

Peter Mair

Party Politics
18(1) 3–6
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1354068811427212
ppq.sagepub.com



3 March 1951 – 15 August 2011

The sudden death of Peter Mair on 15 August 2011 cut tragically short the career of one of the world’s leading scholars of party politics. Struck down while vacationing with his family in his native Sligo, Ireland, Mair was just 60 years old. At the time of his death, he was Professor of Comparative Politics in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence, a position he had held since 2005. From 2007 through 2010, he had served as chair of the department.

Peter Mair was awarded BA and MA degrees by University College Dublin in 1972 and 1973. He taught at the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick, the University of Strathclyde, the EUI and the University of Manchester before completing his PhD from the University of Leiden in 1987. In 1990, he returned to Leiden as a lecturer, and in 1992 became Professor of Comparative Politics, occupying the chair formerly held by Hans Daalder. In 2008 he was named Honorary Professor of Comparative European Politics at Leiden.

Already an internationally recognized scholar by the time he completed his PhD, his dissertation, *The Changing Irish Party System: Organisation, Ideology and Electoral Competition* (Mair 1987), immediately became the standard work on the subject. While he remained one of the leading commentators on Irish politics, Mair’s work was influential far beyond the community of students of Irish politics.

After the publication of his PhD thesis, Mair’s next major work was *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: the Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985* (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Written together with his colleague at the EUI, Stefano Bartolini, the book was honoured with the 1990 Stein Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Research. Beyond its substantive conclusions (which, as Bartolini and Mair observed in the introduction to the 2007 re-issue of the book by ECPR Press, were time-bound), the book made two enduring contributions to the study of political parties

Corresponding author:

Richard S. Katz, Department of Political Science, The Johns Hopkins University, 338 Megenthaler Hall, 3400 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA
Email: richard.katz@jhu.edu

and social cleavages. On the one hand, it established criteria for telling socio-political cleavages from mere social differences (a distinct social base; a sense of collective identity; a clearly defined organizational expression (see, esp., p. 215)) that would allow the possible relevance of the Lipset and Rokkan (1967) analysis to purported new cleavages (for example, a materialist v. post-materialist 'cleavage') to be assessed. On the other hand, it advanced the study of electoral volatility that Mogens Pedersen's influential 1979 article had spurred by partitioning volatility between intra-block volatility (shifts of support among parties on the same side of a cleavage) from inter-block volatility (shifts across a cleavage divide), arguing counter to the 'melting cleavages' thesis that dramatic increases in the Pedersen volatility index had engendered, that only inter-block volatility was evidence that cleavages were no longer frozen. They thus reached the unfashionable conclusion that while the 1950s had been a period of unusual stability that, if taken as the starting point, might lead to the conclusion that the 1970s and 1980s were periods of high volatility, once a longer perspective was adopted, and volatility was decomposed so that attention could focus on inter-block shifts, West European party systems were, in fact, characterized by a 'fundamental bias towards stability' (p. 287).

While working with Bartolini on *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability*, Mair and I began our collaboration on party organization. Originally intended to document party organizational adaptation to social and political changes (the data collected were published in 1992, with country analyses by our national collaborators in 1994), the project led to a series of articles (Katz and Mair, 1994, 1995, 2002, 2009) in which we developed first the 'three faces of party organization' (party on the ground; party central office; party in public office) framework, and then the cartel party thesis. The desire to see developments documented in cross-nationally comparable ways also led to one of Mair's major services to the profession – the origination, along with Ruud Koole, of the *Political Data Yearbook* as an annual special of the *European Journal of Political Research* – with the collaborators in the party organization project central among the original contributors.

Broadening from his work with Bartolini, Mair was one of the leading scholars of party systems and of party system change. His influence in the field was already evident in the 1990 book, *Understanding Party System Change in Western Europe*, edited with Gordon Smith, but *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations* (Mair 1997) staked out a clear position – that, following from Sartori (1976), the term 'party system' refers not just to a collection of parties, but particularly to the patterns of interaction among them. Thus, even if the collection of parties involved did not change, changes in electoral volatility and especially the rise of what he described as coalitional 'promiscuity' (the willingness of parties to enter into novel patterns of coalition including parties with which they had never before been in government) represented real party system change. Likewise, the displacement of policy differences by claims about managerial competence as the basis for electoral competition was for Mair a type of party system change, and one about which he expressed particular concern in a series of influential articles (esp. Mair, 2006) about the 'hollowing out' of democracy.

Beyond his own writings, Peter Mair made major contributions to the development of succeeding generations of scholars. It was largely through his network of contacts among the next generation, and his desire to give opportunities to the young rather than merely

to rely on the established cast of characters, that many of the collaborators in the party organization project were given their first chance to engage in an international research team. He organized numerous workshops and colloquia in which the young were regular participants. The list of his PhD students – Ingrid van Biezen, Cas Mudde, André Krouwel, Petr Kopecký, to name only a few – includes many of the recognized leaders of the next generation of party scholars, and the range of their interests, including new and old democracies; right-wing, pariah and catch-all parties; the EU, South America and Africa, as well as individual European countries, attests to the breadth of his influence.

In his lecture at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Limerick after he and Stefano Bartolini won the Rokkan Prize, Peter quoted from ‘The Old Stone Cross’, observing that Yeats – to quote him – ‘like most of the great poets of the English language . . . was actually Irish’. Obviously, we cannot say that most of the great political scientists working in English are actually Irish, but in Peter’s case we certainly can say that ONE of the great political scientists working in English was Irish. The outpouring of tributes that his death has occasioned testifies to the professional importance of his work. But, even more, it reflects the deep affection he engendered in the colleagues and students who were privileged to know and work with him. His work lives on in textbooks and libraries, but Peter Mair the friend, mentor, colleague, husband and father is irreplaceable, and will be sorely missed.

Peter Mair is survived by his wife Karin Tilmans and by their three children, Cathleen, John and Tessa, as well as by his brother Johnny.

Richard S. Katz
The Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD, USA

References

- Bartolini S and Mair P (1990) *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katz RS and Mair P (1994) The evolution of party organizations in Europe: The three faces of party organization. In: Crotty WJ (ed.) *Political Parties in a Changing Age* [Special issue of *American Review of Politics*, Winter].
- Katz RS and Mair P (1995) Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics* 1(1).
- Katz RS and Mair P (2002) The ascendancy of the party in public office: Party organizational change in twentieth-century democracies. In: Gunther R, Montero JR and Linz JJ (eds) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 113–35.
- Katz RS and Mair P (2009) The cartel party thesis revisited. *Perspectives on Politics* 7(4).
- Lipset SM and Rokkan S (1967) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*. New York: Free Press.
- Mair P (1987) *The Changing Irish Party System: Organisation, Ideology and Electoral Competition*. London: Frances Pinter.
- Mair P (1997) *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mair P (2006) Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy. *New Left Review* 42 (November–December), 25–51.

-
- Mair P and Smith G (eds) (1990) *Understanding Party System Change in Western Europe*. London: Frank Cass.
- Pedersen MN (1979) Dynamics of European party systems – Changing patterns of electoral volatility. *European Journal of Political Research* 7(1): 1–26.
- Sartori G (1976) *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.