‘The Responsiveness of the British Labour Party:
An Analysis of policy-legitimation Arguments’

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Introduction

One of the main questions in contemporary political science is how in the current age of globalization and post-industrialization parties manage to be responsive to their voters. This question is strictly related to the compatibility between democracy and capitalism, and points directly to the functioning of party-governments. While the assessment of the quality of the responsiveness of political parties in western democracies is likely to be the subject of an ever-lasting debate between scholars, there is a general agreement that some fundamental changes have occurred in the modalities through which parties connect voters’ preferences to policy outputs (Bartolini et al 2014). In fact, whereas in the post-war period, during the so called ‘golden age’ of party-government, parties were representative of existing societal cleavages and could rely on stable electoral groups, in the last two decades the representative function of parties has been challenged a more ‘particularised’ electorate (Franklin et al 1992) and an increasing electoral volatility (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). Moreover, as the national economies have increasingly become subject of a rapidly deepening economic integration, governing parties must also be increasingly accountable to an increasing number of external principals (Rose 2014). Out of these observations, the hypothesis has emerged that parties are in a process of withdrawing themselves from civil society and moving towards the state, and thereby progressively neglecting their representative function and emphasizing more and more their governing function (Mair 2009, 2011).

While it is disputable the extent to which political parties in general have been undergoing this process (see for example Kitschelt & Rehm 2011; Thomassen & Van Ham 2014), it can be argued that the transformation of traditional mainstream left-wing parties into modern social-democratic parties considerably reflects the dynamics of that process. In fact, in different European countries, since around the 1980’s/1990’s left-wing parties have started to lose their strong ties with the working class movements and tried to broaden their electoral public (Lee & Stanley 2006). Consequently, they started to moderate their ideology as they increasingly tried to present themselves as reliable governing parties. The culmination of this process was the birth of the Third Way ideology, which can be seen as an effort to transcend the traditional left-right distinction (Bobbio & Cameron 1996: xx). In the 1990’s the British Labour party became a forerunner of this transformation. In this paper I take the British Labour party as a single case study and explore how the transformation has changed the way the party justifies its policies when in government. The aim is to see how the Labour Party has changed the way which in which it combines its representative and governing functions.

The relevance of comparing how the justification arguments of social-democratic governments have changed over time is two-fold. Firstly it contributes to the debate about how to study responsiveness
by exploring a stage of the ‘chain of responsiveness’ (Powell 2004) that has not yet been studied, namely the accountability stage. Secondly, as I show in this paper, the study of policy-legitimation arguments is a way for exploring how parties deal with what Sartori (1976) calls the traditional responsive-responsible dilemma of party-governments. Therefore, as I show in this paper, legitimation arguments give an insight on the extent to which parties are ‘more busy governing’ or ‘more busy representing’ (Mair 2009; 2011). In this paper I limit myself to the study of the British Labour party in order to bring evidence of how the process undergone by the party has not just changed its ideology and electoral base, but also the way in which it makes democracy work.

The evidence I find shows that while in the 1970’s the Labour Party justified its ‘responsive’ policies simply as its duty, the Brown government justified its partisan policies more as the best strategy to lead the country out of the recession. In other words, it appears that whereas in the 1970’s the government feels compelled to pursue partisan policies even if they are in contrast with the demands of ‘responsible’ government, in the 2000’s the government feels compelled to justify its partisan policies according to the effects they have on the economic performance of the country. At a first sight it seems thus that, contrary to Mair’s (2009; 2011) argument, today the demands of ‘responsive’ and ‘responsible’ government are more compatible with one another than they used to be in the past. The other side of the story, however, I argue in the conclusion, is that if policies are only justified in terms of their effect on economic performance, the legitimacy of political parties is endangered. I draw this conclusion on the basis of Sartori’s (1976) idea that if parties govern without representing, they might as well be substituted by technical experts.

I start the paper with arguing how my research fits in and adds to the literature on responsiveness and globalization. In section 2 I explain my choice for left-wing parties and why the British Labour party is a representative case. After having illustrated my case-selection I proceed by describing my methodology, what I consider to be justification arguments and how I classify them. I section 4 I report how the balance between ‘responsive’ and ‘responsible’ arguments looks like for the two governments. The main point I make in this section is that the difference between the two governments cannot be grasped in terms of the number of arguments, but needs to be investigated with a more qualitative approach. This I do in section 5, in which I analyze the justifications for the government’s actions in response to the economic crisis.

