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**The Politics of Constrained Discretion in the Age of Austerity:
Analysing the Capacities, Preferences and Responsiveness of
Political Party since the 1990s**

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, which drew the curtain on ‘the short 20th century’ beginning in 1914, developed capitalist states have been confronted with two faces of disequilibrium that unsettled the foundation of their people’s everyday lives. One of these is the conflict between capitalism and democracy, and the other is the grave lack of balance between responsible politics and responsive politics of political parties toward their electorate. Needless to say, these two types of disequilibrium are closely related. Motivated strongly by the seminal works of the late Professor Peter Mair, this argument has become a crucial subject for most scholars to tackle whenever they examine the nature and even the sustainability of democracy in the 21st century.

Arguably, given the fiscal discipline that has become a norm amongst most developed democracies even before the credit crunch in 2007/08, and the consolidation of service capitalism and demographic transformations, exogenous and endogenous pressures have severely conditioned the choices of policy alternatives that political parties can make. Therefore, even though power-seeking parties wish to be responsive to such voters’ demands as job security, public services, and kinds of distribution, making such pledges has become increasingly difficult.

Against such a background of critical issues, many have questioned: Do we live in the age of ‘politics without choice’, that capitalism triumphs at the expense of democracy and accountability at the price of responsiveness?

Without undue optimism, when we carefully examine the strategic policy design and

its implementation, the discretionary policies applied by governments are apparent. These policies had an impact that could hardly be contained within the margins of error. Therefore, in this paper, I focus on the feasibilities of 'constrained discretion' by considering the experience of the British Labour party during their years in both opposition and power since the 1990s.

It is interesting to note that Labour was driven by an acute desire to prove themselves to be responsible as an alternative governing party, as well as to be responsive to different constituencies from the top – though one could argue, mostly 'by stealth' – to the bottom, in order to be electable. The irony lies in the fact that despite their tremendous efforts, the bulk of the British electorate ended up revolting against them and politics in general.

In approaching the question above, this paper will firstly present the primary hypothesis that the capacities of the political party as well as the preferences of the major policy makers who implement discretionary policies define how the government deals with the pressures of the constraints. In order to tackle the issues of 'political malaise', this paper will advance the second hypothesis that how and to what extent the lack of responsiveness on the part of the political party as an agent is determined by the state of 'social inclusion', the core policy concept in the politics of welfare state reform since the 1990s.