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Mandatory Reselection and the Evolution of Britain's Labour Party

FORREST H. ARMSTRONG

Consider this fascinating set of similarities between British and American politics over the last 25 years. In each country, disastrous electoral defeat (here in 1968, there in 1979) produced massive dissatisfaction by the left wing activists in the left-most party (Democrats and Labour) that led to their capturing the party and rejecting its former leaders. Most importantly, the central issue on the reformers' agenda in each country was to change the rules for nominating candidates for national office (the Member of Parliament (MP) in Britain, the President here) in the name of intra-party democracy.

Apparently, neither party yet thinks it has gotten the new rules right, since each has revised those rules before every election since the changes were first instituted. The reforms have had two effects, one intended and one not: in each case the party's left wing gained power, rejected some of its centrists, and moved its center of gravity to the left. Moving leftward, though, must not have been what either country's electorate wanted, since except for the Democrats' aberrant Watergate-induced victory in 1976, neither left-wing party has won a general election since first enacting the reforms!

In America, the first step incumbent representatives must take when seeking reelection is to win renomination from their party in their district. In Britain, though, incumbent MPs were in essence automatically renominated; contested nominations took place only in constituencies (their term for what we call electoral districts) where the party had no incumbent. Given the level of job security afforded by a system in which each party enjoys a very large number of "safe" parliamentary seats and where candidates win or lose general elections for those seats based almost entirely on their party affiliation, many MPs could expect to be reelected for life while having had to face only one nomination contest—the one which preceded their first Parliamentary victory.

So it remains for Tory MPs, but no longer for Labour, where a decade ago reformers from the party's left wing, campaigning in the name of intra-party democracy were able to force through mandatory reselection—the requirement that all incumbent Labour MPs stand for renomination by their constituencies once in the life of every Parliament. I predicted that mandatory reselection is fashionable among the left that significant and significant if. Just as when I first heard about a highly significant, shift in power relations among power relations among a cadre of serious people something akin to Perhaps the American political situation reminds us of the developments in the American Political Science Review.

Its essence is this: the majority in some party is not thought to be the most acceptable by the party's membership. The policy decision of the party is that of the majority of the party membership organized to produce a majority of the party. At one level, the Labour Party has organized to produce a movement great internal strife over the reins of its annual conference, a movement that has affiliated with the Labour Party in each of the country's constituencies. The conference sets party policy.
When I first heard about it, I thought mandatory reselection would have to be highly significant, since it offered the means by which to change dramatically the power relations among the party's many factions; moreover, I thought it might presage some major change in British political culture—perhaps even the onset of something akin to populism, an idea which has long been a significant part of American political thinking but which never has taken hold in Britain.

When I learned that nothing at all had been published in this country about such a potentially important change, I decided to make it the subject of my sabbatical. During fall, 1990, I was able to conduct extended interviews with a diverse group of British political scientists, Labour party officials and MPs, ranging from former Privy Councillors to activists responsible for initiating the campaign for mandatory reselection a generation ago to centrist members of the party's National Executive Committee who had originally opposed mandatory reselection and would gladly see it ended. Based on my work to date, I submit that the reform had significant short-term effects and reflects significant long-term changes in British politics—but not necessarily the ones I had expected.

Britain has long provided the model for American political scientists who have thought that our politics would be improved if we had a system of strong, responsible parties of the sort Leon Epstein described in his 1979 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association:

Its essence is a sufficiently, but not an absolutely, cohesive parliamentary majority in support of executive office-holding leaders and so of policies accepted by those leaders as well as by the bulk of their partisan followers. Often associated with the model is a mass membership organized in constituency units and represented in national committees and conferences. Their policy-making role is disputed, in fact and in principle, but the model is that of 'responsible-party government' whether the crucial parliamentary majority regards itself as mandated by its organized followers, its largely unorganized voters, or its own judgments.

At one level, the Labour Party takes the idea of mandates seriously and is well organized to produce them. Yet dealing with the mandate has been the source of great internal strife ever since the party's inception. The party's governance is in the hands of its annual Conference, a body representing primarily trade unions that have affiliated with the party and the party's organization of card-carrying activists in each of the country's 650 constituencies (British parlance for electoral districts); Conference sets party policy and helps elect the leader. Between its meetings, the party's
direction is in the hands of a National Executive Committee, more or less a miniature version of Conference. Though MPs may seek to be elected to a seat on either body, they are not formally represented there—a reflection of the party rank-and-file's longstanding distrust of its leadership.