1- Responsiveness and globalization

The question about the impact of globalization and post-industrialization on political parties’ responsiveness has given new fuel to the debate about how parties make democracy work (Dalton et al 2010; Kitschelt & Rehm 2011, Bartolini et al 2014). The unique and fundamental role played by
parties in democracy is the transmission of voters’ policy-preferences into policy-outputs. This is done through the ‘chain of responsiveness’ (Powell 2004), a long process characterized by different representation-linkages. In order to study the process, different scholars focus on different linkages, and so some scholars study the congruence between voters and parties (Kitschelt & Rehm 2011; Thomassen & Van Ham 2014), some the figures of party-membership (Van Biezen & Poguntke 2014) and some others the impact of parties on policy outputs (Allan & Scruggs 2004; Korpi & Palme 2003). The different focuses, the different approaches and the different methodologies have led to different results and therefore no clear assessment has yet been made about the quality of contemporary political parties’ responsiveness. In fact, on the one hand there seems to be an increasing congruence of policy preferences between voters and parties (Kitschelt & Rehm 2011; Thomassen & Van Ham 2014), whereas on the other there are clear figures of declining electoral turnout, increasing electoral volatility and decreasing party-membership (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Van Biezen & Poguntke 2014)). The studies on the impact of parties on policy-outputs, moreover, generally conclude that the partisan composition of government still appears to be relevant, but at the same time it cannot yet be clearly assessed whether globalization is slowly eroding the role played by parties (see Dalton et al 2010). The ambiguity appears to be even more evident in the studies on welfare state development, where the partisan composition of government clearly seems to matter, but at the same time a general cross-national trend of retrenchment is observed (Allan & Scruggs 2004; Korpi & Palme 2003).

The lack of clear answers regarding the state of contemporary political parties’ responsiveness derives from the difficulty of studying a dynamic process such as the ‘chain’ of responsiveness. Moreover, the effects of globalization on responsiveness are not necessarily immediately directly observable, but are likely to become visible only on the longer run (Mair 2008). As Korpi & Palme (2003: 441) also recognize, globalization is altering ‘the parameters within which distributive conflicts take place’. Therefore, what needs to be explored are exactly these parameters of political conflict. Distributive conflicts in western democracies have been and still are mainly characterized by the economic left-right divide (see Kriesi et al 2012). In this conflict the left-wing parties stand for high levels of public expenditure which they try to compensate with higher levels of taxation, whereas right-wing parties stand for low taxes and low levels of public expenditure. In the post-war period, this divide was based both on the representation of the interests of different social classes, as well as the representation of different points of view on how to run the state (Saward 2008). The main change that seems to have occurred to western democracies in the last couple of decades is that the representation of the interests of different social classes as basis for political conflict has been deteriorating and that party-competition today is more about who is the best state-actor (Saward 2008;
Mair 2009). The consequent hypothesis is that the scope of conflict has narrowed and that the differences between right- and left-wing governments are waning (Lee & Stanley 2005). Moreover, the current context of the economic crisis has given new fuel to the idea that globalization severely restricts the policy options available to governments. A major concern that has thus emerged is that in contemporary western democracies ‘you can vote but you cannot chose’ (Alonso 2014). One of the main theories that has emerged out of this type of concerns is that a shift of balance has occurred in the way in which parties combine their roles as governors and their roles as representatives (Mair 2009, 2011).

In a parliamentary democracy a government is expected to be both ‘responsive’ to voters’ demands as well as ‘responsible’ towards the general national interest (Sartori 1976; Mair 2009). During the twentieth century parties managed to combine these two functions and therefore democracies without parties became ‘unthinkable’ (Schattschneider 1942; Mair 2005). In the current age of globalization and post-industrialization the representative and governing functions are becoming increasingly incompatible and consequently parties prefer to put more emphasis on governing and tend to neglect their representative function (Mair 2009; 2011). In order to test this theory about the declining responsiveness of contemporary parties, a framework must be created that allows to have insight on how governing parties deal with their ‘responsive-responsible’ dilemma. In this paper I introduce my idea for such a framework, namely through the analysis of policy-legitimation arguments. With my approach I look into a stage of the responsiveness chain that has not been explored in the literature, namely the accountability stage. The goal of looking into how parties justify their policies is to see the extent to which they see themselves as governors or as representatives.

2- Left-wing parties and globalization: the Third Way

The question about political parties’ responsiveness in the current age of globalization is strictly related to the question of compatibility between democracy and capitalism. The puzzle about this compatibility is that democratic capitalism needs to function according to two different principles of resource allocation, namely economic productivity and social need (Streeck 2013: 265; see also Dryzek 1996). Political parties, and especially left-wing parties, need to move between these two principles and, according to the theory about the declining responsiveness of political parties, globalization is inducing parties to increasingly focus on economic productivity rather than social needs. This is a problem especially for left-wing parties, for whom the trade-off between economic productivity and responding to social need is parallel to the dilemma of ‘responsive-responsible’ government. Responsive government, in fact, is about responding to voters’ demands and the demands of left-wing voters are generally about social security benefits. Responsible government, on
the other hand, is about serving the general national interest which, in a capitalist economy, is very much related to economic productivity. For this reason, the focus of my study goes to left-wing parties who, in western democracies, have always had to find a trade-off between their electoral commitments to high levels of public expenditure and their responsibility towards the state of the economy.

