Government in the UK is party government. We can only approach a proper understanding of governing in the 1990s if we take time to examine the functioning of the main political parties. In this chapter, we shall examine some of the manifest, or alleged, failings of the party system, before going on to consider intra-party developments in more details.

The Party System: Some Deficiencies

It can be argued that the UK party system has failed to fulfil a number of functions crucial to the proper running of government in an adversarial polity.

The system has failed to:

- Offer choice on key policy issues.
- Provide for an alternation of parties in government.
- Provide an opposition party competent to deliver effective scrutiny or hold government properly to account.
- Produce governments truly representative of the nation at large.

Although it is by no means necessary to accept every item of this litany of shortcomings to be convinced that the modern British party system is failing to deliver in key respects, it is necessary to explore these points in a little more detail in order to assess their validity.
Such an exercise will put us in a better position to make judgements on the role of parties in government today, help us more fully to appreciate that few of the certainties that buttressed arguments in the older or more traditional textbooks and which became accepted wisdom concerning the role in government of political parties can any longer be taken for granted. British party politics may truly be said to be in uncharted waters. Let us look in a little more detail at the ways the parties can be said to have failed the system of government.

On perhaps the most significant issue facing the voters in the 1992 election, each of the three major parties (and also the Nationalists) were in favour of fuller participation in the European Community: there was no clearly expressed alternative offered to the electorate. Yet the textbooks tell us that one of the principal functions of political parties in government is to simplify issues so that voters can be offered a genuine choice on major issues. A second advantage that adversarial politics is supposed to provide for government is the fairly regular alternation in power of the two parties. In 1992 Labour suffered a fourth successive electoral defeat, so if it finally forms a government in 1997 (say), it will have been out of office for eighteen years and virtually a whole generation of leading figures will have spent their most effective years in opposition. A Labour front bench will be as ignorant of the realities of holding power as the leaders of minority parties are rightly accused of being now. When the Australian Labor Party under Gough Whitlam finally came to power after 23 years in opposition, its programme provoked an unprecedented constitutional crisis. Thirdly, the adversarial system is supposed to provide Britain with an opposition which not only keeps the government in check by its vigilance but is able to offer a spirited philosophically-based alternative set of policies persuasive enough, should it be put to the test, to convince the electorate to support it. Yet for all of the 1980s the only effective opposition to Conservative governments came from the Conservative back benches and the House of Lords. When these two agents of opposition palpably failed, as in the debate on the poll tax, a profoundly damaging piece of legislation found its way on to the statute book. When eventually, in November 1990, there was a change in the premiership, and (apparently at least) a change of