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Two interpretations of ways in which group politics in Britain have presented challenges to democracy are reviewed, neo-corporatism or pluralistic stagnation and the rise of single issue interest groups. The disappearance of the first paradigm created a political space for the second to emerge. A three phase model of group activity is developed: a phase centred around production interests, followed by the development of broadly based 'other regarding' groups, succeeded by fragmented, inner directed groups focusing on particular interests. Explanations of the decay of corporatism are reviewed. Single issue group activity has increased as party membership has declined and is facilitated by changes in traditional media and the development of the internet. Such groups can overload the policy-making process and frustrate depoliticisation. Debates about the constitution and governance have largely ignored these issues and there is need for a debate.

Key words: Interests, corporatism, depoliticisation, groups, business

This article sets out a three phase model of the development of pressure group politics in Britain. The models are seen as primarily analytical, offering a means of understanding the challenges that pressure groups have presented to the democratic polity at different phases of its post-war development. The models are ideal typical extrapolations of a complex reality, meaning that no one model is dominant at any point in time, but they nevertheless encapsulate a sequence of key trends. No one model is seen as normatively superior to any of the others, but nevertheless they have implications for debates about constitutional reform.

At different periods in post-war Britain, pressure groups have been seen as presenting challenges to democratic politics in Britain. One period was during the 1960s and 1970s when what had been seen as something that contributed to the strength of the British polity, the incorporation of great economic interests such as business and the unions, came to be seen as a source of pluralistic stagnation and even a threat to democracy itself. This was what the period of what was known as 'neo-corporatism' and 'tripartism'. This provoked an academic literature, which often combined the analytical and the normative and was criticised on a variety of grounds. (see Schmitter, 1974, 1979; Panitch, 1980; Williamson 1989 for a critical treatment).

More recently, concerns have focused on the topic of single interest groups and their role in the political process. (Social Market Foundation, 1996; Brass and Koziell, 1997; Dudley and Richardson, 1998; Grant, 2004) This has been much less developed as a theme both in academic and in political debate. In so far as it is discussed it is often seen as evidence of problems in the broader polity rather than in terms of the challenges presented by the groups themselves:

Single issue groups are gaining in membership and one-off campaigns attract

wider interest – suggesting that disengagement from formal political

institutions is a result of people rejecting conventional politics as a means to

express their views and to have influence over decisions that affect them.

(Smith Institute, 2007, 1).

The Blair Government had no hesitation in rejecting corporatism which was seen

as irredeemably Old Labour as one could get.   In an early account of the Third Way,

Giddens listed corporatism as one of five defining characteristics of social democracy

or the 'old left', although he rather oddly defined it as 'state dominates over civil

society' (Giddens, 1998, 18) which is really state rather than liberal corporatism.

Under New Labour there was no question of discussions in Downing Street with the

trade unions (or the CBI) about the management of the economy.   The Blair

Government was, of course, very close to business interests, particularly large

corporations. This was consistent with the ambition stated by Tony Blair in a speech

to American financiers in New York to make Labour 'the natural party of business'.

(10 Downing Street Newsroom, 1998). However, there was no interest in the

structure of business associations or attempts to encourage their reform and

modernisation as had been pursued by Michael Heseltine during the preceding

Conservative administration (Greaves, 2004).   Indeed, the strong impression was

given that trade associations were seen as part of the problem than part of the solution.

The prime minister preferred direct contact with top business people, for example

through the Multinational Chairmen's Group.

It is important to bear in mind that the shift from the first phase to the second is

not entirely disconnected: the effective disappearance of the first phase created a

political space in which the second could emerge.   The shift is also related to broader

changes in the structure of British society.   Corporatism was associated with a period

in which the cleavages that mattered in society were those that arose from the division of labour, in short class politics. 'Thus, the politics of production centred around such issues as wages and conditions; attempts by government to influence the outcomes of collective bargaining through incomes policies; the rights of trade unions; industrial relations law; arrangements for worker participation in decision-making; and the negotiation of subsidies in agriculture through the mechanism of the "annual review"'. (Grant, 2000, 169).

This was initially supplemented and to an extent supplanted by a politics of collective consumption 'concerned with the externalities of the production process.' (Grant, 2000, 169). There was an emphasis on public goods such as air quality and a substantial expansion in the numbers and support for environmental groups. Other groups focused on causes from which their supporters were not potential beneficiaries, e.g., prisoners of conscience or those living in the Global South. These were groups that were essentially other directed.

