THEMES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

'Colin Crouch has written a powerful plea for a politics of the left in the twenty-first century. He is no advocate of the Third Way. For him the stark alternative is liberal democracy or egalitarian democracy, and he clearly opts for the latter. Those who disagree with his analysis or his conclusions will have to make their case, and will no doubt do so. Crouch's book is sure to give rise to lively debate.'

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'Colin Crouch has the great gift of bringing theory down to accessible earth. Social capital theory is applied to the policies needed for civil renewal. This thoughtful book is a culmination of all that we have been expecting – and more – from his Fabian pamphlets and *Political Quarterly* articles on the dilemmas of democracy in troubled times.'

Professor Bernard Crick

Post-Democracy is a polemical work that goes beyond current complaints about the failings of our democracy and explores the deeper social and economic forces that account for the current malaise.

Colin Crouch argues that the decline of those social classes which had made possible an active and critical mass politics has combined with the rise of global capitalism to produce a self-referential political class more concerned with forging links with wealthy business interests than with pursuing political programmes which meet the concerns of ordinary people. He shows how, in some respects, politics at the dawn of the twenty-first century returns us to a world familiar well before the start of the twentieth, when politics was a game played among elites. However, Crouch maintains that the experience of the twentieth century remains salient and it reminds us of possibilities for the revival of politics.

This engaging book will prove challenging to all those who claim that advanced societies have reached a virtual best of all possible democratic worlds, and will be compelling reading for anyone interested in the shape of twenty-first-century politics.

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Post-Democracy

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2004

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COLIN CROUCH

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Why Post-Democracy?

The early twenty-first century sees democracy at a highly paradoxical moment. At one level it could be said to be enjoying a world-historical peak. The past quarter-century has seen first the Iberian peninsula, then most dramatically large parts of the former Soviet empire, South Africa, South Korea and some other parts of South-East Asia, and finally some countries of Latin America adopt at least the important form of more or less free and fair elections. More nation states are currently accepting democratic arrangements of this kind than at any previous time. According to the findings of a research project on global democracy led by Philippe Schmitter, the number of countries holding reasonably free elections grew from 147 in 1988 (the eve of the collapse of the Soviet system) to 164 by 1995, and 191 in 1999 (Schmitter, private communication, October 2002; see also Schmitter and Brouwer 1999). On a stricter definition of full and free elections, the findings are more ambiguous: an actual decline from 65 to 43 between 1988 and 1995, but then a climb to 88 cases.

Meanwhile, however, in the established democracies of Western Europe, Japan, the United States of America and other parts of the industrialized world, where more subtle

indicators of its health should be used, matters are less optimistic.

One need point only to the US presidential elections of 2000, where there was almost irrefutable evidence of serious ballot-rigging in Florida, a result which was decisive to the victory of George W. Bush, the brother of the state's governor. Apart from some demonstrations among Black Americans, there were very few expressions of outrage at tampering with the democratic process. The prevailing mood seemed to be that achieving an outcome – any outcome – was important in order to restore confidence to the stock markets, and that was more important than ensuring that the verdict of the majority was truly discovered.

Less anecdotally, a recent report for the Trilateral Commission – an elite body which brings together scholars from Western Europe, Japan and the USA – concluded that all was not well with democracy in these countries (Pharr and Putnam 2000). The authors saw the problem primarily in terms of a declining capacity of politicians to act because their legitimacy was increasingly in doubt. This rather elitist position did not lead them to see that the public might also have a problem, possessing politicians whom it finds it hard to trust; however, their conclusions are disturbing enough. Of course, as Putnam, Pharr and Dalton (2000) pointed out, one can interpret growing public dissatisfaction with politics and politicians as evidence of the health of democracy: politically mature, demanding publics expect more from their leaders than did their deferential predecessors of a previous generation. We shall return to this important caution at a number of points.

Democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organizations, in shaping the agenda of public life, and when they are actively using these opportunities. This is ambitious in expecting

very large numbers of people to participate in a lively way in serious political discussion and in framing the agenda, rather than be the passive respondents to opinion polls, and to be knowledgeably engaged in following political events and issues. It is an ideal model, which can almost never be fully achieved, but, like all impossible ideals, it sets a marker. It is always valuable and intensely practical to consider where our conduct stands in relation to an ideal, since in that way we can try to improve. It is essential to take this approach to democracy rather than the more common one, which is to scale down definitions of the ideal so that they conform to what we easily achieve. That way lies complacency, self-congratulation and an absence of concern to identify ways in which democracy is being weakened.

One recalls the writings of US political scientists in the 1950s and early 1960s, who would adapt their definition of democracy so that it corresponded to actual practice in the USA and Britain rather than accept any defects in the political arrangements of those two countries (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963). This was Cold War ideology rather than scientific analysis. A similar approach is dominating contemporary thinking. Again under US influence, democracy is increasingly being defined as *liberal* democracy: an historically contingent form, not a normative last word (see the critical accounts of this in Dahl 1989 and Schmitter 2002). This is a form that stresses electoral participation as the main type of mass participation, extensive freedom for lobbying activities, which mainly means business lobbies, and a form of polity that avoids interfering with a capitalist economy. It is a model that has little interest in widespread citizen involvement or the role of organizations outside the business sector.

