
INTEREST GROUP POLITICS

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IN every society, regardless of its political system, power tends to be concentrated in the hand of the few. The direct system of democracy of the ancient Greek city-states where every citizen was given the opportunity to participate actively in the act of governing over the centuries gave way to the doctrine of the divine rule of kings. The reigning monarch was believed to have derived his right to rule from divine powers and his rule on earth was simply the transcendence of a will from above. When Louis XIV of France said 'L'etat c'est moi' he was merely expressing a widely-held belief which was firmly rooted in history.

When the liberal movement eventually managed to encroach upon the absolute power of kings and ultimately to transfer that power to parliament, the democratic states that emerged were not able to reinstate the full participatory process reminiscent of the direct democratic system of the Greek city-states. The form of democracy that took shape was of a representative type wherein the few who get elected in a General Election act on behalf of the governed. The Constitution confers on these representatives of the people the legislative power to enact, repeal, or amend laws as well as the right to govern and administer the internal and external affairs of the state.

Political cynics might sneer at this transformation by arguing that our representatives at the legislative assemblies enjoy the same rights and powers of the anointed king. Ministers have appropriated the awe which was once the prerogative of kings and noblemen. In other words this change has simply dispersed power to a limited few.

However tenable such a view may seem to be, the erosion of the power of kings and the eventual transference of power to constitutional assemblies were the product of an awakening of consciousness among the populace that strength could be derived from unity. As government became accountable to the people, this consciousness proved not only to be self-sustaining but also incremental so that, whereas the existing groups tended to grow in stature and effectiveness, new pressure groups emerged whose aim was to direct the policy of the State towards their beliefs.

The church and the land-owning classes had for many centuries tried (and very often managed) to steer the policy of the State along channels that were consonant with their interests. With this newly won right of representation other groups came into being which started making inroads in the govern-

ment of the State by seeking avenues through which they could influence public policy.

Pressures brought to bear on government started to be exerted from every quarter so that the rulers had now to contend with or accommodate a multiplicity of demands. To quote one example, the disenfranchisement of women in a democratic representative system prevailing in Britain at the turn of the century soon gave birth in 1903 to the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union which from 1906 to 1914 undertook increasingly militant action to further the suffragette cause, its members enduring imprisonment and forcible feeding. Women over the age of thirty were enfranchised in 1918; women between twenty-one and thirty in 1928.

The Trade Unions, commanding the support of a sizeable section of the working force, also became a strong influential pressure group and they played a prominent part in shaping the political history of the last two centuries. The Trade Union movement went beyond merely exerting pressure and it sought to involve itself in policy-making by getting some of its members or people who sympathized with its cause elected to Parliament.

In many Western European countries this cue of active politics has been taken up in the recent years by the Environmentalists who have really become a force to be reckoned with. As the hazards to the environment seemed to be increasing to proportions which could prove to be beyond human capacity to cope with, the Environmentalists decided to make their presence felt more by actually contesting political elections. 'I Verdi' in Italy contested the General Elections, held in July 1987, and obtained more than 2 per cent of the votes cast — a feat which was hailed as a morale booster to the cause of the environment.

Interest Groups

Very often these interest or protectional groups are based on multi-functional organizations which have a common interest. These are the ones who are likely to take part in active politics. They may also publish a daily or a weekly newspaper to inform both the legislature and the public about the problems and issues which they would like to be solved and to stimulate public debate. Other pressure groups whose main concern is the promotion of policies derived from a shared set of values, beliefs, or ideologies cannot operate in the same professional way as these interest protectional groups. They may make use of the media by means of press releases, letters, and articles. They may put pressures on politicians, especially during election time, by the issue of memoranda.

The latter category of groups may be formed owing to a perceived need to

alter the common shared values of society or owing to an arousal of a cause which a group of people think deserves the attention of the public and the government. The suffragettes is a case in point. On the other hand a pressure group may campaign for demands which may sound anathema to another group of people. Thus a pressure group advocating the right to abortion may run counter to the moral values of other people and so an Anti-Abortionist lobby group becomes operational. In Malta we have witnessed how the activities of Ornithological Society (M.O.S.) have mobilized the hunters and bird trappers who, fearing that their pastime was being threatened, began using the same lobbying tactics characteristic of other pressure groups.

The presence of such pressure groups, together with their right to voice their cause, is the essence of pluralism. A pluralist system of government is seen as a system where the power holders try to accommodate, as far as it is humanly possible, a multiplicity of interests. This form of pluralist participation is interest group politics where one interest group competes with other groups in an effort to shape public policy. Pluralism assumes that society is composed of individuals and groups with differing interests and values. Where the divergences are rooted in such objective cleavages as class, occupation, race, and ethnic background, the pressure groups that emerge may seek to dominate the sphere of influence in the political field or else prevent another group from dominating that sphere.

