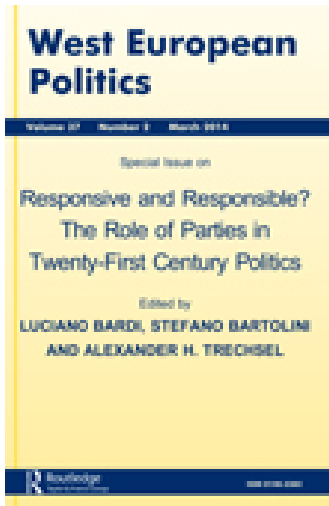


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‘Stripped Down’ or Reconfigured Democracy

DAVID M. FARRELL

In his later writings Peter Mair expressed strong and ever more urgent concerns over the state of party politics and the future of representative politics itself. This paper uses Mair’s thesis to frame a discussion about the state of our representative system of democracy. It starts by setting out his arguments on party and democratic failure. It then considers the question of whether the evidence supports such a perspective, or whether in fact there are signs of adaptability and change. This in turn leads to a discussion about the reform agenda in established representative democracies, with particular attention to the potential of ‘mini-publics’ in enabling a role for ordinary citizens in debates over constitutional reform. The paper concludes by arguing that this reform agenda provides evidence of democracies being reconfigured rather than stripped down.

Democracies are transforming before our very eyes. Contemporary Ireland provides a good example of this. For the past 90 years or so, the picture Ireland presented was one of relatively little reform, at least when compared with other established democracies (see below). The original 1937 Constitution drafted by Eamon de Valera has stood the test of time: in the 70-plus years since its promulgation there have been constitutional referenda and various discussions and debates over constitutional reform, but for the most part the fundamentals of de Valera’s constitutional design remain unaltered. This may be about to change. The worst economic crisis in Irish history has helped to propel political reform towards the top of the political agenda.¹ The current Fine Gael/Labour coalition government has already implemented a series of reforms² and other reforms are promised.³ In addition, in late 2012 the government established the Irish constitutional convention tasked with considering a number of specific areas for reform.⁴ Within the next few years we could well be looking at a pretty different political landscape.

And it is not as if this is not overdue, as Peter Mair stressed in a highly regarded lecture to the MacGill Summer School in Ireland in the summer of 2011 – weeks before his untimely death. In a nutshell, he was not happy about

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the state of representative democracy in Ireland. He talked of a political culture personified by ‘cute hoors’, ‘strokes’ and ‘amoral localism’, of a ‘stagnant politics’ fed by a passive citizenry (Mair 2011b: 39–41). He referred to the country’s loss of economic sovereignty as a result of Ireland’s EU/IMF bailout (see also Mair 2011a). He called for urgent reform centred on and involving citizens, so that ‘we can begin as citizens to engage in running our own State and taking back control over our own State’ (Mair 2011b: 44).⁵

Mair’s pessimism was not just confined to Ireland. In a set of papers published in his final years, he expressed strong and ever more urgent concerns over the state of party politics and the future of representative politics itself (e.g. Mair 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009, 2011a – which, between them, culminated in Mair 2013).⁶ The rather grim picture he painted was of a growing indifference (in some cases hostility) towards democracy shared by citizens and elite alike, whose ‘mutual withdrawal’ from electoral politics has resulted in a ‘hollowing out’ of democracy, even of democracy without a demos.

This paper uses Mair’s thesis to frame a discussion about the state of our representative system of democracy. I start by setting out his arguments on party and democratic failure. I then consider the question of whether the evidence supports such a perspective, or whether in fact there are signs of adaptability and change. This in turn leads to a discussion about the reform agenda in established representative democracies, an agenda that I believe provides evidence of democracies being reconfigured rather than stripped down.

The ‘Failure’ of Political Parties

According to Mair, citizen withdrawal from electoral politics is manifested in a series of (now well-known) trends, notably: declining electoral turnout, rising voter volatility, declining party identification, and declining numbers of party members – each of which he tracks with his typical clarity and thoroughness. While he readily admits that a number of these changes are relatively small scale – ‘in some instances a trickle rather than a flood’ (Mair 2006a: 44) – for him the telling points are that in combination they all point in the same direction, and they are consistent across pretty much all advanced democracies.⁷ ‘The conclusion’, he says, ‘is unambiguous ... citizens are heading for the exits of the national political arena’ (Mair 2006a: 44).