Satisfaction with the unambitious democratic expectations of liberal democracy produces complacency about

the rise of what I call post-democracy. Under this model, while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests. This model, like the maximal ideal, is also an exaggeration, but enough elements of it are recognizable in contemporary politics to make it worth while asking where our political life stands on a scale running between it and the maximal democratic model; and in particular to appraise in which direction it seems to be moving between them. It is my contention that we are increasingly moving towards the post-democratic pole.

If I am right about this, the factors which I shall identify as causing the movement also help explain something else, of particular concern to the social democrats and others concerned for political egalitarianism for whom this book is principally intended. Under the conditions of a post-democracy that increasingly cedes power to business lobbies, there is little hope for an agenda of strong egalitarian policies for the redistribution of power and wealth, or for the restraint of powerful interests.

Further, if politics is becoming post-democratic in this sense, then the political left will be experiencing a transformation that seems to reverse most of its achievements during the twentieth century. During this period the left struggled, at some times and in some places with gradual and mainly peaceful progress, in other times and places against violence and repression, to admit the voices of ordinary people into affairs of state. Are these voices now

being squeezed out again, as the economically powerful continue to use their instruments of influence while those of the *demos* become weakened? This would not mean a return full circle to conditions of the early twentieth century, because, as well as moving in the opposite direction, we are located at a different point in historical time and carry the inheritance of our recent past with us. Rather, democracy has moved in a parabola. If you trace the outline of a parabola, your pen passes one of the co-ordinates twice: going in towards the centre of the parabola, and then again at a different point on the way out. This image will be important to much of what I have to say below about the complex characteristics of post-democracy.

Elsewhere (Crouch 1999b), as noted in the preface, I have written about 'the parabola of working-class politics', concentrating on the experience of the British working class. I had in mind how, during the course of the twentieth century, that class moved from being a weak, excluded, but increasingly numerous and strong force banging on the door of political life; through having its brief moment at the centre, in the period of formation of the welfare state, Keynesian demand management and institutionalized industrial relations; to end as a numerically declining and increasingly disorganized grouping being marginalized within that life as the achievements of the mid-century were booted out after it. The parabola can be seen most clearly in the British case, and perhaps also that of Australia: the rise of working-class political power there was gradual and extensive; its decline has been particularly steep. In other countries where the rise was similarly gradual and extended – primarily in Scandinavia – the decline has been far less. The North American working class had less impressive achievements before an even more profound decline set in. With some exceptions (e.g. the

Netherlands, Switzerland), in most of Western Europe and in Japan the earlier history was more disturbed and punctuated with violence. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have had a very different trajectory caused by the distorted and corrupted shape imposed by the capture of working-class movements by communism.

The decline of the manual working class is only one, important, aspect of the parabolic experience of democracy itself. The two issues, the crisis of egalitarian politics and the trivialization of democracy, are not necessarily the same. Egalitarians might say that they do not care how manipulative of democracy a government is, provided it divides society's wealth and power more evenly. A conservative democrat will point out that improving the quality of political debate need not necessarily result in more redistributive policies. But at certain crucial points the two issues do intersect, and it is on this intersection that I intend to focus. My central contentions are that, while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of predemocratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes. One implication of this is that to view the ills of democracy as just the fault of the mass media and the rise of spin-doctors is to miss some far more profound processes that are currently at work.

The democratic moment

Societies probably come closest to democracy in my maximal sense in the early years of achieving it or after great

regime crises, when enthusiasm for democracy is widespread; when many diverse groups and organizations of ordinary people share in the task of trying to frame a political agenda which will at last respond to their concerns; when the powerful interests which dominate undemocratic societies are wrong-footed and thrown on the defensive; and when the political system has not quite discovered how to manage and manipulate the new demands. Popular political movements and parties themselves may well be dominated by boss figures whose personal style is anything but democratic; but they are at least subject to lively active pressure from a mass movement which itself in turn represents something of the aspirations of ordinary people.

In most of Western Europe and North America we had our democratic moment around the mid-point of the twentieth century: slightly before the Second World War in North America and Scandinavia; soon after it for many others. By then, not only had the final great movements of resistance against democracy – fascism and Nazism – been defeated in a global war, but also political change moved in tandem with a major economic development which made possible the realization of many democratic goals. For the first time in the history of capitalism, the general health of the economy was seen as depending on the prosperity of the mass of wage-earning people. This was clearly expressed in the economic policies associated with Keynesianism, but also in the logic of the cycle of mass production and mass consumption embodied in so-called 'Fordist' production methods. In those industrial societies which did not become communist, a certain social compromise was reached between capitalist business interests and working people. In exchange for the survival of the capitalist system and the general quietening of protest against the inequalities it produced, business interests

learned to accept certain limitations on their capacity to use their power. And democratic political capacity concentrated at the level of the nation state was able to guarantee those limitations, as firms were largely subordinate to the authority of national states.

