Pressure groups in British Politics

LSE 3 December 2013
Structure of talk

• Who do we mean?
• The changing perception of the role of pressure groups...
• Potential theoretical models of influence
• Influencing in practice – examples from IFG’s policy case studies...
• Lessons and reflections
Who do we mean?

- Variety of pressure groups (academic typology?)
- Examples...
  - Big representative groups – CBI, TUC – in Europe/other European countries much more embedded as “social partners”
  - UK example was NEDC (dates) - as opposed to individual industries and unions (both of whom can exert pressure)
  - “Professional” groups – BMA
  - Large membership organisations who use those memberships to influence politically – National Trust, RSPB, RSPCA
  - Classic “pressure groups” – either standing – Shelter, Greenpeace, ASH
  - But now joined by “flash” pressure groups often facilitated by social media – eg Hacked Off (Leveson) or 38 Degrees (forests, NHS ....) London cycling...
All located in wider ecology of extra-Parliamentary influence

- More local .. Other tiers of government can pressurise
- Judges can constrain – and act as very effective pressure groups in their own interests
- Europe offered new forum for pressure – and new routes through European judicial review/European Parliament
- Globalisation also relevant – eg rise of international influencing for a - UNFCC
- Growing numbers of aligned think tanks – used to do thinking for political parties (CPS for Mrs Thatcher, IPPR for Tony Blair, CSJ for IDS)
- And subject specific expert think tanks (eg King’s Fund, Chatham House)
- And outside that – but at times trying to influence – academia and research
Change in view of legitimacy

- Old language – seen as “special interest” as opposed to national/general/public interest
- Felt undue influence – “beer and sandwiches” – veto players on reform (In Place of Strife in 1969)
- Seen as a particularly US phenomenon – focus on Congress and money in politics – (’80s books in the US – Reagan Tax reform – showdown at Gucci Gulch/ Braking the Special Interests…)
- But concern about “producer capture” by departments – Canadian example but also MAFF – establishment of FSA post-BSE
- Necessary evil…(HMT in 1980s…Thatcher…miners privatisation) - labour market reform undermining power base…corporatist structures removed
..as opposed to political parties

- Legitimate – rooted in electoral mandate
- Wide membership bases (add Akash stats)
- Linked to pressure groups (Union funding... business donations) BUT
- Seen as places which had to mediate between competing interests and make trade-offs and had more legitimacy than individual interest groups
Position seems to have been reversed

- Governments feel they have lost legitimacy
  - Declining membership bases
  - Lower voter turnouts and more fractured vote – therefore lower basis in popular support
  - Low levels of trust in politics and politicians – politics itself seen as about personal power not pursuit of public interest
- Change in media –
  - 24/7 Requires constant diet of talking heads
  - Enjoys adversarial framing of issues
  - Social media allows low cost access and rapid mobilisation (NT on Never Again)
  - Legitimised by eg No.10 petition website
- Change in language to become “stakeholders” – some excluded but govt often feels need to govern with consent of pressure groups
  - Migration of many interest group alumnae into govt
  - Use in delivery of government services
  - Creation of dedicated Office of Third Sector (date) – now Office for Civil Society
Routes to influence

- Some very direct methods of influence
  - Fund political parties (Borgen on Saturday – Jorgen Steen Andersen and Organisation of Agricultural Interests)...
  - Run explicit campaigns (National Trust on planning, Countryside Alliance on hunting; National Federation of Badger Trusts v NFU on
  - Provide information to oppositions
  - Put in more theoretical framework ...
Models of influence of academic research

• Rational model ...
• Incremental model
• Diffusion (zeitgeist) model
• Policy streams model

All can be seen in ways in which pressure groups influence – look at some policy case histories which IFG has done...
Case study 1: privatisation (1984)

• Based on some external academic/ think tank thinking – but not in 1979 Tory manifesto
• Policy done incrementally – but key issue was negating veto power of both management and then very powerful trade unions –
• But not done through consultation – done through deliberate tactics by government to circumvent potential opposition.
• Only non-govt inside player were city advisers with whom govt developed close relationship
• Example of govt forcing through policy against widespread opposition as part of wide ranging reform agenda.
Case study 2: Scottish devolution (1997-9)

• Polar opposite..

