacement with forced rhetoric about the primacy of politics, which unfortunately will not automatically get them back in the drivers' seat.

Bovens concludes: "Nowhere has the displacement of politics coincided with a displacement of party politics." (Bovens 2002: 18-19). He is similarly gloomy about means for parties to cope with the displacement of politics, since the new arenas lack any trace of public, universally accessible elections of representatives and officials. Bovens believes that the displaced politics may still be legitimized in some measure by open procedures and reviewing decisions for maximum transparency. The role in store for civil society and the media will in his view exceed that of the parties. The time has therefore come, in our view, for the media to shift in response to the displacement of politics and to complement their traditional interest in parliamentary incidents with a critical review of power exercised elsewhere.

The relationship between politics as a theatre and its displacement is paradoxical. The rise (and fall) of the populist Fortuyn movement in the Netherlands has highlighted this paradox. Politicians star in the media more than ever, and media stars have become more interested than ever in embarking on political careers or are being encouraged to do so. Fortuyn's populist uprising has personalized politics. This revival of politics and political parties here is remarkable, since their importance seems to be waning in other fields. After all, despite all media attention, politicians and political parties matter less and less in the real world of government, legislation, and policy and have in some cases even lost their relevance. This shift from politics to the true policy reality is essentially about replacing the representative party democracy by politics of expertise and politics of well-organized interests.

A wide gap thus separates policy reality on the one hand – where European regulations, courts, officials, corporate interests, and diplomats have in fact assumed democratic representation, and political parties and politicians have been rendered more or less powerless – from everyday media reality on the other hand, where perhaps not the political parties but certainly their leading politicians are disproportionately prominent as media stars on television and in newspapers. This clash of two realities – growing attention for progressively more marginal phenomena – frames the future of politics and political parties.

From politics as a project to political management

Third, and as the culmination of the two other trends, political parties face the basic question how much value is added by politics. Political parties and movements are established for the purpose of achieving social and political reforms on the basis of ideals, views on society, and coalitions of lobbies. They had a political project. The liberal project provisionally came to a halt over a century ago. Despite its lasting impact on society, liberalism became divided in Dutch politics and was driven to the sidelines in party politics. Only in the final quarter of the twentieth century did they recapture their significance. During that century, Dutch politics revolved primarily around the political projects of Christian and social democracy, which completed their trek through government institutions in the 1930s and the 1970s, respectively. Their political emancipation projects have evaporated into affluence and social mobility (van Kersbergen 1995) Do politics and politicians have more than a marginal added value in the current democracy and the present public administration? Has the idea of politics as a project not vanished?

Recently, some authors have focused on this issue in their political observations. In *Een rehabilitatie van de politiek*, the sociologist Hans Blokland analyses the consequences of modernization for our ability to set out a collective course for society. Basing himself on Weber and Mannheim, Blokland notes that in our type of society, the quest for substantive objectives and values is progressively being suppressed by concerns about efficiency and effectiveness. As Weber has written, value rationality is making way for goal rationality (thinking in terms of optimal goal-means relations). According to Mannheim's terminology, substantial rationality is competing with functional or instrumental rationality (how can a specific goal be achieved as efficiently and effectively as possible?). Modernization and rationalization in economy and bureaucracy leads, according to Weber, to iron cages: virtually uncontrollable structures and processes, in which people are imprisoned and have no choice but to operate instrumentally.

Political actions would, according to thinkers such as Mannheim, be the most adequate means to overcome this instrumental rationality and to establish common values and objectives. Even politics, however, has succumbed to modernization, notes Blokland: "Our political system is ever less receptive to substantial rationality and to allowing citizens to jointly give direction and meaning to their coexistence based on a substantive programme." (Blokland 2001: 89). The impossibility of formulating and achieving collective goals

is exacerbated, according to Blokland, by society's increased individualization and complexity. As the title of his study indicates, he advocates restoring the role of politics in response to the consequences of modernization.

Van Doorn's observations about *Democratie in de overgang* revolve around the dramatically heightened complexity of social changes and relationships. Like the German system theoretician Luhmann, he regards politics as "a relatively autonomous but open system that interacts with society around it. Even though this environment is highly complex and turbulent, the political system needs to be sufficiently orderly and stable to reach rational and consistent decisions." According to this view, politics is aimed at reducing complexity.

