

## Lecture eight: Pressure groups

Pressure groups are voluntary organisations formed to advance or defend a common cause or interest. They are unlike political parties in that they do not wish to assume responsibility for governing the country, rather they seek to influence those who do so. They also have a narrower range of concerns than parties, which seek to aggregate a variety of interests in order to broaden their appeal; pressure groups have a more limited focus, many of their aspirations being non-political.

There is no agreed terminology to cater for pressure-group activity across the world. The Americans talk mainly of interest groups, lobbying and single-issue groups, whereas in Britain the tendency is to use the term 'pressure groups' and then to sub-divide them into different categories. A common distinction is between those groups which seek to defend the interests of people or categories of people in society, and those which seek to advance particular ideas and opinions. The former are **interest groups** –associations designed to protect the interests of their members. The latter are **promotional or cause groups**.

**Interest groups** are concerned with one section of the population. They are primarily self-interested bodies which often offer services to their members, as well as looking after their sectional interests. Many are found in the economic sphere of society among the interests just listed, although they are also important in the public sector. Professional associations and trade unions fall into this category, as do the peak or umbrella associations of major firms. Most notable among the peak organisations are the confederations which bring together within one organisation a whole range of other organisations, the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors in Britain being such bodies. They seek to coordinate activity and speak on behalf of all of their constituent

organisations. They may not confine themselves to work in one country, and instead operate on the international scene – in the way that Eurogroups such as UNICE represents business interests beyond the European Union.

In America, there is again a vast array of interest groups, ranging from trade associations such as the American Pharmaceutical Association and the American Electronics Association, to professional bodies such as the American Medical Association. Among labour organisations, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL/CIO) is the umbrella group of nearly 70 trade unions, such as the Teamsters (lorry drivers) and the united Auto Workers.

**Promotional groups** cover a vast array of activities. They seek to advance (promote) the beliefs, ideas and values in which their supporters believe, but these are not ideas which are of benefit to their membership, other than in a most general sense. They are therefore ‘selfless’ in their concerns, and may be concerned to promote long-term goals. They tend to stick to their own agenda, and are liable to lose support if they stray from their original path. Such groups are sometimes short-lived, their membership fluctuates considerably and they are prone to secession as dissatisfied members feel that the organisation has lost its way.

‘Promotional groups’ include within their realms a wide variety of organisations. Among them are various civic, educational and leisure bodies, as well as charities, social clubs and many others. Examples in Britain are the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Electoral Reform Society, the Howard League for Penal Reform, and Shelter. American groups include Common Cause and the Americans for Democratic Action. Among the promotional groups, there has in recent years, been a considerable increase in the number and appeal of those concerned with **single issues**. They particularly tend to operate in areas such as civil liberties, birth control, abortion, environmental protection, nuclear power, nuclear arms, and the sale of firearms.

A different type of categorisation of groups is that between **insider and outsider** ones. This distinction is between those groups that have most influence with government because of the expertise they can provide and the help they can offer in making and implementing policy (for example in Britain, the British Medical Association and the National Farmers' Union (NFU), in the United States the American Farm Bureau). Others are less influential, being able to give little assistance or trade-off in return for policy influence. Some groups are outsiders because they cannot achieve insider status. Other – often ideological – groups do not want such status. For ideological reasons, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament would not seek influence with a Conservative government whose approach to matters of defence and nuclear policy would be very different from its own. Neither would it much care for Labour policies, particularly when the party is in office.

### **How groups operate**

In free societies, groups seek to exert influence via many avenues or **access points**, mostly peaceful, although on occasion they may resort to more violent forms of protest. Pressure groups have traditionally operated at four main levels, seeking to influence the Executive, the Legislature, the Judiciary and the public at large. In Britain and Europe, they tend to be more closely associated with government than is the case in America.

#### ➤ **Influencing the Executive**

Governments need information, much of which is highly technical and specialised. Interest groups in particular are in a position to offer such information, for they contain experts in their field and have access to the views of their members who understand the problems they confront in their daily operation, know what the impact of government policy is and what needs to be done. Governments also need consent for their policies, and leading interest groups – particularly those which are representative of most people who work in their field – are in a position to assist ministers in carrying out their policies. For

instance, the British Medical Association can not only inform the Department of Health about any epidemic of a virulent form of influenza or meningitis, they can also help by carrying out a programme of mass immunisation. In America the American Farm Bureau has traditionally been close to government and enjoyed a successful relationship with the Department of Agriculture.

### ❖ *Policy Networks*

The concept of policy networks has attracted much attention in recent years. They describe the different kinds of relationships between groups and government. The term is a generic one denoting a continuum from close and stable policy communities to looser, more open and discontinuous policy or issue networks.