This pattern of development was seen in its purest form in Scandinavia, the Netherlands and the UK. Elsewhere there were important differences. Although the USA started alongside Scandinavia with major welfare reforms in the 1930s, the general weakness of the labour movement in that country led to a gradual attrition of its early advances in welfare policy and industrial relations during the 1950s, though it remained broadly Keynesian in economic policy approach until the 1980s; the essential democracy of the mass-production, mass-consumption US economy has continued to reproduce itself. The West German state, in contrast, did not embark on Keynesian demand management until the late 1960s, but did have very strongly institutionalized industrial relations and, eventually, a strong welfare state. In France and Italy the process was less clear. There was an ambiguous combination of concessions to working-class demands to weaken the attractions of communism combined with rejection of direct representation of workers' interests, partly because these were predominantly borne by communist parties and unions. Spain and Portugal did not enter the democratic period at all until the 1970s, just when the conditions which had prolonged the post-war model were coming to an end; and Greek democracy was interrupted by civil war and several years of military dictatorship.

The high level of widespread political involvement of the late 1940s and early 1950s was partly a result of the intensely important and public task of post-war reconstruction, and in a few countries also a residue of the intensified public character of life during war itself. As

such it could not be expected to be sustained for many years. Elites soon learned how to manage and manipulate. People became disillusioned, bored or preoccupied with the business of everyday life. The growing complexity of issues after the major initial achievements of reform made it increasingly difficult to take up informed positions, to make intelligent comment, or even to know what 'side' one was on. Participation in political organizations declined almost everywhere, and eventually even the minimal act of voting was beset by apathy. Nevertheless, the basic democratic imperatives of an economy dependent on the cycle of mass production and mass consumption sustained by public spending remained the main policy impetus of the mid-century moment until the mid-1970s.

The oil crises of that decade tested to destruction the capacity of the Keynesian system to manage inflation. The rise of the service economy reduced the role played by manual workers in sustaining the production/consumption cycle. The effect of this was considerably delayed in West Germany, Austria, Japan and, to some extent, Italy, where manufacturing continued to thrive and to employ growing numbers longer than elsewhere. And matters were very considerably different in Spain, Portugal and Greece, where the working classes were just beginning to enjoy the kind of political influence that their northern cousins had known for several decades. This ushered in the brief period when social democracy seemed to take a summer holiday: the Baltic Scandinavian countries which had long been its stronghold moved to the political right, while parties of the left became significant in governments in several Mediterranean countries. But the interlude was brief. Although these southern governments did have considerable achievements in expanding the previously minimal welfare states of their countries (Maravall 1997), social democracy never became deeply embedded.

The working class did not acquire the kind of strength that had been possible elsewhere during the high tide of industrialism.

Worse still, in Italy, Greece and Spain these governments became enmeshed in scandals of political corruption. By the late 1990s it had become clear that corruption was by no means limited to parties of the left or to countries of the south, but had become a widespread feature of political life (Della Porta 2000; Della Porta and Mény 1995; Della Porta and Vannucci 1999). Indeed, corruption is a powerful indicator of the poor health of democracy, as it signals a political class which has become cynical, amoral and cut off from scrutiny and from the public. A sad initial lesson demonstrated by the southern European cases, and soon after repeated in Belgium, France and then occasionally in Germany and the United Kingdom, was that parties of the left were by no means immune to a phenomenon which should have been anathema to their movements and parties.

By the late 1980s the global deregulation of financial markets had shifted the emphasis of economic dynamism away from mass consumption and on to stock exchanges. First in the USA and the UK, but soon spreading in eager imitation, the maximization of shareholder value became the main indicator of economic success (Dore 2000); debates about a wider stakeholder economy went very quiet. Everywhere the share in income taken by labour as opposed to capital, which had risen steadily for decades, began to decline again. The democratic economy had been tamed alongside the democratic polity. The USA continued to enjoy its reputation as the global exemplar of democracy, and by the early 1990s became again, as during the post-war period, the unquestioned model for everyone seeking to be associated with dynamism and modernity. However, the social model now presented by the USA was very different from what it had been in the earlier period. Then, for most Europeans and the Japanese it represented a creative compromise between a vigorous capitalism and highly wealthy elites, on the one hand, and egalitarian values, strong trade unions, and the welfare policies of the New Deal, on the other. European conservatives had largely believed that there was no space for a positive-sum exchange between them and the masses, a belief which led many of them to support fascist and Nazi oppression and terror in the inter-war period. When those approaches to the popular challenge collapsed in war and ignominy, they had reached eagerly for the American compromise based on the mass-production economy. It is in this way as much as in its military achievements during the war that the USA established a legitimate claim to be the world's principal champion of democracy.

However, during the Reagan years the USA changed fundamentally. Its welfare provision had become residual, its unions marginalized, and its divisions between rich and poor had started to resemble those of Third World countries, reversing the normal historical association between modernization and the reduction of inequalities. This was a US example which elites throughout the world, including those in countries emerging from communism, could embrace with open arms. At the same time US concepts of democracy increasingly equated it with limited government within an unrestrained capitalist economy and reduced the democratic component to the holding of elections.

Democratic crisis? What crisis?

