# Labour's lost grassroots: the rise and fall of party membership

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## Abstract

After years of declining membership, and in the wake of a general election in which it recorded its lowest share of the popular vote since 1983, the Labour party is again attempting to attract new members.  This is not, of course, the first time that Labour has attempted to re-create a mass-membership. New Labour deployed many of the same techniques between 1994 and 1997. This article both assesses the extent of the current membership crisis and explores that earlier experience. We outline the basis of Tony Blair's initiative in recruiting new members during the 1990s and detail the extent of the decline in membership after 1997. We examine the state of the party's membership currently and go on to consider the lessons for the party today both of New Labour's initial success in attracting new members and of its ultimate failure to retain them.

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# Labour's lost grassroots: the rise and fall of party membership

**I Introduction**

In the September 2010 Labour leadership contest, nearly 180,000 ballot papers were distributed to individual members of the party. The figure suggested a dramatic rise in party membership since the general election defeat of May 2010, one that continued in the first months of Ed Milband's leadership of the party. In its annual report Labour published a membership figure of 193,961 for December 2010, up from 156,205 a year previously. However, this striking rise in the party's individual membership came after more than a decade in which it had fallen continuously. By 2009, it was under 40 per cent of what it had been when Labour was elected to office in May 1997. Such a decline was all the more noteworthy, of course, because back in the mid-1990s developing a mass membership base was taken to be a defining feature of New Labour, one that was intimately associated with Tony Blair's leadership of the party and with techniques pioneered in Sedgefield, his parliamentary constituency in the North-East of England. Between 1994 and 1997 membership had increased spectacularly, reaching just over four hundred thousand, but thereafter the party had proved unable to hold onto its membership. Moreover, the increase since May 2010 does not appear to have been sustained. By December 2011, the party stated that membership had fallen slightly to 193,300. Reports of the number of ballots distributed for internal party elections in the summer of 2012 indicate a much more substantial decline of nearly 10 per cent in around six months (Black, 2012).

In this article we examine the state of Labour's membership. It is a commonplace observation in the press and in academic research that, given the years of decline and notwithstanding the recent rise,

it is in crisis. We assess the extent of that crisis. Unlike previous scholarship by Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley detailing the state of the party's grassroots (the classic texts are 1992 and 2002), we do not have access to data concerning the activism of members. Instead we draw on four distinct sources of information to chart developments in the membership of the party. First, we deploy the extraordinarily detailed breakdown of voting by individual party members in the 2010 Labour party leadership election to consider the distribution and size of membership on a constituency by constituency basis in September 2010. This data has the advantage that, not being based on a survey, they offer a revealing picture of the precise state of Labour's grassroots. Second, using the party's annual report, we extract information to chart the flow of membership over the last twenty years. Where possible we examine the turnover, taking account not just of those joining but of those leaving . It is well established that party-generated figures may exaggerate membership levels (see Mair and van Biezen, 2001, 6-7; and Scarrow, 2000, 85, 88-89). By charting the flow of members across years, at the same time as noting changes to the means of calculation, we hope to minimise this risk. Third, we draw on data discussed by the party's National Executive Committee (as documented in the form of blogs) to examine the fluctuations in membership. A fourth strand of data in the form of press reports allows us to look at the rise and fall of party membership in two constituencies, Sedgefield and Dunfermline East. Manifestly, both blogs and press reports are potentially problematic as sources. Nevertheless, these two CLPs are especially important to any discussion because they were held up as stories of model success – the parliamentary seats of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, two key architects of developing Labour into a mass membership organisation during the mid-1990s. The extent of press coverage of the Sedgefield model especially provides us with an opportunity to assess the initiative.

Drawing on these distinct sources of data, we address a number of related issues concerning the state of Labour party membership and its apparent recovery since May 2010. We ask what was the

extent of the fall in grassroots' numbers after the 1997 election victory? Where possible, we address

potential reasons for the collapse in the party's membership. We detail the state of Labour

membership at the time of the 2010 leadership contest and we consider what the data reveals about

the party's members in contrast to earlier work by, among others, Seyd and Whiteley. In our

conclusion we discuss the importance for Labour politics of these developments, noting a number of

recurring problems that the party has encountered. In our analysis, we do not offer a specific

hypothesis or suggest a single causal relationship that might explain the fall in membership. Rather,

our aim is to take the detailed evidence about membership changes and consider what conclusions

might be generated.

In themselves, these issues are of significance, but there is, of course, a wider dimension to this

analysis. Labour is not alone as a party in experiencing declining levels of membership. Over several

decades, party membership has fallen across most European polities (see Scarrow, 2000; Seyd and

Whiteley, 2004, 356; and Webb, 2002, 441). More than a decade ago, Peter Mair and Ingrid van

Biezen (2001) charted the absolute drop in members, alongside the relative decline in party

membership as a proportion of the electorate. A second paper, coauthored with Thomas Poguntke,

confirmed the pattern, demonstrating the 'staggering' extent of the loss (van Biezen, Mair and

Poguntke, 2012, 33). But the British case was especially precipitous as all three major parties lost

members (Marshall, 2009). Between 1983 and 2008, the proportion of the electorate that was a

member of these parties fell from 3.8 per cent to 1.2 per cent (Marshall, 2009, 6; Biezen, Mair and

Poguntke, 2012, 28, 32). Only Slovakia and the Czech Republic indicated a greater decline in

membership. By that date, only Poland and Latvia revealed a worse figure for party political

engagement. In another analysis, the United Kingdom offered the lowest level of political

participation (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010, 825). Such statistics are all the more striking given that the

British decline comes in the face of a sustained initiative by Labour to regenerate its grassroots in the mid-1990s.

Academics do not agree on quite why party membership has experienced such trouble. Comparative scholars note variation in terms of the historical entrenchment of a democracy and the size of a polity (Mair and van Biezen, 2001, 9-10; and van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012, 36). Through their extensive surveys, Seyd and Whiteley (see, for example, 2004) came to emphasise choice based factors focused around the incentives that shaped an individual's decision to participate. They downplayed structural factors such as societal trends. In more recent work, Paul Whiteley (2010) has distinguished between two broad perspectives (see also Mair and van Biezen, 2001, 14). Under the first approach, parties have been undermined by state interventions. Public authorities have undertaken more and more tasks traditionally the responsibility of parties. As a result, increasingly redundant, political activists have ceased to participate. Under such 'state capture', there is no demand for large memberships. In the case of Britain, a strong statement is to be found in Mair's analysis of New Labour as 'partyless democracy' (Mair, 2000; see also Mair, 1997). Under the second approach, parties have been undermined by more general changes to civil society that have shaped the supply of members. Such changes might include the rise of competing organisations, increased pressure on leisure time, and the changed social backgrounds of potential participants. Given the range of alternatives, there is less incentive for individuals to join a party. In this perspective, declining participation is reflective of a more general decline in social capital (the classic statement of this approach is, of course, Putnam, 2001). In a cross national survey, Whiteley's conclusion indicated support for the former explanation. It is worth emphasising that, in this paper, our aim is not to test the conclusions of this comparative literature. Rather it is to use the available data to illuminate the case of the Labour party. Nevertheless, our analysis allows us to offer some reflections on these wider perspectives and we do address issues relevant to comparative discussion in our

conclusion. In the next section we discuss the foundation of the Sedgefield model of mass membership.