Something similar is happening to the political elite. Building and developing on his earlier work with Richard Katz on the cartelisation of party politics (Katz and Mair 1995), Mair outlines two sets of changes in party politics that indicate a similar cutting loose from electoral politics by the political elite, which he summarises as identity and locational shifts. The shift in identity relates to the reduction in ideological polarisation of party systems together with a bi-polarisation of party competition (to offer voters choices between alternative coalition governments), and the willingness to accept all parties – however extreme the bedfellows – into government, so that: ‘[a]s more or less

all parties become coalitionable, coalition-making has become promiscuous' (Mair 2008: 216).

Locational shifts refers to parties moving along the continuum from being defined primarily as social actors to 'one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors' (Mair 2006a: 45). Indicators of this include: the sidelining of party activists,⁸ weakening of wider community and social ties (e.g. sister or affiliated organisations) associated particularly with mass parties, growing reliance on public funds and state support, the growing regulation of their activities (and organisation) giving them quasi-official status, and 'according increasing priority to their role as governing (as opposed to representative) agencies' (Mair 2006a: 47). Both sets of changes (identity and locational) amount to a scenario in which '[p]arty-voter distances have been stretched, while party-party differences have lessened' (Mair 2006a: 45), between them feeding the growing distrust of parties and political institutions by the public.

Mair draws all this together by linking back to Elmer Schattschneider's (1942: 1) much quoted statement that 'modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties', which generally has been seen along the lines of democracy providing a bulwark to parties, thus ensuring their ultimate survival. On the contrary, Mair suggests that the unthinkable may well be happening, that parties are failing (even if they have not as yet failed) and democracy with them, or at least democracy as we know it. In his view democracy is being 'redefined' to downplay popular sovereignty. This entails a heightening of the distinction between Robert Dahl's (1956) 'constitutional' ('Madisonian') and 'popular' democracy combined with a downgrading of the latter – in essence a 'stripped down' democracy, that is 'about rights rather than voice, about output rather than input' (Mair 2006a: 8).

In short, all this suggests a pretty dismal state of affairs: a growing divide between citizens and their leaders, political parties seemingly in their death throes, and democracies shorn of their populist roots. And it is not as if Peter Mair is alone in presenting such a perspective: another prominent exponent is his former European University Institute colleague, Philippe Schmitter (2001), whose view of political parties is that they 'are not what they once were'. Nor, for that matter, is this perspective that new: the 'parties in decline' thesis dates back a number of decades. What marks out Mair's work from the rest are a number of points: the typical painstaking use of evidence to back up his arguments; his leadership in the field of party politics; and – most of all – the striking contrast he presents from his earlier writings that placed great emphasis on the ability of parties to adapt and weather the storms of change.⁹

Party Adaptability rather than Failure?

Mair's perspective may seem persuasive, but does that mean it is right?¹⁰ Certainly there is no denying the trends he cites on citizen withdrawal from electoral politics – falling turnout, declining partisan attachment and rising volatility, falling membership levels; nor, for that matter, is there any doubt that parties are

becoming ever more reliant on and attached to the state apparatus. But how much of the former is entirely down to a specific ‘failure’ of parties, and to what extent can the latter actually be seen as a weakening of parties?

Let me take the last of these first. The greater reliance by parties on state resources to buttress their positions is seen, by Mair and a number of other prominent party scholars, as an indicator of how they have ‘become absorbed by the state and begun to act as semi-state agencies’ (van Biezen 2008: 339; see also Katz 2004). But to suggest that the greater dependence of parties on the state is in some way an insidious development – even a threat to the position of parties – is rather missing the point. From its origins the classic ‘party government’ framework has viewed parties as effectively synonymous with the state (Katz 1986), and this has always been so (at least since the origins of representative democratic systems). The fact that the level of support may be greater merely reflects decisions by the parties (*qua* state) to provide it. But are they any weaker for it?

As regards the issue of citizen withdrawal, the trends need to be considered in the wider context of societal change that has affected institutions beyond political parties. Societal change has contributed to a breakdown of collective identities as citizens become increasingly individualised. Rudy Andeweg (2003: 151) uses poetic license to illustrate this point succinctly: ‘religion is increasingly expressed outside churches, interest promotion is taken care of outside interest associations, such as trade unions, physical exercise outside sports clubs ... work outside permanent employment, love outside marriage, and even gender differences are becoming divorced from sex differences’. Little wonder, then, that parties have fewer members, few loyal followers, and face growing competition from other non-party actors.