Given the difficulty of sustaining anything approaching maximal democracy, declines from democratic moments

must be accepted as inevitable, barring major new moments of crisis and change which permit a new re-engagement – or, more realistically in a society in which universal suffrage has been achieved, the emergence of new identities within the existing framework which change the shape of popular participation. As we shall see, these possibilities do occur, and are important. For much of the time, however, we must expect an entropy of democracy. It then becomes important to understand the forces at work within this and to adjust our approach to political participation to it. Egalitarians cannot reverse the arrival of post-democracy, but we must learn to cope with it – softening, amending, sometimes challenging it – rather than simply accepting it.

In the following discussion I try to explore some of the deeper causes of the phenomenon, and then ask what we can do about it. First, however, we must look in more detail at doubts which many will still entertain at my initial statement that all is not well with the state of our democracy.

It can be argued that democracy is currently enjoying one of its most splendid periods. Not only have there been the major extensions of elected government referred to at the outset, but closer to home, within the so-called 'advanced countries', it can clearly be argued that politicians receive less deference and uncritical respect from the public and mass media than perhaps ever before. Government and its secrets are increasingly laid bare to the democratic gaze. There are insistent and often successful calls for more open government and for constitutional reforms to make governments more responsible to the people. Surely, we today live in a *more* democratic age than in any 'democratic moment' of the third quarter of the twentieth century? Politicians were then trusted and respected by naïve and deferential voters in a way that they

did not deserve. What seems from one perspective to be manipulation of opinion by today's politicians can be viewed from another as politicians so worried about the views of a subtle and complex electorate that they have to devote enormous resources to discovering what it thinks, and then respond anxiously to it. Surely it is an advance in democratic quality that politicians are today more afraid than were their predecessors to shape the political agenda, preferring to take much of it from the findings of market research techniques and opinion polls?

This optimistic view of current democracy has nothing to say about the fundamental problem of the power of corporate elites. This is the theme at the centre of concern in the following chapters of this book. But there is also an important difference between two concepts of the active democratic citizen, which is not recognized in optimistic discussions. On the one hand is positive citizenship, where groups and organizations of people together develop collective identities, perceive the interests of these identities, and autonomously formulate demands based on them, which they pass on to the political system. On the other hand is the negative activism of blame and complaint, where the main aim of political controversy is to see politicians called to account, their heads placed on blocks, and their public and private integrity held up to intimate scrutiny. This difference is closely paralleled by two different conceptions of citizens' rights. Positive rights stress citizens' abilities to participate in their polity: the right to vote, to form and join organizations, to receive accurate information. Negative rights are those which protect the individual against others, especially against the state: rights to sue, rights to property.

Democracy needs both of these approaches to citizenship, but at the present time the negative is receiving considerably more emphasis. This is worrying, because it

is obviously positive citizenship that represents democracy's creative energies. The negative model, for all its aggression against the political class, shares with the passive approach to democracy the idea that politics is essentially an affair of elites, who are then subjected to blaming and shaming by an angry populace of spectators when we discover that they got something wrong. Paradoxically, every time that we regard a failure or disaster as being somehow resolved when a hapless minister or official is forced to resign, we connive at a model which regards government and politics as the business of small groups of elite decision-makers alone.

Finally, one might question the strength of the moves towards 'open government', transparency and openness to investigation and criticism which can otherwise be seen as the contribution to the general political good that neo-liberalism has made since the last quarter of the twentieth century, since these moves are currently being countered by measures for tightened state security and secrecy. These follow a number of developments. In many countries there has been a perceived rise in crime and violence, and anxiety about the immigration of people from poor countries into the rich world and about foreigners in general. These all achieved a symbolic climax in the murderous and suicidal air crashes engineered by Islamic terrorists in the USA on 11 September 2001. Since then, in the USA and Europe alike, there have been, on the one hand, new justifications for state secrecy and the refusal of rights to scrutinize state activities, and, on the other, new rights for states to spy on their populations and invade recently won rights of privacy. It is likely that in coming years many of the gains in government transparency of the 1980s and 1990s will be reversed, apart from those which are of primary interest to global financial interests.

Alternatives to electoral politics

Different evidence to contest my claim that democracy is weakening comes from the lively world of causes and pressure groups which are growing in importance. Do these not constitute the embodiment of a healthy positive citizenship? There is a danger that one might concentrate too much on politics in the narrow sense of party and electoral struggle, and ignore the displacement of creative citizenship away from this arena to the wider one of cause groups. Organizations on behalf of human rights, the homeless, the Third World, the environment and many other causes could be said to provide a far richer democracy, because they enable us to choose highly specific causes, whereas working through a party requires us to accept a whole package. Further, the range of objects of action available becomes far more extensive than just helping politicians get elected. And modern means of communication like the Internet make it ever easier and cheaper to organize and co-ordinate new cause groups.

This is a very powerful argument. I do not fully dissent from it, and as we shall see in the final chapter, within it lie some of the answers to our present predicament. However, it also embodies some weaknesses. We need first to distinguish between those cause activities that pursue an essentially political agenda, seeking to secure action or legislation or spending by public authorities, and those that tackle tasks directly and ignore politics. (Of course, some groups in the former category may also do the latter, but that is not the issue here.)