The third phase of activity is particularly represented by single issue interest groups and arising from a much more fragmented identity politics in which individuals see themselves as wronged motorists caught by speed cameras or patients who had received inadequate treatment or categories of individuals who want their rights to be recognised by society. The Blair Government was particularly sympathetic to the last group, for example in terms of the creation of civil partnerships, a stance entirely consistent with its commitment to diversity. The Government has faced a shifting and unpredictable kaleidoscope of protest where it is difficult to forecast which issue will next capture the agenda. What these groups have in common is that they feel wronged by government, in terms of the application of regulation, the provision of resources or the recognition of their rights. They are

also groups that are inner directed and in many cases associated with lifestyle politics Depoliticisation may have been an ambition of the Blair Government, particularly in the sphere of economic policy (Burnham, 2001) and major areas of public expenditure such as the National Health Service, although it can be argued that in social areas such as smoking there has been increasing politicisation and regulation.   In any event, depoliticisation has been difficult to achieve in practice and this is perhaps where single issue groups have struck at the very core of the Blair project, an issue which will be returned to later.

Corporatism revisited

In this section the experience of corporatism is revisited by examining academic analyses of corporatism. The evolving thoughts of Sam Beer are selected for particular attention because he is regarded as 'a central figure in the study of British politics … he was probably the most distinguished foreign scholar of our system of government in the 20th century.' (Moran, 2006, 139).   His analysis of British politics gave a central place to the role of groups as a means of understanding changing patterns and philosophies of politics.   He considered that their significance increased over time.   'Pressure groups were nothing new in British politics, but in the twentieth century they had assumed a distinctively new form.' (Beer, 1969, 320).   In particular, Britain had hesitant, half hearted but nevertheless significant experiment with corporatist arrangements. There will be a review of why corporatism failed to deliver a functioning mode of economic governance in the British case. The model advanced by Eichengreen (2007) will be used to show that in many respects this was beneficial for the UK in the longer run in contrast to earlier analyses which suggested that the failure to construct successful tripartite arrangements constituted a significant failure of the British polity.

In his analysis Sam Beer emphasised how the tradition of consultation with organised producer groups was deeply rooted in British history. He saw a 'widespread acceptance of functional representation in British political culture.' (Beer, 1969, 329). Under the post-war managed economy and welfare state, government required from pressure groups 'advice, acquiescence and approval.' (Beer, 1969, 330). The analysis presented was basically a benign one of the influence on policy exerted by consumer and producer groups and the narrowing of the ideological divide between the parties. British politics are portrayed as representing a balance between 'the powerful thrust of the new politics of group interest and, on the other, the continuing dynamic of ideas.' (Beer, 1969, 386). As Beer states in the concluding sentence of the original book: 'Happy the country in which consensus and conflict are ordered in a dialectic that makes of the political arena at once a market of interests and a forum for debate of fundamental moral concerns.' (Beer, 1969, 390). All this is consistent with a once prominent strand in American political science which saw lessons to be learnt from the disciplined two party system in Britain which also appeared to successfully manage group interests, although Beer had long been clear about the advantages over public ownership of 'the superior New Deal approach of regulation, trust-busting and other forms of countervailing power.' (Beer, 1997, 323).

In the epilogue which he wrote for the 1969 edition of *Modern British Politics,* Beer was able to review the experience of the 1964 Labour Government which seemed, at least initially, to have won the assent of business to indicative economic planning. Hence, reflecting prevalent attitudes at the time (see, for example, Shonfield's *Modern Capitalism* published in 1965) he was able to look forward to a more corporatist future:

The future development of corporatism is surely to be expected. Planning is
inevitable in an economy that seeks both stability and expansion … To this
extent, as planning develops, functional representation will likewise grow,
becoming an even more important part of the representative system of the polity.
(Beer, 1997, 427).

Beer subsequently suggested that Jo Grimond was perhaps the most prescient
politician of the time as he was one of the few people to anticipate an eventual 'third
way' solution which would combine economic efficiency and the pursuit of social
justice without significant reliance on producer group consultation. (Personal
communication).

