Pressure groups

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Unlike political parties, pressure groups do not aspire to govern the country and are concerned with a relatively narrow range of issues. Much of their work is non-political, but in as much as their concerns and aspirations are affected by government they seek to acquire an influence over the conduct of public policy.

In this chapter, we are concerned with examining the range of groups in Britain and the United States, the ways in which they operate and their effectiveness. In addition, we consider the changes in pressure-group activity on both sides of the Atlantic over the last two or three decades.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- What are the differences between movements and pressure groups, and what are the distinctive characteristics of New Social Movements?
- Why have single-issue groups become so much more significant in recent years?
- In what respects does lobbying of the Executive branch differ in Britain and the United States?
- Which access points are most important in British and American politics, and why?
- Distinguish between iron triangles and policy networks.
- Why have some groups resorted to direct action in recent decades?
- Do pressure groups make a positive contribution to British and American democracy?

Free societies are **pluralist**, in that a variety of organisations are allowed to exist and compete for influence over government. No single group can exert a monopoly of power and manipulate the system for its own advantage. In a number of pluralist societies, there are strongly antagonistic ethnic, linguistic or religious organisations; others may be more class-based. Political parties are the most significant of these bodies, and their composition may reflect some of the differences to which we have referred. But in Western liberal democracies there are thousands of other bodies which seek to influence the conduct of power and make their views known. Those people who represent business interests tend to be among the most powerful players in pluralist societies such as Britain, France, Italy and the United States. In all societies there are groups which seek to influence the way the political process operates.

pluralism
Describes a political system in which numerous groups compete to exert influence over the government. New groups can easily be created, so that further competition can emerge in the market place.

pluralist societies
Those in which the power of the state is limited and there is a political market place in which group activity can flourish. Governments are responsive to group interest. Not everything is politicised, and fundamental freedoms such as free speech and the rights of groups such as professional bodies and trade unions are guaranteed. The USA and UK are examples, as are countries ranging from Australia to France, from Canada to Japan.

These groups differ considerably in their internal operation, some being democratically structured, others led by a powerful elite which dominates proceedings on a regular basis. Some are large, others are small; some operate at a national level, others do so regionally or locally; some are particularly effective and have popular appeal, others cater for minority interests and needs. Some are durable and make a great impact; others are short-lived and make little impression.

The growth of group activity

Pressure groups actually have a long history. In the nineteenth century, the Anti-Corn Law League was a classic case of an organisation which was formed to influence government. At around the same time, de Tocqueville observed that in America too what he called 'associations' were becoming 'a powerful instrument of action'.[1] Yet most groups are of much more recent origin. Their number has markedly increased since the war. Governmental intervention in economic and social life has expanded enormously. As voters expect those who rule them to produce policies on a range of issues from health to consumer protection, there are groups established to press their own claims, interests and ideas.

In countries where proportional representation is used, groups representing some interests have formed political parties. In Scandinavia, farmers' parties have long existed and the presence or absence of their support can be critical

in determining the fate of governments. In two-party systems such as Britain and America, the farmers are more likely to seek influence through the organisations set up specifically to defend their interests – the National Farmers' Union in Britain and various organisations in the United States including the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers' Union and the Grange, the latter being as much social as political in character. In addition to these large and general agrarian organisations, there has in recent years been a vast expansion in the number of agricultural groups representing the interests not only of producers but also of refiners and distributors, of different cereals, fruits and vegetables, and other farm produce.

Especially since the 1960s there has been what Heywood has referred to as an 'explosion in pressure and protest politics'.[2] In his view, this burst of activity 'may be part of a broader process that has seen the decline of parties and a growing emphasis on organised groups and social movements emerging as agents of mobilisation and representation'. Since the 1970s, another type of organisation has emerged: the New Social Movements, whose structure is looser than political parties and whose aims are broader than those of pressure groups. Among the most conspicuous are those which deal with environmental matters, and issues such as nuclear power and weapons, the advancement of women's rights and the protection of minority interests.

Classification of 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. However, because their concerns are liable to be affected by government decisions, they need to be organised in order to influence ministers and respond to what they propose.

