J. Meisel and M. Mendelson, “Meteor? Phoenix? Chameleon? The Decline and Transformation of Party in Canada,” in Thorburn and Whitehorn, eds., *Party Politics in Canada 8th Ed.* (2001)

**Overview**

Chapter revisits assertion of 20 years ago that “political parties were declining in importance.” Authors argue that while parties have certainly undergone a relative decline in importance in some areas, their power to determine who forms the govt remains critical. Argue that we must conceive of parties not in a state of permanent or absolute decline, but rather, as now sharing with others in the discharge of functions that were once their exclusive purview. The party is a chameleon, permanently engaged in surveying the political landscape and transforming itself to respond to new circumstances, and thus guarantee continued relevance.

**Background**

The role of parties – many diverse tasks have been assigned to parties, though seven are consistently identified as important in Canada:

1. Integrating and mobilizing citizens by providing linkages between citizens and the state
2. Setting the policy agenda and formulating policy
3. Recruiting elites\*
4. The organization of govt\*
5. Structuring the vote and elections\*
6. Organizing public opinion
7. The aggregation of interests so that various communities have a say in decisions, compromises can be forged and interests can be organized and heard

\*Parties **still** active in these functions

* The brokerage function of Cdn parties has declined. Brokerage theory posits that parties broker regional interests by facilitating the compromise process and incorporating representatives from all regions in policy making – on this score, they have failed
* Explicitly regional parties (Reform and BQ) make this particularly difficult
* Parties still actively participate in (3), (4), and (5) – on the other activities, parties have lost importance in comparison to other agencies and forces

Following organizational reasons help explain this shift:

* Rise of bureaucratic state – civil service has become an important actor in generating policy ideas
* Expansion of quasi-judicial bodies – make wide range of regulatory decisions, and removes political control of these issues from parties
* Courts and the Charter – Charter enhanced the power of the courts and reduced the relative importance of political, versus judicial, decision-making. Moreover, govts now sometimes avoid making policy decisions on controversial issues
* Federal-provincial relations – accommodation between various regions of the country now takes place through meetings that are largely unrelated to party politics.
* Rise of the PMO – power of the party may not have declined in absolute terms, but has rather shifted from caucus and cabinet to the PMO and the PM’s administration
* Decline of the MP and patronage

**Conclusions**

In response to changing context, parties have transformed themselves – their chief strategy is to re-establish links with the electorate through direct democracy. The rising 4th party system is characterized by teledemocracy, referenda, direct mail, personal media, feverish use of public opinion polling, tight centralized control by First Ministers’ offices