ESRC Joint Sessions: Helsinki 7th - 12th May 2007
Comparative perspectives on local politics

Party cartelisation and the locality:
the British case

Karin A. Bottom
Institute for Local Government Studies (INLOGOV)
School of Public Policy
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
B15 2TT
k.a.bottom@bham.ac.uk

+44 (0)121 414 4972 (telephone)
+44 (0)121 414 4989 (fax)
Abstract
Recent years have been characterised by much discussion on the utility of the cartel thesis, yet one overlooked feature of the model is its predictions for development in the locality. In contrast to proposals that national cartelisation will lead to a rejuvenation of mainstream party politics at the local level, this paper contends that, the converse is more probable and parties are – where able – more likely to engage in their own form of cartelisation. These predictions are considered in reference to developments in British politics throughout recent decades and some support is found for them. While conclusions suggest that mainstream politics at a local level are under threat in Britain and the parties must engage in new strategies if they are to maintain their positions of dominance, attention is also drawn to their strength and continuity.
Introduction

A recent, and particularly influential contribution to the debate on party development has suggested that in order to stabilise competition and secure dominance at a national level, mainstream parties have begun to display behaviour analogous to that of business cartels (Katz and Mair, 1995; Blyth and Katz, 2005). Hypothesising ‘a relationship…between patterns of inter-party competition on one hand, and intra party developments on another’ (Katz and Mair, 1996: 526) it offers an account of how the established political class has managed to survive, even prosper in environments characterised by unprecedented levels of flux and volatility, defrosting cleavages and altered electoral behaviour (Dalton and Flanagan, 1984; Dalton, Flanagan and Allen Beck; 1984; Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).1

The model seeks to explain party change in ‘advanced capitalist societies’ suggesting that large organisations with strong histories of leading government have altered their profiles both internally (Katz and Mair, 1995) and externally (Blyth and Katz, 2005; also Katz and Mair, 1995) in order to maximise control of the political market. In the first instance the thesis proposes that parties have transformed into well oiled professionalized machines characterised by public offices which have strengthened at the expense of those on the ground while in the second it suggests that inter-party relationships have changed

---

1 A large number of models and typologies have been forwarded attempting to both understand and classify party change that has taken place over the last hundred years or so (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 168-9). A number, namely the cadre, mass (Duverger, 1954), catch-all (Kirchheimer, 1966) and cartel models (Katz and Mair, 1995) are thought to have been particularly important in identifying the crucial junctures in mainstream party development. Whereas cadre parties were small, restricted, loose gatherings of notables organised to represent society’s elite (Duverger, 1954) and distribute ‘particularistic benefits’ to a very select portion of society (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 175), mass parties were superior organisational forms (Duverger, 1954) created out of mass suffrage and designed to penetrate a number of spheres of social life (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 178). Concerned with social reformation and widespread representation (Duverger, 1954; Katz and Mair, 1995; 18), they mobilised civil society in the run-up to elections yet also provided them with benefits and social goods outside of these periods in order to maintain allegiance (Barnes, 1967). Unlike the previous model that was part of the state and restricted to representation of society’s elite, this party-type was available to all (Katz and Mair, 1995). In contrast, the catch-all party embodied the decline of ideology and mass principles, also being characterised by the ascendency of professionalism and entrepreneurial logic (Kirchheimer, 1966; Katz and Mair, 1995; 18). Placed somewhere between society and the state, this party model unlike its predecessors, divided its loyalties between the two (Katz and Mair, 1995: 14).
and they have begun to operate in a manner similar to that of business cartels so that they have more chance of controlling the market for votes, seats and access to government office. While the theory would suggest that such developments strengthen parties and their ability to function in modern-day environments, such changes imply a reduced desire and capacity to fulfil the responsive and aggregative roles most commonly associated with political parties (1995: 21). Accordingly the thesis proceeds to suggest that democratic shortfalls at a national level can be remedied by more autonomous and responsive parties on the ground. The validity of this proposal is examined in this paper and in contrast to Katz and Mair’s suggestions, it is proposed that parties engaging in behaviour suggestive of cartelisation at a national level will not be able to transfer such roles and responsibilities to the locality and successfully achieve the outcomes they desire.