**II The 'Sedgefield model':  The importance of mass membership in New Labour**

Even before becoming party leader in July 1994, Tony Blair was closely associated with the need to increase the size of Labour's local membership. In the early 1990s, dissatisfied with the extent of modernisation strategies elsewhere in the party, he helped to pioneer a number of schemes to boost recruitment in his Sedgefield constituency (see Rentoul 1995, 312-313; and Smyth 1996). An increased membership, one that was in some generalised sense different to past memberships, was a fundamental way of revitalising Labour. Blair told the BBC's *On the Record* in January 1993, 'What I want to see is the Labour party pushing itself outwards, getting back in its local community, being the party that represents people within that community' (BBC On The Record 1993a). He continued 'it is so important that we go in a different direction on membership', holding up Sedgefield as an exemplar of what could be achieved. For Blair, getting people to join was not just a statistical exercise, it was a means of recasting the party altogether. He told Brian Walden in September 1993, 'This mass membership – extending the membership of the party – that's not a glorified recruitment drive to me, it's about transforming the way the Labour party works and it operates and it thinks… We are changing the whole culture of the party and the way it works' (Walden 1993; see also Timmins 1992). The development of a mass party was linked to reforms to Labour's structure, in particular the establishment of one member, one vote, for internal posts and leadership election contests. The measure, it was argued, empowered members and encouraged participation.

In a 1999 pamphlet for Progress, an internal group within Labour, Phil Wilson outlined the Sedgefield model in detail emphasising a focus on 'traditional hard working communities' (Wilson 1999, 5). He

noted, 'Tony Blair believed that the party had to become less introspective and more community-focused, with a mass membership making it more representative' (Wilson 1999, 6). For Blair, having a mass membership was a way of locating the party in the community and avoiding the extremism of the past which could be blamed, in part at any rate, on unrepresentative activists taking control. He concluded, 'We have to represent communities and have roots in them' (Hetherington 1994, 8). It was an important lesson to learn: Blair argued, 'There is a slight tendency to take people's votes for granted, to think an area like this [Sedgefield] is solid Labour.' Sedgefield offered members the opportunity to pay what they could afford and replaced some party meetings with social occasions. When Blair was filmed eating a burger at a barbecue, one journalist commented 'the scene gave a whole new meaning to the idea of a political party and was meant to' (Aitken 1994, 27). Wilson made the point: 'Political debate, socials and even barbecues were the order of the day' (Wilson 1999, 8).

Blair was not alone in supporting such an initiative. An eloquent statement of the possibilities of developing a mass membership base was provided by Gordon Brown in a 1993 pamphlet, *Making Mass Membership Work*. This built on earlier work he had done for the Tribune group of MPs which had emphasised recruiting trade union levy payers – members of unions affiliated to Labour – into formal membership: 'for this army of supporters now waiting in the wings', he claimed, 'individual membership should be inexpensive to buy and attractive to hold' (Brown 1987). In the event the attempt to enrol trade unionists proved disappointing. In four years only 23,000 levy payers joined the party (Russell 2005, 218). By 1993, Brown was focusing on an active, directed recruitment strategy in the community. People should be asked to pay what they could afford (a central theme in Sedgefield's experience) with local parties making up shortfalls through fundraising. He was blunt about the party's existing culture: 'We also need to address the fact that the style of our meetings has been a turn off for many members' (Brown 1993, 6). Labour needed to locate itself within the

locality – 'at the centre of community life' and look out for 'local issues to highlight' (Brown 1993, 7). Members would be 'two way ambassadors for Labour' as 'our party will reflect the communities that its members live in' and he promised 'an explosion of political involvement and community activity' (Brown 1993, 8-9). Wilson argued that local policy forums might involve community groups (Wilson 1999, 17). Brown subsequently picked up on this theme after he became leader of the party in 2007 in a Progress pamphlet he wrote: 'every local party should involve local organisations and individuals with our shared values in our debates' (Brown 2007, 8).

In similar vein to Blair, Brown drew on his experience in Dunfermline, telling John Humphreys, 'in my constituency the membership's trebled. If you go out and talk to people, if you get out and visit people, if you knock on doors and explain your message, people will join' (BBC On The Record 1993b). Personal contacts were vital. The experience of both Sedgefield and Dunfermline indicated there were many potential members ready to participate. Both were part of a series of pilot schemes that the NEC authorised in 1993. *The Independent* newspaper quoted Rita Taylor, the secretary of Sedgefield CLP, 'There is no doubt there are literally hundreds of people out there wanting to join up. It is about involving the community in what happens' (quoted by Pithers 1993, 6; see also Webster 1991; and Rentoul 1995, 313). Wilson too claimed that people were waiting to be asked to join (Wilson 1999, 8). In his pamphlet Brown maintained that the record in Dunfermline destroyed 'the idea that mass membership is a romantic illusion' (Brown 1993, 3). Years later Brown told a journalist, 'I always thought that the party was too narrow in its membership, and its link with the communities it served. I thought that contributed to many of our problems, that we were talking to ourselves, rather than relating to the country' (Hughes 1998, 6).

Accordingly, a mass party membership, one that was based in the community, was for Blair and Brown a central feature of New Labour. Wilson asserted, 'The distinction between community and the Labour party was beginning to dissolve' (Wilson 1999, 9). In his introduction to Wilson's pamphlet, Blair was indignant in rejecting the charge that 'New Labour is somehow a recent invention of a metropolitan elite, foisted on an unwilling party.' Elsewhere he was equally categorical: 'I see the Labour party here [Sedgefield] as the model of what the Labour party (nationally) should be' (quoted by Smyth 1996, 63). Rentoul (1995, 312) noted, 'There is a strong urge to be sceptical about the claims made for the Sedgefield Labour Party' but he concluded that it was 'a genuine success story'.  As James Purnell (2012, 94) put it recently, 'New Labour was born there, in Trimdon [in Sedgefield], not in Islington.'

Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley gave academic support to initiatives aimed at boosting the number of individual members of the Labour party. From 1990 onwards, in a series of books and articles, based on extensive surveys, they gave a detailed account of who joined Labour in terms of their socio-economic background and political views (Seyd and Whiteley 1992). They developed a detailed theoretical account as to what motivated individuals to participate. Their 'general incentives' model combined a number of motivations including specific benefits – political (such as individual voting rights) and social – alongside a more solidaristic aspect. In its emphasis on a range of features, including the importance of a community base, it was compatible with Blair's Sedgefield initiative. Most importantly of all perhaps, Seyd and Whiteley offered a persuasive and rigorous model, one at odds with the prevailing academic orthodoxy, which suggested that members helped to generate electoral support (see also Whiteley and Seyd 1992). The implication of such a conclusion was straightforward. After four successive general election defeats between 1979 and 1992, if Labour wanted to win office again, it needed to expand its membership base considerably (Seyd 1993, 100). Such a claim was not lost on the media where Seyd and Whiteley's research was frequently

published and discussed (see, for example, Whiteley and Seyd 2000, 21; Whiteley and Seyd 2001, 17). In later work they demonstrated the different characteristics of those who had joined since Blair became leader of the party: younger, more likely to be male and working class, working in the private sector, not in unions, and less partisan (Seyd and Whiteley 2002). They went on to chart a significant decline in activism both in long term members who were less participative than they had been and in the new members who were less engaged in party activities than more established participants (Seyd and Whiteley 2002; Whiteley and Seyd 2002). The finding was significant. Labour hoped that its new mass membership base would generate a sustained increase in party activism and in its level of electoral support. Manifestly, the continuing lack of grassroots activism threatened such goals. Of course, the agenda established by Seyd and Whiteley stood in contrast to the comparative research, noted earlier, which highlighted the difficulties political parties had in sustaining mass membership across a number of polities (Mair and van Biezen 2001).

**III The rise and fall of Labour party membership**

Figure 1 sets out the development of Labour party membership since 1981. Charting the pattern since the party's foundation in 1900 is by no means straightforward (see Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 13-14; Russell 2005, 216-219; see also Marshall 2009; and Tanner 2000). Formally, there was no individual membership until 1918 and figures were not published till 1928. After peaking at over one million in 1952, membership declined but the figures from the late-1950s to the end of the 1970s are inaccurate. When they reported figures in this period, local constituency parties had to affiliate a minimum of 800 members (from 1957), subsequently increased to 1,000 (in 1963). The minimum affiliations hid the extent of the collapse of party membership. In 1979, the affiliation level was abolished so from 1980 onwards the figures are, once again, more accurate. In the late 1980s, a national membership scheme was introduced to replace local organisation. Historically, little importance was given by the party leadership to the recruitment and retention of members. Indeed

for much of the period from the 1950s onwards, senior figures within Labour were of the view, backed by some scholarship, that in an era of national campaigning, widespread access to the media, and stable electoral alignments, party members were relatively unimportant. By the early 1990s membership had fallen further.

**Figure 1 Labour Party Membership, 1981-2011**
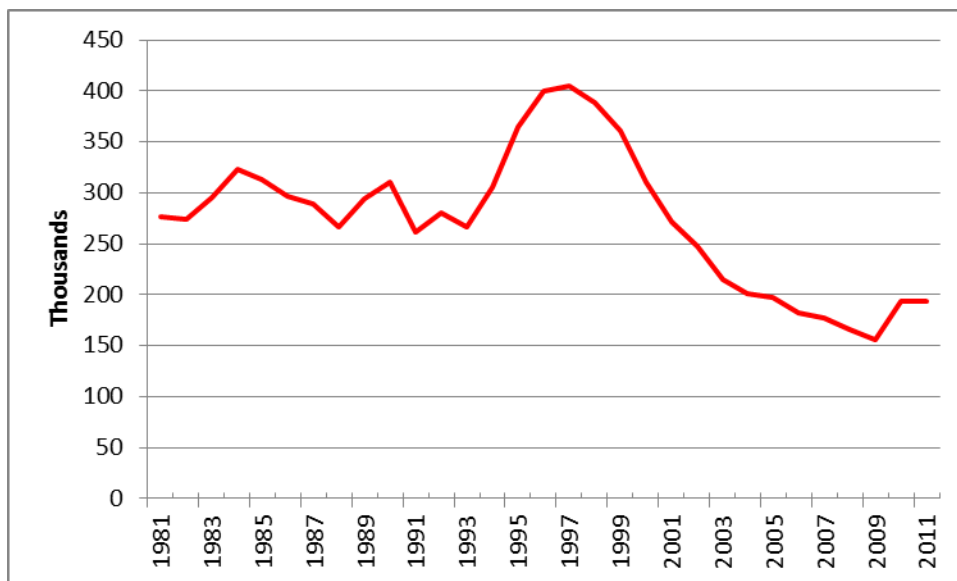


Sources: 1981-90: Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 16; 1991-2011: Labour party NEC, *Annual Report* 1990-2012.

Following Tony Blair's election as leader in 1994 a sustained expansion of Labour's membership took place. As well as benefiting from local strategies to target members, the party allocated considerable resources to recruitment at a national level in the form of advertisements and staff. Labour also benefited from an extremely favourable political climate in which the Conservative administration was exceptionally unpopular in the opinion polls. However, one commentator claimed that the direct recruitment of members through personal contacts was the most successful method of

increasing enrolment (Smyth 1996, 71). Peter Mandelson suggested 28 per cent of new recruits came through friends (Mandelson and Liddle 1996, 220). He commented, 'recruiting new members has been the biggest organisational priority for the party' (Mandelson and Liddle 1996, 218).