The early years of the Thatcher period saw the publication of Beer's *Britain
Against Itself.* The central argument was that 'the collectivist polity, that
culminating success of political development in the postwar years, itself engendered
the processes which converted success into failure'. (Beer, 1982, xiv). Beer
explained, 'Intrinsic to the collectivist polity was a heightened group politics. This
rising pluralism so fragmented the political system as to impair its power of acting for
the long-run interests of its members.' (Beer, 1982, 4). The decline of parties
relative to the rise of interest groups removed a major restraining influence:

The new pluralism had been kept in order, as it had been bred, by the robust
regime of party government in the 1940s and 1950s. The fatal conjunction
occurred when the new group politics …. confronted from the mid 1960s, a party
regime with diminishing powers of aggregation.' (Beer, 1982: 210).

The corporatist century?

Corporatism represented an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for
understanding what Beer termed 'pluralistic stagnation'. Although it was arguably

possible to have corporatism without incomes policy, it was the widespread use of prices and incomes policies that was a major driver of the adoption of liberal forms of corporatism, not least in Britain. Successful incomes policies required the cooperation of organised labour and successful prices policies required the active consent of organised business. Incomes policies were needed because the Keynesian orthodoxy then prevalent offered no solution to coping with wage pressures on inflation in a full employment economy. For Keynes keeping efficiency-wages reasonably stable was a political problem and 'One is also, simply because one knows no solution, inclined to turn a blind eye to the wages problem in a full employment economy.' (Quoted in Jones, 1977, 53).

The debate was effectively launched by Schmitter's 1974 article 'Still the century of corporatism?' (For an assessment of why this was genuinely a path breaking article, see Streeck, 2006, 8-12). As an analytical debate, it was in many respects unsatisfactory. There was a continual difficulty of agreeing on a definition of what was being observed. 'Thus the cumulative picture presented over the years is one of a rather elastic concept with a somewhat uncertain central core.' (Williamson, 1989, 5). In that sense it was rather like pluralism and another objection that was made with some force is that it was insufficiently differentiated from pluralism. (See Almond 1983). Thus analysts were left with the question 'whether a corporatist theoretical perspective improves our understanding of particular phenomena around the state's intervention into production politics that cannot be achieved by using other theories.' (Williamson, 1989, 222). In retrospect, Streeck frankly admits (2006, 17) 'while there may have been a corporatist *debate,* there was never a corporatist *theory.*'

Many corporatist analysts displayed a normative attachment to a particular version of social democracy which privileged the position of trade unions as bargaining

partners in a shared reformist agenda. Even if corporatist arrangements worked elsewhere, there were grounds for scepticism about their applicability to Britain (see Marsh and Grant, 1977). Beer (1969, 421) highlighted the structural weaknesses and lack of cohesion of British trade unions and employers' associations and the way in which this made it difficult to make bargains that could be kept in the way that modern economic management required. Of course, one response was to advise British policy-makers 'that they had to get a more neo-corporatist industrial relations system if they wanted their industry, and by extension their country to be governable and prosperous again.' (Streeck, 2006, 16).

Corporatists can be criticised for focusing too much on trade associations at a time when large firms, particularly in the USA and UK, were increasingly forming their own government relations divisions to pursue their own interests independently of business associations. (Grant 1981). This move in the direction of a 'company state' model of business-government relations has strengthened since then, not least until the Blair Government. Such arrangements privilege (very) big business. Corporatist arrangements faced issues of exclusion, e.g., of small businesses under corporatist arrangements, although as Crouch points out (2006, 47), 'problems of insider lobbying are by no means limited to neo-corporatist cases'.

In a retrospective essay, one of the leading contributors to the corporatist debate, Wolfgang Streeck, manages to offer a convincing explanation of why corporatism failed. He admits 'With hindsight, the neo-corporatist era may appear today as no more than a rearguard effort to defend the increasingly obsolete post-war settlement between the state, capital and labour'. (Streeck, 2006, 19). It is possible to reconstruct Streeck's essay to extract eight explanations of 'the bursting of the neo-corporatist bubble in the 1980s'. (Streeck, 2006, 23). Two of these might be

described as structural in the sense that they reflected broad changes in political economy that were beyond the control of corporatist agents. Three of them might be termed operational in that they reflected the consequences of actions by agents involved in neo-corporatist exchanges or, in one case, analysing those exchanges. Three of them concern values, shifts in the normative context within which political economy was conducted.