**Party cartelisation at a national level: an overview**

Cartel theory suggests that in order to achieve stabilised and predictable environments at a national level, parties have retreated from, and ceased to provide – with differing degrees – demand-related policies associated with growth and public service expansion. Moreover, it is suggested that they have externalised a number of decision making responsibilities to devolved and un-elected bodies (e.g., central banks and the EU) that are neither accountable to the electorate nor in pursuit of its endorsement (Katz and Blyth, 2005: 42-44; see also Cerny, 1995). Somewhat dislocated from their aggregative and representative role anyway (as a result of catch-all politics), these developments have compounded national parties’ retreat from their constituency related responsibilities (Blyth and Katz, 2005).

Internally they have stratified in order to empower party elites, bypassing middle and lower ones in the decision making process (Katz and Mair, 1995: 20-21; see also Katz and Mair, 2000; see also Katz and Mair, 1993 and Koole, 1994) while members – traditionally in favour of collective rather than selective benefits (Panebianco 1988) – have been marginalised and the distinction between them and voters blurred to the extent
that the latter has been invited to participate in party business (Katz and Mair, 1995: 21; 1996; see also, Katz, 2001; Carty, 2004).

Externally it is suggested that the relationship between parties has altered and just as business cartels form to assure access of all participants to the market and its ensuing goods, party cartels have been constituted for much the same reasons. In these instances however, the desired commodities are stable environments, assured electability and survival (Blyth and Katz, 2005): they seek to provide voters with ‘fixed menu[s] of political parties’ so that they [the cartel parties] can monopolise and control the market for parliamentary votes, seats, and ‘government office’ (Katz and Mair, 1995: 21) as well as the benefits that stem from all three. Analogising the scenario to that of a business cartel, the proposal is as follows: parties (firms) set policies (quantities), supply them to the electorate (buyers) and alter them (as price leaders) in the knowledge that other(s) partaking in the agreement will follow suit rather than instigate competition (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 39).

It is suggested that policy competition is distorted in a cartel environment. The available space constricts and centre-left and centre-right policies become increasingly similar. However, in contrast to the previous catch-all model which was – theoretically – characterised by centripetal vote-seeking convergence on the median voter (Kirchheimer, 1966), this convergence is primarily a result of de-radicalisation on the left and most importantly a post-convergence stabilisation (Blyth and Katz, 2005). Nevertheless, this is not to say that all competition is removed in cartel politics. In line with Gidden’s assertions about the future development of progressive politics, the theory suggests that an ‘ideology of managerial competence’ is introduced to replace ‘the various ideologies of principle’ thus becoming the defining variable upon which electoral choice is made (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 46).

Thought to result from a tacit form of inter-party collusion, cartel situations can only be maintained if all relevant ‘parties’ perpetuate the status quo. Such balance can, according to Blyth and Katz (2005), only be maintained though an equilibrium of Cournot Nash: defection – a hazard of any cartel – thus being prevented in this instance as all players
believe they operate by way of the same strategy acknowledging that benefits resulting from withdrawal and re-introduction of competition will be short lived and followed by unfavourable outcomes such as exclusion or the dismantling of cartel arrangements (Katz and Blyth, 2005; see also Blyth, 2003: 6-7). Accordingly, in a cartel, the parties set the policies and alter them in the knowledge that others will follow suit (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 39). What is described here is a scenario comparable to an iterative Prisoner’s Dilemma (Kitschelt, 2000). Tentative even when stable and dependent upon continued participation by all parties, these situations are ultimately vulnerable to the behaviour of the electorate, which, as the final arbiter in such situations can demolish a cartel in one fell swoop at the ballot box if they shift their support to a party outside of it and force the re-instigation of competition.