A few months before the 1997 general election, in January 1997, Labour membership passed 400,000 (Rentoul 1997, 6). But, far from sustaining this momentum and achieving the 500,000 plus target that had been set by Tony Blair, membership peaked soon after at around 405,000 and then started to decline (McSmith 1998, 4). Over the next twelve years the fall was steady. It was discussed at various points by the party, including at National Executive meetings, and the role of membership was the subject of a number of initiatives during Labour's period in office: *Partnership into Power*, with a 'healthy party taskforce' under the MP Ian McCartney, was followed by *A 21st Century Party* (Macleod 1996, 6; and Watt 1998, 15). By the time of the latter scheme, McCartney claimed, rather optimistically given the data in table 1 below, 'In the last few years we have spectacularly reversed many years of declining membership', (Labour party 1999, 1). Elsewhere, however, he was quoted by *The Times* as complaining that Labour needed to find new ways to 'involve members and engage with local communities' (Baldwin and Webster 1999). Neither scheme came up with much by way of a solution as to how to recruit and retain members. John Denham, a Labour minister admitted later that there had been 'a naïve optimism' about party membership, which was in 'a parlous state' (Denham 2003, 301).

| Table 1: Labour party membership 1989-2011 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | Members | Year on year change, % | Year | Members | Year on year change, % |
| 1989 | 293,723 | | 2001 | 272,000 | -12.5 |
| 1990 | 311,152 | **5.9** | 2002 | 248,294 | -8.7 |
| 1991 | 261,233 | -16.0 | 2003 | 214,952 | -13.4 |
| 1992 | 279,530 | **7.0** | 2004 | 201,374 | -6.3 |
| 1993 | 266,270 | -4.7 | 2005 | 198,026 | -1.6 |
| 1994 | 305,189 | **14.6** | 2006 | 182,370 | -7.9 |
| 1995 | 365,110 | **19.6** | 2007 | 176,891 | -3.0 |
| 1996 | 400,465 | **9.7** | 2008 | 166,247 | -6.0 |
| 1997 | 405,238 | **1.1** | 2009 | 156,205 | -6.0 |
| 1998 | 387,776 | -4.3 | 2010 | 193,961 | **24.2** |
| 1999 | 361,000 | -6.9 | 2011 | 193,300 | -0.3 |
| 2000 | 311,000 | -13.9 | 2012* | 178,005 | -8.6 |

Source: 1998-2011 data taken from NEC, *Annual Report* 1990-2012 (occasionally authored as Labour party, *Annual Report*. In 2012, the party published a revised figure for 2010 of 193,261. *The 2012 figure comes from an email circulated by Ann Black, 4 July 2012, which detailed the number of ballots distributed for internal party elections.

A number of points are worth noting from table 1 (see also figure 2 below). The dramatic increase in membership during 1994-1997 is apparent. That increase came after a number of years in which membership fluctuated. Of course, in any one year the net increase, or net fall for that matter, hides a larger shift as those joining are offset by some leaving and vice versa. Usually, Labour has not published these gross figures for recruitment. In 1991, 1992, 1993 and 2008 the party did give the full data. For 1991-93, these figures reveal the staggering extent of the membership crisis that confronted Labour by the time Blair became leader. Nearly 80,000 people left the party in 1991 alone. In the following two years a further 70,000 departed. In both years the net effect was limited by a considerable number joining. In all, departures between those three years alone represented nearly 50 per cent of the 1990 total. Of course there may be some double counting in these figures as people left, rejoined and then decided to leave once again in the space of a few years. The figures may also owe much to the completion of the national membership system in 1991 and a subsequent correction of inaccurate constituency based records. Some members may have been genuinely 'lost' in the transition to the new system. Nevertheless the scale of the haemorrhage is manifest. A party report in 1993 indicated that Labour had only 90,000 fully-paid up members and a retention rate of 50 per cent over a three year period (Routledge 1993). The collapse in membership continued into 1994: only around 250,000 papers were issued for the leadership contest in July that year. A considerable proportion of the rise in membership after 1994 simply reflected the recovery of ground lost during the first part of the decade.

**Figure 2 Annual Change in Labour Party Membership, 1991-2011**
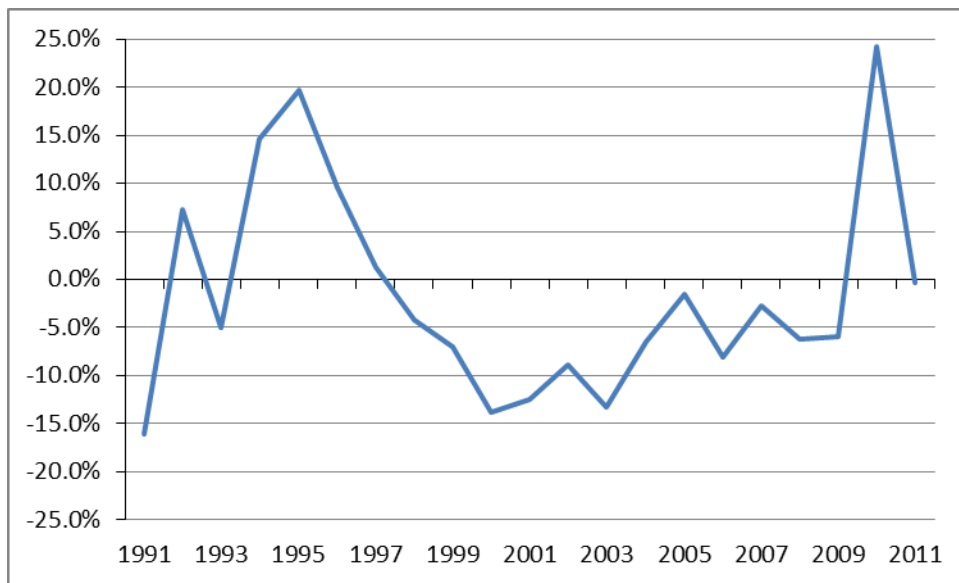


**Source:** Labour party NEC, *Annual Report,* 1991-2011; Electoral Commission 2011.

A second feature of table 1 concerns the relentless and persistent collapse after the successes of 1994-97. Unlike the fluctuations before 1997, individual party membership fell for twelve successive years from its peak in that year. Within this trend, the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 does not seem to have had a dramatic effect. Membership fell by 13.4 per cent in that year (the invasion was in March) but other years such as 2000 and 2001 – before the intervention in Iraq - were as marked in their decline. Some of the fall in 2000 can be attributed to a change in the method of calculation (members in long-term arrears were no longer included). Two years in which the rate of decline was relatively low were 2005 and 2007. The former may reflect the impact of the general election, the latter the deputy leadership contest within the party - both of which may have generated increased political activity and engagement (though this did not happen in another general election year, 2001).

Support for such an interpretation is to be found from Whiteley and Seyd (2002, 127 and 165).