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. The word 'pressure' has an unfortunate connotation, and many groups operate without resorting to any degree of coercion. They may employ a variety of approaches to press their case, ranging from passing information to writing letters of protest, from having informal consultations to staging popular demonstrations. There are similar difficulties with many of the labels which are sometimes used by

political scientists. For instance, the use of the term 'interest groups' fails adequately to cater for the myriad of groups which are more concerned to promote a particular idea than to look after any specific interest. Given such difficulties, there is little point in further discussing terminology. In reality, most groups represent some interests and most interests are concerned to promote themselves to those who make policy. Whatever the label, Wilson- points out, they all, as 'have some autonomy from government or political parties and try to influence policy'.[3]

Movements and pressure groups

Movements are different from pressure groups, although closely related to them. Broadly, a movement may be described as a large body of people united – but loosely organised – around a central idea, issue or concern whose goal is to change attitudes or institutions, as well as policies. Their activities often arise at grass-roots level and later evolve into national crusades. Within our definition, we may speak of the women's movement or the anti-abortion movement. From time to time, new movements arise as people discover new needs and old ones have been tackled. At the present time, a vocal and newsworthy example is the animal rights movement, which falls more easily into a specific category, the New Social Movements.

New Social Movements emerged in the 1960s. The student protesters of the 1960s were an early example, but since then the women's movements, the black movement for civil rights in the USA and the various environmental movements have provided useful illustrations. Often these New Social Movements have a core group which provide strength and direction to the movement, and then a broader amount of less-organised support. Sometimes, the whole movement lacks tight organisation, is less cohesive and lacks the structure normally associated with a pressure group.

This type of social movement has made a great impact in recent years. They are different from what might be termed the old social movements of the nineteenth century, which were primarily concerned to confront the harsh working conditions of the times and to press for change. As Doyle and McEachern explain:

> **Like the preceding social movements they have a radical edge and visions of a world transformed by their demands . . . [They] are characterised by their informal modes of organisation; their attachment to changing values as a central part of their political challenge; their commitment to open and ultra-democratic, participating modes of organisation (at least in the initial stages) and their willingness to engage in direct action to stop outcomes which they see as harmful.**[4]

In the United States, the movement for civil rights included many bodies within its membership. They ranged from those often associated with Dr Martin Luther King (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to the more militant and separatist Black Power and Black Panther organisations. Movements are wider and more all-embracing than pressure groups and as this example shows often contain groups which have their own distinctive agendas and approaches.

Accepting that the term 'pressure group' is a convenient and general one to embrace the whole range of organisations with which we are dealing, it is possible to be more specific about the types of body which come under that umbrella. 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.

Environmental movements saw the birth of environmentalism. In the eyes of many observers there may seem to be one broad environmental movement in each region, country or continent, but those in the know would make a distinction between several different ones. Thus Doyle and McEachern point out that there are those which are traditional nature conservation movements, and those which are more radical – concerned as they are with political ecology and anti-nuclear issues, and sometimes referred to as 'New Left movements'.[5] Some would quibble about the term New Left which is often associated with the anti-imperialist protest politics of the 1960s. 'New Social movements' more clearly describes movements which have arisen since the New Left, such as the anti-globalisation protests which seek to show that intensified global competition is not a natural and inevitable development of modern life.

The main thrust of nature conservation movements is to protect species threatened with extinction, and as a consequence of this aim they are often in the forefront of the fight against pollution. They are willing to work within the existing economic structure in society and push for reforms to improve the prospects for animal and plant life. They work to 'green' the political parties so that their ideas might be implemented within the foreseeable future. American environmental movements tend to be of this type, concerned as some of them are with the fate of wolves and grizzly bears, and the management of national parks and the protection of species of fauna.

By contrast, the New Left or post-New Left movements seek more dramatic change in which ecological and social needs are seen as having greater importance than the existing pattern of society, based as it is on the obsession with economic growth. Increasingly, anti-globalisation and other movements within the radical environmentalist category now conduct much of their planning and advertising via the new medium of the Internet. The anti-nuclear movement is an offshoot of the ecology movement, often sharing a similar membership and a common outlook. Its main preoccupation is with the danger posed by nuclear power stations and the search for alternative energy sources. Within its orbit, the emphasis has been on decentralisation and individual or small-group activity, sometimes of a more radical and unconventional kind.

Many well-known environmental movements are based in Western Europe, but they exist elsewhere too. In poorer parts of the world, they tend to be more concerned with issues of survival and security in conditions worsened by environmental misuse and damage – for example, the struggles of the Ogoni peoples of Nigeria against environmental degradation brought about by oil-drilling.