The British Labour is an example of a party that, after not being in government for more than fifteen years, confronted itself with this dilemma and changed its ideology in order to ‘meet the challenges of a different world’ (Labour Party 1997). With this transformation the party aimed to speak to a more centre-ground electoral public and consequently it started to gradually lose parts of its traditional electoral basis (Lee & Stanley 2006). Even though between 1997 and 2005 it won three elections in a row, between these elections the votes won by the party declined gradually. Most importantly, the lost votes were from the traditional electoral base, namely skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled-workers. In fact, in 2005 constituencies with high concentrations of workers got unexpectedly lost (Lee & Stanley 2006: 4). In its pursuit of winning control of the executive, thus, Labour lost part of its traditional base. This makes it an interesting case for me in order to see if the process undergone by the party also affects the nature of party-government. In other words, does such a transformation also mean that contemporary governments are more about governing and less about representing?

In order to answer this question I make a cross-time comparison between a contemporary British Labour government and a Labour government from the so-called Golden age of party-government. As my main interest is how governing parties deal with the responsive-responsible dilemma, I look for governments that had strong external pressures to reduce public expenditure but tried to hold to their electoral commitment of high public expenditures. The comparison that I make is thus between the 2007-2010 Brown government and the 1974-1979 Wilson/Callaghan government, both of which had to face a severe international economic crisis. This comparison thus gives insight into how, during an economic crisis, a Labour government today justifies its policies differently than in the past, and thus the extent to which it sees itself as a representative or a governor. This single comparison allows for generalization for two main reasons. First, the context of an economic crisis tends to bring forward certain aspects of the political process that in periods of economic wealth may remain hidden (Gourevitch 1986). Second, a process similar to the transformation of the British Labour Party has also occurred to mainstream left-wing parties of various other western European countries (Green Pedersen & Van Kersbergen 2002). The patterns I find for the British case, might thus very well be present in other western countries as well.
The justification arguments I look at are those contained in the Budget speeches held by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. These speeches are representative of the overall government’s action and allow for over-time comparisons. Besides the yearly Budget speeches, in section 5 I also look at the pre-budget reports of December 1976 and November 2008. These pre-budget reports were held in periods in which the external pressures on the government were exceptionally high and are representative of how the two governments approached the economic crisis. Therefore, these speeches give an extra-deep insight on the responsive-responsible dilemmas of the two governments. In the following section I explain the relevance of justification arguments and introduce the framework through which I analyze them.

3- Methodology

For justification or legitimation arguments, I use these terms interchangeably, I intend the arguments with which the government explains why its policies are just and why they must be accepted. These arguments are a stage of the democratic process in which the arrows of representation start to go back from the policy-outputs towards the voters. Figure 1 reproduces a model of representative democracy, a simplified version of the model designed by Kriesi et al (2013: 58).

![Diagram of the democratic process]

Source: Kriesi et al (2013: 58)

Parties are the actors connecting all the different stages of the democratic process: they mobilize and aggregate preferences in order to implement them into policies, then they have to justify their policies and finally they get judged by the electoral public who, on the basis of the information it receives, will form new preferences. Justification arguments are the beginning of the chain of accountability.
(Kriesi et al 2013: 58) through which parties make representations of their actions in government towards the parliament and the voters. It is the process through which they legitimize the policies they have pursued or are still pursuing. Legitimacy, in fact, consists in ‘the principles and procedures through which it can be rationally argued that collectivized decisions must be accepted’ (Bartolini 2005: 165-166). Legitimation arguments are thus those arguments through which the government relates its policy to what a government is expected to do, and in a democracy that is to respond to voters’ demands and deliver common goods (Sartori 1976). For this reason, these arguments are informative about the self-perception of parties in office, namely the extent to which they want to be judged as governors and the extent to which they want to be judged as representatives. For the proper functioning of party government, it is crucial that parties perceive the importance of fulfilling to both functions: if they govern without representing, they might as well be substituted by technical experts, while if they represent without governing they might as well be substituted by opinion polls (Sartori 1976: 28). The justification arguments thus need to be categorized into those referring to the demands of the voters and those referring to the general national interest. This distinction is similar to the distinction made by Scharpf (1975; 2000) between input and output-legitimacy, where the former refers to the legitimacy deriving from democratic representation and the latter refers to the government’s capacity of delivering policies that serve the national interest.

Following Schneider’s et al (2010) idea that legitimation statements can be reduced to the proposition “the policy is legitimate because…”, I developed the following framework in order to study the justification arguments. I look for the arguments referring to the origins of the decision, the criteria behind the decision-making process and the source of legitimacy. Then I divide the arguments into those referring to the electoral mandate and those referring to the general national interest. This framework is summarized in table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Input legitimacy</th>
<th>Output legitimacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origins of decision</strong></td>
<td>Inputs coming from the electoral mandate and societal interests</td>
<td>Need for certain decisions, adapting to current circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria behind the decision-making process</strong></td>
<td>Will of governing party, responding to electoral demands/electoral promises</td>
<td>Rationality, technical competence, efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of legitimacy</strong></td>
<td>Electoral mandate</td>
<td>National interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The classification basically divides the justification argument into those referring to the demands of the party-voters and those referring to what the government needs to do in order to serve the national interest. In the case of a Labour party governing a capitalist economy, this means to divide the arguments into those referring one the hand to social security, redistribution and public investments, and on the other those referring to economic productivity and sustainable public finances. This classification, however, cannot always be clear-cut, as there are for example some categories of arguments, such as those referring to employment or in some cases even social equity, that fall between the demands of the electoral mandate and the general national interest. In fact, a democracy functions properly when the principles of input and output-legitimacy are intrinsically linked and thus hard to grasp (Scharpf 1975; Bartolini 2005). Therefore, I also added an ‘in-between’ category which comprises those arguments in which the input- and output-criteria coincide.