Looking at those who had exited the party in the late 1990s, they found them more likely to be

inactive and weakly attached to Labour than other members. Such attributes were characteristic of

new members close to the spirit of New Labour. A subsequent survey of ex-members, conducted by

Paul Whiteley, found steady figures for the date at which people had left the party. Over a quarter of

respondents had left during 2001-2005, representing over 6 per cent a year of the total of those who

had left the party. But for each year between 1997 and 2001, the figure was around 5 per cent of

those who were surveyed (Whiteley 2009, 249). Further, qualitative evidence to back this analysis is

to be found in Ann Black's reports of NEC discussions on the topic. She noted, 'Three members leave

for each one who joins, though most are thought to lapse rather than actively resigning. We do not

know if boring meetings or policy disagreements are the main cause and we should find out before

they go' (Black, 25-26 November 2002). A few months later David Triesman, Labour's general

secretary, argued that lapsed subscriptions were a major cause of declining membership: such

individuals could often be persuaded to renew (Black, 25 March 2003). Until April 2003, active

resignations were outnumbered by new recruits (Black, 3-4 November 2003). Earlier, *The

Independent* quoted a party official, 'It is no secret that it is easier to recruit members as an

opposition fighting a deeply unpopular government in the run-up to an election than it is when you

have high satisfaction ratings in the polls and people seem happy with the government' (Smith 2000,

8; see also Baldwin 2002). Triesman told *The Scotsman*, 'One of the things about political parties is

they are not all ruthlessly efficient machines in the way that is sometimes supposed. Quite often

people join. They are not pursued at the end of the first year to pay again and they drift out' (Innes

2002, 9). Anecdotal information suggested people had joined to help eject the Conservative

government. Almost as soon as that had been achieved, as early as June 1997, a survey of Scottish

members found that 19 per cent 'felt they derived little or nothing from their membership (Bond

1999). To be sure, ideological differences over such matters as Iraq, public service reform, and

university tuition fees, are likely to have played a part in the collapse of Labour's membership in this

period. But declining numbers also reflected the realities of office after the enthusiasm of opposition, changes in dealing with arrears, and inefficiency on the part of the party. The flow of the decline and the evidence collected by Whiteley and Seyd indicates that Labour simply experienced considerable difficulty in holding onto members it had recruited so energetically in the 1990s. Whiteley (2009, 248) noted that by 2008, for every Labour party member there were 2.3 ex-members (the equivalent ratio for the Conservatives was 1.9).

Third, as noted above for 1991-1993, the net figures in later years are likely to hide more dramatic shifts. The only recent year for which the full data is available is 2008. The net decline in this year was just over 10,000, a figure offset by over 12,000 new members joining up. Over 14.0 per cent of members left the party in 2008, the first full year of Gordon Brown's premiership.

A last feature concerns the fluctuation in membership since May 2010. Proportionately, the year with the greatest increase in membership did not come under Tony Blair's leadership of Labour but following the 2010 general election defeat. Individual membership of the party rose by nearly 25 per cent in a single year. In 2011, the party leadership claimed 65,000 new members since the May 2010 general election. This figure indicated that it was likely that a third or more of the party's membership was newly recruited (though, of course, some of those to leave may have done so after only one year's membership). Equally striking is the 178,005 figure given by Ann Black for the distribution of membership ballots for NEC and internal elections in 2012. These ballots were distributed between 25 and 29 May 2012. If accurate, Black's figure would indicate a decline of 8.6 per cent in less than five months of that year putting the party's membership at virtually the number of ballots distributed for the 2010 leadership contest. At an annual rate such a decline would take the party back, by the end of 2012, pretty much to where it was in December 2009 before the 2010

general election (the figure for 2012 will be published in the summer of 2013). Overall, table 1 makes apparent the scale of Labour's organisational crisis over most of the last twenty years in terms both of the overall decline of membership and of the volatility of the figures.

The experience of Sedgefield and Dunfermline mirrored the decline in national party membership. As noted above, in terms of recruiting new members during the 1990s, the two constituencies appeared to lead the way. Both were pivotal in pioneering a number of techniques to boost recruitment and in mapping out the model of a mass party. By August 1993, Sedgefield's membership was at 2,000 (Hetherington, 1994). Dunfermline's membership had also increased dramatically (Sherman, 1993). Having already doubled, the constituency party set itself a goal of 1,500 by October 1993 (Jones 1993). By the autumn of 1995, one newspaper reported that it was the fourth largest CLP in Scotland (behind three constituencies with well established social clubs; Dawson 1995). But the success of Sedgefield and Dunfermline East was not sustained. *The Guardian* reported in May 2003 that Sedgefield had lost over half its members in six years and was down to around 900. Interestingly, it stated that the £1 rate, by which members paid a token amount and had been held up as fundamental to getting people to join, had been dropped. It had proved too expensive to offset through the kind of fundraising that had attracted so much press attention in the mid-1990s (Maguire 2003, 8). When faced with the option of paying the full amount, individuals had left the party. It was such financial logistics that were blamed for the fall in membership rather than contentious political choices on the part of the government, such as intervention in Iraq. Earlier, at the outset of the initiative to raise membership, one newspaper article had stated that Dunfermline East would be unable to make up the difference in contributions through fundraising (Sherman 1993). A low membership fee was therefore not a viable strategy. Another report identified apathy as the 'main problem' behind falling membership in Sedgefield (Grice 1999, 3). Elsewhere Andrew Pierce identified a degree of disenchantment with New Labour's policies as a factor alongside a

more general lack of interest (Pierce 2000). The end result was that by the time of the 2010 Labour leadership contest the membership of both constituencies was a fraction of what it had once been. In both cases the fall was larger than that of the party's membership as a whole. Sedgefield lost around 80 per cent of its members; Dunfermline East something like 70 per cent of its membership, being now only the 20th largest CLP in Scotland. In July 2010, Trimdon Labour Club, one of the centrepieces of Blair's community-based party, closed as a result of lack of business (Lloyd 2010, 12).

**IV Labour party membership at the 2010 leadership contest**

At the time of the 2010 Labour leadership contest, the number of party members had risen by over 20,000 from around 156,000 at the end of 2009 as individuals joined following the interest generated by the general election (some being disaffected Liberal Democrats) and by the intense battle for the party leadership (in which new recruits could vote). The total reported for 2009 was the lowest ever recorded by the party but it seems likely that membership had bottomed out in the months before the general election at an even lower figure of around 150,000, an historic low.