### **Iron triangles and policy communities**

For many years, there were particularly close links in America between interest groups, committee chairmen and government departments, an arrangement often referred to as 'iron triangles'. The three elements were often in close contact with each other and enjoyed cosy relationships based on interdependent self-interest. Such iron triangles often dominated areas of domestic policy-making, possessing a virtual monopoly of information in their sector. Examples were the smoking and tobacco triangle (the Department of Agriculture, the House and Senate agricultural committees, and the tobacco lobby of farmers and manufacturers) in which there was a focus on crop subsidies to tobacco farmers.

Policy communities have begun to decay in most democracies and the trend is towards the more open style of policy-making which characterises **issue networks**. The impact of any particular group may vary from time to time or issue to issue, partly depending on the expertise it possesses. There are more participants in issue networks, relationships are not continuous or particularly close and there is less interdependence.

### ➤ **Influencing the Legislature**

Today, many professional lobbyists and pressure group activists seek to influence elected representatives. In America, the fact that the two houses are powerful assemblies with a major legislative role makes them particularly useful to those who seek influence. Activity at the legislative level is usually more overt than that aimed at the executive branch, much of which tends to take place behind closed doors. Much of the contact is transparent, and may receive widespread popularity –though this does not necessarily make it more effective. It is more effective in France and the USA, which have less strict party discipline, so that there is a real chance that pressure-group activists may sway votes by their campaigning. In Britain and Canada, tight party discipline makes such parliamentary action less effective.

➤ **Influencing the judiciary**

On occasion, British groups may turn to the law and use test cases to highlight an issue and bring about pressure for change. In 1994, Greenpeace and Lancashire County Council challenged the opening and commissioning of the Thorp nuclear processing plant. They gained valuable publicity even though they lost the battle. Judicial challenge to national legislation is ruled out by the doctrine of Parliamentary Sovereignty, but groups can mount test cases and challenge the way a law has been implemented.

In the USA, the method is much more well-established, not least because Americans are traditionally a litigious (ready to go to law) people. Notable progress has been made by civil rights groups and anti-abortion campaigners via lobbying of the Supreme Court. Consumer and environmental groups have also found the legal outlet a useful means of advancing their concerns.

➤ **Influencing public opinion**

In Britain, it used to be said that ‘more noise equals least success’, and that those groups which operated at the public level did so only because of their impotence at the parliamentary and executive levels. The most effective groups seemed to be those which operated behind closed doors, lobbying discreetly

those with the power of decision. Only those groups denied access to the corridors of power needed to resort to lively protest and take more militant forms of action. Activity on a national or local scale in the public arena can – if it is conspicuous – attract the television crews. A piece of **direct action** – such as obstruction of a highway, occupying a tunnel under an airport or climbing a tree – will engage much popular interest, especially if several people are involved.

American groups adopt a dual strategy of going public and lobbying on Capitol Hill. They may seek to exert influence over the public not just by allthe-year-round background campaigns or by shorter blitz, fire-brigade activity. They may also intervene in the electoral process, perhaps by organising the petition for an initiative and then involving themselves in the arguments surrounding the issues at stake. Sometimes, they try directly to influence the outcome of election contests. Groups can also have an enormous impact on the funding of American elections. Political Action Committees (PACs) assist the candidates in several ways, by providing research material and publicity, by raising election funds and by providing organisational back-up to a candidate who lacks a strong personal political organisation or the support of a party machine.

### *Other targets for pressure groups*

- **Government beyond the centre:** The new devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales provide obvious opportunities for influence. As a vast federal country, the USA offers enormous scope for group activists to lobby at a variety of different access points. Key areas of policy such as welfare are increasingly handled at state level, so that campaigners find it worthwhile to establish offices in state capitals, and lobby governors and state legislatures.
- **The media:** In his 1992 survey, Baggott found that 80 per cent of British groups claimed to be in contact with the media at least once a week. American pressure groups exploit the communications media to influence

voters at election time, and to motivate constituents to contact their representatives between elections.

- **Companies:** Large firms (some of them multinationals) with great economic power are of increasing interest to campaigners.

Environmentalists from several countries have often concentrated their fire on Shell International, as in 1995 over the plans to dismantle the disused Brent Spar oil rig at sea.

- **Pressure groups:** Some lobbyists are concerned to influence other groups whose views may be susceptible to change. In Britain, the pro- and anti-hunting lobbies have long concentrated on seeking to persuade the National Trust (NT) to come out in their favour. ‘Anti’ campaigners are particularly active within the NT itself. American groups have been successful in forging alliances with other bodies. For instance, the thirty-year-old Food Group comprises some sixty or so business and trade organisations, who work together to lobby Congress and government departments.