A structural change was brought about by the collapse of the Bretton Woods regime and the rapid internationalization or globalization of the world economy. Corporatist structures were essentially domestic in character and did not translate easily to a supranational level. Corporatism was irrevocably associated with the essentially domestic politics of the high tide of the Keynesian welfare state. Turning to operational considerations, or the actions of agents, one of the failings of corporatism was its failure to deliver what it promised in policy terms or at least only to do so at a high and increasingly unacceptable price. Particularly in the British case, legislative concessions led only to a temporary and often ineffective response from union leaders, despite the use of devices such as linking tax cuts to wage restraint. Streeck admits (2006, 19) that 'the concessions that had to be made to unions year after year were becoming ever more expensive with time, and more often than not simply moved inflation forward into the future or caused a crippling accumulation of public debt.'

For its part business quickly tired of corporatism; in the British case, business was for a while prepared to go along with tripartism, particularly as long as the CBI was in the control of a 'progressive' tendency. In particular, the CBI's director-general Campbell Adamson was characterised as 'the impresario of advanced

revisionism' (Boswell and Peters, 1997, 81) and was seen as having 'an instinctive and value-driven desire for social partnership.' (Boswell and Peters, 1997, 82). However, tensions within the peak business organisation increased as a result of the dominance of the progressives or revisionists (see Grant and Marsh, 1975), leading to the eventual replacement of Adamson as director-general and a more hard line presidency under a former Conservative minister, Lord Watkinson. The revisionists who had seen themselves as the 'self-appointed vanguard of business' (Boswell and Peters, 1997, 41) in the decade between 1964 and 1974 were displaced. The participation of business in voluntary price restraint schemes such as that run by the CBI in 1971-2 and the Government's 1976 'price check' scheme became more reluctant and could not be sustained.

One of the assumptions on which corporatism was based was that securing full employment was the primary objective of government economic policy. The management of inflation was a secondary, although important, objective. Thatcherism provided an alternative to corporatism. 'More than anything else, the Thatcherist experiment put to rest once and for all the received wisdom of post-war political economy that democratically elected governments, and perhaps democracy as such, could not survive at a level of unemployment above the Keynesian maximum of five per cent.' (Streeck, 2006, 21).

Thatcher was a scourge of vested interests and 'the dominant public discourse and, increasingly, the practical wisdom of political decision-makers seems to have more or less accepted the neo-liberal equation of interest politics with rent-seeking'. (Streeck, 2006, 29). Despite his more emollient style, this tendency continued under John Major whose governments displayed 'a reluctance to consult widely and fully with interested parties prior to announcing policy intentions.' (Baggott and

McGergor-Riley, 1999: 85).   The 'Major governments were not afraid to take on political interests' (ibid.: 85), although increasing political weakness meant that they often were forced to compromise.

There was a sense in which corporatism was a political illusion in the manner of the Emperor's Clothes: corporatism only worked as long as no one realised what was going on.   In a sense it is like the monarchy: remove the veil and the mystery is replaced by a tawdry reality.   'Very likely, corporatism "worked", if at all, precisely because, and only as long as, the way it worked was not publicly explained.' (Streeck, 2006, 28).   Thus, by explaining what was happening, analysts actually contributed to its demise.   Normative corporatists failed to develop a convincing justification for their position.   They 'remained unable to develop the charismatic or utopian attraction that social theories may exercise if they manage to align themselves with strong moral values.'   (Streeck, 2006, 28).   In fact it was not that difficult for neo-liberals to equate interest politics 'with exclusion of those *not* represented by established organisations' and neo-corporatism with 'a political-economic conspiracy in favour of a new establishment of job owners, native citizens, old industries and the like.' (Streeck, 2006, 29).   Corporatism did tend to ossify existing industrial structures and distributions of power, it was not conducive to innovation or to small and medium-sized firms, and it was ill equipped to deal with the rise of consumerism or new social markets.   As Crouch admits (2006, 60), 'insider-serving neo-corporatist systems are highly vulnerable to the charge that they are hostile to democracy.'   In Streeck's view (2006, 24) what one is left with is 'a collection of fragments, structural and functional, of the old corporatist construction – fragments that continue to be used, like the ruins of ancient monuments, by being converted into new, less grandiose purposes.'

