

THE REALITIES OF POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY:

PARLIAMENT AND PARTY IN WESTERN EUROPE

Outline for a Research Project

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Though Western Europe has reached a high degree of economic stability, most of its major nations -- France, Germany, Italy -- are still groping for political forms adequate for advanced industrial mass society. On the threshold of unified European political institutions they are left with the disagreeable sensation that essentials of the structure under construction are still missing. The difficulty does not lie in technical agencies, commissions or courts. Experience with European institutions has already shown that the links purportedly connecting the institutions with the public at large and its representatives are weak. The difficulty is only partially that Europe has not yet developed a political substructure of its own. It is part of the much wider and pervasive problem of communication between governing elites and their clienteles. The political form of such difficulties varies from country to country. It may lead, as in France, to the abandonment of any building of long-term political institutions in favor of tricky plebiscites. It may lead, as in the Federal Republic, to abandonment of meaningful political discourse between political professionals and their clienteles, in favor of sporadic wrangling over

the various professionals' respective responsibility in dubious "affairs". Or it may, as in Italy, manifest itself in a more traditional way with seemingly irreconcilable political elites drawn up against each other.

In none of these cases is there much vitality left in the traditional forms which provide legitimacy and focus responsibility by tying regular elections for a parliamentary assembly to the selection and control of the executive. It is now closer to the facts to state the proposition on political responsibility as follows: A cabinet is responsible for the political business conducted by a bureaucracy over which it has an uncertain control to a parliament which lacks any means outside the trappings of constitutional authority for enforcing such control.

To disengage the present meaning and future requirements of political responsibility in Western European society calls for an inquiry into the status of the major political institutions. For this purpose I have chosen parliament and the political parties. Both are intermediaries between the voter and the executive. Without cues from these intermediaries neither the voter nor the executive can operate in anything but a haphazard way. But how do parliament and parties function presently? In regard to parliament, we need first an analysis of the extent to which its functional authority and prestige have recently declined. To what extent is that decline due to non-repetitive factors operating in particular societies? To what extent is it due to technological factors and to ideological obsolescence operating in all of them?

## Research Proposal

### A. Parliament

I propose to examine these questions:

1. To what extent has parliament been relegated to a kind of constitutionally sanctioned ceremonial position with its functions either assumed by other institutions or going begging? To what extent and in what fields has legislative authority been superseded in substance, if not in form, through (a) combined administrative, interest group and expert domination of the legislative process (England, Germany); (b) radical constitutional reshuffling of legislative authority (France)?

2. To what extent has budgetary control been transformed from a key function to a purely symbolic act because of (a) the physical burden and intellectual impossibility of genuine control; and (b) the incompatibility between economic planning and budgetary control?

3. To what extent have parliamentary committees, whether of regular or special investigatory type, been able to substitute as agencies for control of the executive?

(a) France: the arduous, but losing, struggle for parliamentary control over public enterprises.

(b) Great Britain: limitation of the select committee as control mechanism.

(c) Federal Republic of Germany: tactically motivated inter-party feuds artificially kept alive for publicity purposes limit the value of investigations.

4. The Ombudsman: Functions effectively as complaint device for small man. Does he substitute for political control?

5. The representative character of parliament. In spite of its technical shortcomings in supervision of the executive, parliament might still exercise a degree of moral and political leadership. The extent to which it has been and will be able to do so depends largely on the recruitment and quality of its membership. Various European studies in this field will be brought together and analyzed to determine the kind of leadership being attempted, and to be expected, from Parliament:

- (a) the extent and depth of interest-representation;
- (b) the bureaucratic component;
- (c) impact of intellectuals and professions;
- (d) typology of the structures of parliamentary political leadership.

#### B. The Party

The decline of parliament as an institution coincided with a change in the fortunes of the political party. The high-water mark of parliament was at the same time the formative period of the party, as expression of popular currents before becoming the prime mover of government. Today the party of integration has established its dominance and invested the state, utilizing parliament only as a place where previous electoral decisions and inter-party compacts are registered. At the same time the mass party of integration is

itself undergoing important mutations as a consequence of the increase in the number and importance of government functions.

The major changes in the character and role of the parties are:

(a) the narrowing of the substantive content of inter-party differences;

(b) the increasing official character of the "friendly" integration-type parties;

(c) a diminution of the focus of popular attention on the party because of people's increased well-being and the enhanced role of the state in direct administration and the omnipresence of interest groups.

To what extent does the party, in this stage of social development, retain its capacity for integrating the population into the political structure by translating popular desires and images into action preferences and forcing these preferences on decision makers?

#### 1. The Electorate and the Party

Voting preferences and abstention records furnish limited criteria for the party's integrative potentialities. They may give some help towards determining the respective share of images, symbols and specific desiderata. French, German, Belgian, Italian, and English studies, correlating social class and political activity, need to be compared and analyzed to give more precision to the idea of political choice. A related problem is the interpretation of

abstentionism. Under what circumstances does the increase or decrease of abstentions affect the legitimacy of electoral choices?

## 2. Party Membership and Party Leadership

The meaning of party membership for the fulfilling of party roles and for the legitimacy of party functioning is undergoing changes. The party as an institution for adjusting group differences has different membership prerequisites and a different basis of legitimacy than the party as program builder. The new role of the party changes both leaders' images and members' images of the party and increases the gap between them. We need further study of the images of the party among

- (a) party leaders;
- (b) party activists;
- (c) dues-paying party members;
- (d) voters.

## 3. Elements Determining Action Preferences

Political action preferences derive from a symbiosis of many thought patterns and from the urgency of many demands. What elements decide the rank order in which issues are taken up?

(a) leaders' perceptions of the relative ease or difficulty of meeting specific situations;

(b) leaders' personal scales of values, acceptance of existing elites, deviant images of society, etc.;

(c) institutional pressures and their avoidance: the prerequisites of a competitive party game.

#### 4. Survival Chances of Party Action Preferences

Party action preferences are declarations of intentions. To what extent can we trace the factors deciding their chances of being carried through?

- (a) choice of party representatives appointed to political office;
- (b) cohesiveness of party organization;
- (c) relevance of party decisions to basic political issues;
- (d) mechanisms of enforcement of party decisions;
- (e) typology of relations between civil servants and political head of department.

#### 5. Competitors of the Integration Party

The political party which attempts to integrate the population in the existing or a slightly modified political structure is only one of the forces, and not always the most significant one, competing for people's loyalties. The advantage of the party's association with the machinery of the state may be outweighed by its remoteness from key groups of the population. Hence the importance of the relations which it may establish with other organizations having possibly closer or more continuous access to various strata of the population. The means and forms of its interrelation with them may determine its effectiveness.

- (a) the opposition of principle: stabilizer or destabilizer of the integration party?

(b) the party and inchoate popular movements: hostility vs. attempts at absorption.

(c) political parties and interest groups: who shapes whom?

(d) under what conditions does there prevail between party and interest group a relation of absorption, clientele, various degrees of alliance, relations of benevolent, strict, or hostile neutrality?

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6. The Conditions of Survival of the Non-monopolistic Party as Originator of Political Action Patterns.