### *Trends in recent years: the changing pressure-group scene*

- *There are far more groups than ever before*

Over the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, the number of single issue, local action and other campaigning organisations soared. The ecological concerns of the greens have been well publicised on both sides of the Atlantic. Pre occupations have ranged from pollution to the ozone layer, from conservation to the need to limit economic growth as part of the search for a better means of organising society. Consumerism has become a growth industry, so also has the development of research institutions and **think tanks** such as the Adam Smith Institute and Demos in Britain and the Brookings institutions and the Heritage Foundation in America.

- *Some groups have lost and others gained in influence*

The lobbying scene in Washington was once dominated by three interests, but the influence of these traditional agricultural, business and labour organisations has declined.

- *Groups have changed their approach*

Pressure groups have developed a more sophisticated approach to the ways by which they seek to influence ‘pressure points’ in the political process. Some have turned to the use of the new commercial ‘lobbying industry’, which developed in America and has been imported into Britain since the 1980s. Professional lobbyists were defined in a House of Commons report as those who are ‘professionally employed to lobby on behalf of clients or who advise clients on how to lobby on their own behalf’.

- *Direct action has become more acceptable*

A number of groups have seen more point in using direct action as an additional means of persuading government into following their ideas. Many local action and promotional groups have used direct action as an additional tool, in their bid to block moves to build a housing estate on green-belt land, or stop the felling of some ancient tree in the name of progress. Mothers and Children Against Toxic Waste (MACATW) is a Welsh example of the genre. It sought to prevent the burning of toxic waste by a chemical processing plant. In America, the activities of anti-abortionists have been widely reported; Operation Rescue has moved on from blockading clinics to engage in more violent forms of protest.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of pressure-group activity**

Groups aid democracy in several ways. They:

- provide detailed and valuable information on areas of economic and social activity, thereby helping to promote better decision-making;
- perform an educative role by raising and explaining issues for public attention, often alerting journalists in the media to matters which need a public airing;



- help to maintain dialogue between government and the governed between elections;
- defend the interests of minorities in the community, particularly those which do not gain a powerful outlet via political parties;
- allow for increased participation in politics by people who might otherwise be inactive on the political scene;
- counter the monopoly of political life by parties, allowing for the taking-up of issues which often fall outside the agenda of party politicians – for instance, cause groups took up environmental concerns before politicians did so;
- ensure that political power is dispersed, thereby acting as a brake on the power of more centralised institutions and players.

*Group activity has inbuilt disadvantages:*

- The leadership of pressure groups may be unrepresentative, as was the case with British union leaders until the reforms of the 1980s. Officers may wield considerable influence, without being accountable for their actions, and often voluntary organisations are liable to be led by elites which are self-perpetuating and out-of-touch with the feeling of less active members.
- Insider groups are too active behind the scenes, engaging in discussions with civil servants which are beyond the public gaze. They may in this way exercise enormous influence, as in the days of corporatism in Britain and of iron triangles in America. Professor Finer – in an early study of group activity – wanted more information and more public scrutiny, ending his book with the plea for ‘Light, more light’.
- Groups do not represent all sections of the community equally. The voices of industry and unions, as well as of many professional organisations, are heard loud and clear. Consumer organisations have traditionally exercised less clout, and some groups in the community – the poor, the old, racial minorities and others – are less well-organised and lack muscle, having no strong bargaining stance. The influence groups can exercise is excessively influenced by the

resources at their disposal and the relationships they can construct with governments. Moreover, they are a sectional interest. Governments must listen and take all views into account, but govern in the national interest rather than being dominated by any single one.

- The methods employed by campaigners may be unhealthy. Some use money and other means to influence elected representatives. Increasingly, activists turn to militant, direct action to achieve their ends, much of which is illegal.
- The sheer volume of group activity has a detrimental effect on government, undermining the capacity of those in power to get things done. The view was expressed by Douglas Hurd, a British Home Secretary in the 1980s. He attacked groups as ‘strangling serpents’ which created unnecessary work for ministers and made it difficult for them to reach decisions in the public interest.

Pressure groups are valuable organisations. It is easy to portray them as special interests intent on undermining democracy and the interests of the public, but they represent and articulate legitimate viewpoints which need to be expressed. Modern governments could not exist without them, for they provide necessary knowledge and expertise to policymakers, and monitor the effectiveness of existing policies and ideas for alternative ones. They may at times make unreasonable demands, but it is in the interests of those who govern to try and work with them rather than against them. They are an inevitable feature of any democracy and their growth is unlikely to be reversed.