

What is a pressure group?



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Pressure groups are known to be small and extremely diverse formed on the basis of interest and activities, their functions give them a high public profile where minds are influenced and driven to make change. “ A Pressure group is an organisation which seeks to influence the details of a comparatively small range of public policies and which is not a function of a recognised political party” (Baggott, 1995: p. 2). An aim of pressure groups is to generate support which can influence political agendas; this can directly persuade the government to think about taking action. In this essay I will concentrate upon exploring on various issues on pressure groups, discussing the relationship between the groups, their use of the media and their status as “ insiders” and “ outsiders” in the political process. Pressure groups have two main types of groups the insiders and outsiders, which each promote a common cause with a different relationship with the media and political party making one as an unheard voice in the public sphere. To the public Pressure groups is another form where the public can engage in politics, participating directly in the political process. I will also intricate in this essay the growths of pressure groups due to their use of the media and their political engagement. The size of a group is a basic indicator of how much public support they get especially those that possess open membership, they mobilise through demonstrations, protest involving some non members through organised events. The different types of well known pressure groups that I will include are ‘ Greenpeace’, ‘ Child Poverty Action Group ‘, ‘ Police Federation and ‘ Friends of the earth’. These are high profile groups that bring about transformation to society focusing on the ability to gain access to media coverage for a high public profile. The political process can also benefit from this as they ensure that the media will concentrate on issues

that will benefit them the most. “ Exerting influence on government and the policy making process is the ultimate aim of pressure groups” (Lowe and Goyder, 1983, p79). In Paul Smith a ‘ study of pressure group behaviour’. This quote again highlights the aim of pressure groups as they want their marginalised voices to be heard by the people that can have an immediate influence on policy making process.

Body

Pressure groups represent, influence and build upon their public; they have to demonstrate further political support to gain their position. It can be achieved through parliamentary lobbying; this is when groups are in frequent contact with the House of Commons or House of Lords. There are various reasons why groups lobby parliament, Rush (1990) explain three possible reasons one of which is “ outside organisations fail to perceive parliament’s place in the policy- making process, believing it to have more influence over policy than is actually the case. The second is parliament is used when pressure elsewhere has failed and therefore is the last resort for those unable to influence ministers and senior civil servants. The third is that parliament does have an impact on policy. Groups deliberately choose a strategy which involves parliamentary lobbying because they correctly believe that this will bring benefits in terms of policy (Baggott, 1995: p. 135). There is evidence to support all three reasons as groups believe that parliament is all powerful, and that by simply lobbying MP’s they will secure their objectives. Public opinion is essential and important in policy decisions, concerns by the public is easily expressed through pressure groups. an example “ Shelter and the child poverty action group in the 1960’s reflected

a wider public concern about the failure of the welfare state to provide for the poor” (Baggott, 1995: p. 168). This example represents both citizens' interest and political views.

Grant (1989) identifies the two types of groups, the 'Insider and Outsider' group. Insiders are seen as legitimate as they are recognised by the government and consulted on a regular basis; an example is the Police Federation, however outsiders are not as recognisable as insiders due to their relationship status with the government. Grant states the 3 categories of outsider groups, one of which is the potential insider group; this is achieved by a strategy acceptable in the eyes of the government, another is outsiders who are less knowledgeable than an insider, and lastly an outsider group can refuse to reform to an insider because of the fundamental nature of their aims. “The implication of Grant's distinction is that insider status is linked to effectiveness. The assumption appears to be that most groups will seek insider status” (Baggott, 1995). However, Clements and Wright's view of this is different in a study where they found that although a group could seek insider status, it is not always effective. “Local governments went from 'outsiders' to 'insiders' in the New Blair government, but insider status does not guarantee success in achieving desired policy goals, as the Local Government Association found (Clements and Wright, *The British Political Process: An Introduction*, (2000) pp. 138).