There are thousands of economic interests in modern societies, ranging from the vast to the very small and covering the activities of powerful groups such as big business, investment houses and agriculture and those of small employers who run a plumbing or electrical concern. **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

TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR DECLINING INFLUENCE AS INTEREST GROUPS

Trade unions have in most countries suffered from a shrinking membership, partly as a result of the decline of manufacturing in countries ranging from Britain and the United States in both of which new, less-unionised service industries have become ever more significant. As a general trend, unions have failed to cater for the growing number of office workers and those in services (often small-scale and harder to motivate), but membership has suffered from other factors such as:

- unemployment, which has hit workers in traditional industries;
- public attitudes to unions, which were influenced by the hostile approach adopted by conservative governments across the continent and in the USA in the 1980s and 1990s;
- the increase in the amount of part-time working, especially by women, which made union activity difficult to organise;
- the increased diversity of work-forces in terms of qualifications and working conditions.

The decline has not been universal or at the same rate, because of differing economic and social conditions prevailing in different countries. Some unions have been skilful in making adjustments in their attitudes and appeal.

Union strength in Britain, Europe and America

Union membership varies considerably across the continent. It is high in Eastern Europe where once union systems were controlled by communist parties, and where frequently membership was associated with additional attractions such as cheap holidays and welfare benefits. The introduction of market economies, which have produced harsh economic circumstances for workers at least in the short term, has meant that unions continue to enjoy popular backing. Budge *et al.* point out that Eastern European unions have a defensive function and are strongest where there is most opposition to market economics.[6] As in the West, older employees tend to be well represented among trade union members. Younger workers are more employable and more mobile, and are often less concerned with the defence of their collective rights and see less need for solidarity.

In Western Europe, union bargaining power has been reduced, for the high unemployment of the 1980s and the trends to globalisation of national economies have generally taken a

the peak organisation 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

toll of union influence. Unions tend to be consulted less, though in countries which maintain the corporatist tradition they are stronger. Where that tradition has lapsed (Belgium, Netherlands and Sweden) they have diminished. British unions were never so involved in the national economies as is common on the continent, and after the era of strong union power in the 1960s and 1970s they have lost much of their influence; they were never strong in terms of European comparisons.

In America, the unions reached their peak in the 1950s when around a third of the non-agricultural workforce was unionised. Since then the drop has been substantial, with current membership around 15 per cent, even lower in the South. The job market in key manufacturing industries has been hit by imported supplies, from Korea in the case of steel and Japan in the case of cars. As a consequence, unions have found that they have lost much of their former muscle in bargaining. Another reason for decline is the difficulty which unions have had in making membership seem necessary and relevant to today's society. Paul Johnson argues that the task has been made all the more difficult because employers of non-unionised workers have made greater efforts to satisfy their workforce.[7] Whatever the explanation, labour – never strong in the United States – has lost much of its clout in recent decades, and millions of workers – particularly in the growth areas of the economy – are unorganised. Even so, the AFL/CIO still has more affiliated members than any other interest group apart from the 35-million-strong American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and can still mobilise millions of people. Nearly 14 million workers are members of unions affiliated to the AFL-CIO. Millions of others belong to unions not in the AFL/CIO, among them the teachers.

Union membership in selected countries, 2000
(per cent of workforce)

- **80 and above** Denmark Sweden
- **70–80** Norway
- **40–70** South Africa
- **30–40** Australia Germany Italy UK
- **under 20** France USA

(Adapted from figures provided by International Labour Office.)

Medical Association and the American Bar Association. In the world of industry, the major umbrella organisations are less representative of big business than in Britain. The Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Business Roundtable cater for fewer than a quarter of American businesses. Many large corporations – Chase Manhattan, Chrysler, and American Airlines among them – are formidable in defending their own sectional interests. 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. Some promotional groups deal with a range of concerns within their area of interest, others are single-issue groups.

Among the promotional groups, there has in recent years, been a considerable increase in the number and appeal of those concerned with **single issues**. As Davies writes: 'First identified as such in the United States, many were perceived to be on the left of the political spectrum and in the past the people they attracted may have joined the Democratic Party'.[8] Today, there are single-issue groups operating on both sides of the Atlantic which deal with a specific issue of popular interest, such as gay rights, the export of live animals and the siting of some social amenity. 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. Snowdrop in Britain had a brief existence in which it lobbied hard and ultimately successfully for a ban on hand-guns. In America, the pro- and anti-abortion groups are of a similar type.