The Eichengreen model

Corporatism did at least provide a structured account of the distribution of power among interests. There is another way of telling the corporatist story that perhaps provides a more convincing account of its underlying historical imperatives than the neo-corporatist analysts are able to provide themselves. Eichengreen's model also challenges the assumption of corporatist theorists that the failure to get tripartism to work in Britain carried a high price in terms of economic efficiency. Their implicit assumption was that corporatism might not be very democratic in a conventional sense, although they hoped to find ways of making it more so, but that this consideration was outweighed by its beneficial impact on economic performance. Eichengreen argues that different modes of organising capitalism were beneficial in the period from 1950 to 1973 and after 1973. In the first period, coordinated capitalism worked best, in the second period more market oriented modes of organisation worked better in terms of the fit between institutions and economic and financial imperatives. Hence, the first period favoured corporatism, the second liberalism.

The process of catch-up in the immediate post-war decades 'was facilitated by solidaristic trade unions, cohesive employers associations, and growth-minded governments'. (Eichengreen, 2007, 3). This period of catch up involved the mobilisation of capital on a large scale to make full use of existing technologies. The post-1973 phase required efficiency gains, internally generated innovation and involved more technological uncertainty. Hence, institutions designed to facilitate cooperation between capital and labour and promote conditions of stability were less relevant and possibly even an obstacle. 'The problem was that institutions tailored to the needs of extensive growth were less suited to the challenges of intensive

growth.' (Eichengreen, 2007, 6).   The very disappointments of economic performance in Britain led the electorate to vote in an economic radical who was prepared to pursue a new approach more in tune with the times.

Eichengreen praises neo-corporatist institutions for their success in restraining wage increases.   'Most neocorporatist economies had greater success in achieving [wage moderating agreements] – not surprisingly, since stabilizing wages was precisely what the post-World War II period's neocorporatist institutions had been elaborated to do.' (Eichengreen, 2007, 268).   Using data from Nickell, Eichengreen shows that the UK was the least coordinated European economy and became even less coordinated over time.   However, this became an advantage rather than a disadvantage while the corporatist economies found it harder to adjust:

From a longer-term perspective, the success of the more corporatist economies

in restraining the growth in wages and rise in unemployment … was one reason

why countries were slow to move away from these arrangements in the 1980s in

the face of growing evidence that the sharp wage compression and the barriers to

firm entry and exit that they created constituted obstacles to innovation.

(Eichengreen, 2007, 270).

The bulk of the corporatist literature appeared just as the phenomenon itself was starting to decline in the face of a relentless new economic logic, although is simply confirmation that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk.   Britain, encouraged by a somewhat incomplete attempt at learning from elsewhere (Leruez 1975), attempted its own corporatist experiment under Conservative and Labour governments which foundered in the face of structural obstacles.   Elsewhere in Europe as 'catch-up growth weakened and the macroeconomic environment turned sour … a form of status quo bias meant that an implicit coalition of definite and

possible losers was powerful enough to prevent reform.'   The resultant 'inflexible labor and product markets … were detrimental to productivity performance.' (Crafts, 2000, 36).

As far as the Blair Government is concerned, globalisation represents a challenge and an opportunity for the UK and the open and liberal structure of its economy is best suited to respond to that challenge.   Any reversion to even a mild form of corporatism would threaten its flexible labour markets in particular.   What has proved very difficult is to extend the UK model of competitiveness, less regulation and flexible labour markets to elsewhere in Europe through the Lisbon process.   In that sense, the ghost of corporatism still stalks mainland Europe, even if it is now a more supply side corporatism that values adjustment to new technologies and the role of smaller and medium-sized firms.

Other regarding groups

From the 19th century onwards there had always been groups that have been concerned with moral causes from which the members of the group themselves sought to derive no direct benefit.   However, they had drawn their membership principally from the progressive middle class, often from those with some kind of professional interest in the cause the group pursued.   They were not mass membership organisations but had a rather restricted membership among the establishment, albeit the dissenting, reforming establishment.   Thus, a group like the Howard League for Penal Reform could draw on magistrates, probation officers and those engaged in prison visiting etc.   Some of the new organisations also had a hybrid character.   For example, the Disablement Income Group (set up in 1965) had a constituency that 'was, and is, pretty mixed: people with disabilities, carers and health professionals.' (Simkins, 2004, 310).