In order to collect the arguments I looked for every passage of the Budget speeches in which the Chancellor explains the reasons behind the government’s action, be it either the general action or specific measures. For every speech I analyzed, I found between the forty and sixty arguments. This means I collected around three hundred arguments from the Wilson Callaghan government (five Budget speeches and one pre-Budget report) and around two hundred for the Brown government (three Budget speeches and one pre-Budget report). The categorization of these arguments gives a general overview of how the arguments referring to electoral commitments balance against the arguments referring to governmental duties. However, in order to fully understand the legitimation strategy of the government, a deeper analysis of the logic of the argument is needed. This I do in section 5, whereas in section 4 (below) I illustrate the categorization of the legitimation arguments of the two Labour governments.

4- The balance between input- and output-legitimation arguments

The Wilson/Callaghan government

The Labour’s party election manifesto of 1974 was characterized by the pledge to massively redistribute wealth and income in order to help to poor and weaker parts of society, such as the low paid, families in poverty, pensioners and the disabled. In the manifesto, the economic crisis is presented as a circumstance that should strengthen rather than weaken this commitment. The most characterizing statement of the manifesto in this regard is the following:

The graver our economic situation the more important it will be to protect the poorer members of the community - such as the pensioners - by a drastic redistribution of wealth and income (Labour party 1974).
During its office term, however, the party was directly confronted with the fact that its electoral promises were to a large extent not compatible with the requirements of managing an economy affected by inflation (Hickson 2005). Consequently, in autumn 1976 it saw itself forced to review many of its spending commitments. Also, it saw itself forced to introduce a pay policy in order to avoid an excessive rise of wages.

The commitment towards the redistribution of wealth and income thus constitutes the aspect of the electoral mandate of the Labour party that clashes with the requirements of governing in the general national interest. The justification arguments of the government referring to this commitment I categorize as input-legitimation arguments. On the other hand, the justification arguments referring to the balance of payments, public finances and economic performance I categorize as output-legitimation arguments. In its election manifesto, the party also presented plans that coincide with the duties of a ‘responsible’ government, such as for example the commitments towards full employment and the fight against inflation. These commitments were presented as a fundamental part of helping the weaker parts of society. The arguments with which policies in the general national interest are justified as being functional to the partisan commitments fall in the ‘in-between’ category. Table 2 summarizes the categorization of the justification arguments for the Wilson/Callaghan government.

Table 2 - Categorization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input-oriented arguments</th>
<th>Output-oriented arguments</th>
<th>In-between category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase public expenditure to help weaker parts of society</td>
<td>Sustainable public finances and economic performance</td>
<td>Economic performance and sustainable public finances coincide with helping the weaker parts of society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figure below illustrates how, following this categorization, the balance between input- and output-legitimation arguments looks like. The numbers indicate the number of arguments I collected.
What can clearly be seen is that, overall, output-oriented arguments constitute the main form of justification for the government’s action. This means that the government mainly justifies its policies on the basis of what it needs to do in the given circumstances. A few examples:

- **The Budget I have presented today is a hard one for all of us in Britain. It is dictated by the harsh reality of the world we live in. A severe Budget is a necessary element in any strategy for improving the overall performance of our economy**

  Denis Healey, 15 April 1975

- **The scope for such measures is governed by the need to maintain the financial stability we have now achieved and to get rid of the deficit on our current balance of payments.**

  Denis Healey, 29 March 1977

The input-oriented arguments seem to follow the electoral cycle, as, in proportion, they appear to be most present in the first and last budget speeches. In fact, in both these speeches, the Chancellor often refers to the electoral pledges:

- **I made it clear in the last election that in the economic situation we were likely to inherit the scope for increasing public expenditure would be very limited**
the first year, that we would concentrate our immediate efforts in the three fields of the greatest and most urgent importance to the mass of the British people—pensions, food and housing

Denis Healey, 26 March 1974

- if the Budget measures are to generate the support of working people for the nation's economic objectives they must also contribute directly towards the relief of poverty, to the fight against unemployment, to the improvement of our social services and to the achievement of a more compassionate and fair society. The measures I am about to describe are designed specifically to achieve these objectives

Denis Healey, 11 April 1978

The second citation, the argument from 11 April 1978, is an example of how the government tries to compensate its ‘responsible’ policies with ‘responsive’ measures. The argument as input-oriented because the emphasis goes to the electoral promises of the relief of poverty and a fair society. Other arguments, especially those referring to the fight against inflation and employment, can be simultaneously considered input- and output-oriented. I categorized these in the ‘in-between’ pillar. Below a few examples of such types of justification:

- I do not need to stress the domestic damage which would be caused if inflation continued at this rate. Such inflation redistributes the nation's wealth and income in an arbitrary and anti-social way

Denis Healey, 15 April 1975

- Our main objective in the coming years, like that of other countries, must be to reduce the intolerable level of unemployment by stimulating demand in ways which create jobs at home without refuelling inflation.

