

Pressure groups:
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A pressure group is an organisation that seeks, as one of its functions, to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy. 1 A pressure group's interests lie in influencing a relatively narrow range of public policy, without itself seeking to govern (the country)2. When pressure groups with exclusive interests (aggressively) petitions for the progress of those interests, it is best to regard them as lobbyists as to prevent confusion, although traditionally, lobbyists also fall under the loose category of 'pressure groups'. This paper will to demonstrate how a particular pressure group functions for the advancement of a third party's interests.

Historically, the British Government had very close relationships with pressure groups as it needed specialised expertise for the formulation of public policies. While the Government still engages pressure groups and even funds some of their operations - such as MENCAP and MIND3 - its reliance on pressure groups have significantly decreased.

Despite the decline in collaboration, there are several case studies - The Anti-Organophosphorous Campaign, The Snowdrop Campaign, the Druridge Bay Campaigns and the infamous Anti-Poll Tax Movement4 - that validates the existing intricate role that pressure groups still play in British politics. As Seyd and Whiteley (1992) argued, pressure groups in Britain serve to: recruit and socialise future political leaders; to act as the communication bridge between leaders and voters; and to contribute to policy-making, ensuring that new ideas get onto the political agenda5. One should keep in mind that pressure groups can only function in a political climate that accommodates one's right to express, gather and protest.

The pressure group that this paper examined is the National Assembly Against Racism (NAAR). As an ethnic Chinese residing in a predominantly Caucasian society, I am constantly intrigued by the illusory power of race; and how something of such triviality can never be fully reconciled with in Britain and around the world.

Racism, or formally known as racial prejudice, refers to beliefs and practices that assume inherent and significant differences exist between the genetics of various groups of human beings. It assumes that these differences can be tangibly measured on a scale of "superior" and "inferior" 6.

Racism is not new in Britain. It existed well from the Anglo-Saxon era right through till today, although the emphasis shifted between different races. In fact, racism is so pervasive in British society that the Lawrence Report and the Macpherson Report published in 1997 had detailed illustrations of institutional racism in Britain. It is disturbing to learn that such draconian practices still exist in modern-day Britain.

The National Assembly Against Racism was established in 1994, at the initiative of Black community organisations based in Tower Hamlets, following the community-led campaign against the election of a British National Party (BNP) councillor in a by-election in Millwall.

The NAAR is a 'cause' and 'outsider' pressure group as defined by Grant as "it does not wish to get enmeshed in a consultative relationship with officials"

8. It is a massive conglomeration of anti-racism affiliates that transcends local, national and European levels. Currently, it receives funding from

Cadburys, Rowntrees, the Churches Ecumenical Racial Justice Fund, the Lord
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Ashdown Trust, and UNISON (the single largest donor - £15, 000 out of £56, 000 received in year 2001)⁹.

The NAAR runs campaigns and educational programmes on fighting the far right, asylum and immigration rights, racial violence, deaths in custody and racial developments across Britain and Europe. Occasionally, it also participates in sideline agendas like fighting against poverty and the proliferation of gun crimes. In spite of being predominantly led by Black-community leaders, the NAAR's mission far extends beyond the protection of Black rights. In reality, one of the NAAR's priorities for at least the past 5 years has been to safeguard and expand Muslim and Asian rights in Britain.

Judging from the founding cause of the NAAR, it is therefore not surprising that the banning of the British National Party such that they will no longer "gain a base, in the footsteps of their neo-Nazi counterparts in Austria, Italy and France" ¹⁰ has been the core agenda of the Assembly. The NAAR's aggressive opposition to the BNP, and more recently the newly established National Front, can clearly be demonstrated in their Annual General Meetings. Archival records of the past 5 years show that Lee Jasper, the NAAR's secretary, always delivers his opening speech by highlighting marked progresses of the BNP in the local and general elections; and how the NAAR must never lose sight of its paramount objective of banning this, and all other, fascist political parties.

Given that British politics respects political freedom, the exclusive prohibition of fascist political parties is unfeasible. Therefore, the NAAR modified its strategy against the BNP. It redirected its focus to the prevention of the BNP

from gaining any national political platform, which they hope will eventually lead to its eviction from the political arena. They have been mobilising campaigns in vulnerable wards, particularly in the North and in London, to urge dormant voters to use their vote against the BNP.

The canvass also receives support from close affiliate Student Assembly Against Racism, which has a strong footing in the National Union of Students. According to the NAAR's statistical figures, their campaigns, which include mass leafleting, have gained substantial success, albeit far from their goal. In the 2004 Annual Reports, it was claimed that through their strategy of maximising turnout, the BNP had lost their traditionally strongholds of Oldham and Yorkshire; and other wards in the West Midlands, the North West and in London. Nevertheless, the BNP had fanned-out geographically to hold 22 Council seats, an increment of 6 from the previous year. As a result it was stressed, in that AGM, that the prevention of "the (BNP's) national breakthrough remains the top priority of the NAAR".