Cartel equilibriums are attractive to mainstream parties that wish to maximize their access to office because they are marginalised or fear they are likely to become so. However, not all environments are conducive to party oligopolies: essentially the result of rational behaviour that ultimately, can only be opted for if both necessary and achievable, they are most likely to thrive in majoritarian, adversarial systems that are characterised by less effective parties and few exit, and thus bargaining, options for voters (Blyth and Katz, 2005).²

As with all party models, a particular type of democracy is described here (Katz and Mair, 1995: 6) and it is one charged with severing much of the electorate’s influence in political and social arenas. Here the implication is that the homogenisation of main party policy and goals has prevented elections from being channels through which political participation can exact ‘social change’ and rendered them “dignified” features of

² Blyth and Katz provide an illustrative example of this point. While electorates in Britain and US accepted policy cartelisation continuing to vote for the main parties, in Sweden they did not. Despite the Social Democrats (SAP) and Conservatives presenting a set of cartelised options in 1998, they were rejected and the voters deserted the mainstream (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 46-53). This forced the SAP to restore welfare state policies and re-instigate a supply-based agenda, ‘thus exposing the limits of the cartelisation strategy’ (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 52), highlighting the power of the electorate and underlining the process’s dependence on opportunity structures.
constitutions that promote ‘social stability’ (Katz and Mair, 1995: 22). Consequently, the theory suggests that such environments see local office holders picking up this democratic shortfall. Autonomised by virtue of party stratification this set-up is particularly advantageous for the central party because an active and responsive local party should attract more involvement and participation and thus make it, as an organisation, more attractive to potential members and supporters (Katz and Mair, 1995: 21). Such a scenario paints a picture where national politics has a free rein to operate independently without unwelcome influences while revitalised local parties fix the democratic deficit, both encouraging and welcoming the input and activity of members and voters.

In an empirical sense, evidence of party cartelisation has been mixed (McIvor, 1996; Young 1998; Pedersen, 2001; Blyth and Katz, 2005; Detterbeck, 2005; Bottom, 2006) thus leading to the conclusion that while the model is invaluable for heuristic purposes, the reality is that its representation varies across systems and, accordingly, it is probably more fruitful for it to be understood as a collection of behaviours that can be exhibited together or independently. The purpose here is to explore the local and perhaps more ephemeral aspect of the party cartelisation phenomenon; specifically in the context of recent developments in Britain. First, the paper draws attention to how the cartel model fails to acknowledge the links that exists between national and local politics. Within the context of the cartel model, it then provides a brief description of how national politics have developed in recent years, the following section then proceeding to examine the developments that have taken place in local politics: the paper questions the trajectory predicted in the cartel model and suggests that behaviour indicative of party cartelisation at the national level will, in party based councils, ultimately create situations where cartelisation becomes the most attractive option.

Effects on the locality?

The cartel models proposes that while parties become detached from and less responsive to their members and voters at the national level, they are likely to become more active and dynamic in the local one. Implicit in this suggestion is that each level of the party
operates in a relatively detached and insular environment whereby the actions and fortunes of one will not impact upon those of the other. Such as assumption seems to contrast with much thought in this area which, whilst acknowledging the different faces of party as ‘distinct units of analysis’, also recognises the presence of rich, complex and inter-dependent relationships that inextricably link them together (Clarke, 2004); for example, it has been suggested that party behaviour in the locality can influence its national fortunes (and presumably visa versa) and indeed, local activities have been shown to have a direct effect on turnout in national elections in Britain (Pimlott, 1974; Denver and Hands, 1997; see also Copus, 2007a: 7). Furthermore, this notion of isolation assumes that each level is distinct and unconnected in the eyes of the electorate, yet, it has been shown that citizens’ perceptions of competence in the locality are directly related to those they hold for higher tiers (Vetter, 2000) and referring again to the British context, it seems that local elections can often reflect ‘the wider trends’ in politics (Rallings, Thrasher and Denver, 2005: 294).