Protective associations are traditionally stronger, and better organised. They are also better resourced, because they benefit from subscription fees from their

members. They take up contentious issues of the moment which affect their membership, so that organisations of businessmen and trade bodies in Britain will currently have great interest in the single currency, just as farmers have recently been concerned about BSE and other animal diseases in the news, and about the desirability or otherwise of genetically modified foodstuffs.

NIMBY ('Not In My Back Yard') groups are a sub-category within the general orbit of protective associations, whose importance has grown considerably in recent years. They are protective groups based on geographical rather than functional interests. Their formation has been inspired by various causes, often relating to land use (the threat of development) in the countryside. They arise when inhabitants of the same areas feel threatened. People opposed to proposals for such things as a new road, prison, hostage for women or chemical-waste dumping site are worried that their lifestyle may be affected adversely. The greater availability of media attention today has meant that local action campaigns built around such issues can achieve the desired results.

Examples of protective and promotional (interest) groups in Britain and America

	Britain	*United States*
Protective		
Big business	CBI	Business Roundtable
Labour	Trades Union Congress	AFL/CIO
Professional	The Law Society	American Bar Association
Agriculture	National Farmers' Union	The Grange
Promotional		
Civil liberties	Liberty	American Civil Liberties Union
Environment	Friends of the Earth	Sierra Club
Public interest/Civic	Electoral Reform Society	Common Cause
Welfare	NSPCC	American Cancer Society

A different type of categorisation of groups is that between insider and outsider ones. Developed by Wyn Grant, 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.

The insider/outsider categorisation works less well in the United States than in Britain, because of the different structure of government. The separation of powers gives a greater role to the legislature than in Britain. An American administration lacks the capacity of a British government to push its programme through the legislative chambers, so that there is much more concentration by large pressure groups on Congress.

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.

access points
Those formal parts of the governmental structure which are accessible to pressure-group influence. There are many such outlets via which groups can present their case, the more so in America given its constitutional structure.

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. Similarly, the NFU, representing as it does the vast majority of farmers, can help the Department of Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) not only by tendering advice, but also by ensuring that its members take careful precautions to ensure that an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease is contained. In America the American Farm Bureau has traditionally been close to government and enjoyed a successful relationship with the Department of Agriculture, whereas the US National Farmers' Union has never had the same proximity to those charged with making key decisions.

Interest groups wish to influence government in order to see the implementation of policies favourable to their membership. After all, it is ministers and

the officials who advise them who have the power of decision, and they are inevitably therefore the target of lobbying activity. This will mean that there is close consultation between the executive branch and group leaders, many of whom will be in daily contact with officials in a government department, having a mix of formal and informal links. The relationship is normally a cordial and cooperative one, for each side has something to offer the other.

Business groups have an advantage at this level. They play a crucial role in the economy as producers and employers, and leading business figures often enjoy a particularly close relationship with senior officials. Sometimes there are social links as well, for many of the people who have a key role in industry may come from a similar social background to those with whom they deal in the bureaucracy. Indeed, so close are the links that there can be what the Americans term a 'revolving door', through which leading figures in government leave to find themselves a lucrative job in private industry when the administration in the White House changes.

In Britain, some insider groups such as the NFU are very close to government. In the 1960s and 1970s – the age of tripartism or **corporatism** – it became fashionable for leading economic bodies such as business/trade organisations and trade unions to work with representatives of government in the management of the economy. Each side contributed its views, and ministers sought to get agreement about what the economy could afford by way of price rises and wage increases. Such corporatism has gone out of fashion since the 1980s, although it is still practised in some European countries.

corporatism

The term used to describe the various forms of tripartite bargaining between governments and interest groups (representing business and labour) which have been common in Europe and were employed in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. The aim is to make the process of government inclusive, by institutionalising group consultation, to avoid open conflict, and to foster harmony among the competitive interests in a market economy. Since the 1980s, there has been a marked reduction in corporatist activity across Europe, as governments have increasingly moved to free-market competition, with greater use of competition and de-regulation.

One study of American groups found that no American interest groups focused exclusively on the executive branch.[10] The majority concentrated their attention on both the Executive and the Legislature, but a sizeable minority lobbied Congress only or Congress and some other target. The Washington representatives of large companies attach more importance to Capitol Hill than the government departments, as do labour unions. According to research by the same writer, many lobbyists in the national capital spend more time on gathering information from government that is relevant to their groups' interests (perhaps about changes in laws and regulations) than they do in providing information to government with the intention of influencing its policies.[11]

POLICY NETWORKS IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

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.