It is possible for an outsider to play an important role in public policy by mobilising public sentiment, an example shown by the anti-poll tax federation. There are different methods used to achieve an objective, Insider groups use the influence in Westminster and Whitehall. Insiders are more likely to be consulted by the government than an outsider group, their

communication strategy is 'lobbying'. Lobbying is the direct communication between a pressure group and government, bringing their cause and ideas to the attention of parliament, targeting key groups; they employ parliamentary officers and do not need special campaigns to influence the government however. "The Implication is that insider groups will spend relatively less time on other strategies such as parliamentary lobbying which will be pursued to a greater extent by outsider groups" (Baggott, 1995: P. 136) "Lobbyist argues that they improve the efficiency of the policy making process by explaining the tight timetable of legislation to clients and the need to apply pressure at the right place" (Baggott, 1995: P. 137). While outsider groups are more likely to depend on the media and it's public to spread their message as well as to raise funds. It is important to state the combination of both insider and outsider model as an insider group can part take in both but with great limitations.

Environmental pressure groups, they employ strategies in order to get the attention of the media. Growing concerns about the environment led to the recognition and growth of environmental pressure groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Greenpeace an environmental pressure group embodies both insider and outsider strategies promoting a non violent action as well as gaining a high level of government and public support.

Greenpeace well known for "initiating a campaign backed by governments and the public after the British government approved a proposal by shell UK for deep sea disposal of 463 ft of Brent spar oil storage in the north Atlantic" (Parliamentary Affairs, 51 (3): 397). However "Greenpeace credibility was damaged by the apparent lack of scientific evidence supporting its position

in the Brent Spar oil rig incident in 1995” (Clements and Wright, *The British Political Process: An Introduction*, (2000) pp. 138). In terms of the media, Greenpeace has successfully used the media to mobilise their public support, maintaining a positive image through the media. An aim of Greenpeace is to gain the support of the media; it will always centre any campaign strategy. They provide a spokesperson to provide information and views on particular issues. Newspaper’s View: Daily Mirror declared that the policy change was a victory for Greenpeace and that it was an example of people’s power. “ The political significance of the Greenpeace campaign and of shell’s actions is universally recognised as a defining period or benchmark in the relationship between business, the government, the public and the environment” (Parliamentary Affairs, 51 (3): 397). The internet plays a huge role in Greenpeace becoming a campaigning tool, where one can communicate campaign developments in the quickest and most effective way e. g. Social Networking Sites, Blogs and so on. Another Outside pressure group that also uses the internet as a form of communication is Friends of the Earth, having their own website which serves as an information centre; this allows supporters to communicate with a single click of a button leading to the website.

The media plays a huge role in day to day society somewhat acting as a pressure group in its own right protecting and advancing its own interest, taking up issues defined as legitimate by those in power. The media first and foremost plays an important role in politics; actively pressure groups can use the media to gain publicity. “ A recent survey of over a hundred various groups found that four out of five were in contact with the media at least

once a day and that 13 per cent of those surveyed perceived media campaigning to be their most important source of influence (Baggott, 1992 pp. 18-22). Thus contacts with the media are important for a large proportion of pressure groups, who use the media in a number of different ways” (Politics, 1999: pp. 23). The use of the media’s visibility of a pressure group is to create this public Profile that the public would recognise. Outsiders especially need the awareness and visibility as some are not considered legitimate by the government, its importance is to raise issues to the public via the media; this is done by the two most important methods, the press ‘ Newspapers’ and broadcast ‘ Radio/Television ensuring issues are communicated accurately and clearly to sustain a growing mass interest. Constant coverage is vital as it keeps a buzz on the group reassuring members its activeness within the group as well as its growth. An example of this is Friends of the Earth an outsider group that showed through a survey that 24 per cent of members joined after seeing a media campaign. Survey seen in (Grant, 1995, p. 86 taking from Politics (1999) p. 23). According to Baggott, at least four out of five groups are in contact with the media to raise and build public support.

Most pressure groups appreciate the role of the media in their centre. Child poverty action group a pressure group that aims to raise awareness of causes and to bring about positive policy changes for families and children in poverty, they use the media to help promote and develop policies. Using a term called ‘ reactive coverage’ which uses the media to put across its viewpoint and influence. “ The child poverty action group used media

coverage to demonstrate that an issue was of public concern and therefore reinforce a case being made civil servants” (Field, 1977, pp53- 4).