In a more recent event, the NAAR had been vigorously broadcasting the scheduled BNP march in Leeds and Keighley in coming November. They are aiming to assemble support for a counter-demonstration. On 25th October 2005, the NAAR published a letter received from the Chief Inspector of West Yorkshire Police indicating that he is applying for an injunction against the BNP demonstration. Quoting the NAAR official website, this is "a big step forward, and a tribute to the campaign against the BNP". This certainly validates the strength of the NAAR.

The next key objective of the NAAR is the protection and extension of asylum seekers' rights in Britain. The Assembly highlighted that over the past few years, Parliament had increased legislations to further restrict the rights of asylum seekers. This was deemed to be not only draconian in nature, but also in contradiction to the 1951 United Nations Convention and in breach of at least 22 human rights.

In an effort to combat the Asylum and Immigration Act (the 5th piece of such legislation in the past 11 years), the NAAR organised activities such as candlelit vigils organised by their affiliate the London Assembly Against Racism, a sleep-out in Trafalgar Square which London Mayor Ken Livingstone attended together with 1, 000 others, the implementation of a postcard-campaign to all Members of Parliament and many other forms of campaigns. On top of these, the NAAR is currently seeking for a court order to prevent the media from portraying asylum seekers in negative light.

Additionally, the NAAR had, in year 2001, set up The Tower Hamlets Lawrence Monitoring Unit. The Unit is designed to closely monitor the implementations of the recommendations of the Lawrence Report regarding the institutional racism. Through continuous observation, they managed to refute and challenge the Government's claim that 70% of the Report's recommendations had been put into operation. While scrutinising the Government's efforts to strip public institutions of racist practices, the NAAR have simultaneously been engaging in the support of families that were victims of racial prejudice from law enforcement agencies, particularly from the police. Their family campaigns include: Justice for Jevan, Friends of Mal Hussain, Roger Sylvester Justice Campaign, Chhokar Family Justice Campaign <https://assignbuster.com/pressure-groups-identify-a-pressure-group-of-your-choice-essay-sample/>

just to name a few. These families were all victims of racism which mostly resulted in deaths, and were unsystematically denied of due judicial proceedings due to institutional racism in schools, courts and more notably the police.

It appears that institutional racism is the most challenging to dispel, amongst all forms of racial prejudice. The reason being, these institutions are usually inter-linked and therefore inter-protected. Furthermore, the police force, the biggest alleged bigot, has customarily enjoyed immunity from prosecution under the Common Law. The complexities of these problems are highlighted by the limited success in these campaigns that the NAAR had been supporting. Thus far, the only tangible progress made is the temporary suspension of the officers responsible for Roger Sylvester's death. This saddening condition is most aptly encapsulated by Sir David McNee when said in an interview with Radio 4, (1981) he commented, " The greatest problem I will have in my commissionership, an that my successor and probably his successor will have, is getting on with the ethnic minorities in this great city.". 11

We have, hitherto, explored the three-pronged strategy that the NAAR engages in combating racism in Britain. Nevertheless, their activities are not limited only to these. Indeed, the NAAR has a whole plethora of other campaigns to advance its goals slowly, but surely. For instance, it holds an annual Respect Festival in London. In their first year, the festival only managed to draw a crowd of 4, 000, but through vigorous promotion, last year's event attracted over 70, 000 people. In light of the recent racial attacks on ethnic Arabs, the NAAR had also began campaigning against '
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Islamophobia' by holding public forums that addresses legislation that exclusively affect Muslims and ethnic Arabs. The most recent of such public meetings was one that was held on the day the latest anti-terrorism bill was published. In addition, there are other less aggressive campaigns like the ongoing demand for a public apology from the British Government for slavery and colonialism across the globe.

In any study of pressure groups, it essential to not only consider how pressure groups operate, but also to consider what they have achieved¹². Even so, it is difficult to quantify the success or effectiveness of pressure groups because it is never easy to distinguish between policies created through the Government's own initiative and policies urged by pressure groups; or that events may simply be following a natural course. In addition, there is the underlying question of whether the effectiveness of a pressure group is a result of internal strategies or due to certain government policies that boosted their efficiency¹³.

The above interpretations can be illustrated by the relationship between the BNP's election results and the NAAR's campaigns. While the NAAR claims that there is a direct link between the two, there can also be a variety of other reasons for the BNP to lose those wards.

In light of the difficulties posed, I propose to restrict the criterion to measure the success of the NAAR objectively. On the aspect of making the public more aware of the tribulations of racism, the NAAR had faired relatively well because it was able to increase local election turnout and was able to attract a substantial number of supporters for the Respect Festival. On the aspect of

reducing race-related crimes, the NAAR had also achieved much success as the number of racially-instigated crimes had decreased by 50% since 1995¹⁴. On the aspect of affecting legislature, the NAAR had little, if not no achievements as there are no policies that were a direct result of the NAAR's campaigns. Of course, these assessments are based on the hypothetical assumption that the NAAR is the sole pressure group in Britain that campaigns against racism.

Whatever the evaluation, one undeniable fact is that as a pressure group to have successfully operated for more than 10 years and receives more than £85, 000 through donations annually, the NAAR is definitely a (political) force to be reckoned with. This clearly demonstrates the general conception and faith the public has in pressure groups. As a democracy, British politics will unquestionably constantly find itself to be intertwined with the weights of pressure groups.