It may be impossible to return to the halcyon days of the past when parties had larger memberships, more people voted, and more people identified with a political party. But changes in the public can be separate from the actions of parties as political institutions.¹¹ Moreover, it could be argued that some of the observed changes in modern parties reflect an attempt to adapt to social and political changes in democratic publics.¹² Indeed, to succeed and persist, political parties have to adapt to changing political conditions in order to contribute to the process of representative democracy.

Some of the concerns raised about the state of parties may reflect an underlying (implicit) hankering after a supposed Golden Age of ‘mass party’ politics personified by Duverger’s classic account (1964). The mass party model emphasised a loyal supporter base, the representation of particular social groups, and large mass memberships – all of these the very features that are singled out as evidence in support of the party decline thesis. But arguably this model was more an ideal typical than a widespread political reality (Scarrow 2000; Whiteley 2011). Writing in an American context, John Aldrich (1995: 245, 282) makes much the same point, observing that rather than decline, we have witnessed a shift from the ‘party in control’ form of the Van Buren era to a ‘party in service’. In other words, the party has changed, but it is not

necessarily any weaker as a consequence. As Michael Saward (2010: 133) puts it: 'It may be, in the words of Schmitter, that these shifts lead to the conclusion that "parties are not what they once were", but that does not necessarily mean that they are *less* than they once were' (emphasis original).

Representative Democracy and the Reform Agenda

The corollary of fixating on a particular model of party is a tendency to pay undue homage to a style of democracy that may well be past its sell-by date. For instance, we saw in the previous section how Mair places Schattschneider's 'unthinkable democracies' on its head by arguing that not only are parties failing but with them so is popular democracy. However, again this sort of perspective fails to recognise the potential for adaptability, in this instance of democratic forms.

It bears asking whether democracy in bygone days was truly so halcyon.¹³ If, as Mair believes, democracies are deteriorating, then by what standards are they actually measurably worse? Were the male-dominated parliaments of the 1950s better merely because more people (among those over 21) voted? Were the 1960s and 1970s better because more citizens participated in street protests (though, if so, surely this was already a sign that parties were failing to channel citizen demands even then)? Were democracies such as Ireland's of the 1950s really more citizen-oriented in an age when the clergy set the terms of public debate and politicians gave due deference to Church doctrine? In short – and to mix metaphors – when looking back to a Golden Age there is a risk of doing so through rose-tinted glasses.

That representative democracy (like political parties) can adapt to new times is a central theme in the work of Michael Saward among others. He tracks a shift from one ideal typical form of democracy, which he refers to as the 'popular mode' – the form of democracy lauded by Mair – to alternative ideal typical modes, such as 'statal' or 'reflexive' modes. Saward's (2008: 283) point is that such a shift 'do[es] not necessarily add up to a picture that is less democratic. It can, rather, be differently democratic'. At the heart of Saward's (2010: 8) vision of representative democracy is its very adaptability, of representation that is 'a dynamic process of claim-making' (by those who would wish to represent) 'and the reception of claims' (by those being represented). 'In the end', he concludes, 'whether democracy is unthinkable save for political parties may no longer be the question we need to ask. Rather, we may need to ask: what kinds of representative democracy are thinkable. And what forms of party claims, if any, are appropriate to them?' (Saward 2010: 136–37). This speaks to an agenda of reform of democratic institutions to a form that may no longer have parties quite so much at its centre.

There is certainly plenty of empirical evidence of ongoing adaptations of our democratic institutions to suit new styles of political participation by our citizens. The picture may not be quite so negative as set out by Mair. For instance, as Russell Dalton and his colleagues (2003a: 1) observe: 'Although

electoral participation is generally declining, participation is expanding into new forms of action¹⁴ as more of us engage in new, less conventional (sometimes even unconventional) forms of political action, as more of us become ‘good’ (Dalton 2009) or even ‘critical’ citizens (Norris 2009), seeking a more active (less passive) role in the political system, prepared to challenge (and thereby engage with) existing systems and norms.

Dalton *et al.* (2003b: 274) argue that a ‘new model of democracy is evolving. The contemporary democratic process requires more of its citizens. It also challenges politicians and bureaucrats to figure out what it means to move past a trustee model of politics without abdicating political leadership. But the result may be a further democratisation of advanced industrial democracies, and the betterment of society and politics that this may produce’. What all of this amounts to is evidence of a *behavioural* shift among (at least some) citizens, to a citizenry that is changing in its expectations of the political system and its approach to the system.

