

IN PURSUIT OF PUBLIC OPINION: POLITICS OF PRESSURE GROUPS

By Joseph A. Gatner

Pressure groups are a growing phenomenon in modern pluralistic society. Their detractors claim that as political elites they undermine the democratic process. Members of Parliament have traditionally welcomed the presence of pressure groups as sources of information on particular issues and problems. This article raises a number of questions related to pressure groups in Canada.

Organized pressure or interest groups and the development of lobbying probably first began some three centuries ago when businessmen sought special privileges from Members of the British Parliament in the outer lobbies of Westminster. Some authorities maintain that lobbying, which stems from the right to petition government, goes back to the Magna Carta of June 1215. Today lobbying agents of particular pressure groups are employed by organizations of every kind and description. They range from corporations, trade associations and labour unions to religious and ethnic groupings. While their activities are found at all levels of government and are directed at the different arms of government as well, their most important area of operation in Canada is directed at the executive arm at the federal level where their impact has been the most profound.

Pressure or interest groups have been variously defined. A comprehensive description was made by Robert Presthus in 1973 after an extensive study carried out under a Canada Council grant. He described interest groups as collectivities organized around explicit values on behalf of which essentially political claims are made vis-à-vis governments as well as other groups and the general public. These interest groups, according to Presthus, are also endowed with such characteristics as membership, organization, and an official *raison d'être*

or collective mission, with such associated sub-goals as the establishment of security, prestige, and income for a permanent staff. Such groups seek to satisfy their claims through the practical political process involving negotiation and consultation with power structures in both the public and private sectors of society.

Unfortunately the majority of Canadian citizens have little knowledge of pressure groups or their lobbying agents' functions. As a result, when a lobbyist is associated in the press with some interest group he is often immediately regarded with suspicion.

In an effort to establish their legitimacy pressure groups often go beyond the mere articulation of the demands of their members. In such instances the organizational goals of the leadership are considered the more important of their activities. Some of the most important organizational goals of interest groups are the preservation and the continued growth of their organizations as well as the continuation of their leaders in respective positions of leadership. Research has indicated that the Canadian Labour Congress, for instance, has sought to establish the role of its leaders, and that of itself as an institution, as the primary spokesmen for the trade union movement in Canada in the minds of both its members and the government as well as with the public.

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Leaders of such interest groups develop close links with existing political and social structures as a means of ensuring the protection of their interests and of maintaining their access to governments. Such links are often developed through participation in joint ventures with other interest groups in the pursuit of specific mutual political objectives. This activity enhances their leadership mandate and reinforces the status of the interest body representing the specific segment of society. David Kwavnick pointed out in his study, *Organized Labour and Pressure Groups, the Canadian Labour Congress 1956-58*, that relations between the Canadian Labour Congress and Canadian political leaders clearly demonstrate that the principal officers of the former, particularly its president, have access to any member of the cabinet, including the Prime Minister, at almost any time for the discussion of virtually any aspect of government policy.

Hearings before parliamentary committees, either in the House or the Senate, provide other opportunities for the pressure group leaders to affirm their mandate. As a consequence it is not surprising to find that pressure groups, whenever possible, seek to ensure that parliamentary hearings are held on bills which pertain to their interest.

TYPES OF PRESSURE GROUPS

A rather intriguing finding in some studies has been that interest groups are not profit oriented, although many are creatures of bodies which in themselves are in the business of profit-making. Among the more notable of such interest groups are the Chambers of Commerce and the Boards of Trade. Indeed, the larger share of pressure group activity in Canada has traditionally represented the economic interests of agriculture, labour, and business and industry.

In the sector where economic gain is of lesser importance or is shared with other competing interests, one finds such professional groups as the Canadian Association of University Teachers, the Canadian Bar Association, and the Canadian Medical Association. The communication sector is represented by such bodies as the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association, and many others. Well-known bodies in the field of public administration include the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities. Another category consists of the increasing number of ethnic groups and related religious interest groups. An important and growing

group area today consists of women's organizations. Social action and ideological groups include such bodies as the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews and such militant groups as the Consumers Association of Canada.

The activity of pressure groups in Canada is related to the evolution of problems and the changing priorities of our society. Ecological concern of the 1960s spawned a large number of environmental protection groups. Since the end of World War II Canada's concern with the feeding and development of the Third World has precipitated the proliferation of interest groups co-operating with the Canadian government to dispense development to the Third World. The Canadian Council for International Co-operation is the umbrella organization for some ninety Canadian nongovernmental organizations concerned with Third World development. The emergence of Canada's native people in the last two decades has resulted in the birth of another segment of Canadian interest group activity. These groups represent Canada's three native people, i.e. the Indian, the Inuit, and the Metis and nonstatus Indians.

The obvious conclusion from the proliferation of interest groups in Canada since the end of World War II is that as society becomes more complex and governments become more involved, increasing group pressures are generated and ultimately find themselves operating in the political arena.

ORGANIZATION

A significant aspect of pressure group organization in Canada is their local or national peculiarities. They are organized on a federated basis when interests which concern them come under both federal and provincial jurisdictions. On the other hand, the federation principle is less adhered to by those groups whose interests come under national rather than provincial jurisdiction. Among the best examples of the non-federated type organization is the Canadian Bankers Association. The federation principle of organization exists in such influential bodies as the Canadian Chambers of Commerce and the Canadian Manufacturers Association, which tends to facilitate access to the federal government. Such organization, however, does not automatically breed success. For instance, officials of the Canadian Medical Association have conceded that their greatest achievements have come through their provincial organizations. R.A. Weir, in surveying the operations of the Canadian Medical Association in 1973, explained that the *raison d'être* underlying this phenomenon was

Generally, Canada's principal interest groups maintain close liaison, by means of informal discussion, personal letter or formal brief, with that part of the Ottawa establishment, or the parallel provincial establishments, that affect them most directly. In the case of the Canadian Labour Congress that would be the Department of Labour, for the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the Department of Agriculture or the Canadian Wheat Board; with regard to the Canadian Manufacturers Association, the Departments of Industry, Trade and Commerce, Finance and Labour. The Consumers Association of Canada, whose interest spreads over many departments at one time, is known to maintain relations of mutual thrust and friendship with officials in several different departments. This practice of course is repeated at the provincial level, usually on a smaller scale.