From the 1960s onwards one saw the revival of long established but ineffective groups with small memberships such as the Abortion Law Reform Association and the emergence of new mass membership organisations concerned with a range of issues such as housing, child poverty, lone parents, sexual minorities, the Third World, human rights and, above all, the environment. They were generally concerned with groups inside or outside the UK that were in some sense deprived of rights or resources that would be enjoyed by the generally prosperous supporters of these groups. 'It was during [the mid-1960s] that academics, politicians and commentators began to pay attention to the casualties of modern British society: the unemployed, the mentally disabled, the sick, the elderly and so on.' (Sandbrook, 2007, 600). Why then? Rowbotham (2004, ix) attributes these developments to a shift in consciousness attributable partly 'to the bounce that prosperity and greater security produces and partly in the new social movements of the era.' However, it was also a response to the availability of new evidence that suggested that social problems that were generally thought to have been solved had not been. 'There had been no way of measuring family poverty until Peter Townsend and Brian Abel Smith took the Family Expenditure Survey and used them as a database to study families as a unit'. (Bull, 2007, 116). It was no longer possible to assume that poverty had been eliminated from Britain and one consequence was the formation of the Child Poverty Action Group.

In the case of environmental groups, they were concerned with threats to the planet as a whole even if their particular interest might be focused on, for example, biodiversity as in the case of the World Wide Fund for Nature (which over time has placed a greater emphasis on broader issues such as the ecological carrying capacity of the planet and climate change). Organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of

the Earth quickly attracted large memberships and were also prepared to engage in unorthodox tactics to gain attention for their views. 'They were distinguished by the breadth of their conception of environmental issues, their unabashed use of the mass media to mobilize public opinion in order to exert pressure on governments and corporations, and, especially in the case of Greenpeace, their employment of non-violent direct action.' (Rootes, 2003, 21). Although it was possible to argue that some amenity societies were a mechanism for defending property values, in general these groups helped to establish relatively neglected issues such as environment and human rights on the political agenda. They also undermined the idea that those receiving help from society in various ways, for example as claimants of social security or patients in a hospital should be passive and grateful recipients of whatever was provided, but did in fact have rights and were entitled to campaign for better treatment. The idea of the citizen as an empowered consumer of public services and of public goods such as breathable air represented a fundamental shift in the way in which understandings of politics were conceived.

Single issue pressure groups

The available evidence suggests that 'more *collectivistic* forms of participation have declined and that more *individualist* forms have come to the fore.' (Stoker, 2006: 92). This reflects a society in which social identities are no longer substantially ascribed, e.g., class membership but are constructed or created through a reflexive process of personal choice, a process which some analysts would see as emancipating. (Giddens, 1991). A particular set of lifestyle choices can give rise to a pressure group, e.g., the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement or, an even more specific example, the Evangelical Fellowship for Lesbian and Gay Christians. Thus, in the latter example, one has a movement of persons who identify themselves as (a) Christian, (b)

Evangelical and (c) Lesbian or Gay. As Crouch states, 'the present time is a particularly rich one for innovation in interest and identity definition and mobilization.' (Crouch, 2006, 67).

An important part of the context here is the decline of political party memberships which have fallen faster than voter turnout. 'In 1964 9 per cent of all registered electors were party members; by 1992 it was barely 2 per cent; it has undoubtedly fallen further since.' (Hay and Stoker, 2007, 05). Reliable figures on party membership are difficult to obtain, but an approximate calculation by the author suggests that the figure could now be around 1.3 per cent of registered electors. Membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds alone approaches double that figure. 'Public regard for the political parties is low. Indeed, they are the least trusted of political institutions as measured by the regular Eurobarometer surveys'. (Worcester, Mortimore and Baines, 2005, 281). Moreover, 'Hostility to the political parties seemingly acts as a deterrent to involvement.' (ibid., 282). As political party membership has declined, group membership or at least involvement has increased. Political parties are concerned with the aggregation of a range of demands into an overall policy. However, as they have sought to become 'catch all' parties and their policies have become less differentiated as they seek to assemble a policy package that will appeal to, or at least not offend the median voter, they are less able to represent intensely held views, particularly those that are radical or unconventional. Pressure groups can articulate demands in a more raw and unmediated way which can be expressed through a variety of forms of protest. 'They want direct action and they take it. They are much more impatient than some past generations of political activists who put up with all the layers and the time lag that exist between going to a meeting or march and any positive results that might be achieved.' (Brass and

Koziell, 1997, 8). The growth of single interest pressure groups is at least in part a reaction to the decline of political institutions that are perceived to have failed in terms of responsiveness to the concerns of citizens.

A note of caution is necessary here. The number of groups that can be formed is not infinite. What we have learnt from the population ecology approach to interest group formation (Nownes, 2004; Nownes and Lipinksi, 2005) is that both founding rates and death rates of organisations are substantially affected by population density. Although the relationships are not monotonic, beyond a certain point group formation rates decrease and group mortality rates increase. Organisational ecology therefore operates to limit the number of groups in existence in relation to a given cause.