Broadly speaking, representatives can go about their work in one of two ways—as delegates, whose role is to execute precisely the instructions given them by their constituents, or as trustees, who are to deliberate and to act in their constituents' best interests without being limited merely to executing previously-issued instructions. Labour's annual Conference and National Executive Committee give it an especially effective means by which to formulate mandates, and its Constitution defines Labour MPs as agents who are obligated to follow those instructions when in office. Said one modern day reformer, Labour MPs "have no rights more or less than the ordinary card-carrying party member. They are simply the party members to whom has fallen the honour of giving practical expression to the ideals of the Labour movement [as expressed by its members through the party's annual Conference]."

Not surprisingly, though, incumbent MPs, like legislators around the world, typically reject this view of their role. As revered a Labour leader as Keir Hardie vigorously rejected being bound by mandates, and the so-called "conscience" clause, which exempts Labour MPs from having to execute those parts of the mandate that violate their conscience, has been part of the party's Constitution almost from the beginning.

The root of the problem is thus the relationships among three distinct groups: the constituency Labour parties, which each nominate and elect one MP, the national Labour party, which meets annually to set policy and elect leaders, and the party's elected members in Parliament, who often find themselves caught between competing demands from the other two groups.

So long as the party is in the minority, the issue is functionally moot, because in a parliamentary system minority parties have no real chance to act on their principles. But the problem is greatly exacerbated when Labour forms the government. A party is allowed to govern only because it commands a parliamentary majority, and it is expected to use that majority to enact the policies articulated in its election manifesto (platform) which presumably led voters to give it that majority. If it loses that majority, it (and all incumbent MPs) must immediately contest another election and face the possibility of losing office, so everyone expects MPs to support the positions taken by their government.

Labour governments, though, seem consistently to have difficulty reconciling the policy mandates issued by Conference, which are often ideologically "pure" but not always politically feasible, with the pragmatic concerns associated with actually governing the country. Once in office, Labour governments commonly compromise at least some of the socialist principles laid down by a (relatively) radical Conference, thus compounding the tension between the party's members and its own members.

The poor MP is caught in a web of power, decreed that he must follow the Labour government's policies from Conference, and that defections would be divisive both for the party and its incumbent MPs. The problem, as the party itself has recognized, existed within the party's own ranks, a challenger from within the party and from other elements of the national Conference—could be dispensed to aspirants to Labour's national leadership.

To address this imbalance, the party (CLP) once during a period of government, left-wing gadflies like John Austin argues correctly that the "hinge" which sets the reselection would link Labour's national Conference policy to that of the party's leadership. All this was part of a larger democratic process. It even seems less interested in theoretical mechanisms by which the party's leadership could exert a countervailing force on Labour's national leadership. To our American eyes, it stands for renomination by the incumbent without reselection could make certain Labour's leadership was given to the party's left-wing gadflies. Suddenly, the reform of Labour's complex structure and its leadership seemed: (1) it greatly enhanced Labour's latent explicit rules, (2) it enhanced the party's capacity to give Labour's latent leadership coherence to the party's membership.

The results were plain to see. Labour's renomination by their incumbent MPs for seats without trying to change Labour's latent leadership. Many did not.
The poor MP is caught in the middle. Consider, for example, the recent situation surrounding unilateral nuclear disarmament, a policy which Conference, while out of power, decreed that the party would implement if elected. Once in office, though, the Labour government chose not to do so. MPs are expected to vote for their government's policies, but in this instance the policy was at odds with the mandate from Conference, and since Labour had only a bare majority in Parliament, any defections would bring down the government and force a new election in which the party and its incumbent members might lose office. What's the MP to do?

The problem, as the left defined it, was that an asymmetrical power relationship existed within the party: since incumbent MPs never had to face losing office to a challenger from within the party, there was no countervailing force with which other elements of the party—either at the constituency level or at the level of the national Conference—could counter the lure of patronage party leaders or which they could dispense to aspiring MPs even when the party was out of office.

To address this imbalance, the left proposed mandatory reselection: the requirement that each incumbent MP stand for renomination by his constituency Labour party (CLP) once during the life of each Parliament. Tony Benn, former cabinet minister, left-wing gadfly, and easily one of the most fascinating men I've ever met, argues correctly that the linkage between the Member and his constituency is the "hinge" which sets the basis for relationships among all parts of the party. Mandatory reselection would link MPs and their constituents in a recurring and significant way: it would make certain that the hinge swings both ways.