Denis Healey, 11 April 1978

The balance between input- and output-legitimization that emerges out of this classification is that of a government trying to combine its representative and governing functions in a time of crisis. Both criteria of decision-making are significantly present and the predominance of output-legitimation arguments can be attributable to the difficult economic circumstances. The protection of the weaker parts of society is the main partisan priority of the government, and in some cases this commitment
coincides with the governmental commitment of maintaining certain levels of economic output. In many other cases, however, the input- and output-criteria are clearly incompatible and the government needs to make decisions about which one to follow. From the budget speeches, it appears that the government is fully aware of the economic problems faced by the country, but its will to take effective action seems to be constrained by its partisan commitments. The ‘responsive-responsible’ dilemma is thus thoroughly present in the decision-making process throughout the whole term in office, and there appears to be a deadlock between input- and output-oriented criteria for decision-making. Below I will show that for the Brown government the balance between input- and output-legitimacy as similar to the Wilson/Callaghan government, but there seems to be a smoother interaction between the input- and output-oriented arguments.

**The Brown Government**

The categorization of the arguments of the Brown government also follows the logic of distinguishing those arguments referring to the partisan commitment of high public expenditure from those referring to the commitments towards the state of the economy and public finances. However, as the times are different, the distinction between input- and output-oriented arguments follows slightly different criteria. The election manifesto of 2005 is in fact much less radical than the manifesto of 1974. With the transformation into New Labour, the party has aimed to move towards the political centre (Lee & Stanley 2006) and consequently the commitments towards helping the weaker parts of society has shifted towards helping people in general (see Labour Party 2005). Despite the moderation of its ideological standpoints however, the party maintains typical left-wing commitments such as to maintain high levels of public investment, improve public services, eradicate child poverty and support families. Arguments referring to these commitments fall under the category of input-legitimacy.

Similarly to the Wilson/Callaghan government, the Brown government also faced strong pressures to reduce its public expenditure commitments in order to preserve the sustainability of public finances (see for example *The Telegraph* 2008). These pressures induced the government to introduce ‘efficiency savings’, savings in public service expenditures, which reached an unprecedent highpoint with the Budget of 2010 (see *The Guardian* 2010). The arguments referring to the commitment towards sustainable public finances, together with those referring to economic performance, I categorize as output-oriented arguments. Similarly to the Wilson/Callaghan government, however, also for the Brown government there is a grey area of arguments referring to commitments towards full employment and ‘opportunity for all’. These arguments somehow rely on the idea that the partisan
objectives coincide with the general national interest. Therefore, I categorize these as ‘in-between’. Table 3 summarizes the categorization for the Brown government.

Table 3 – Categorization Brown government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input-oriented arguments</th>
<th>Output-oriented arguments</th>
<th>In-between category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase public expenditure to improve public services and</td>
<td>Sustainable public finances and economic performance</td>
<td>Increase of public expenditure is made in order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support families</td>
<td></td>
<td>improve economic performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figure below illustrates the balance that between input- and output-legitimacy that emerges out of the categorization of the justification arguments of the Brown government.

The pattern is not substantially different from the Wilson/Callaghan government. Output-legitimation arguments are overall the most frequent, and they generally refer to the government’s duty of leading the country out of the economic recession. Below a few examples:

- This Budget takes place as the UK is emerging from the deepest global recession for over 60 years. It has been a testing time, which has required Governments across the world to make difficult decisions and difficult choices, and to take unprecedented actions
Alistair Darling, 24 March 2010

- *The reforms we made and this hard won stability mean that (...) we enter this period of uncertainty better placed than any other major economy.*

Alistair Darling, 12 March 2008

The input-oriented arguments become surprisingly more frequent when the crisis becomes more acute. The government in fact underlines its duty of protecting families during the crisis, and in some cases it even explicitly underlines the social-democratic values of tackling child poverty and helping pensioners. Also it remarks its commitment towards maintaining the quality of public services at a high level. Below two examples:

- *Even in these difficult times, there is fair and targeted help for grandparents and pensioners and to tackle child poverty, encouraging people to save now and in the future.*

- *The importance of our public services, on which we all depend, becomes even clearer in these difficult times. We have made our choice to continue investing in our public services, which underpin the health and strength of our nation now and in the future.*

Alistair Darling, 22 April 2009

As can be seen from this second citation, however, the one about public services, input- and output-legitimacy seem to be much more interwoven as was the case for the Wilson/Callaghan government, where the partisan interests were in some cases clearly in contrast with the general national interest. The arguments collected in the in-between category show how the electoral commitments are justified as being in line with the general national interest:

- *I believe that the Government have made the right choices to rebuild our public services. When faced with the upheaval of the global recession, we made the right choices to support the economy, businesses and families. Because of the steps we took, opposed by the Conservatives, the recovery has begun, unemployment is falling and borrowing is better than expected.*

Alistair Darling, 24 March 2010
- *This Budget is about equipping Britain for the times ahead and making sure that everyone, no matter what their circumstances, can exploit their full potential. It is about building a fairer society, offering more opportunity—a fair Britain in which everyone can succeed.*

Alistair Darling, 12 March 2008

Differently than in the case of the Wilson/Callaghan government, in the justification arguments of the Brown government the input-oriented arguments are incorporated in the overall strategy of the government to deal with the crisis. While in the 1970’s there is a clear distinction between what the Labour party wants to do as a party and what it needs to do as an executive, in the 2000’s this distinction is much less vague. Even though the balance between input- and output-legitimacy appears to be similar, there seem to be substantial differences in the way in which the demands of ‘responsive’ and ‘responsible’ government are reconciled.

In order to further explore these differences, in the following section, with a deeper qualitative analysis, I try to understand the logic of those arguments in which the demands of government and those of representation are clearly distinct and in contrast with each other. Therefore, I look into those arguments in which the government directly deals with the responsive-responsible dilemma, and thus into those arguments in which the government deals with both its partisan commitments of high public expenditure and with the pressure for reducing those expenditures. In order to look at the most representative cases of the general justification strategy of the two governments, I focus my analysis on two speeches held in the moment in which the economic crisis the two governments were facing was arguably at its highest. Therefore, in the following section I analyze the pre-Budget reports of 1976 and 2008. In the conclusion, I argue how the patterns I find in these two speeches are representative of the general justification strategy of the government and how the different justification strategies may have significant implications for the functioning of democracy.

5- **Two different justification strategies**

The tension between the electoral promises made by the Labour party in 1974 and the requirements of managing an economy deeply affected by inflation reached its culmination in autumn 1976, a point at which the Bank of England was no longer willing to support the sterling and, in order to calm down...
the markets, the Labour government saw itself forced to apply for an IMF loan (Hickson 2005; Financial Times 2010). It had practically become self-evident that the electoral commitments towards increasing social security benefits and other public expenditures were not compatible with the state of the economy of the time and were not sustainable for the public finances. The conditions attached to the IMF loan therefore consisted in deep cuts in public expenditure. The measures taken by the Government, after having reached an agreement with the IMF, were by announced to the Parliament by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healy on 15th December 1976. The measures announced by Denis Healey in 1976 consisted therefore mainly in cuts in public expenditure covering a wide range of policy areas. At the same time, however, the government tried to maintain the commitments towards the social contract.

When the financial crisis broke out in autumn 2008, even if there was no direct involvement of an external institution such as the IMF, the Brown government was put under strong pressure to review or even overhaul its commitments to public investment, which would put unbearable strain on public finances. At the same time, there was also strong pressure to rescue the banking system and this increased the pressure to reduce spending in other areas. In fact, in October 2008 the Treasury forecast that spending would exceed tax revenues by £43 Billion (The Telegraph 2008). The government, however, repeatedly restated its commitment to its plans for public expenditure and in the pre-Budget report of 23rd November 2008 the Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling presented the actions the government was going to take. The measures announced by Alistair Darling constituted a two-year fiscal stimulus package worth £20 billion consisting mainly of a 2.5% cut in the main VAT rate, a package to support small business and special measures to help pensioners and families with children (The Guardian 2008; The Economist 2008). Similarly to the Wilson/Callaghan government, the Brown government did not limit itself to simply act according to the circumstances, but pursued also policies that derived from the electoral mandate, even if these policies seemed to be in contradiction with the actions that were needed to be done. My focus goes especially to the justifications for these decisions, as they give an insight in the extent to which the party perceives itself as a governor or as a representative.

The Brown Government

The main theme recurring throughout the speech with which Chancellor Alistair Darling presented its pre-Budget report is ‘the government helping people through difficult times’. This motive explicitly recurs throughout the text about a dozen times, and represents the justification of the general action taken by the government. Below a few examples:
- In these exceptional economic circumstances, I want to take fair and responsible steps to protect and support businesses and people now, while putting the public finances on the right path for the future.

- These are exceptional times and they require exceptional measures. They require action now to help people—and action now to help build a stable economy. We have made our choice. We are helping businesses and home owners. We are helping people into work and boosting incomes.

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008

The general action of the government, which consists in direct assistance to business and families in combination with an effort to put public finances on the right path, is thus justified as ‘responsible’ and ‘fair’. ‘Responsible’ because it is aimed at building a stable economy, ‘fair’ because it protects the interests of the people and more specifically the interests of the British taxpayer, who should not pay the burden of the crisis:

- The recent financial turbulence has highlighted the potential problems with overseas territories and Crown dependencies. (...) The British taxpayer cannot be expected to be the guarantor of last resort, so I have asked for a review of those regulatory arrangements.

- All these steps are aimed at combating instability, restoring confidence and improving protection for depositors, while defending the taxpayers’ interests.