The term triangles was particularly applied to the USA, whereas elsewhere there was more talk of 'policy communities'. Such communities involved a high degree of interdependence between insider groups and government, without the involvement of committee chairmen in the legislature. They were characterised by close, mutually supportive ties, based on a stable relationship between the participants and a high degree of contact. The idea of policy communities fitted in well with Grant's classification of insider and outsider groups, the former having close involvement in decision-taking. In Britain, policy communities were formed around subjects such as food and drink policy, technical education and water privatisation.

Since the 1980s, the autonomy of such triangles or sub-governments in America has been challenged by alternative centres of power, often known as 'issue networks'. Issue networks are wider and looser, and – in addition to the three elements above – describe other players involved in discussion of a policy area, including the research institutes and the media. Media scrutiny and the attentions of consumer protest groups have led to a more critical analysis of policy-making processes, so that secret deals and mutual backscratching are now less frequent or effective. As Hague and Harrop have explained, 'the iron has gone out of the triangle; now influence over decisions depends on what you know, as well as who you know'.[12] In America, the policies supported by the tobacco triangle came under challenge from health authorities, who had been excluded from the area of tobacco policy-making.

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. As we have seen, Congress is noted as a focus of such interest, but all parliaments are a natural target. 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. Capitol Hill is very accessible to American groups, not least because many legislators are financed by sizeable PAC contributions, but also because they may come from an area where a substantial proportion of the population is engaged in a key interest, for instance farming in the Midwest. As Richardson remarks, 'they often see themselves as having a duty, as well as an interest in re-election, in helping interests important to their constituents'.[13]

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. Even in the United States, the emphasis on individual contact with congress members and committee chairmen has increasingly been supplemented by greater commitment to supporting sympathetic candidates at election time and 'going public'.

Influence at this level can be with individual representatives, committees or with a political party In Britain, trade unions have traditionally had a strong and close relationship with the Labour Party ever since they helped to create it at the beginning of the century. In recent years, the constitutional and financial ties have loosened, and the emotional and historical bonds count for less than they did in the past. Nonetheless, the relationship is still much closer than that which exists between left-wing parties and the industrial labour movement in most other countries. In America, there have never been similar institutional links between the Democrats and organised labour.

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. Bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality have also used the law to gain redress for individuals who have suffered discrimination, having been alerted by campaigning groups.

In the past, there has been little concentration on the courts as a target for action. However, the general trend towards judicial activism and the number of cases concerning civil liberties following the passing of the Human Rights Act (1998), may prompt groups to see this as an avenue which can be exploited. In Britain and in several other democracies, the courts are likely to become more important as an access point in the future. 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 countries in which the Constitution provides the courts with a formal role of judicial review, activists will use the courts more readily. 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. American judges have wide constitutional powers to overrule decisions of the Executive and considerable latitude in interpreting the meaning of legislation, so that bringing test cases may prove invaluable in winning a friendly judgement. Of course, much depends who is on the Bench, and US groups often seek to influence the selection of judges, pressing the claims of those whose political and social leanings they find acceptable.

amicus curiae
A brief filed by an individual or group with the permission of the court. Such briefs provide information and argument additional to that presented by those immediately involved in a case. In effect, a group is acting in the privileged position of being an adviser to the court, a role popular with campaigners in the debates on abortion, consumerism, law and order, and the environment.

It is not just civil rights groups who have used this route. 'Going to law' requires substantial resources, so that it is often the large and powerful business corporations which have been successful in adopting this approach. They regularly challenge government statutes and regulations, and have their own lawyers to advise them and handle the passage of cases through the courts. In other cases where they met not be a party to the litigation, groups may submit an **amicus curiae** ('friend of the court') brief, in order they can have their views represented and taken into account.

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; militancy was a sign of weakness rather than of

strength. Indeed, going public was often a sign that that they were operating in the face of considerable hostility from many elected representatives and officials.

direct action
Any action beyond the usual constitutional and legal framework, such as obstructing access to a building, preventing the building of a motorway or – at worst – terrorism. Usually a last resort after other approaches have failed, it is an attempt to coerce those in authority into doing something they would not otherwise do.