• Project developed in Scotland during years of Conservative government (recognising that “Westminster solution” was problem in 1970s – needed to be Scottish home-grown solution)

• Support from John Smith and Labour leadership – but heavy lifting done by “Scottish Constitutional Convention” – Labour, Lib Dems but also wider grouping of Scottish “civil society” to develop blueprint

• Expert advice produced by Constitution Unit at UCL – ex Home Office civil servants

• Reversed into Labour manifesto for 1997 – and then TB demanded reaffirmation through a referendum
Case study 3: national minimum wage (1997)

• Issue initially put on agenda by dedicated pressure group – Low Pay Unit – and NUPE
• Resisted by other pressure groups – big TUC players who saw as threatening existence and the interests of their membership
• Eventually adopted by TUC then Lab party in 1980s – but in election losing form
• Research from US academics undermined economic case against MW – used by advocates
• Proposition reformulated – Low Pay Commission – tripartite organisation – employees/ employers/ independents
• CBI dropped opposition when realised change was inevitable
• Conservatives dropped opposition when clear was working
• LPC survives today ...
Pensions Reform: Turner commission (2003-5)

- Gold standard of “rational policy making”
- Established as a way of resolving Blair/Brown tensions
- Triggered by No.10 concerns about the closure by business of final salary pension schemes
- Commission reflected stakeholder concerns – Jeannie Drake – unions; Adair Turner – business; John Hills academia – but not as representatives
- Worldwide search for best evidence
- Put raising state pension age on agenda - -thought unthinkable by successive govts because of concern about pensioner reaction
- Thorough engagement to craft a deal that all players would sign up to – something for employers, something for employees
- Proposals now being implemented by Coalition (ads on TV)
Case study 5: Smoking ban

- Long history of pressure group activism – from initial moves by doctors to take up Bradford-Hill-Doll findings
- Govt navigating between business (tobacco industry v adapt lobbyists), activist/advocates for public health – cumulative policy change (and some reverses) – but stopping short of bans. DH funding of ASH to help create public space for measures
- Pressure to up status of voluntary ban – Ireland, CMO and lack of impact
- Area of competing interests – ASH and health lobby; tobacco industry – and hospitality industry. Parly pressure through Health Select Cttee.
- Govt position changed by coalition of campaign from health groups, HSC and hospitality industry which was alienated by govt “compromise” proposal
- Ended up in PM and CX voting down a manifesto commitment...
Case study 6: Climate Change Act

- Ambitious commitment in Labour manifesto in 1997 (itself probably product of pressure groups work – pressure on govts to competitively out green each other)
- Ran into sand in govt – govt missing target – CCPR – lingered for 2 years – failed to deliver
- Green groups thinking of alternative strategies – saw PM speech as opening – FoE refocussed campaigning on “Big Ask”
- Signed up new Tory leader – and Lib Dems (and radiohead – created coalition (Stop Climate Chaos) – govt risked being outflanked
- Internally HMT had commissioned Stern review – influencing ahead of Copenhagen ...
- Pressures lead to CCA – passed with only 3 votes against – with adapted version of legislated targets
A more recent example....the Tobacco Products directive and ecigarettes

• Still in play in real time...
• About how to regulate a “novel” product – banned in some places (Canada, Norway) free market in others..
• Seen by some as a new threat – but by others as offering the biggest public health breakthrough since the link between tobacco and disease first established
• EU competence – UK had made a decision to regulate as “medicine” – now proposal to enshrine in EU legislation – commission proposed – Council agreed..
• BUT>>>
TPD continued ..... 

• Focus of activity moves to European parliament
• Conventional health groups (and big business) in favour of medicines regulation – precautionary; barrier to entry of new products; BUT
• Other less conventional health advocates fear this risks stifling potential innovation – bias towards most dangerous product
• Govt fails to engage at all with arguments from small manufacturers (badly organised SMEs) and “vapers” (quote from blog) – big social media user community
• Lib Dem and Conservative MEPs vote to amend TPD in response to their arguments – gone back to council...
General conclusions

• Pressure groups now able to mobilise quickly – and have gained legitimacy vs political parties/political establishment
• Now able to mobilise rapidly and take advantage of 24/7 and social media
• Better at acting as veto players (stopping things, reversing things than positive agenda shaping – Health reforms still happened)
• New fora – European Parliament, international processes offer more access possibilities
Relationship with govt

• Quite complex
• Seen as independent groups pursuing altruistic goals vs dishonourable and venal politicians; but
• Makes govt keen to fund and coopt if possible – serving on committees and boards; used as intermediaries –
• used to be dependent on govt largesse – now increasing role as govt contractors
Relationship with public

• But need also to take account of incentives of pressure groups
• Need to fundraise – means need to find issues – and less scrutinised relationship to facts/data than govt
• Need to build profile – makes difficult to work with other groups (competition vs collaboration)
• Need to maintain membership bases