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008

The government acts in order to ‘protect’ the taxpayers from the financial crisis. The strategy adopted by the government in order to respond to the crisis is in line with the social-democratic principle of an active government’s management of the economy. This strategy, moreover, is backed by a wide international consensus:

- there is a growing international consensus—although unfortunately not shared in the House—that we must act now to protect people and to help pull our economies out of recession.
One can choose to walk away, let the recession take its course, adopt a sink-or-swim attitude and let families go to the wall. (...) Or one could decide, as I have decided and as Governments of every shade around the world have decided, to support businesses and to support families by increasing borrowing, which will also reduce the impact and length of the recession.

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008

In the immediate-short term the government is taking action to support the economy. For the medium-long term, however, the government aims to remain loyal to its code of fiscal stability, which it introduced in 1998.

The Government introduced the code for fiscal stability in 1998, committing themselves to conducting fiscal policy in accordance with a clearly stated set of principles. Our objectives are and remain to support the economy, to ensure medium-term sustainability and to maintain public investment.

Consistent with the code for fiscal stability, the Government are setting a temporary operating rule that requires us to set policies to improve the cyclically adjusted current budget each year.

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008

The general action of the government will require extra borrowing, increasing thus public debt. The strategy is however to inject money in the economy in the short term, in order to create the conditions for restoring balance in public finances in the long term. At the same time, in order to avoid an unbearable rise of public expenditure, the government introduces some ‘efficiency savings’, savings in public administration, without however putting front-line public services at risk:

there is a point at which front-line public services would be affected—and we will not pass that point. However, having carefully considered the extent and the limits of efficiency savings, today I can announce that the Government will now find an additional £5 billion of efficiencies in 2010-11 for a total saving of more than £35 billion over three years.

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008
The main electoral commitment is the maintenance of high levels of public expenditure and more specifically investment in public services. The importance of this commitment is explicitly expressed with the statement “we will not pass that point”. In terms of redistribution, moreover, another important partisan commitment is maintained, namely the introduction of measures to help people with low, modest and middle incomes, mainly through increases in tax allowances. Besides that, the tax increases introduced in order to ensure sustainable public finances affect only the top 1% of higher incomes, so that those on middle and low incomes are protected. The justification for these measures, however, is the same one as the justification of the general action of the government, namely the belief that it is the best strategy to help the country out of the recession:

- *Taken together, these steps will ensure that there is extra money flowing into the economy now when it is needed most, (...). And as a result of my decisions today to provide support now and to balance the books in the future, I will bring the current budget back into balance by 2015-16: fiscal support now and fiscal sustainability both now and in the future.*

- *These are exceptional times and they require exceptional measures. They require action now to help people—and action now to help build a stable economy. We have made our choice. We are helping businesses and home owners. We are helping people into work and boosting incomes.*

Alistair Darling, 24 November 2008

The partisan policies of the government are presented as the right recipe to lead the country out of the crisis. The justification strategy is thus characterized by a strong interconnection between the input- and output-oriented arguments. From the speech, it seems that the economic crisis, rather preventing from, is stimulating the government to increase public expenditure. The continuous reference to the ‘people’ are typical examples of what Saward (2008: 277-279) calls ‘statal claims’ of representation. With these claims, backed by a more flexible ideology, the party aims to speak as a state-actor rather than as a representative of a specific societal group. From the justification arguments, it seems evident that the Labour Party is competing with the opposition in order to be the best ‘state actor’ rather than the representative of a different social group. Below I show how this is different for the Wilson/Callaghan government.

*The Wilson/Callaghan government*

The actions taken by the Labour government in 1976 are mainly justified with the theme of the inevitability of the choices in the given circumstances. The figures of the public spending borrowing
requirement (PSBR) are repeatedly defined as ‘unacceptably high’ and therefore the justification for the government’s adjustment to its economic policy is that they are made mainly on financial grounds:

- The adjustments made to our policy last week were made primarily on financial grounds. They were designed to ensure that we could finance both our external and internal deficits over the period before the economy has achieved balance

- I shall confirm, as I told the House in the debate the other day in which the right hon. Gentleman spoke, that the Government have taken decisions because they believe them to be necessary

Denis Healey 15 December 1976

The government sees itself compelled to introduce cuts in almost all policy areas, also in sectors such as construction in which the electoral commitment is to increase expenditure. The justification for the cuts in this sector represents quite well the general justification strategy used by the Chancellor:

- I appreciate the deep feeling of many of my hon. Friends on these reductions and wish that it had been possible to make the cuts in construction smaller. But that would have meant reductions in the only major programme now spared from any contribution to the total saving. I refer, of course, to social security benefits, which represent about a fifth of all public expenditure and which, unlike wages, are increased automatically each year at least in line with prices.

Healey 21 December 1976

This passage is a response to a criticism expressed by a Labour MP. The commitment towards social security benefits is very strong, and it is the reason for which the government distributes the cuts it is announcing over a period of two years, instead of one year as wished by the IMF:

- The standby arrangements this time cover a two-year period, so that we can make the necessary adjustment without imposing unacceptable strains on the social contract and the industrial strategy.