In contrast to the model’s suggestions then, it is proposed that parties exhibiting behaviour suggestive of cartelisation at a national level are not likely to be rejuvenated and successful in the locality; rather they are more likely to be punished for the actions of their organisation in central and public office. Focusing on Britain, the following sections examine this proposition in the context of Katz and Mair’s argument.

**Application of the theory: British politics at the national level**

Blyth and Katz suggest that the ineluctability of Labour in the 1980s allowed the Conservatives to act as unrestrained monopolists until the mid-1990s and accordingly Labour was galvanised into making itself electable and trying to create a political oligopoly out of a monopoly (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 46). Instigated by Neil Kinnock the process culminated in 1997 under Tony Blair when the party was elected with a landslide result. Ideologically the party shifted had to the right, eliminated the unions’ veto power, adopted the principle of ‘one man one vote’, elevated voters at the expense of members and activists (Jones, Kavanagh, Moran and Norton, 2001 247), and began to court and

---

3 For a comprehensive review of this ‘revisionist’ school of thought, refer to Clark (2004).
secure funds from private business thus relaxing their dependence upon the electorate (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 46). Once elected, the party committed itself to replacing the politics of class with those of the Third Way, gave the Bank of England independence, deepened its relationship with Europe and devolved Scotland and Wales thus distancing the centre from responsibility for outcomes in those regions (Blyth and Katz, 2005: 47).

Mirroring conservative rule in the 1980s and early 1990s New Labour has enjoyed some what of a monopolistic position since 1997. Yet, recent years have seen the Conservatives display what could also be construed as ‘cartel-seeking behaviour’. Indeed, William Hague centralised membership and consolidated control within the core of the party (Webb, 2000), the leadership election process in 2006 clearly attempted to quash the voice ideological activists or ‘believers’ in favour of its ‘careerists’ (see Panebianco, 1988) and the party now competes with Labour for the middle ground.

In addition to internal change, the last decade has seen the two parties converge on left-right policy and devote increasingly more attention to proving their competence and efficiency (see Volkens, 2001; Bottom, 2006, chapter 4). Indeed, the evidence appears supportive of the cartel argument. The question is how have these developments been concurrent with a rejuvenation of traditional parties at the local level, or, as proposed above, have the repercussions been rather more negative and posed a number of new challenges for the parties?

**Developments at the local level in Britain**

The UK government is an extremely centralised organism, even hyper-centralised (Loughlin, 2001: chapter 2) and this has become increasingly so throughout the last twenty five years (Lyons, 2006: 1). While the Labour government has consistently made a rhetorical commitment to the ‘new localism’ and more freedom for local government (ODPM, 2005), the reality has, by and large, been rather different (Wilson and Game, 2006: 157). Contrary to what might be expected – given the thrust of the cartel argument (Blyth And Katz, 2005) – local authorities have reduced in numbers, powers been curtailed and finances have become subject to tighter control (Wilson and Game, 2006:}
While there have been some moves to empower localities, and certain highly performing councils have been endowed with more authority (Wilson and Game, 2006: 176), their constitutional position has remained unchanged and – despite a commitment to reduce it – the quango⁴ state has flourished (Skelcher, Wier and Wilson, 2000).

Indeed, recent developments have only served to compound this situation and the latest White Paper on local government serves only to demonstrate this. In fact, a number of its initiatives seem concerned with further disempowering councils and strengthening the centre (Bovaird, Coulson, Game, Raine, Spencer, Whiteman, Willis, 2007). While there has been some attempt to empower councillors at an individual level, the role of party in local government has been almost completely disregarded (Leach and Wilson, 2007) and the political functions of local politics have been overlooked to the extent that the publication could read more as a proposal for local services (Bovaird et.al., 2007: 1).