There is also growing evidence of widespread *institutional* reform, in large part in reaction to the growing clamour from citizens, and to a large degree driven by parties (in government). There is no shortage of examples: here is a sample of the more prominent ones:¹⁵

- Austria’s decision in 2008 to reduce the voting age to 16;
- Belgium’s long road to federalisation;
- Finland’s 2000 reforms to reduce the power of the presidency;
- Reforms in France (2008) and the Netherlands (2004) introducing the right for citizens to petition for referenda;
- Italy’s various stages of electoral reform;
- The ongoing devolution agenda in the UK.

The most comprehensive evidence to date is provided by Bedock *et al.* (2012; see also Renwick 2012), who examined the trends across seven main dimensions of institutional reform in 18 established European democracies over a 20-year period from 1990 to 2010. Summary indicators are provided in Table 1, showing a total of 173 reforms across the period, 51 of which were deemed ‘substantial’ – defined as: ‘significantly alter[ing] the balance of power and/or the nature of the relationship between parties ... citizens and elites’ (Bedock *et al.* 2012: 9). As Bedock *et al.* note, this amounts to an average of 9.5 reforms (three of them substantial) per country. The evidence is emphatic: ‘institutional reform is far from a rare occurrence and indeed occurs quite frequently’ (p. 17).

Included in the mix of institutional reforms are a series of measures that specifically cater for a citizenry more interested in political action outside of the election cycle, thus addressing Dunn’s (1979: 16) observation that the once every four years or so act of voting is little more than a ‘placebo’. In countries across the globe the evolving pattern is one of ‘democratic innovations’ (Smith 2009), of institutions being (re)designed for citizen participation. Dalton and

TABLE 1
INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS IN EUROPE: 1990–2010 (NUMBER)

	Total	Substantial
Decentralisation	58	20
Electoral reform	29	7
Public subsidies	28	2
Parliamentary reform	23	10
Suffrage access	16	1
Direct election	13	8
Direct democracy	6	3
Total	173	51

Source: Bedock *et al.* (2012: Figure 1).

his colleagues (2003a; see also Warren 2003) refer to this as a ‘second wave of democratic reform’, personified by the creation of new institutions and the redesign of existing ones with the principal aim of facilitating greater citizen participation, or, as Smith (2009: 1) puts it, ‘to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process’.

There is no doubt that when it comes to contemporary democratic institutions things are not as they once were. But this is only to be expected ‘when nineteenth-century concepts meet twenty-first century realities’ (Warren 2001: 226). Institutions must change and are changing with the times (of course, in some cases more quickly than others). The emerging ‘new model of democracy’ that Dalton and his colleagues (2003b) refer to is one that is more ‘talk-centered’ rather than ‘election-centered’, with citizens being ever more drawn into the policy process in between elections (Steiner 2012: 37).

Table 2 illustrates some of the key changes that are associated with this democratic transformation, which includes, *inter alia*, the sheer expansion in the number of things to elect (e.g. Dalton and Grey 2003); citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy (e.g. Altman 2011); reforms within parties (most notably, the greater role of members in selecting leaders and candidates; e.g. Cross and Blais 2010; Hazan and Rahat 2010); more transparent and open administrative processes facilitating greater citizen engagement (most notably the freedom of information trend; e.g. Cain *et al.* 2003); and direct citizen engagement in policy and institutional debates, in a process that tends to follow deliberative practice.

The last of these provides a particularly good illustration of the efforts by the political elite to reconnect with citizens. More specifically, it represents an effort to reinstitute voice (as opposed to rights) and a focus more on inputs than outputs – some of the core concerns expressed by Mair in his fears of ‘stripped down’ democracy. As implied in the table, this type of initiative can come in a range of forms, participatory budgeting, consensus conferences, citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, citizens’ assemblies, and so on. Generally referred to as ‘mini-publics’, what they share in common is an ambition to allow ordinary citizens to have a say, to ‘speak’ (Fishkin 2009), even to ‘decide’ (Fournier *et al.* 2011).

TABLE 2
A NEW DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION?