Cause groups that set their face against political engagement have grown considerably in recent times. This is partly itself a reflection of the malaise of democracy and

widespread cynicism about its capacities. This is particularly the case in the USA, where left-wing disgust at the monopolization of politics by big business interests joins right-wing rejection of big government to celebrate non-political civic virtue. One notes here the extraordinary popularity among US liberals of Robert Putnam's book on civil society *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam, with Leonardi and Nanetti, 1993). This presents a rather idealized account of the way in which in many parts of Italy strong norms and practices of community co-operation and trust have developed without reference to the state. Italian critics have pointed out that Putnam ignores the fundamental role of *local* politics in sustaining this model (Bagnasco 1999; Piselli 1999; Trigilia 1999).

In the UK too there has been a major and highly diverse growth of self-help groups, communitarian networks, neighbourhood watch schemes and charitable activities trying desperately to fill the gaps in care left by a retreating welfare state. Most of these developments are interesting, valuable, worthy. However, precisely because they involve turning away from politics, they cannot be cited as indicators of the health of democracy, which is by definition political. Indeed, some such activities can flourish in non-democratic societies, where political involvement is either dangerous or impossible, and where the state is particularly likely to be indifferent to social problems.

More complex are the second type of cause organizations: politically oriented campaigns and lobbies which, though not seeking to influence or organize votes, do work directly to affect government policy. Vitality of this kind is evidence of a strong *liberal* society; but this is not the same as a strong *democracy*. Since we have become so accustomed to the joint idea of liberal democracy we tend today not to see that there are two separate elements at work. Democracy requires certain rough equalities in a real capacity to affect political outcomes by all citizens. Liberalism requires free, diverse and ample opportunities to affect those outcomes. These are related and mutually dependent conditions. Maximal democracy certainly cannot flourish without strong liberalism. But the two are different things, and at points even conflict.

The difference was well understood in nineteenth-century bourgeois liberal circles, who were acutely aware of a tension: the more that there was insistence on the criterion of equality of political capacity, the more likely was it that rules and restrictions would be developed to reduce inequalities, threatening liberalism's insistence on free and multiple means of action.

Take a simple and important example. If no restrictions are placed on the funds which parties and their friends may use to promote their cause and on the kinds of media resources and advertising which may be purchased, then parties favoured by wealthy interests will have major advantages in winning elections. Such a regime favours liberalism but hinders democracy, because there is nothing like a level playing field of competition as required by the equality criterion. This is the case with US politics. In contrast, state funding for parties, restrictions of spending on campaigns, rules about buying time on television for political purposes, help ensure rough equality and therefore assist democracy, but at the expense of curtailing liberty.

The world of politically active causes, movements and lobbies belongs to liberal rather than to democratic politics, in that few rules govern the modalities for trying to exercise influence. The resources available to different causes vary massively and systematically. Lobbies on behalf of business interests always have an enormous advantage, for two separate reasons. First, as argued convincingly by Lindblom (1977), a disillusioned former celebrator of

the US model of pluralism, business interests are able to threaten that, unless government listens to them, their sector will not be successful, which will in turn jeopardize government's own core concern with economic success. Second, they can wield enormous funds for their lobbying, not just because they are rich to start with, but because success of the lobbying will bring increased profits to the business: the lobbying costs constitute investment. Non-business interests can rarely claim anything so potent as damage to economic success; and success of their lobbying will not bring material reward (this is true by definition of a non-business interest), so their costs represent expenditure, not investment.

Those who argue that they can work best for, say, healthy food, by setting up a cause group to lobby government and ignore electoral politics, must remember that the food and chemicals industries will bring battleships against their rowing boats. A flourishing liberalism certainly enables all manner of causes, good and bad, to seek political influence, and makes possible a rich array of public participation in politics. But unless it is balanced by healthy democracy in the strict sense it will always proceed in a systematically distorted way. Of course, electoral party politics is also disfigured by the inequalities of funding produced by the role of business interests. But the extent to which this is true depends on how much of liberalism is permitted to leak into democracy. The more that a level playing field is ensured in such matters as party funding and media access, the more true the democracy. On the other hand, the more that the modalities of liberal politicking flourish while electoral democracy atrophies, the more vulnerable the latter becomes to distorting inequalities, and the weaker the democratic quality of the polity. A lively world of cause groups is evidence that we have the potential to come closer to maximal democracy.

But this cannot be fully evaluated until we examine what use post-democratic forces are also making of the opportunities of liberal society.

Similar arguments can be used to refute a further US neo-liberal argument that modern citizens no longer need the state as much as their predecessors did; that they are more self-reliant and more able and willing to achieve their goals through the market economy; and that therefore it is reasonable that they should be less concerned about political matters (for example, see Hardin 2000). But corporate lobbies show no signs of losing interest in using the state to achieve favours for themselves. As the current situation in the USA shows, these lobbies cluster at least as thickly around a non-interventionist, neo-liberal state with low public spending levels as around high-spending welfare states. *Indeed, the more that the state withdraws from providing for the lives of ordinary people, making them apathetic about politics, the more easily can corporate interests use it more or less unobserved as their private milch-cow.* Failure to recognize this is the fundamental naïveté of neo-liberal thought.