Though it is generally considered that the higher the level of political participation, the greater the ‘quality’ and ‘legitimacy’ of a political regime (Pateman, 1970; Dahl, 1971; Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Jennings and van Deth, 1990; Dalton, 1996) Britain is associated with particularly low levels (Hoffman, Martinot, Rallings, Thrasher, 186). Indeed, recent decades have, albeit with some fluctuation, shown decaying links between the population while local parties and membership of the three main parties has declined and continues to do so both in real numbers (Wheeler, 2006; Leach, 2007) and per percentage of the electorate (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2006: 312) Of a small and decreasing pool available to the political parties only a minority of members make themselves available for party activities on a monthly basis (Seyd and Whitely, 2004:359) and Britain is not alone in the fact that an increasing number of people now choose to try and influence the state through non-conventional channels (Dalton, Flanagan and Allen Beck, 1984; Flanagan and Dalton, 1984; Lawson and Merkl, 1988; Lawson, 1988).

⁴ Quasi autonomous non governmental organisation.
However, the fault does not fully lie and the door of the electorate as there is little evidence to suggest that local parties have been particularly innovative in their activities to encourage political participation in recent years; despite recent Governmental analysis trying to suggest the opposite (see DCLG, 2006: 50-51; Copus, 2007a: 9). Nevertheless, parties remain – although increasingly less so – at the centre of local government and they continue to be ‘critical determinants for the health of local democracy’ (Copus, 2004: 57). With the power to maintain ‘continuity’ they also have the ability to initiate change in the community (Copus, 2004: 57) clarify issues, enhance accountability and coherence and consolidate local democracy (Wilson and Game, 2002: 296). However, it seems that even at this level, they can hold an almost institutionalised mindset against such aggregative or representative behaviour: though varied in perception of their representative role (see, Copus, 2004; Leach, 2006), as ‘risk averse organisations’ evidence suggests that they choose to close down rather than encourage debate, keeping it and the consideration process behind closed doors, turning public deliberation into exercises that defend pre-considered ideas (Copus, 2007a: 9).

Moreover, the most recent publication by the government on local issues suggests a number of initiatives that, in all probability, will discourage public participation and a strengthening of ties between parties and community. First, it has made a strong commitment to increasing the number of unitary one tier authorities at a local level (DCLG, 2007). This move fails to recognise the fact that citizens have shown a proclivity respond to smaller units, electoral as well as governmental (Bovaird et.al., 2007), and this has been shown to be particularly so in countries where the local level is traditionally less autonomous (Vetter, 2002: 16). Second the commitment it makes to partnerships and the LSP\(^5\) is in all probability likely to mitigate against effective accountability and confuse the public (Bovaird et.al., 2007: 7) thus further deterring them from engagement in the political process.

\(^5\) Local Strategic Partnership
It appears then that local developments in Britain contrast with the cartel model’s predictions. Government directives do not appear to encourage a strengthening of the party role at a local level and there is no evidence to suggest that there has been a revitalisation of [party-led] traditional politics; if anything they have petrified.

So what developments have taken place? One by-product of party cartelisation and its concomitant lack of political choice, is, we are told, a rise in extremism: both in terms of electoral sentiment and party options (Katz and Mair, 1995; Blyth and Katz, 2005). Taking into account the lack of opportunities afforded by the British electoral system at national level; an increased possibility for influence at a local level (Vetter, 2002), and the link that exists between national and local politics, particularly that in the mind of the electorate, it is suggested that the backlash against cartelisation, if it exists, will first be played out in the locality.

Extremist politics are understood here to be those that rally against the political norm. Often termed as anti-system, outsider, and radical they describe political views and practices, that, to some degree or other, stand alone from the mainstream. At a local level this area becomes some what complicated as competition can not be confined to political parties, however, the competition experienced by Labour, the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats can be identified as emanating from one of four corners: small parties with a national base, small parties with a local base, associations both politically affiliated and non-politically affiliated and various types of independents (Copus, 2007b).  