First wave of democratic reform	Second wave of democratic reform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dahl's 'polyarchy' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of elections to most offices • Mass suffrage extension • Freedom for all parties to compete in elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of elections for more offices (e.g. elected mayors; regional assemblies) • Citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy • Greater competition between and within parties • Greater engagement with administrative processes (e.g. freedom of information) • Direct citizen engagement in policy and institutional debates (e.g. citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting)

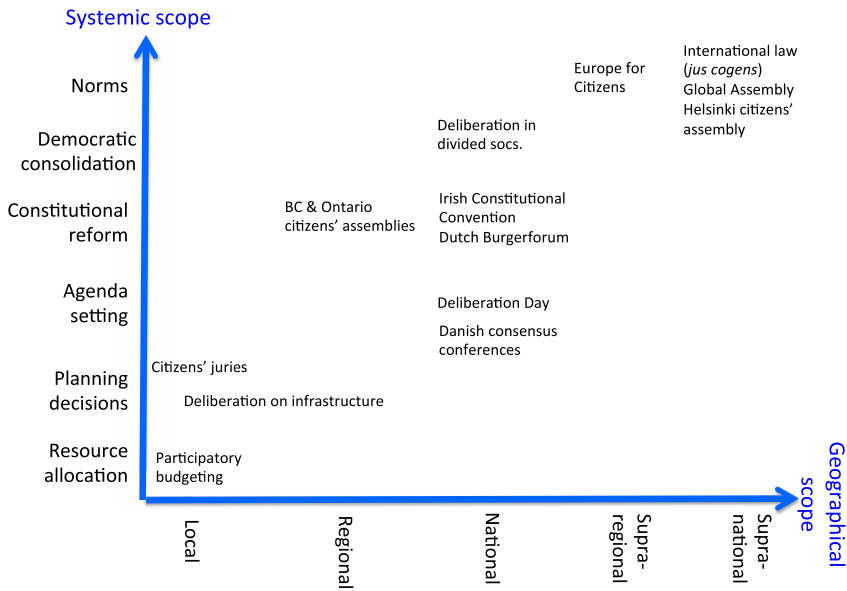
Mini-Publics and the Reform Agenda

The precise details of how the various forms of mini-public operate is beyond the scope of this paper (for more discussion, see Dryzek 2010; Fishkin 2009; Fournier *et al.* 2011; Smith 2009), but, in summary, there are a number of traits that are common to most, such as the following: the entity (jury, assembly, etc.) is established with a particular purpose in mind; it is given a clearly defined agenda; it is made clear to its members how their recommendations will be followed up on; its operation is time-delimited; its members are selected randomly (rather than elected); there is an important role for experts, not as participants, but rather as witnesses; and at the heart of the enterprise is deliberation, described aptly by James Fishkin (2009: 33) as 'the process by which individuals sincerely weigh the merits of competing arguments in discussions together'.

For the most part, and especially until quite recently, the use (and study) of deliberation has tended to be focused on administrative or policy-related questions and often at the local level – the bottom left quadrant of Figure 1. Undoubtedly, these local initiatives provide further evidence of just how much democracies have been evolving, with greater efforts by policy makers to involve citizens in important decisions that affect their locale – yet more evidence to counter Mair's imagery of 'hollowed out' democracies. Various studies have traced the spread of these initiatives across developed and developing democracies alike (for a sample, see Fishkin 2009; Smith 2009; Steiner 2012).

While few doubt the significance of deliberative approaches in adding to politics at local level, there are real doubts over the extent to which such activities could realistically be mainstreamed – made more central to the decision-making process in our political system (Dryzek 2010; Pateman 2012). A question can quite reasonably be asked over how small-scale, carefully controlled mini-publics can be scaled up to such an extent as to be taken seriously by citizens or the political elite. It is hard to demonstrate the potential national practicalities of a method designed primarily for local application, and for the most part applied in local arenas.

FIGURE 1
SCALING UP DELIBERATION



At the heart of this is the challenge of how to scale up to a degree that it resonates and is taken seriously, but to an extent that it does not become unmanageable. This can be seen in two dimensions: geographic scope (affecting larger numbers of citizens) and systemic scope (having greater policy impact), the implication being that moving towards the top right quadrant of Figure 1 should help to improve the profile and receptiveness of deliberation in practice.

