

# 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
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# 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...
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# 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
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# 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
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## ..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
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## 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
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## 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 ...
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## 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...

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## 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 v 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.
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## 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
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## 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 ...
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## 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)
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## 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...
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## 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
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## 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>>>
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## 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...
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## 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
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## 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
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## 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
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