The symptoms of post-democracy

If we have only two concepts – democracy and non-democracy – we cannot take discussion about the health of democracy very far. The idea of post-democracy helps us describe situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after a democratic moment; when powerful minority interests have become far more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands; where

people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down publicity campaigns. This is not the same as non-democracy, but describes a period in which we have, as it were, come out the other side of the parabola of democracy. There are many symptoms that this is occurring in contemporary advanced societies, constituting evidence that we are indeed moving further away from the maximal ideal of democracy towards the post-democratic model. To pursue this further we must look briefly at the use of 'post-' terms in general.

The idea of 'post-' is thrown around rather easily in contemporary debate: post-industrial, post-modern, post-liberal, post-ironic. However, it can mean something very precise. Essential is the idea mentioned above of an historical parabola through which the thing being attached to the 'post-' prefix can be seen as moving. This will be true whatever one is talking about, so let us first talk abstractly about 'post-*X*'. Time period 1 is pre-*X*, and will have certain characteristics associated with lack of *X*. Time period 2 is the high tide of *X*, when many things are touched by it and changed from their state in time 1. Time period 3 is post-*X*. This implies that something new has come into existence to reduce the importance of *X* by going beyond it in some sense; some things will therefore look different from both time 1 and time 2. However, *X* will still have left its mark; there will be strong traces of it still around; while some things start to look rather like they did in time 1 again. 'Post-' periods should therefore be expected to be very complex. (If the above seems too abstract, the reader can try replacing '*X*' by 'industrial' every time it occurs, to have the point illustrated with a very prominent example.)

Post-democracy can be understood in this way. At one level the changes associated with it give us a move *beyond* democracy to a form of political responsiveness

more flexible than the confrontations that produced the ponderous compromises of the mid-century years. To some extent we have gone beyond the idea of rule by the people to challenge the idea of rule at all. This is reflected in the shifting balance within citizenship referred to above: the collapse of deference to government, and in particular in the treatment of politics by the mass media; the insistence on total openness by government; and the reduction of politicians to something more resembling shopkeepers than rulers, anxiously seeking to discover what their 'customers' want in order to stay in business.

The political world then makes its own response to the unattractive and subservient position in which these changes threaten to place it. Unable to return to earlier positions of authority and respect, unable to discern easily what demands are coming to it from the population, it has recourse to the well-known techniques of contemporary political manipulation, which give it all the advantages of discovering the public's views without the latter being able to take control of the process for itself. It also imitates the methods of other worlds that have a more certain and self-confident sense of themselves: show business and the marketing of goods.

From this emerge the familiar paradoxes of contemporary politics: both the techniques for manipulating public opinion and the mechanisms for opening politics to scrutiny become ever more sophisticated, while the content of party programmes and the character of party rivalry become ever more bland and vapid. One cannot call this kind of politics non- or anti-democratic, because so much of it results from politicians' anxieties about their relations with citizens. At the same time it is difficult to dignify it as democracy itself, because so many citizens have been reduced to the role of manipulated, passive, rare participants.

It is in this context that we can understand remarks made by certain leading British New Labour figures concerning the need to develop institutions of democracy going beyond the idea of elected representatives in a parliament, and citing the use of focus groups as an example (Mulgan 1997). The idea is preposterous. A focus group is entirely in the control of its organizers; they select the participants, the issues and the way in which they are to be discussed and the outcome analysed. However, politicians in a period of post-democracy confront a public that is confused and passive in developing its own agenda. It is certainly understandable that they should see a focus group as a more scientific guide to popular opinion than the crude and inadequate devices of their mass party claiming to be the voice of the people, which is the alternative historically offered by the labour movement's model of democracy.

Virtually all the formal components of democracy survive within post-democracy, which is compatible with the complexity of a 'post-' period. However, we should expect to see some erosion in the longer term, as we move, blasé and disillusioned, further and further away from maximal democracy. The largely quiescent response of US public opinion to the scandal of the 2000 presidential election was evidence that this had happened. In Britain there are signs of weariness with democracy in both Conservative and New Labour approaches to local government, the functions of which are gradually disappearing, with little opposition, into either central government agencies or private firms. We should also expect the removal of some fundamental supports of democracy and therefore a parabolic return to some elements characteristic of pre-democracy. The globalization of business interests and fragmentation of the rest of the population does this, shifting political advantage away from those seeking to reduce inequalities of wealth and power in favour

of those wishing to return them to levels of the pre-democratic past.

Some of the substantive consequences of this can already be seen in many countries. The welfare state gradually becomes residualized as something for the deserving poor rather than a range of universal rights of citizenship; trade unions exist on the margins of society; the role of the state as policeman and incarcerator returns to prominence; the wealth gap between rich and poor grows; taxation becomes less redistributive; politicians respond primarily to the concerns of a handful of business leaders whose special interests are allowed to be translated into public policy; the poor gradually cease to take any interest in the process whatsoever and do not even vote, returning voluntarily to the position they were forced to occupy in pre-democracy. That the USA, the world's most future-oriented society and in the past a pioneer of democratic advance, should also be the one to show the strongest such return to an earlier time is only explicable in terms of the parabola of democracy.