All this was proposed, and ultimately passed, in the name of intra-party democracy. It even sounds vaguely populist. But its supporters seem to have been less interested in theory than in political practicalities: mandatory reselection was the mechanism by which the party's members in Conference and the constituencies could exert a countervailing force on MPs, hence "influence" the tendency of Labour's national leadership to ignore mandates.

To our American eyes it hardly seems exceptional to require that incumbents stand for renomination before each election (even if almost none are actually denied it). But the devil is in the details. As originally passed, the power to reselect MPs was given to the general management committee of each CLP—the place in Labour's complex structure where the hard left's power has long been concentrated. Suddenly, the reform that put great new power in the hands of the CLPs did two other things: (1) it greatly boosted the power of the party's most radical elements and (2) it enhanced the power of the periphery—650 disparate CLPs—thereby exacerbating Labour's latent tendency to fragment and undercutting its ability to present a coherent message to the electorate.

The results were predicable. About two dozen incumbent MPs were denied renomination by their CLPs, and perhaps twice that number resigned their Labour seats without trying to retain them; essentially all were in the party's center or right wings. Many did not leave politics when they left the party, though; instead they
formed a new centrist party, the Social Democrats. With its internal balance tipped by the departures, Labour slid left—pushed along by the need to differentiate itself clearly from the Social Democrats. The result was disaster: Labour lost badly in 1983, the first general election held after mandatory reselection went into effect, and worse yet in 1987.

Mandatory reselection’s short term electoral impact has been clear, but may not be the aspect of it that proves most interesting to political scientists. It is clearly a powerful sanction, one that could enable CLPs interested in doing so to produce MPs who perform their representational duties as agents, not as delegates. One can easily see that the threat of being denied renomination could induce MPs to carry out the will of the party as determined by its annual Conference. But—and here’s the key point—if after winning a general election and forming a government the party were to proceed strictly on the basis of those decisions by its Conference, would not the existence of the party mandate thereby deprive Parliament of any role? Wouldn’t that in effect substitute the deliberations of a very unrepresentative body—Labour’s Conference—for Britain’s central political institution?

Remember that parliamentary acts are intended to be supreme in Britain. Things we take for granted—like the separation or sharing of powers among branches of government—do not exist there: unlike our requirement that the Senate concur precisely with the House of Representatives before a bill can become a law, in Britain the House of Lords can temporarily delay, but not defeat measures passed by the House of Commons, which is the only popularly elected national representative assembly. There is no Supreme Court, no provision for declaring parliamentary acts unconstitutional, no written constitution—though groups on both the right and the left are now working to draft one.

Everyone I interviewed—even those on the hard left—recoiled in horror at the possibility that mandatory reselection might appropriate Parliament’s role. Most immediately labelled it with the epithet “Stalinist” and chose to insist that mandatory reselection sought “influence,” not “control” over MPs’ actions, but I heard no adequate response to the fundamental question.

The decision to vest control over renomination in the general committee of a CLP had other interesting ramifications. British parties are much less well staffed than ours, even though one could argue that the constant need to be able to contest a general election with no more than seventeen days notice (SIC) means that they are, in effect, always campaigning. Labour has always had to depend heavily on its activists to offset the Tories’ superior ability to hire professional staff, and since the general committees are commonly dominated by those activists, one might reasonably argue that it was good internal politics to give an enhanced role to those persons upon whom the party depends—regardless of the faction to which they belong.

But over this last decade British politics have begun to evolve in ways that make theirs look much more like ours: specifically, the class and group bases on which their parties rest. The last election is notable both for the close union vote there, and for the many changes in the many changed opinion polls and the many changes in the many changes. The importance to electoral politics of enacted a general mandate and contributed

With trends like this it seems that the only way to be able to argue that Britain, unlike the United States, has the national-level party coherence, but no control the party over the position and interests of its MPs, be able to provide itself any way out of its hands a body in which that has seldom seen ideologues who are the core of British voters and party coherence results doesn’t.

Why, then, is it so important to the significance of the party, because a different faction is interested in winning costs. The party, in point lead in the matter of which political.