Environment pressure groups i. e. ‘ Greenpeace’ and ‘ Friends of the earth’ well known pressure groups backed by the public has used the media to help change the ‘ climate’ of public opinion having an immediate influence’. “ The growing use of the public relations and the media specialist by pressure groups reflects the influence which they believe the mass media have over public opinion and policy decisions” (Baggott, 1995: pp. 184). TV is the most popular source of news to pressure groups as well as newspaper being its main source. Pressure groups operating at a national level regard television as the most important source. Other strategies that both insider and outsider pressure groups have used are posters or press advertisement in order to get their message across to its public. As Outsiders, Friends of the earth have organised stunts which have attracted a great deal of media attention, leading to their coverage because they were dramatic. Outsiders need to be visual in order to get their message across unlike insiders; a recent example would be the student fees protest which got a lot of attention not only because of the drastic change but because of the stunts that were pulled by protesters in order to influence the policy change. Using photographic imagery and television news would attract a large number of Media, also embodying an outsider strategy Greenpeace uses television news and newspaper visuals employing their own cameraman and photographer which is a main strategy of an outsider group.

Friends of the Earth approach to the media is different as they produce well researched and reliable reports, operating by establishing firm contacts,

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especially journalist through individual campaigners. As an Outsider group they have a good reputation on doing a lot of research and having answers before campaigns. The growth of pressure groups is due to the changes in the social structure of Britain, particularly the fragmentation of British society resulting from the “breakdown of previously rigid class divisions” (Moran 1985). An explanation is more people who are affected by issues are more willing to join protest. Another factor is “the impact of a more highly educated population which is a feature of post – affluent societies. It is argued that a more articulate and highly educated public is more likely to indulge in group politics, and again there is much evidence to suggest that this is the case (Parkin, 1968; Parry et al, 1992). In today’s society the public is more active than passive wanting to get involved in political activity. Public becoming more concerned with issues will make the government consider policy change. “There are also signs that people are increasingly willing to undertake collective action in such circumstances, although this still remains a less popular option than other forms of participation, such as signing petitions and contacting MPs on an individual basis” (Baggott, 1995: p. 172).

An advantage of an Insider Group is that they are too powerful and are in connection with those in power as well as media connections, having the opportunity to influence and shape policies formulated by the government. However Outsiders are a disadvantage to that. Outsiders use inappropriate tactics at times and their connection with power is not as great as that of Insiders. However due to the freedom of information it gives them an

opportunity to campaign in a more effective manner, as well as Internet being an effective campaigning tool.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will draw out my conclusions regarding pressure groups, this essay explores on the theories on pressure groups and their role in democracy and society. Also stated is how pressure groups use the media as a communication strategy to influence. I distinguished the difference between the two pressure groups outsiders and insiders, they both share the ability to reform policies and both have clear strategies. An important factor in the concept of this essay is the relationship between the groups and the government which determines the group's legitimacy and success. The growth of pressure groups being increased by the media and its coverage has led to the importance of media in an Insider group but significantly more important in an outsider. Outsider groups also have an advantage of using the public in demonstrations creating more awareness regarding issues and policy process. Group membership has grown due to people concerned with quality of life an example of a pressure group, Greenpeace, which highlights the environment and portrays it as something that would affect us if we do not take action. In contrast some groups have declined in membership as changes occur in the social structure. Participation is however still on the rise, e. g. Student Fees Protest. It has been proven that Pressure groups Like Greenpeace has been successful in the decision making process. The Brent Spar episode is an example in relation to Greenpeace. Groups are now more aware that they need to establish a good relationship with parliament and the media, as well as parliamentary lobbying and public campaigning when

necessary. There has been an increase in lobbying especially among the insider groups who wish to influence political influence. Most inside groups have passive members as they are recognised in parliament and work with the government. “ It is in the interests of good government to work with pressure groups rather against them (Baggott, 1995: pp. 230). Groups can contribute to efficiency their knowledge and information can help government to develop a more effective policy.