Table 2 details the shift in the size of constituency parties between 1993 and 2010. At the start of this period well over one hundred had a base of over 500 members. By 2010, the number had dwindled to just 54. In 1998 after the success of the initiative to recruit members, 50 CLPs had memberships of over 1,000 (McSmith 1998); by 2010 there were just four, all in London. Banff and Buchan had just 43 members. On average each constituency had 279 members. Whilst only 13 CLPs had less than 100 members, well over 200, over a third of local parties had less than a membership of under 200 (astonishingly, 25 of these had a Labour MP). Across the country, therefore, many local parties had been reduced to a rump.

| Table 2: Size of Constituency Labour Parties | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **1993** | | **2010** | |
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| 500+ | 132 | 21 | 54 | 9 |
| 300-500 | 285 | 45 | 146 | 23 |
| Under 300 | 217 | 34 | 432 | 68 |
| Source: Brown 1993; Labour party 2010 | | | | |

Table 3 details the regional distribution of Labour party membership in 2010. Figures taken from Seyd and Whiteley allow a contrast with 1990. The comparison is not exact as Seyd and Whiteley's definition of the regions is slightly different from the one we have used (taken from the BBC). The broad trends are interesting, however. The most notable feature of the table is that over a fifth of Labour's membership now comes from London. In fact, well over half of the CLPs with more than 500 members in 2010 (34 out of 54) were in the capital. Wales did not have a single constituency party with a membership of more than 500; Scotland just two. At the other end of the spectrum to London, the data indicates the utter paucity of Labour's membership in Scotland. Just before Blair became leader each CLP in Scotland had, on average, 283 members (Routledge 1993). By 2010 that figure had fallen to 223. It is striking that many of the constituency parties outside London with memberships over 500 are either home to or close by traditional established universities. Around 14 of these 20 CLPs had close links to old universities (another two to newer establishments). Outside of the capital, Labour membership may be heavily shaped by access to a student and university staff population.

| Table 3: regional distribution of Labour party members and Labour voters, 1990 and 2010. | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **1990** | | | **2010** | | |
| | Members % | Voters (1987) % | Ratio of members to voters | Members % | Voters % | Ratio of members to voters |
| London | >12 | 10-11 | >1.25 | 21 | 14 | 1.4 |
| South-east | 10-11 | <7 | >1.25 | 10 | 8 | 1.3 |
| Southwest | <7 | <7 | >1.25 | 6 | 5 | 1.2 |
| East of England | 8-9 | <7 | >1.25 | 8 | 7 | 1.2 |
| West Midlands | 8-9 | 10-11 | 0.75-1.00 | 8 | 9 | 0.8 |
| East Midlands | <7 | <7 | 1.00-1.25 | 7 | 8 | 0.9 |
| Wales | <7 | 8-9 | 0.75-1.00 | 6 | 6 | 1.0 |
| Yorkshire & The Humber | 8-9 | 10-11 | <0.75 | 9 | 10 | 0.9 |
| North-West | >12 | >12 | 0.75-1.00 | 12 | 15 | 0.8 |
| North-East | <7 | <7 | 0.75-1.00 | 6 | 6 | 0.9 |
| Scotland | 8-9 | >12 | <0.75 | 7 | 12 | 0.6 |
| Totals | 100 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 100 | 1 |
| Sources: Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 29-31; Labour party 2010 | | | | | | |

By 2010 there was considerable variation in the size of CLPs both across the regions and according to

incumbency. London CLPs were much bigger than any others. Labour held seats were double the size

of those in six of the other regions. Even non-Labour constituencies in London were, on average, bigger than Labour constituencies in any of the other regions. Figures generated by Justin Fisher from a survey by David Denver and Gordon Hands allow a comparison with 1997, at the height of New Labour, and this data is set out in Table 4 (Fisher 2000: Denver and Hands 1998). Overall, the average CLP declined in size by 53 per cent. The regional pattern is much the same in both years: London dominated in 1997 as it did in 2010; CLPs in Scotland were notably small in both years. Variations in the ranking of regions according to overall average CLP size within that range are not significant except for the East of England, down from 3rd to 7th. However, we note that the collapse in CLP size is generally more pronounced in the South (outside London) and in the Midlands. Thus membership has tended to decline by more since 1997 in the areas targeted by New Labour in broadening its appeal, and in which the party performed badly at the general elections of 2005 and 2010.

**Table 4: Average size of CLPs by region and incumbency**

| | Average size of CLP, Labour held seat 2010 | Average size of CLP, non-Labour held seat 2010 | Overall average size of CLP in 2010 (ranking) | Overall average size of CLP in 1997 (ranking) | Change in overall average CLP size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| London | 622 | 359 | 496 (1st) | 930 (1st) | -47% |
| South-East | 489 | 210 | 224 (9) | 524 (8) | -57% |
| South-West | 303 | 189 | 197 (11) | 513 (9) | -62% |
| East of England | 585 | 222 | 235 (7) | 628 (3) | -63% |
| West Midlands | 275 | 201 | 231 (8) | 495 (10) | -53% |
| East Midlands | 341 | 221 | 260 (6) | 601 (6) | -57% |
| Wales | 312 | 218 | 279 (5) | 582 (7) | -52% |
| Yorkshire and Humber | 307 | 262 | 289 (4) | 612 (5) | -53% |
| North West | 307 | 262 | 290 (3) | 625 (4) | -54% |
| North-East | 356 | 243 | 340 (2) | 662 (2) | -49% |
| Scotland | 266 | 124 | 223 (10) | 385 (11) | -42% |
| Overall | 356 | 226 | 279 | 591 | -53% |

Source: for 2010, Labour party 2010; for 1997, Fisher 2000, 145

A straightforward consequence of London's domination of the regional distribution of individual

membership can be seen in the results of elections to the party's National Executive Committee.

Division III of Labour's NEC is made up of six constituency party representatives elected for a two year term. Half those elected must be women and candidates cannot be members of the House of Commons (or other national assemblies) or the House of Lords. In 2010 there were 20 candidates. Nine were from London (and two others had strong links to the capital). There were no nominations from the North-East, South-West, and Wales. Five out of the six elected were either from London or (in the case of one) had been based in the capital until very recently. The sixth, Ann Black, lives in Oxford, only sixty miles from London. In November 2010 when Oona King was appointed to the Lords, she was replaced by Joanna Baxter, also from London. In 2012 the pattern was similar. Of the six successful candidates, four were from the capital (or in the case of one had a close link to it). Ann Black was re-elected from Oxford. Peter Wheeler was elected from Salford. Seven of the thirteen unsuccessful candidates were from London.

**V Members and votes**

In the early 1990s, Seyd and Whiteley identified a link between Labour's individual membership and the party's general election vote (see especially Whiteley and Seyd 1992). There were a number of ways of exploring this link and any the correlation between the two variables was not straightforward. Causality was potentially problematic: votes might shape membership levels but, equally, both might be dependent on any one of a number of other variables such as housing, unemployment and so forth. Clearly both votes and memberships were likely to be shaped by a historical trajectory. Moreover, the exact causal relationship as to how membership might shape votes was not specified in some of the models. Nevertheless, the Seyd and Whiteley analysis, building on survey data, generated a powerful argument that in some sense members shaped Labour's vote at general elections.