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With trends like these now so pronounced, it is more important than ever for a party to be able to project a clear, simple, coherent message. Normally one would argue that Britain's system enables its parties, which are centralized and controlled at the national level, to do just that. The party's national leadership could provide that coherence, but mandatory reselection undercuts the national leadership's ability to control the party. Though much larger, and with more rapid turnover in both composition and intellectual commitments, Labour's annual Conference might arguably be able to provide a measure of coherence. But mandatory reselection took control out of its hands as well. No loss of coherence would result if those

grand in horror at the party's role. Most insist that mandatory reselection

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their parties rested for so long have deteriorated rapidly (Labour's crushing defeat in last election is no surprise when one realizes that it failed to win a majority of the union vote then). As a result, both parties have come to rely heavily on public opinion polls and appealing to individual voters through the mass media—one of the many changes Margaret Thatcher wrought in British politics. Both these moves use technology to replace activists, whom neither party seems to see as being as important to electoral success as they once were. (Our own campaign finance reforms enacted a generation ago also deprived activists of a key role in the political process and contributed to the precipitous decline in participation rates we now all decry.)

Why, then, is it currently in vogue for Labour's centrist leaders to downplay the significance of the impact that mandatory reselection has had on the party? Perhaps it is because a different sort of activist has emerged within the party—one who is more interested in winning elections than in supporting an unpopular ideology at all costs. The party, after all, has been out of office for over a decade, but it now has a 20 point lead in the polls and the election is just around the corner. That's just the stuff of which political pragmatism is made.

Though vigorously opposed by the hard left, the party's national executive committee under Neil Kinnock and with support from some of the largest unions has consistently tried to change the rules for mandatory reselection. Unions, which sponsor most Labour candidates, do not want to spend money needlessly, and many constituency Labour parties which are satisfied with their MPs want to be absolved of having to participate in what they have come to see as a useless exercise. Originally the National Executive Committee tried to make reselection optional arguing that the mere threat of reselection had "corrected" the relationship between MPs and their constituents, noting that, after the original purge, very few MPs have actually been deselected.

Subsequent efforts to change mandatory reselection have sought to dilute the factional advantage it confers upon the left by opening up the process to participation
by a broader range of party members at the constituency level. The first successful reform effort of this sort came when reselection was taken from the general committees and given instead to newly created entities—constituency level "electoral colleges" in which individual party members are guaranteed a majority of the votes and in which the party's "affiliated organizations" (primarily trade unions and the CLPs) are limited to no more than 40%.

The establishment of these electoral colleges may be only a temporary expedient, though, since current reform proposals focus on extending the opportunity to vote in reselections to all of a constituency's party members in something that could come to look quite like the primary elections which have become commonplace in America over the last twenty years. Called "one member, one vote," this change would redress a situation in which Labour MPs were selected by a smaller electorate than before the Reform Act of 1832! "One member, one vote" would, not coincidentally, dramatically undercut the importance and power of left wing activists in those constituencies where they still dominate. So once again, an act which, on its surface, might appear to indicate nascent populism seems to spring less from a change in thinking about the fundamental relationships among the elements of the party than from factional infighting. But once loosed, it is hard to get the genie back in the bottle. "One member, one vote" would go a long way toward changing the Labour party from being an organization dominated by other organizations, especially trade unions, to one dominated by its individual members. Though such a change might in the short run benefit Labour's centrists, such as its current leadership in the longer run, it could fundamentally restructure the party's purposes and power relationships.

In sum, mandatory reselection seems to me to have been what I thought it was when I first came across it: a change that was significant in its own right, one that presaged other significant changes in British politics, though not altogether the ones I had anticipated I would find. There is more to be learned though. Proposals to change mandatory reselection are again likely to be on Conference's agenda in the fall. Moreover, if it persists, a Labour victory in the upcoming election would provide the opportunity to see mandatory reselection's effect on the party when it is in power—something that Tory successes during the 1980s have thus far prevented. It will be especially interesting to see whether constituency activists choose to use it to control their government and if so whether it proves to be an effective tool for that purpose. And even though the proposed "one member one vote" reform seems not to spring from any strongly populist commitments, were it to be enacted it might combine with the perceptible decline in deference one now sees in British political culture to produce just that.

Finally, to return to that interesting set of similarities between happenings in British and American politics: were they mere happenstance, or are there causal links—is it association or correlation? Unfortunately, I cannot yet say. There may be some deeper structure that caused the same sort of reforms to be sought by persons occupying the same portion of the political spectrum at the same time and with the same effect: I suspect interesting coincidence is at work.
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