There is profound ambiguity in the post-democratic tendency towards growing suspicion of politics and the desire to submit it to close regulation, again seen most prominently in the USA. An important element of the democratic moment was the popular demand that the power of government should be used to challenge concentrations of private power. An atmosphere of cynicism about politics and politicians, low expectations of their achievements, and close control of their scope and power therefore suits the agenda of those wishing to rein back the active state, as in the form of the welfare state and Keynesian state, precisely in order to liberate and deregulate that private power. At least in western societies, unregulated private power was as much a feature of pre-democratic societies as unregulated state power.

Post-democracy also makes a distinctive contribution to the character of political communication. If one looks back at the different forms of political discussion of the inter- and post-war decades one is surprised at the relative similarity of language and style in government documents, serious journalism, popular journalism, party manifestos and politicians' public speeches. There were certainly differences of vocabulary and complexity between a serious official report designed for the policy-making community and a mass-circulation newspaper, but compared with today the gap was small. Today the language of documents discussed among policy-makers themselves remains more or less similar to what it was then. But mass-circulation newspaper discussion, government material aimed at the mass public, and party manifestos are totally different. They rarely aspire to any complexity of language or argument. Someone accustomed to such a style suddenly requiring to access a document of serious debate would be at a loss as to how to understand it. Television news presentations, hovering uneasily between the two worlds, probably thereby provide a major service in helping people make such links.

We have become accustomed to hear politicians not speaking like normal people, but presenting glib and finely honed statements which have a character all of their own. We call these 'sound bites', and, having dismissively labelled them, think no more about what is going on. Like the language of tabloid newspapers and party literature, this form of communication resembles neither the ordinary speech of the person in the street, nor the language of true political discussion. It is designed to be beyond the reach of scrutiny by either of these two main modes of democratic discourse.

This raises several questions. The mid-century population was on average less well educated than today's. Were they able to understand the political discussions presented to them? They certainly turned out for elections more consistently than their successors; and in many countries they regularly bought newspapers that addressed them at that higher level, paying for them a higher proportion of their incomes than we do today.

To understand what has happened since the middle of the last century, we need to look at a slightly broader historical picture. Taken by surprise, first by the demand for, then by the reality of, democracy, politicians struggled for the first part of the century to find means of addressing the new mass public. For a period it seemed that only manipulative demagogues like Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin had discovered the secret of power through mass communication. Democratic politicians were placed on roughly equal discursive terms with their electorates through the clumsiness of their attempts at mass speech. Then the US advertising industry began to develop its skills, with a particular boost coming from the development of commercial television. The persuasion business was born as a profession. By far the dominant part of this remained devoted to the art of selling goods and services, but politics and other users of persuasion tagged along eagerly behind, extrapolating from the innovations of the advertising industry and making themselves as analogous as possible to the business of selling products so that they could reap maximum advantage from the new techniques.

We have now become so accustomed to this that we take it for granted that a party's programme is a 'product', and that politicians try to 'market' us their message. But it is not really at all obvious. Other successful models of how to talk to large numbers of people were potentially available among religious preachers, schoolteachers and serious popular journalists. A particularly striking example of the last was the British writer George Orwell, who strove to

make mass political communication both an art form and something deeply serious. (See Crick 1980 for a particularly fine account of this.) From the 1930s to the 1950s there was considerable emulation of the Orwellian approach in British popular journalism. But little of it survives today. Popular journalism, like politics, began to model itself on advertising copy: very brief messages requiring extremely low concentration spans; the use of words to form high-impact images instead of arguments appealing to the intellect. Advertising is not a form of rational dialogue. It does not build up a case based on evidence, but associates its products with a particular imagery. You cannot answer it back. Its aim is not to engage in discussion but to persuade to buy. Adoption of its methods has helped politicians to cope with the problem of communicating to a mass public; but it has not served the cause of democracy itself.

A further form taken by the degradation of mass political communication is the growing personalization of electoral politics. Totally personality-based election campaigning used to be characteristic of dictatorships and of electoral politics in societies with weakly developed systems of parties and debate. With occasional exceptions (like Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle) it was much less prominent during the democratic moment; its insistent return now is another aspect of the parabola. Promotion of the claimed charismatic qualities of a party leader, and pictures and film footage of his or her person striking appropriate poses, increasingly take the place of debate over issues and conflicting interests. Italian politics was long free of this, until in the 2001 general election Silvio Berlusconi organized the entire centre-right campaign around his own persona, using omnipresent and carefully rejuvenated pictures of himself, a strong contrast with the far more party-oriented style that Italian politics

had adopted after the fall of Mussolini. Instead of using this as the basis of attack, the immediate and sole response of the centre-left was to identify a sufficiently photogenic individual within its own leadership in order to try to copy as much as possible the Berlusconi campaign.