A group's power to influence legislation is not based simply on the size of its membership but by the amount of financial and manpower resources it can commit to a legislative pressure campaign and the astuteness of its leaders. The pressure brought to bear by Solidarnosc on the Polish Government was the arousal of a long-suppressed will by the Polish workers to voice their protests. The economic hardships and the leadership of Lech Walesa brought these repressed feelings to the surface. The time was propitious and leadership was not lacking. Even in the United States of America the Jewish Community can exert a highly influential pressure on the foreign policy of the USA owing to the financial resources which it can harness.

Marxist Ideology

This dominance of one group over others as a result of its resources forms the bone of contention for the detractors of pluralism. Indeed Marxists still maintain that the basis of cleavages in society is mainly economic. It follows that those wielding economic power constitute the dominant pressure group in society. Such is the dominance of this group that, rather than lobbying

for its cause, it tends to make use of or associate itself with the social institutions so that the norms and value imparted to members of society approximate to its ideals. Somehow, the Marxists maintain, our dominant values are culturally moulded. The State for the sake of its survival has very often to submit to the dictates and imperatives of economic needs and is therefore constrained by the power wielded by this group. Subsequently the State becomes the real defending bastion of the dominant values. So participation through pressure groups is illusory and it simply helps to legitimize a system which is constantly manipulated by an economic élite.

Moreover, pressure groups may work on the assumption that the centre-piece of democracy is opposition rather than participation. Protests, strikes, demonstrations, and petitions are all signs of underlying grievances which give rise to conflicts. Faced with confrontation the economic élite, through the apparatus of the State, grants concessions in order to preserve itself. So far it has managed to adjust itself to new exigencies. So pluralism, according to Marxist thought, is a mere window-dressing.

The bureaucracy and rationalization that have permeated our economic and social life may lend support to these contentions. The hierarchy inherent in this bureaucratic system creates an élite who will do everything within its power to maintain the status quo. And yet, however valid these contentions may be, it can hardly be denied that pluralism has given the citizens room to manoeuvre. The presence of pressure groups means the acceptance by the State of the rights of different groups. This right constitutes one of the tools which the minorities, the underprivileged, and other groups being discriminated against have used to further their cause. Whether the benefits accruing to the populace belie the Marxist contentions is still an ongoing debate between the so-called Left and Right.

The principle of pluralism has also permeated industry. A big industrial firm is today a coalition of different interests. Paternalism has had to give way to mutual collaboration and compromises. Collective bargaining, a feature of industrial relations in the industrial sector, 'is seen by many as being the main agency for workers' participation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and not least the United States (where collective agreements are wide in scope and cover many managerial practices)'.¹ There seems to be similarities in the political and industrial fields. In both cases the question being asked is whether pressure groups have

1. Michael Poole, *Towards a New Industrial Democracy – Workers' Participation in Industry* (London, 1986), 131.

really managed to make a dent in the prerogatives of the power holders. Or is it simply the case of the policy makers adjusting to new exigencies but by and large retaining their power intact? These are questions which the historian, the political scientist, and the sociologist are called to answer.

Functions of Pressure Groups

What may beset the researchers in this field is the fact that pluralism is a phenomenon which cannot easily be measured. Dissent is one of its features for it is based neither on consensus nor on unanimity.

But open dissent need not always make news value. On the other hand, where features of pluralism are lacking, open dissent tends to hit the world headlines and it may well lead to violent uprisings that either cause disorder or threaten the stability of society. In spite of the waves of confrontation and conflict that pressure groups bring to the fore, they may also by the same token give a valid contribution to the political stability by serving as a bridge between the governed and government.

So a study of the various ways in which pressure groups operate may well provide the analyst with objective criteria for there seems to be some parallelism in the functions of pressure groups.

All pressure groups try to ensure that their cases are well known and sympathetically received by the public for the education of the public may well change the climate of public opinion.² By airing their grievances or proclaiming their beliefs, they somehow act as mediators between State and citizens thus serving as a control over specialized political institutions and ensuring that these remain within the broad framework of the social values of societies. Through pressure groups the public may really make its voice heard effectively.

Any government needs a measure of public support. Being oblivious to well deserved causes and demands, it may jeopardize its position. Had Marie Antoinette endeavoured to procure bread for the hungry rather than say 'let them eat cakes', her execution might have been averted. Pressure groups may indeed give government the seal of legitimacy.

2. F. Randall, *British Government and Politics* (London, 1979), 20.