The Emergence of British Political Parties

Introduction

By the 1880s the organisational outlines of modern political parties were visible. Both the Liberal and Conservative Parties possessed coherent extra-parliamentary organisations both at national and local level. These organisations were structures primarily designed to mobilise the voters, generate election funds and arrange for the nomination of local candidates. Neither the Liberal nor the Conservative Party organisations were successful in gaining any appreciable influence over the policy-making processes of their parliamentary parties, though the leadership could not entirely ignore the views of their rank and file, particularly in the Liberal Party. Power was to remain firmly in the hands of the parliamentary parties during and after the development of these extra-parliamentary structures.

The Irish Home Rule Party did not differ from the Conservative and Liberal models with regard to this basic power relationship, but it did display, particularly under the leadership of Parnell, a greater degree of parliamentary cohesion, exhibiting fewer of the coalition aspects of the two larger parties.

The Labour Party, founded in 1900, did give indications of being different with regard to the distribution of power. It was the only one of the parties to be formed outside Parliament. The extra-parliamentary organisations of the Conserva-
tives, Liberals and Home Rulers emerged to ensure the continuance of parties already having parliamentary representation. The Labour Party gave its extra-parliamentary wing much more policy-making power. However, in the long term this power was to be no match for the growth in prestige of the parliamentary party.

The new party structures did not represent a complete break with the past. *Ad hoc* committees, especially for the purposes of nominating candidates, and registration societies existed before the extension of the franchise in 1867. The new party structures were built on these and on various groups that emerged to agitate for parliamentary reform in the 1860s. In the two main parties the new structures reflected these diverse origins. These parties were coalitions before and following the emergence of the extra-parliamentary organisations.

Yet it was not merely the extension of the franchise in 1867 and 1884 that facilitated the rise of party organisations. Certainly these reforms were important, and the larger electorates, coupled with the other electoral reforms outlined in Chapter 1, did demand more sophisticated means of conducting elections. But the emergence of these modern parties also owed much to other historical developments. The growth of a national press and the rise of organised Nonconformity were two important factors in the 1860s and 1870s. In the late nineteenth century electoral issues became less community-based and more national. Technological developments, especially in transport, the continued growth in large cities and the decline of agriculture as a source of employment again tended to produce national constituencies. Above all, it was the emergence of class issues, particularly in the 1880s, that helped to polarise British politics, changing the Liberal Party, strengthening the Conservatives, and giving birth to the Labour Party.

Yet again care must be taken to avoid imposing a particular pattern of development on the process of party evolution. Economic cycles, levels of unemployment, the intrusion of special issues such as Ireland and the impact of political personalities such as William Gladstone prevent any historical neatness. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the twentieth