In their discussion of the 1987 general election Seyd and Whiteley presented an interesting comparison between the size of individual CLPs and the party's vote that year. Their conclusion was direct: smaller CLPs were associated with Labour getting a lower share of the vote. Table 5 allows us to make a direct comparison between 1987 and 2010. We see in 2010, as in 1987, that small CLPs are associated with a low vote; conversely large CLPs are more associated with a high vote. The relationship has become slightly more pronounced: more seats which have a low grassroots base do badly in terms of achieving a vote under 20 per cent. In the context of a pronounced shift towards smaller CLPs this development signals a major concern for Labour.

**Table 5: Relationship between CLP size and the Labour vote, 1987 and 2010**

| Number of members | Percentage of the constituency vote in 1987 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | <20 | 20-30 | 30-40 | >=40 | Total |
| Under 180 | 62 | 10 | 6 | 22 | 100 |
| 180-360 | 36 | 20 | 12 | 33 | 101 |
| 360-540 | 12 | 20 | 16 | 53 | 101 |
| Over 540 | 4 | 16 | 19 | 61 | 100 |
| All CLPs | 34 | 17 | 12 | 38 | 101 |
| Number of members | Percentage of the constituency vote in 2010 | | | | |
| | <20 | 20-30 | 30-40 | >=40 | Total |
| Under 180 | 76 | 12 | 6 | 6 | 100 |
| 180-360 | 22 | 13 | 31 | 35 | 100 |
| 360-540 | 6 | 11 | 28 | 54 | 100 |
| Over 540 | 0 | 10 | 13 | 77 | 100 |
| All CLPs | 32 | 12 | 23 | 33 | 100 |

Source: Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 185; Labour party 2010 and 2010 general election data

Recent scholarship challenges some aspects of the Seyd and Whiteley model (see the discussion in Fisher, Denver and Hands, 2006). The data in table 6 below contests the notion of a linear relationship between members and votes (though it is based on the relationship between membership and the size of electoral majorities). Fisher, Denver and Hands argue that centralised interventions by party bureaucracies matter more than localised memberships. On the basis of the data available to us at the time of the 2010 Labour leadership we cannot resolve this issue, though the construction of a variable to capture centralised intervention is problematic. We can state that the relationship between electoral votes and local Labour memberships currently looks very similar to that originally posited by Seyd and Whiteley (without necessarily drawing the same causal inference that they do). Labour's performance at the 2010 general election may well have been shaped by strategic interventions: it was certainly characterised by a link between falling membership and declining votes on a constituency by constituency basis.

**Table 6: Average size of Labour CLP according to marginality**

| | All | Very safe | Comfortable | Marginal | Possible | Hopeless |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Majority 20%+ | Majority 10-20% | Majority 0-10%, second, third 0-10% | Second 10-20% | Second 20%+, third 10%+, fourth |
| 1992 | 444 | 483 | 558 | 577 | 504 | 348 |
| 1997 | 592 | 669 | 602 | 765 | 575 | 474 |
| 2010 | 279 | 367 | 351 | 298 | 268 | 197 |
| % decline 1997-2010 | 53% | 45% | 42% | 61% | 53% | 59% |
| 2010 n= | 631 | 115 | 64 | 190 | 47 | 215 |

Source: 1992 & 1997 Denver and Hands (1997), pp. 77-78; data for 2010 is our analysis of Labour party (2010) in conjunction with returns for the 2010 general election.

Note that 2010 n=631 due to the exclusion of the Speaker's seat.

Table 6 illustrates Denver and Hands' alternative view of the relationship between party membership and votes: here the average size of CLPs is broken down by the marginality of the seat over three general elections. (The seats will change across elections, of course, but then so too do many local memberships.) Taken in 1992 and 1997, Denver and Hands' data differed from Seyd and Whiteley by suggesting that membership levels might stall in safe and comfortable seats. By contrast, it was likely to be higher in marginal seats. The data from 2010 demonstrates that the most serious decline in membership since 1997 has occurred in marginal seats. As a result, there is now a

clear linear relationship, with average constituency size falling away as we move from 'very safe' to 'hopeless' constituencies. At the latter end of the scale, we see 215 'hopeless' seats with an average number of members less than 200. The data from 2010 thus broadly confirms the Seyd and Whiteley model established in the early 1990s: higher constituency membership is associated with a higher election vote. It also confirms our conclusion that Labour's membership crisis is not simply linked to partisan disaffection driving individuals out of the party: far from it, the decline has been more marked in marginal, possible and hopeless seats, the kind of constituencies targeted by New Labour in the mid-1990s. It has been less pronounced in Labour's heartlands. Again, this finding bodes ill for Labour in the context of its collapsing membership. The net result is that, of 405 marginal constituencies where the MP had less than a five percentage point lead in 2010, Labour had a CLP membership of less than 200 in nearly half (195). Of those, 13 had a membership of under a hundred and 63 of between 100 and 150. Moreover, a large constituency membership is no guarantee of electoral success: in March 2012 Labour lost the Bradford West by-election to George Galloway's Respect Party candidature. The constituency had the 15th largest Labour party membership outside of London.


The data in Table 7 give a sense of fluctuations in the number of votes per member of the party at a general election. It is noteworthy that the two extremes - the most votes per member and the least - came in the two worst general election performances, 1983 and 2010 respectively. However, what is also striking is the huge shift in the ratio of voters to Labour members, as individuals have left the party. In 1997 there had been just over 100 voters for every Labour member. By 2010, that figure had nearly tripled. Overall, the decline in Labour membership to a low point of around 150,000 at the time of the 2010 general election raises question marks about the capacity of the party's grassroots to represent Labour in the wider community.

**Table 7; Labour party membership in proportion to the electorate and Labour voters, general elections, 1983-2010**

|      | Members | No on electoral roll per member | No of Labour voters per member |
|------|---------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1983 | 273,803 | 154 | 31 |
| 1987 | 297,364 | 145 | 34 |
| 1992 | 261,233 | 166 | 44 |
| 1997 | 400, 465 | 109 | 34 |
| 2001 | 311,000 | 143 | 34 |
| 2005 | 201,374 | 220 | 47 |
| 2010 | 156,205 | 292 | 55 |

Note: membership given in December of preceding year.