Various proposals for mainstreaming have been suggested, perhaps most notably Ackerman and Fishkin's 'deliberation day' (2003) – the idea of a pre-election national holiday to coordinate deliberative events across the country. Another suggested approach is that deliberation should 'go global' (Dryzek 2010; Goodin 2010), with deliberative exercises giving citizens a role as 'norm entrepreneurs', helping to set the agenda on big questions in international politics, such as environmental protection, human rights, or even global governance.

A third approach that perhaps has greatest potential to resolve the scale vs. manageability trade-off is to use mini-publics to address major issues of constitutional or institutional (re)design at national level. National-level themes have maximum 'first-order' salience. A mini-public at national level would seem to come closest to one of Dahl's (1970: 158) classic proposals for solving the 'Goldilocks dilemma' of how to find 'units of government that are "just right" – small enough to facilitate participation and yet large enough to exercise authority

so significant as to make participation worthwhile'. These were his advisory councils comprising ordinary citizens elected by lot (Dahl 1970: 149).¹⁶

What is being referred to here is a type of constitutional convention that follows deliberative practices, most notably: the inclusion of a random selection of ordinary citizens as members, and deliberation as the mode of discourse rather than formal debate and bargaining from fixed positions. Clearly, constitutional conventions are not a new phenomenon. The most recent survey of patterns of constitution making over time identifies more than 700 cases in which new constitutions were drafted at national level since 1780, the vast bulk of these in the last 50 years or so (Mendez and Wheatley 2013). But only a portion of these will have included the engagement of ordinary citizens. In their detailed analysis of 160 of these cases, Mendez and Wheatley (2013; also Mendez and Triga 2009) develop a typology to categorise constitutional convention based on two main features.¹⁷ The first feature is 'mode of representation', distinguishing those constitutional conventions that are elite-appointed with little regard for representativeness, those that are indirectly selected in a broadly representative manner, and those that are directly elected. Secondly, they delineate three 'modes of legitimation', ranging from little or no popular input into ratification of the constitution, to some form of institutional ratification, through to maximum popular input in the form of a referendum. These two features produce a three-by-three typology of models of constitution making, in which the option of a directly elected constitutional convention combined with ratification by referendum is seen as offering 'the purest example' (Mendez and Triga 2009: 374).¹⁸

The work of Fernando Mendez and his colleagues speaks to a growing research interest in the *process* (as opposed to the content or outcome) of constitution making, in which the 'main message ... is that the democratic legitimacy' of that process 'is of key importance' (Elster 2000; Ghai and Galli 2006; Hart 2003; Karli 2009: 400; Samuels 2006). The past decade has witnessed the emergence of a form of constitutional convention that follows a mode of representation not accounted for in the Mendez framework, namely the use of random selection to determine the membership of the convention. The use of random selection is of more than philosophical interest (regarding its virtues over election, etc.).¹⁹ Its principal significance in the present context is that it results in a constitutional convention membership not feeling a need to represent particular constituencies, not beholden to any vested interests: these are members who are there simply because they were invited in a random process not because they sought election. This in turn facilitates a deliberative style of operation.

There have been four examples to date: the citizens' assemblies on electoral reform in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia (2004) and Ontario (2007), the Dutch citizens' forum (*BürgerForum*) of 2006; and the 2013 Irish constitutional convention (Farrell 2014; Fournier *et al.* 2011; Warren and Pearse 2008).²⁰ The first three cases had in common that ordinary citizens were the only members, all selected at random. Meetings occurred at weekends over a number of months: 11 months in British Columbia, eight months in Ontario and nine

months in the Netherlands. The two Canadian cases resulted in referendum questions that went directly to the wider citizenry for consideration, which in both instances were defeated (though in British Columbia, which held two successive votes on this, on the first occasion while the proposition actually received majority support it failed to pass a super-majority threshold). In the case of the Dutch citizens' forum the recommendation was for only minor changes to the existing electoral system. This was to have been discussed by the government but the process disintegrated with the collapse of the coalition government.

At the time of writing the Irish constitutional convention has virtually completed its programme. As with the other cases, the membership includes a random selection of ordinary citizens, with one important difference being that these make up two-thirds of the members, the other third comprising members of parliament. Another notable difference is that the agenda of the Irish constitutional convention is more wide-ranging and the timescale of its activity more constrained. Unlike the other three cases which each had a long period of time to consider just one item (the electoral system), the Irish constitutional convention (also meeting on occasional weekends) has been given one year to consider eight items (the electoral system included). This is closer to the 'constitutional gardening-frame' recommended by Olsen (2003: 820), but it is not without logistical challenges.