For over a century, the political system was reasonably well-equipped to handle the mounting social complexity and dynamics. Legislation, elaboration of the constitutional state, development of a vast bureaucracy, and use of corporatist support systems (the co-operation of capital and labour) enabled the political system to weather social turbulence and accommodate it in the decision-making process. That era lies behind us. Politics now faces an excess of social issues that need to be squeezed into the narrow conduits of what is realistically possible. "This leads to overload. All political sub-systems are being inundated with expectations, complaints, suggestions, and pressures, scrutinized by the media, and constantly stalked by representatives of lobbies and pressure groups. The core political institutions, founded during a less turbulent era, seem to lack the flexibility required to deal with the flood of new challenges." (Van Doorn 2002: 47 and 49). One could in fact argue that holders of political offices are dealing with particularly intractable semi-public complexes, which have now virtually eluded their control. According to the German expression, "politics harbours a control trilemma." In an analysis of Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's style of government ("multi-options pragmatist, master of coalitions, and executive chancellor"), contemporary politics is defined as the art of juggling three completely non-interchangeable levels: the party democracy, the social negotiation democracy, and the media democracy (Korte 2003).

How is the political system coping with the rising complexity and turbulence throughout society? Largely through outsourcing: to the courts, to the people (by referendums), to all kinds of independent quangos, to supervisors, or to the market. This does not make effectiveness, the chief objective of the current government conduct and an important criterion for its legitimacy, any easier to achieve:

"while everything in the public sector appears designed to make government actions more effective – even at the expense of representative-democratic elements – ineffectiveness is now the main problem. Official services are being fragmented and privatized, the flood of consultants is weakening the power of public administration, the constitutional state risks becoming entangled in a regulatory frenzy, regulatory agencies are proliferating, privatisation of public responsibilities is creating at least as many problems as it solves, and the economy has escaped the control of the national government and is therefore immune to political intervention, due in part to internationalization." (Van Doorn 2002: 53-54)

Van Doorn sees no easy solution. On the one hand, we might pursue a more hierarchical order; on the other hand, we might introduce a more plebiscite democratic system, where the authority would become more personalized: two entirely different courses.

Last but not least, in his study about Prime Minister Kok's first three-partisan labour-liberal government (1994-1998), the political scientist Jouke de Vries tried to define the contemporary role of politics. He advanced the concept of a managerial state, where the role of politics is reduced to managing the public domain. Under the managerial state, the welfare state is adjusted to conform to the globalizing market economy. "In organizational respects, such a state is organized according to an ideology based heavily on private sector views." (de Vries 2002: 22) In this case, too, the pretence of management does not mean that management is conducted properly. This managerial state was more omnipresent in the second Kok liberal-labour government than in the first one.

The system leap

Where does this sketch of the crisis of political parties and party democracy take us? Is the case of the Netherlands and the Dutch Labour Party exceptional? Or is the situation in other European countries similar? Some similarities are indeed apparent. The coincidence of a minor and a major party crisis, the rapid ascendance of right-wing populist movements in Europe, the democratic discomfort of the intellectual elites, the draconian lack of self-confidence of the existing institutions and "their residents": everything suggests a system leap or change in paradigm in our democratic so-

ciety.⁹ The three sweeping transformations described above – the transition from political representation to political theatre, the displacement of politics, and the transition from political project to political management – have drastically reduced the room available for politics to determine the course of society and have brought about a “democracy in transition,” as Van Doorn put it. Traditional mechanisms and institutions of representation – the parliament and political parties – are facing a loss of function and authority.

The first to be affected are the intermediary organizations of which political parties (as well as broadcasting associations, newspapers, trade unions, and churches) are prototypes. Citizens are progressively less represented by such intermediary organizations. They no longer view political parties as their advocates and have transferred this responsibility to other institutions, such as the court or lobbies. Values and interests have become so fragmented that many citizens no longer feel represented by ideologically oriented political parties. The number of floating voters has increased substantially, and this trend appears irreversible. Less than 40 percent of the Dutch voters is loyal to a single political party, based on traditional foundations such as religion or background (Bovens / Michels 2002: 56).