More extreme still was the role of personality campaigning in the exceptional Californian gubernatorial election of 2003, when the film actor Arnold Schwarzenegger waged a successful campaign with no policy content that was based almost entirely on the fact that he was a well-known Hollywood star. In the first Dutch general election of 2002, Pim Fortuyn not only based a new party entirely around his own person, but named the party after himself (Lijst Pim Fortuyn), with such dramatic success that it continued despite (or because of) his own assassination shortly before the election. The party then collapsed through internal feuding soon afterwards. The Fortuyn phenomenon is both an example of post-democracy and a kind of attempted response to it. It used a charismatic personality to articulate a vague and incoherent set of policies, which reflected no clearly articulated interests except unease about numbers of recent immigrants into the Netherlands. It appealed to sections of a population that have lost their former sense of political identity, though it does not help them find a new one. Dutch society is a particularly acute case of rapid loss of political identity. Not only has it, like most other Western European societies, experienced a loss of clear class identities, it has also experienced a rapid loss in salience of the religious identities that were until the 1970s fundamentally important in enabling Dutch people to find their specific cultural as well as political identities within their wider society.

However, although some of those who have tried to articulate a 'new', post-identity approach to politics, such as Tony Blair or Silvio Berlusconi, celebrate the decline of

such kinds of identity, Fortuyn's movement also expressed dissatisfaction with that very state of affairs. Much of his campaigning lamented the lack of 'clarity' in the political positions adopted by most other Dutch politicians, who he claimed (with considerable accuracy) tried to solve problems of declining clarity in the profile of the electorate itself by appealing to a vague middle mass. In finding an appeal to identity based on hostility to immigrants, Fortuyn was not so unusual; this has become a feature of contemporary politics almost everywhere – an issue to which we shall return.

In addition to being an aspect of the decline from serious discussion, the recourse to show business for ideas of how to attract interest in politics, the growing incapacity of modern citizens to work out what their interests are, and the increasing technical complexity of issues, the personality phenomenon can be explained as a response to some of the problems of post-democracy itself. Although no-one involved in politics has any intention of abandoning the advertising industry model of communication, identification of specific cases of it, in current British jargon stigmatized as 'spin', is tantamount to an accusation of dishonesty. Politicians have thereby acquired a reputation for deep untrustworthiness as a personality characteristic. The increasing exposure of their private lives to media gaze, as blaming, complaining and investigating replace constructive citizenship, has the same consequence. Electoral competition then takes the form of a search for individuals of character and integrity. The search is futile because a mass election does not provide data on which to base such assessments. Instead what occurs is that politicians promote images of their personal wholesomeness and integrity, while their opponents only intensify the search through the records of their private lives to find evidence of the opposite.

Exploring post-democracy

In the chapters that follow I shall explore both the causes and the political consequences of the slide towards post-democratic politics. The causes are complex. Entropy of maximal democracy has to be expected, but the question then arises of what emerges to fill the political vacuum that this creates. Today the most obvious force doing this has been economic globalization. Large corporations have frequently outgrown the governance capacity of individual nation states. If they do not like the regulatory or fiscal regime in one country, they threaten to move to another, and increasingly states compete in their willingness to offer them favourable conditions, as they need the investment. Democracy has simply not kept pace with capitalism's rush to the global. The best it can manage are certain international groupings of states, but even the most important by far of these, the European Union, is a clumsy pygmy in relation to the agile corporate giants. And anyway its democratic quality, even by minimal standards, is weak. I shall take up some of these themes in chapter 2, where we shall consider the limitations of globalization as well as the importance of a separate but related phenomenon: the rise of the firm as an institution, its implications for the typical mechanisms of democratic government, and therefore its role in bending the parabola.

Alongside the strengthening of the global firm and firms in general has been a weakening of the political importance of ordinary working people. This partly reflects occupational changes that will be discussed in chapter 3. The decline of those occupations that generated the labour organizations that powered the rise of popular political demands has left us with a fragmented, politically passive

population that has not generated organizations to articulate its demands. More than that, the decline of Keynesianism and of mass production has reduced the economic importance of the mass of the population: the parabola of working-class politics.

These changes in the political place of major social groupings have important consequences for the relationship between political parties and the electorate. This is particularly relevant to parties of the left, which historically have represented the groups now being pushed back to the margins of political importance; but since many of the problems concern the mass electorate in general the issue extends much wider. The model of parties developed for coping with the rise of democracy has gradually and subtly been transformed into something else, that of the post-democratic party. This is the subject of chapter 4.

Many readers might object that, especially by the time we have reached the discussion in chapter 4, I am myself concerned only with a self-referential political world. Does it matter to ordinary citizens what kinds of person walks the corridors of political influence? Is it not just all a courtly game with no real social consequences? One can refute that contention by looking at many policy areas, demonstrating to what extent the growing dominance of business lobbies over most other interests has distorted the real policy delivery side of government activity, with real consequences for citizens. There is here space to select just one example. In chapter 5 I consider the impact of post-democratic politics on the currently important theme of organizational reform of public services. Finally, in chapter 6, I ask if there is anything that we can do about the disturbing tendencies that have been described.