Healey 15 December 1976
An important difference that can be seen is that, while in 2008 the partisan decisions are justified with the argument that they are the right measures to lead the country out of the recession, in 1976 there is no explanation for why the government tries to avoid cuts in social benefits: the government simply considers it its duty, as Labor party, to take those decisions. Even more interesting is to observe is that, while in 2008 the government seems to be more concerned with justifying its ‘responsive’ policies with ‘responsible’ arguments, in 1976 the government seems to be more concerned with justifying its ‘responsible’ policies as the best way to maintain its electoral commitments:

If the Government had failed to take the measures which the economic prospect now requires, (...), inflation would have gone through the roof, unemployment would have reached pre-war levels and the social contract and the industrial strategy would have collapsed with all the rest of our hopes.

Healey 21 December 1976

The argument than proceeds with the Chancellor emphasizing how any government would have had to implement the cuts and that the positive thing of having the Labour party in office is the government’s measures take into account social considerations

Any Government would have been faced with this problem. If there were ever a Tory Government again, they would face this problem. They would face the problem of retaining the confidence of the working people, which we have won and on which we have built such progress as we have made in the fight against inflation in the past two years. In their choice of measures to adopt, a Conservative Government would forfeit that confidence and return this country to the conditions which it had to endure for so many months under the previous Conservative Government. I am sure that this Government were right to take some account of social considerations in deciding on the distribution of their cuts.

Healey 15 December 1976

The competition with the opposition parties is therefore not centered upon who is the better ‘state actor’, as in the case of the Brown government, but is more about protecting certain interests vis a vis others. With its justification arguments, the government claims that it is the best representative of the working people. With the justification for its partisan decisions, in fact, the government speaks as an agent of the working class people and, therefore, the justification arguments are characterized by what Saward (2008: 275) calls ‘popular claims’ of representation, namely claims to stand for pre-existing
social interests. Consequently, the competition with the opposition parties is not so much centered upon who is the better ‘state actor’, but is more about protecting certain interests vis a vis others.

Conclusion

The difference between the justification strategies of the two governments is the same as Saward’s (2008) distinction between ‘statal’ and ‘popular’ modes of representation. A different mode of representation does not mean that the quality of representation is necessarily better or worse. A different mode of legitimation strategy, however, has some wider implications. Considering that legitimacy is about the reasoning according to which ‘collectivized decisions must be accepted’ (Bartolini 2005: 165-166), a different legitimation strategy means that there is a different perception of what a government should do. The justification strategy held by the Brown government in November 2008 shows that the government is expected to lead the country out of the economic recession and that the party holding office provides the recipe for the government’s action. On the other hand, from the justifications of the Wilson/Callaghan government it appears that in the 1970’s the government and the party in office have two different roles: the government must secure a certain level of economic performance while the party must make sure that certain societal interest are being served. The question that remains to be answered is: what do these different legitimation strategies tell about the quality of political parties’ responsiveness?

The evidence emerging from recent research on political parties’ responsiveness features a puzzling picture in which parties are increasingly losing members and loyal voters, while at the same having their policy positions still highly congruent with those of voters. Also, in this picture, the partisan composition of government still seems to be relevant for policy outputs while at the same time the parameters within which political conflict takes place seem to be narrowing. The different justification strategies of contemporary and past governments described in this paper may provide some elucidations regarding these contradictions. First of all, the evidence shown in this paper confirms the idea that parties are no longer deeply embedded in pre-existing social interests, but compete in order to be the best state-actors. This fact can be easily brought in relation with the figures of party-membership and electoral volatility. Secondly, the high congruence between contemporary parties and voters might be explained by the fact that competition between parties today is mainly about providing different recipes for running the economy: if voters define their preferences regarding economic policies on the basis of the solutions offered by the different parties, then their preference will be perfectly compatible with the political offer given by the parties. Thirdly, if parties provide different recipes, a different partisan composition of government will indeed produce different policy-
outputs. At the same time, however, due to the different nature of the competition between parties, governments are no longer in conflict with opposition on the basis of the representation of different interests, but more on the basis of different opinions on how to govern. In this sense, thus, the parameters of conflict have narrowed. Is this good or bad for democracy?

The extent to which this is a positive or negative development remains disputable. On the one hand, it can be considered positive: the dis-embedment from social groups may reduce the risk of clientelistic politics, and the different mode of representation makes the government govern more in the general national interest. From this perspective, this development can be interpreted as a shift towards a different type of representation, which does not necessarily mean a change in worse or better (Thomassen & Van Ham 2014; Saward 2008). At the same time, however, this development may also have the effect of endangering the legitimacy of political parties. The raison d’etre of parties, in fact, lies in the combination of representation and government (Sartori 1976). If parties fail to represent, and competition is only about who is the better state-actor, then they can also be substituted by technical experts. The risk, therefore, is that this development, which can in fact be seen as a shift towards a different type of representation, may lead in the long run towards a shift from democracy to technocracy. It is in this sense, I believe, that it is important for the future of western democracies that parties do not fail.

Bibliography