This jeopardizes the logic and legitimacy of the current political representation model. At the very least, our representative democracy will have to abandon its business-as-usual attitude and will need to become receptive to democratic innovation and experimentation to retain its legitimacy.

The present “democratic menopause” is not necessarily a problem for democracy as such – after all, democracy is based primarily on the constitutional state (“Rechtsstaat”): the state that prevents a Hobbesian all-out civil war, guarantees human rights and liberal freedoms, and is itself subjected to the rule of law. The current changes are, however, a fundamental problem for the representative party democracy that exists today. The bottom seems to have dropped out from under this party system dating back to the nineteenth century. Following a process described as depillarization in Dutch political science, following individualization and secularization, and following successful completion of the major political emancipation projects of the Christian-democratic and social-democratic people’s parties, the old cleavages surrounding class and religion are left in a vacuum. What will become of

mass parties without masses and ideological parties without ideologies?

The parties that represent the political centre in the European democracies and are at the same time buttresses of the European welfare state – the social-democratic and Christian-democratic people’s parties – face a problem that is both sociological and ideological. They find fulfilling their historical-collective destiny as a *Weltanschauungspartei* (Max Weber) increasingly difficult and are entangled in virtually continuous innovation. Like aging divas, they camouflage their faded glory under layers of make-up and flattering apparel. Nonetheless, the inability to devise coherent principle programmes and the deep internal divides (e.g. the current SPD in Germany) suggest that the days are numbered for political parties as we know them today. As Bovens and Michels write: “adopting a clear stand, drafting a coherent world view, and involving their members is unlikely to help political parties recover lost ground. In recent decades the nemeses of the political parties have not been weakness of character or poor leadership but structural lack of power.” (Bovens / Michels 2002: 58).

Three strategies are available to these parties in their quest to retain or reclaim their role in democracy. First, as party researcher Peter Mair has argued, they will need to focus far more on their procedural functions (Mair 2000). As political parties become less adept at their representative function, they will need to take on a new role as keepers of transparent and democratic public administration, where access to political and administrative decision-making remains open; private and public interests are clearly distinct, the foundations of the constitutional state are taken into account, and diversity and freedom of expression and information provision are guaranteed. Entrepreneur-politician Berlusconi’s skill in using politics and state to further his interest demonstrates that his party fails as the countervailing power required for democracy. Progressive parties, Mair adds, should take care to ensure that political democracy is and remains the “realm of equality.” Only in democratic elections does each vote carry the same weight. Such elections remain essential for protecting the non-organized interests.

In addition, we believe that the major crisis of the existing party system requires that parties deploy two other adaptation strategies:

1. a shift toward more direct democracy
2. party innovation with a capital P, which means improving professional quality and fostering a more open party style. In the case of the Netherlands a reallocation of the party landscape into a loose two-party system would be desirable.

9 In addition to Van Doorn 2002, the German political scientist Karl-Rudolf Korte mentions “a stealthy change in the system, a change from a parliamentary Democracy to a populist polyarchy”. Korte 2003: 222.

The move toward more direct democracy appears unavoidable, wherever the representative filters of political parties and parliament are rapidly losing their standing and function in the complex environment. The electoral system is likely to become more direct and personalized. Other expected reforms include various types of referendums and popular consultation, including within the old parties. Following Willy Brandt's renowned speech: again, we have to take a chance on more democracy in response to a new anti-institutional wave and deficient representation, without expecting democratic innovation along plebiscite lines to solve everything.

Moreover, the American friends we quoted earlier might indeed be right: European institutions (and European intellectuals?) are deeply bothered by the current changes occurring in Western democracy. The social forces that have been active in Europe for a while are propelling us toward a bipolar political landscape of two –rather loosely organized – party structures with identifiable political profiles but less rigid than the ones today. One option would be a loosely organized two-party system that meets a basic requirement for democratic procedure: the change of elites (Schumpeter) through democratic election, which will certainly remain divided according to political-programmatic orientation: conservative versus progressive, private sector versus collective sector, rural versus urban. "Parties" will come to resemble conglomerates of electoral and campaign organizations revolving around persons and programmes, combined with think tanks and issue-oriented lobbies (the longstanding social-democratic heritage might serve as an important lobby in such a new party structure).