There are some pretty obvious criticisms of this mini-public variant of constitutional conventions that must be acknowledged. First, there is the plain fact that they have not exactly had a notable record of success: the referenda in British Columbia (on two occasions) and Ontario were defeated; the Dutch process in large part disintegrated with the collapse of the government; we have yet to see the outcome of the Irish process. In their detailed study of the Canadian and Dutch cases, Fournier *et al.* (2011) find that a lot of the reason for the failed referendums in British Columbia and Ontario was due to a mismatch between the deliberative ideals in which these citizens' assemblies operated and a wider societal and political setting that was not the most receptive – not least the 'rickety bridge' provided by the mass media (Parkinson 2006; see also Dryzek 2010).

Secondly, criticism can be made of the fact that, for the most part, the role of these conventions is limited to advising – or, at most, proposing – rather than deciding. Of course, this is not unique to the mini-public variant of constitutional conventions. As Mendez and his colleagues (2013) demonstrate, in most instances the outcomes of the convention require some form of subsequent ratification. But at least they can have a role in influencing the agenda and framing the debate, and when the membership of the convention – such as in the mini-public variant – comprises ordinary citizens this at least can be empowering for them. As Goodin (2003: 167) has argued, the very act of involving ordinary citizens 'might afford otherwise powerless people some real power over the policy process and the outputs that eventually emerge from it'. They get to speak; those in power get to hear them speak and learn how they frame issues; and the real potential is there to influence outcomes.

A third criticism made by Pateman (2012: 10) is that the very one-off short-term nature of these mini-public conventions is itself a weakness: ‘they are not integrated into the overall system of representative government or democratic institutions, nor do they become part of the regular political cycle in the life of a community’. One way of resolving this would be the establishment of more permanent entities, such as Dryzek’s (2010: 50) ‘chamber of discourse’. Alternatively, however, one could argue that the fact that they are one-off activities is an advantage as it helps to keep them at a remove from the established institutions of government.

John Ferejohn’s (2008: 197) observation of the British Columbia citizens’ assembly is that it was ‘an important institutional innovation’. For Mark Warren (2008: 69), processes such as this form ‘a potential part of the ecology of democratic institutions’. They are a complement to other representative institutions, but they have a limited application (on this, see also Dryzek 2010: 167). In Warren’s view, they are best aimed at certain kinds of issues: intractable and/or important problems that require careful deliberation and the seeking of board consensus; or those issues that pose a conflict of interest for elected representatives (such as electoral reform). By no means is the mini-public variant of constitutional conventions a be all and end all; but they do represent significant additions to our repertoire of representative institutions.

Conclusion

Van Biezen and Saward (2008: 30) make the observation that ‘[s]cholars of political parties have largely ignored the “deliberative turn” in democratic theory’, a turn that appears to be impacting on the internal dynamics within parties themselves (Gauja 2013). And certainly it is not something that is viewed with any great enthusiasm. A question to be resolved, therefore, is how do deliberative developments such as those outlined in the last section, and for that matter the wider set of institutional reforms discussed previously, square with the rather grim perspective painted by Mair and other party scholars?

Of course, it is not as if Mair was unaware of the sort of reform (and deliberative) developments outlined above (in this, as so many other areas, he was an exception to van Biezen and Saward’s rule). He knew about them, it is just that he did not rate them much. His perspective was that a lot of the discussions and debates over political reform favoured ‘options that actually discourage mass engagement’ (Mair 2006a: 28). And specifically in the case of deliberative approaches such as mini-publics, he saw these as ‘exclusive’, as not offering ‘much real scope [for] ... conventional modalities of mass democracy’ (Mair 2006b: 8).

Was Mair being unfair in his characterisation of the reform and deliberation trends? Recall some of his criticisms of the state of parties and representative democracy – for instance, his bemoaning the loss of societal linkage, or his references to stripped down Madisonian democracies fixated more on outputs than on inputs. I believe the evidence presented in the previous two sections

indicates that Mair might well have been unfair. The institutional reforms have been widespread (many of them observed by him; e.g. Bedock *et al.* 2012), and in a number of areas pretty extensive. The trend characterised by Dalton and his colleagues (2003a) as a 'democratic transformation' has been largely towards engaging with citizens, of increasing the scope for ordinary citizens to have a say. This represents a serious intent by political parties (in government) to re-engage with society, a step towards a form of reconfigured democracy that seeks to place the citizen centre stage – a democracy, in Goodin's estimation (2003), actually centred more on inputs than outputs. Of course, the various reforms might not succeed; the problems that these reforms seek to resolve may not be resolved (Bowler and Donovan 2013); the new institutions that are created may run into the same familiar difficulties. It is undoubtedly too early to tell, but we can at least speculate.