Today, the picture of group activity described above is less true than it once was, because of the rise of the media. 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. The protests against the transportation of live animals to the continent organised by Compassion in World Farming in 1995 were a good example of the use of this means of securing public support (see pp. 238–40 for more information on the use of direct action).

American groups recognise that one way of impressing Congress is to gain public sympathy. They adopt a dual strategy of going public and lobbying on Capitol Hill. They may seek to exert influence over the public not just by all-the-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. This may be done because they wish to see certain candidates elected and certain ideas advanced, or because they wish to stop the candidatures of other candidates and oppose the outlook they represent. Often this may involve publishing and grading the voting records of sitting congress members, in an attempt to show the extent to which they fulfil the group's requirements. Environmental groups have in the past singled out the 'Dirty Dozen' legislators with the worst voting records on issues within their orbit; in 2000, eleven were Republican.

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. The number of PACs has mushroomed since the 1980s, following the controls on party funding under the FECA legislation of the 1970s. (For further discussion of PACs and the role and control of spending in American elections, see pp. 293–4.)

Other targets for pressure groups

In Britain and America, there are other targets for the lobbyist besides the Executive, Legislature, judiciary and popular opinion. Such 'pressure points' include:

- **Government beyond the centre.** In Britain, local councils may have lost many of their former powers, but they still make important decisions affecting the lives of people within their boundaries. 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. The shifting balance of influence in the era of New Federalism has led to a surge of activity in the states and at the local level. 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. There has also been an increase in intergovernmental lobbying, with states and local governments taking offices in Washington to press their claims at the federal level.
- **The media.** Many groups have realised the importance of the media as a means of bringing their cause to a significantly wider audience. 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.[14] 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. Some Greenpeace activists see business rather than politics as the best arena within which to seek to further group aims.
- **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.
- **The European Union.** For Britain, the European Union (EU) has become an important target for pressure groups since the 1980s, as more and more decisions have been taken in Brussels.

Trends in recent years: the changing pressure-group scene

Business interests continue to exercise political muscle in most countries, for their role is essential to the success of the national economy and governments are likely to listen to them. Businessmen have the power to make or withhold key investment decisions which can influence the levels of employment and prosperity in their countries. Hence there is a widespread feeling that what is good for business is good for everyone. However, the former dominance of traditional peak associations has been undermined by the growth in number of other lobbying organisations such as those representing small businesses, trade associations and individual companies.

There have been significant changes in the number, campaigning methods and effectiveness of various other types of groups.

think tanks

Policy institutes which carry out detailed research and provide analysis of and information on a range of policy options. They are often ideologically based, their ideas sometimes being influential with the parties which share a broad affinity of perspective – e.g. the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Labour Party. In America, think tanks such as the Progressive Policy Institute have taken on much of the work of developing new policy options. The role of parties in this area has diminished.

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. As we have seen, corporations do more of their own lobbying and rival business organisations have emerged. Unions have lost members and there are now more specialist agricultural associations. The same is true in the field of medicine, which is no longer dominated by the American Medical Association. Its activities are now just part of the campaigning on health matters by groups ranging from that of the insurance companies to the work done by specialist groups such as nurses and paramedics, and organisations representing health delivery (clinics and

hospitals, among others). In Britain, too, certain interests carry less weight today than was once the case. Labour has lost much of its previous influence and the impact of the CBI on policy has declined from the corporatist days of the 1960s and 1970s when it exerted real influence. Many campaigning social groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter have faced a harsher climate in which to operate in recent decades, as governments have been more stringent with the nation's finances.

There are additional outlets at which groups can target their propaganda

Many British groups have taken opportunities to lobby in Europe, as increasingly, key decisions affecting aspects of British life are being taken in Brussels.

The merits of pressure-group activity

Writers have taken differing views of pressure-group activity, many of them regarding groups as inevitable if not actually beneficial to good government, others being more alarmed at the methods by which they operate and the influence they can attain. The two views are well expressed in the observations of two famous Presidents. John F. Kennedy saw groups as an essential part of democratic activity, performing an invaluable role in American life: 'the lobbyists who speak for the various economic, commercial and other functional interests of this country serve a very useful purpose and have assumed an important role in the legislative process'. By contrast, one of his distinguished predecessors, Woodrow Wilson, was alarmed because he saw the government of the United States as being 'the foster child of special interests . . . not allowed to have a will of its own'.

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 organisa-