We believe that such new political parties, due in part to their programme-based heritage and intuition, might remain relevant in the public arena. In the audience democracy, parties would turn into platforms of expertise and convergence points of various types of professional expertise. We will derive inspiration from a motto of the German political theoretician Von Alemann: "Rather than less party politics, we need better parties that have more ambition than running the state and will organize exciting debates on essential social issues. The public deserves it." (U. von Alemann, C. Strünck and U. Wehrhöfer 2002)

If parties hope to survive and to remain significant in democracy, they will need to improve their response to the changed circumstances and to offer a far higher calibre of programmes and persons. They now lack adaptive and innovative ability. Compared with large social organizations and especially corporate industry, political parties have very limited means. This situation

does not, however, excuse the almost metaphorical poor administration and management of the present political parties. Amid society's new rules of conduct and heavy pressure, enough room remains to strengthen and professionalize the debating and agenda setting function (the lesson of technocratic government and the populist citizens' uprising) and the recruitment function (the lesson of an "autistic" government party) of parties in their new form. In a post-modern audience democracy, political parties still have a major role as actors *and* as spectators. Parties will need integrity, responsibility, and professional quality. New potentials may be put to better use to this end.

Parties should become more aware of the broader crisis of the party democracy and should not focus blindly on small, internal signs of crisis. If parties hope to survive, they will need to do their level best in the field of democratic and constitutional innovation by evolving into an expertise platform and by better recruitment policies. If they do not take seriously the signs that our democracy is in transition, they will become more marginal by the day and will ultimately be best suited to the entertainment industry.

We will therefore conclude with the well-considered sense of urgency of the German-British sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf. He has observed that many people are losing faith in elections; voters no longer trust political parties ("the party game is becoming a minority sport"); party programmes based on ideology have lost much of their strength; and the people no longer view parliament as a representation of themselves and entitled to take decisions on their behalf. He concludes:

"Everybody who values freedom should put reconsidering democracy and its institutions at the top of their agenda." (Dahrendorf 2003).

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The Party Paradox: Political Parties Between Irrelevance and Omnipotence. A View From the Netherlands

There are two tales about party politics. In the first, political parties are moribund, if not on their last legs. Parties are believed to have lost virtually all their functions to the courts, the bureaucracy, the media, or powerful socio-economic organizations. According to the second tale, the “established” political parties run the show. They have formed a “state cartel”, and they monopolize the government administration. This ambiguous image of political parties – parties are both helpless and omnipotent – is what we call the paradox of party politics.

Is it possible to overcome and transcend the paradoxical positioning between powerless marginality and omnipotent regency? The answer to this question is related to the minor and the major crises of the political parties. Most aspects of the minor crisis are well known. Party organization has weakened because of declining membership and decreased social rooting. The role of grass root membership has diminished, while the position of professional politicians and their staff and advisors has been strengthened. The ideological profile of parties has eroded, while electoral campaigns have become ever more central in political life.

The key cause for this is that exogenous changes deeply influence the position and function of political parties. The transition from political representation to political theatre, the displacement of politics, and the transition from political reform project to political management are responsible for the major crisis of the party democracy. They have drastically reduced the room available for politics to determine the course of society and have brought about a 'democracy in transition'. Traditional mechanisms and institutions of representation – the parliament and political parties – are facing a loss of function and authority.

The present “democratic menopause” is a fundamental problem for the representative party democracy that exists today. The bottom seems to have dropped out from under this party system dating back to the nineteenth century. As a result of individualization, secularization and the success of the emancipation projects of the christian and social democrats, the old cleavages of class and religion are left in a vacuum.

If parties hope to survive and to remain significant in democracy, they need to improve their response to the changed circumstances and to offer a far higher calibre of programmes and persons. They now lack adaptive and innovative ability. Parties should become more aware of the broader crisis of the party democracy. If they do not take the signs that our democracy is in transition seriously, they will become more marginal by the day and will ultimately be best suited to a museum of folklore.