Pressure groups attempt to influence royal commissions or task forces by submitting briefs during the hearings but they also have been known to make efforts to obtain the appointment of their representatives, or people whose leanings are in their favor, to the enquiry itself. Occasionally, interest groups manage to have their representatives appointed to government boards that have advisory or regulatory power over their interests. The need for pressure group as a vehicle to obtain access to government is also prompted by the rather high degree of diffidence individual citizens show towards personally approaching officials at any level of government. Analogous to this is the generally higher interaction that labour representative groups have with backbenchers while industrial pressure groups tend to gain access at the cabinet level, a fact that is undoubtedly related to their somewhat similar social homogeneity. Furthermore, pressure groups possessing generous shares of recognized legitimacy and related political connections tend to function quietly within the system. Groups possessing fewer such resources often operate on its periphery and tend to employ more provocative and publicly oriented stratagems such as mass campaigns on Parliament Hill.

While a good deal of lobbying goes on behind the scenes there is quite a bit of traditional pressuring that is open to public view. The most traditional and best known representation of this type is the annual submission to the federal cabinet. These annual submissions cover all the areas of interest of the group making the submission. As already noted, sometimes such representation is made both before the government as well as a parliamentary committee.

Not all briefs made to government and parliamentary committees carry the same weight. While the government normally places a good deal of importance on briefs, the degree to which each submission will influence policy depends on a number of factors. Among these are: the importance of the group making the presentation; the tone of the brief; the submission's concern with the public good; the validity and accuracy of the claims made; and the recognition of opposing interests.

INTEREST GROUPS AND MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

While a major share of the lobbying by pressure groups is directed at the cabinet, interest groups have also become more aware of Members of Parliament in recent years. One explanation for this current phenomenon is the growing importance of parliamentary committees. However there is also the general realization that Members of Parliament are potential cabinet ministers and contact with them should not be neglected in the early stages of their parliamentary careers. Furthermore, the nature of the matter is also important in determining where the pressure of the lobby should be placed. In such matters as amendments to the criminal code, like capital punishment, or abortion and especially when free votes are permitted in Parliament, lobbying groups increasingly direct the thrust of their efforts towards the individual Member. If a matter has local consequences that are repeated throughout the country, such as the lobbying for the exemption of local soft drink franchises from the requirements of the *Combines Investigation Act* in 1975 by the Canadian Soft Drink Bottlers' Association, Members of Parliament collectively are also liable to pressure from interest groups.

Interestingly, the reaction of some Members of Parliament is that pressure groups often mistakenly believe that if they can persuade a sufficient number of backbench Members of Parliament to support a given policy they might, through the latter's efforts in caucus, be able to change the mind of the relevant minister and hence the policy of the government. Generally, Members of Parliament tend to find useful the practice of establishing contacts with group representatives in order to obtain information about technical aspects of certain legislation. Moreover, a Member of Parliament likes to make such contacts because the interests concerned happen to coincide with those of his constituents. Ideological identification between Members and particular groups on certain policy matters also attract lobbyists.

Members of Parliament of course must obtain information on both the operational consequences of government policy as well as on the reactions to its implementation from their own constituencies. Furthermore, Presthus' survey carried out in the early part of this decade showed that provincial legislators were even more prone to being approached by lobbyists representing interest groups than their federal counterparts in Ottawa. The general contention is that the lobbying of legislators does in the end produce positive results for pressure groups. Whether such practices serve the general welfare is still a matter of public discussion and should continue to be examined closely.

Organized interest groups represent concentration of power. One of the major criticisms directed against them is that their ability to mobilize large individual units of power and thus exert a greater impact, gives them tremendous advantage over unorganized groups. Charges have also been made that interest groups are often not democratically organized, with the rank and file having little to do with the selection of officers and leaders and even less with policy-making. Furthermore, critics point to the alleged fact that such groups too often put their own interest above that of the public. A further charge is directed at the techniques used by groups, which in the past have included such questionable practices as bribing, deceiving, cheating and falsifying of information in order to obtain their objectives. It is understandable then why it is sometimes held that they

tend to do more harm than good and divide and confuse people with slanted propaganda. In the eyes of their detractors such criticisms amount to a powerful indictment of pressure groups and their value to society.

Parliamentary registration of lobbying agents has been suggested for some time. It was advocated in Canada when the then Minister for Consumers and Corporate Affairs, the Honourable Ron Basford, indicated in 1969 that his department was on the verge of introducing legislation to bring about the registration of lobbyists and interest groups. This never transpired but the importance of pressure groups and the activities of their agents undoubtedly warrants the establishment of means to identify them. Democratic and parliamentary institutions are primarily designed to serve the public interest and the presence of anonymous agents placing pressures on legislators, the executive and at the implementation levels of the public interest should undoubtedly require some public identification. Indeed, the absence of their public visibility might, in the long run, undermine not only the parliamentary and democratic process but also the public's confidence in these institutions. The secrecy surrounding non elected and anonymous agents of particular interests has undoubtedly already contributed to the erosion of the credibility of the country's public institutions. The need for the regulation of "interest group agents" probably has never been greater. Such registration might be considered part of an emerging code of ethics that is required of all people dealing with the public's affairs.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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