A decade ago John Dryzek (2000) coined the phrase that democratic theory had taken a 'deliberative turn'. While it clearly would be premature to suggest that recent developments in the use of deliberative approaches, particularly as personified by the spread of mini-publics, amounts to a deliberative turn in *practice*, what cannot be denied is that they are a move in that direction (Dryzek 2010: ch. 8). Taken together with the wider set of institutional reforms they represent an intent to maintain and develop the links between our political institutions and wider society – one of the themes at the heart of Mair's perspective about elite withdrawal. It is too soon to know for sure, but we can at least speculate, as John Ferejohn (2008: 213) does, about how these efforts to reconfigure democracy could yet provide 'a way to redeem, to some extent, the ancient promise of democracy as a form of popular government – in Lincoln's words, as government "by" the people'.

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Notes

1. The suddenness of Ireland's economic crisis was undoubtedly an important catalyst in motivating the parties to embrace the reform agenda (see Suiter and Farrell 2011) – a reform agenda that, as Mair and others would argue, is long overdue. However, it would be wrong to

- conclude from this one instance that there is inevitably an inherent linkage between economic crisis and political reform.
2. For instance, in such areas as gender quotas, party funding, and reducing the size of the parliament.
 3. Such as reform of the freedom of information legislation, and new legislation to facilitate whistleblowing and to regulate lobbyists.
 4. <http://www.constitution.ie>.
 5. Were he with us today, I have no doubt that Mair would be critical of the shortcomings in the Irish government's reform agenda, but at least it has gone some way to considering reforms that he promoted, notably by involving ordinary citizens in the constitutional convention and by including electoral reform as one of the questions for the convention to consider.
 6. The following summary of Mair's arguments draws variously on these papers.
 7. In passing it is worth noting his fascinating cross-referencing of climate change studies (e.g. Mair 2006b: 36) as a means of better understanding gradual and lumpy changes over time.
 8. A point he first drew attention to decades ago, and which is generally referred to as 'Mair's paradox' (see Mair 1994: 13–14).
 9. For an example of his earlier, more positive, perspective, see Mair (2003). In the more recent papers, referred to in this section, he suggests that his earlier perspective may have been 'too sanguine' (Mair 2006a: 49–50). Clearly these later papers were part of a larger project he was working on, as evidenced from draft papers in the Mair library on comparative party politics housed in the School of Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin, and which were published posthumously (Mair 2013).
 10. Much of this section is drawn from Dalton *et al.* (2011: chs. 1 and 2).
 11. This point is also made by Katz (2013: 63) in a recent essay in which he questions whether declining party membership 'should be attributed to failures by the parties'. He continues: 'there are good grounds to believe that ... the decline has been a by-product of social changes that neither can – nor in most cases should – be reversed'.
 12. As we have seen, this is a perspective that Mair used also to share in his earlier writings, before feeling that such views were 'too sanguine'.
 13. I am grateful to one of my referees for suggesting this line of discussion.
 14. Of course, it could be argued that these new forms of 'political action' were already emerging decades earlier (Barnes *et al.* 1979).
 15. This list is based on data reported in Annex 2 of Bedock *et al.* (2012).
 16. See also Dahl's (1985: 88) later discussion of 'minipopulus', arguably the origins of the term 'mini-publics'.
 17. They refer to a third feature of variation, the style of the process, which can be either closed (behind closed doors and subject to negotiation and horse-trading) or open (more in public view with a greater potential for deliberation).
 18. They note, however, that the most popular models tend to trade off one ideal versus the other: i.e. either using direct election to elect members *or* using referendum as a means of ratification, but not both (Mendez and Wheatley 2013).
 19. For discussion on the virtues of random selection (or 'sortition') in democratic politics, see Dowlen (2008) and Stone (2011).
 20. The Icelandic Constitutional Council is not included in this list as its members were elected (Bergmann 2013). Obviously the two Canadian cases are not 'national'; however, given that the country is a federation, a province-wide initiative is undoubtedly a first-order event.

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