---

6 Copus, building on other such as Grant (1971; 1973) has forwarded a typology trying to make sense of this area. Additional to small parties with a national base, he has pointed to the existence of the ‘local party’ which organises and is active in one locality, the ‘political association’, again formed in the local context but ‘straddling’ the ‘political’ and ‘civic’ realm, the decidedly ‘non-partisan political association’, and the three types of independent, ‘the fully independent councillor’ with no supportive organisation, the ‘concealed conservative’ that supports a political party but chooses – for what ever reason to stand against it (Grant, 1971) – and ‘revealed party independent’ who makes his or her ideological affiliation know and the ‘fragmented independent’ that is part of a loose and fragmented organisation (Copus 2007b, 15-17).
While party politics at the local level continues to be dominated by the main three parties, their collective monopoly over the ballot box has clearly begun to wane and recent years have seen this group of challengers chip away at the mainstream vote: indeed, the collective vote for the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats dropped by 9% between 1996 and 2006 (LGCEC, 2007). While this period has seen independents benefit the least, their vote increasing (but with much variation) by only .5%, small parties and associations enjoyed almost a 9% increase in this time. Throughout the period all categories of challenger built on the number of seats contested, numbers won, and, most importantly, numbers won as a percentage of those contested (LGCEC7, 2007; Copus, 2007b: 19-22).

Yet how have these shifts impacted upon council systems in Britain? Table 1 provides information on their composition between 1996/7 and 2005/6. Observation shows us that while there has been some change, most notably Labour losing its grip and the Conservatives increasing theirs, overall change has not been as extensive as one might have expected. Utilising Wilson and Game’s typology that identifies six council types: completely/predominantly non partisan, weak partisan, multi-party/fragmented, two party, one party dominant or one party monopolistic (2006: 300) we can see how council make-up has changed throughout the last decade. While one party monopolistic systems have decreased by 20% to almost a third of their figure in 1996/7, one party dominant systems have increased by 5%; the Conservatives being the greatest benefactors. Additionally two party systems have risen by almost 2/3 to 29% and multi-party fragmented systems have reduced by 3%. Weak partisan systems have risen by 2% yet the number of completely or predominantly non-partisan remains unchanged. While highlighting change, the figures also appear to provide testimony to the resilience of mainstream politics at the local level. Indeed, a collapsing of categories shows that together, two party, one party dominant and one party monopolistic systems consolidated their hold over British politics and increased their share of council systems by 1% between 1996/7 and 2005/6. However, the extent to which they maintain their hold

---

7 Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre.
cannot be identified here and it is suggested therefore that we are missing much of the picture and the most interesting change is that which is taking place within rather than between categories.

Table 1.1: Party system in local government Great Britain, 1996/7-2005/6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992/3</th>
<th>1996/7</th>
<th>2005/6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely/predominantly non-partisan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak partisan</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-party fragmented</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two party</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One party dominant</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SNP</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One party monopolistic</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Completely/predominantly partisan 60% or more held by Independents; Weak partisan: 20-59% held by Independents; Multi-party fragmented: 20 or more held by third parties; two party: 80% held by two parties, neither more than 55%; one party dominant 55-69% of seats held by one party; one party monopolistic: 70% or more of seats held by one party.

Indeed, speculation over the forthcoming elections appear to indicate that while the Conservatives may continue to make inroads into the local councils, Labour will, in all probability, perform worse than it has for over two decades (Wilson and Carlin, 28.04.2007) this is likely to be the case even more so in the Scotland as the introduction of the single transferable vote is expected to increase the proportionality of the outcome (Bennie, 2007). Moreover, it is the small parties – all of whom are fielding an unprecedented number of candidates – that are expected to benefit the most (BBC News, 12.04.2007) and, it is suggested, if this is the case, we may see a further fragmentation of council systems at this level thus making the position of mainstream parties more insecure and increasing the incidence of multi-party politics at the local level.