Source: NEC reports and Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010, 350-351

## VI Conclusions

In this article, we have examined the current state of Labour's grassroots in the context of the experience of the last twenty years or so, which saw an initial rise in membership followed by a period of steady decline. What have been the key determinants of the fluctuations in Labour's membership? On the basis of the flow of members tracked by party statistics, we conclude that alignment related to partisan issues does not provide a complete explanation of the fall in Labour's membership. Certainly, there was a decline associated with the decision to invade Iraq. But the drop

began well before the date of the invasion and was remarkably steady. We do not have survey evidence to explore this issue further. However it is quite likely that such data would fail to capture fully the reasons why people leave a party: respondents would be likely to exaggerate the principled basis of their motivations. In our judgement fluctuations in membership are linked as much to the political context as they are to particular party policies or political alignments. There is some evidence that a lower membership fee can encourage supporters to join the party - a 1p rate attracted 3,000 youth members in 2010 (NEC, 2011a, 31) - but generally new members join in response to opportunities to participate (such as internal elections) and enhanced political debate (unpopular governments, general elections). They drift away in response to limited opportunities, an uncertain role, and/or the compromises that being in government entail. This raises some doubts about the emphasis placed on incentives by Seyd and Whiteley in their earlier analysis of the decision to join the party. They conclude that 'the decline of membership can be turned around with the right incentives' (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004, 357). Provided parties offer 'a range of these incentives they can still attract members' (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004, 365). Retaining Labour party members since 1997 has required more than incentives to the extent that the basic range of inducements remained much the same over the period. By contrast, the political context altered and members drifted away. Without rejecting motivations and party strategy, we suggest that the political environment plays a major role in shaping Labour membership fluctuations.

Does the reduction in the number of Labour members matter for the party's fortunes (see the general discussion in Scarrow, 2000; and Seyd and Whiteley, 2004)? Members can provide significant resources to a party, most obviously in the form of financial support. They act as a pool from which office holders in the and in external party positions can be recruited party (around one member in fifteen held a party office in 2012 according to NEC, 2012). They represent parties in the community, generating legitimacy, and they may play a part in campaigning at general and other

elections. Equally though, it is arguable just how significant is the kind of decline identified in this article. Other parties too have lost members – though not proportionately as many as Labour. Modern elections are centralised, frequently dominated by elites and by national campaigning. Members may not be needed to provide political ballast in the way that they were in the 1990s at the launch of New Labour (in the face of more extreme activists). Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) concluded that parties may become more representative of the community as membership levels fall. In terms of broad attributes – age, race and gender – there is some evidence that Labour now confirms this trend (NEC, 2011a, 31). In terms of political attributes, such as policy positions and ideological outlook, it seems less certain: as the evidence in this article indicates, people are less likely to leave in Labour's traditional heartland but, of course, the available data does not confirm one way or the other; and recent data suggest that the present party membership is considerably to the left of the voters the party has lost since 1997 (Kellner, 2012). Scarrow's earlier work noted the possibility that membership might fail to represent a party geographically: 'another measure of a party's grassroots strength is the extent of its organisation throughout all parts of the country' (2000, 97). From the data in table 4, Labour looks extremely weak on such an indicator with average local party sizes of around 200 or less in non-incumbent constituencies in the South-East, South-West, West Midlands and Scotland. Moribund CLPs in marginal seats is an issue. The trend is for the ratio of Labour members to Labour voters to increase as membership declines, making such members increasingly unusual in their communities.

At the same time, the Labour leadership has persisted in emphasising the importance of membership recruitment and a healthy grassroots, despite the failure of these repeated initiatives. In the aftermath of the 2010 electoral defeat, it launched the 'Refounding Labour' project to energise the party and enrol new members (Labour party 2011). But many of the initiatives it emphasised to help recruitment were not new: restructured meetings, social gatherings, revised fee

structures, and community links had all been features of Tony Blair's New Labour model. The experience of that earlier initiatives suggests it is unlikely that such revised incentives alone will enable parties to retain newly-joined members.  Moreover, some leading figures within the party appear unwilling to acknowledge the extent of the party's grassroots crisis: James Purnell (2012, 94) claims, 'Today Labour is full of active parties (as well as a few in need of defibrillators).' The data marshalled here suggests such an attitude to be complacent.

What does this discussion indicate more generally concerning party membership? The comparative literature has done a good job in terms of tracking the variations in membership levels. However, we note a significant general issue arising from these analyses. Have authors working in this field paid sufficient attention to the 'revolving door' of membership?  Much of the analysis tends to conclude that there has been a straightforward decline with parties unable to recruit new members. Thus, van Biezen et al write that parties have failed 'to recruit new members in significant numbers' (2012, 25). In as much as the data allows us to judge, Labour <u>has</u> proved effective at recruiting new members. It has simply lost members in even greater numbers. Even in the two years following the invasion of Iraq, Labour enlisted something like 25,000 individuals (some of whom may well have left and rejoined within that period – see Black, 1-2 November 2004).  The velocity with which membership has gone up and down suggests to us that in many cases members are joining, leaving and rejoining on a cyclical basis, thus generating our 'revolving door' metaphor.  Accordingly, on the basis of this data, we ask whether the comparative literature has given sufficient attention to the retention of members, once they have been recruited.

Our analysis of membership trends within the Labour party, just one case to be sure, appears to be at odds with the findings generated by Paul Whiteley (2010). His statistical model indicates that state

interventions have smothered party activity thus provoking falls in membership. With regard to Labour, the party has centralised many of its activities and organisational practices but it is not clear that such interventions can explain the withering of its grassroots. Such centralisations have not been linked to state activities. At the very least, if leaders have deliberately incited the decline such an approach seems to be at odds with the importance that they have also placed and continued to place on recruiting members and sustaining the party's grassroots. If Labour leaders knew a declining membership would result from party centralisation, it must be explained why they have placed so much public emphasis on attempts to revive local participation. Labour elites have not been 'relatively unconcerned' about membership levels as van Biezen et al indicate parties to be (2012, 40). Their attempts to boost recruitment have often succeeded: they have failed in retention. Thus the sustained attempt to revive Labour's grassroots must be seen as a failure: yet the party's current leadership continues to emphasise such a development. We conclude the political environment and contextual factors to play an important part in this pattern.

The precarious state of the party's membership overall and of many local CLPs in particular is patent. Labour's membership currently is metropolitan and centralised in terms of its domination from London. Across the country as a whole, by the time of the 2010 general election the party appeared in many of its CLPs to have been reduced to a rump of committed activists and inert members. With memberships of under 200 in some Labour held seats and low turnouts, the number of activists choosing the party's parliamentary candidates may be very low; raising the possibility either of systematic entryism or irregular contests involving paper memberships. Quite what this state of affairs means for the future organisation and indeed for the ownership of Labour is unclear. Parties are resilient. They can develop and they can adapt. But a sustained revival of grassroots membership levels does not appear likely to occur. Labour may have to look to an alternative model as the basis of its future activities. There are of course many potential alternatives available with differing roles

for members alike. But the emphasis placed by the leadership currently on membership recruitment suggests that Labour has not developed a coherent and sustainable model.  On the basis of the data deployed here, we believe that the era of mass Labour membership is over. What will replace it remains uncertain.

**Acknowledgment**

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