Therefore, rather than the mainstream parties consolidating their position at the local level and increasing their ties with the electorate, it appears that the reverse is taking
place while small parties and organisations become increasingly attractive. Accordingly their position is becoming increasingly tenuous; therefore it is suggested that in many instances the conditions are ripe for the development of party cartels in the locality.

Much like national cartels, local manifestations are concerned with closing competition and restricting political choice so the larger mainstream parties can capture the market in terms of votes, seats and access to office. In terms of conditions their requirements are relatively similar and it is suggested that those to whom cartelisation is the more attractive prospect tend to either be marginalised or fear they are becoming so. Much like in the case of national politics, party cartels can only be opted for if both necessary and achievable and the situations most facilitative of this particular strain of competition are those prone to more adversarial politics, fewer parties (associations or independents) and ideologically homogenous executives.

Indeed, attention has already been drawn to the development of local cartels and it has been suggested that though the process is by no means completed, this tier of politics is in fact – like its national counterpart - heading towards partyocracy: rule for the party, by the party on behalf of the party (Copus, 2007a: 10). Indeed the government’s current distaste for party politics, the recent drive towards council executives and most importantly the White Paper’s emphasis on partnerships and governance as opposed to government (DCLG, 2007), will isolate parties serving only to encourage the process of cartelisation: these factors suggest that partyocracy could indeed be where local politics [in mainstream party dominated councils] are headed.

**Concluding comments**

This paper has attempted to investigate developments in British local politics within the context of predictions made by the cartel thesis first introduced by Katz and Mair (1995) and later extended by Blyth and Katz (2005). While the model – as an entirety – has been criticised on a number of levels; when observed as a collection of loose behaviours, it has proven a rather useful tool for analysis: indeed, observation of British politics suggests that Labour and the Conservatives have exhibited behaviour suggestive of
cartelisation in recent years. Yet, it appears that with regards to developments in the locality, its predictions have been rather too simplistic and failed to take the link between local and national politics into account. While the British parties may be concur with aspects of the model at the national level, they do not at the local one. Rather, instead of increasing the representative role and leading a revitalisation of local politics, the reverse has been noted. Seemingly, and in contrast to all predictions, it does appear that this situation has allowed the national government to rhetorically distance its self from local responsibility while simultaneously maintaining, even strengthening, its grip on the decision making process: it could be argued then, it has managed to secure for itself the best of both worlds, more control but less responsibility.

Indeed the position of local mainstream parties is becoming increasingly tenuous. Again, highlighting the contagation factor between local and national politics, extremist and non-traditional politics have become more popular in recent years; this has predominantly been played out in the locality and it is clear that the three main parties have suffered as a result of this. What we need to know is: what are the exact characteristics of this challenge to the mainstream? Is it party based or is it predominantly emanating from organisations and independents that have anti-party tendencies and eschew all connections with ‘politics’? We also need to establish the nature of their support, are we witnessing a dealignment of traditional support and an increase in floating voters, or are we observing a realignment of political preferences that are likely to be somewhat more permanent? It is suggested that questions such as these must be answered before we can ascertain the true nature of the threat that mainstream political parties face at the local level. Finally, we need to obtain a measure that will shed light on the extent of fractionalisation in party systems. As highlighted in Table 1, despite loss throughout the last decade, the mainstream have managed to increase their hold over British local council systems; if only in a numerical sense. Therefore future research that can provide a longitudinal insight into the trajectory and extent of change within council systems would make a significant contribution to this research area.
Finally, the paper has drawn attention to the suggestion that the opportunity structure in party-based councils is becoming increasingly facilitative of political cartels; indeed, it could be argued that the increasing uncertainty of party political environments at this level demands that their initiatives focus on this possibility.