Once a group has been formed, features of the contemporary polity can assist the mobilisation of support. First, the proliferation and fragmentation of the news media means that there is a constant demand for stories, particularly on a 'slow' news day. Stories that have emotive appeal are particularly likely to resonate with television. Second, the increasing importance of the internet means that the formation costs of a new group can be relatively low. It can effectively be run off a website which can be used as a basis for gathering signatures for an electronic petition, attracting supporters and raising funds.

At the level of the polity as a whole, pressure group demands may overload the system and reinforce feelings of cynicism about its performance. 'Demands to keep sponsors "on side" leads to citizen groups too often taking a populist line in politics in which they blame the government and politicians for the failures and difficulties.' (Stoker, 2006, 112). As Stoker points out, whatever the government does to respond to their demands, it is never enough because there is a dynamic that requires them to claim that they continually battling for the particular cause to consolidate and develop

their support. 'A by-product of this is an impression of a cycle of seemingly never ending "non-delivery" by politics.' (Stoker, 2006, 112).   The consequence may be to contribute to the sense of 'disconnect' that is the main theme of Stoker's analysis. (Stoker, 2006, 111).

The problems that can arise may be considered in relation to patient groups in the National Health Service (NHS), particularly those campaign for a particular drug to be made available to treat a specific condition even though it is has not been approved by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) which is supposed to make an assessment of the costs and benefits of treatments.   Because the individuals suffering from the condition often have a terminal, degenerative or serious chronic industry, it is not difficult to mount emotive media appeals on television and radio and in the print media.   Indeed, such appeals are increasingly common.   The problem for the NHS is that, given that funds are finite, and are unlikely to increase at the rate that they have in recent years, increasing expenditure on a drug (which may not be very effective) means reducing expenditure elsewhere.   These issues of opportunity cost do not have to be addressed by single issue groups as they have no aggregation function like a political party or amore broadly based pressure groups.

Moreover, all is not quite as it seems.   Often these groups have links, including financial ones, with the pharmaceutical companies that produce the drugs. Baggott et al (2005, 203) show that in those 'condition areas where drug therapies are used heavily in treatment' there is more contact between health consumer groups and pharmaceutical companies and their trade associations.   'The main reason for contact between pharmaceutical companies and health consumer groups related to funding, either through sponsorship or grants … 34 per cent of groups accepted private sector sponsorship, a category which included drug companies.' (Baggott et al, 2005, 191).

What is more as patient groups have become more prominent the way in which pharmaceutical companies work with them has changed. 'As the visibility, influence and capacity of groups has increased, so companies have become more aware of the potential for alliances. As a consequence, funding has tended to become more closely targeted to focus on projects with particular groups rather than generalized charitable giving.' (Baggott et al, 2005, 199). In June 2007 the Alzheimer's Society joined with a drug company in a High Court action to challenge the refusal of NICE to sanction a drug being made available through the NHS. (http://uk.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKL2542272720070625?pageNumber=2, accessed 28 June 2007) This could be seen as having some democratic benefits in terms of business supporting smaller and relatively resource poor public interest groups, but this is done in a context in which it is not possible to balance the strength of different claims on limited resources.

Actions of these kinds pose a clear challenge to the Blair Government's depoliticisation project. Flinders and Buller (2006, 300) specify NICE as 'the institutional tool of depoliticisation' in the case of the NHS. As Lord Falcolner commented in 2003, 'What governs our approach is a clear desire to place power where it should be: increasingly not with politicians, but with those best fitted in different ways to deploy it.' (Quoted in Flinders and Buller, 2006, 312). Of course, it might reasonably be argued that technocratic decision-making is not necessarily preferable to more politicised forms and that Lord Falconer's claim (ibid.) that 'The depoliticising of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people' is open to challenge.

However, even if single issue pressure groups do have a repoliticising effect, it is not one that is entirely positive. What they are really about is the entitlement of one

group of persons to the disadvantage of others.   While 'the new-style groups may have opened up opportunities for representing neglected interests, but many of these interests reflect the concerns of the already privileged educated and professional classes.' (Stoker, 2006, 111).   Nye Bevan told the Labour Party conference in 1949, 'The language of priorities is the religion of socialism'.   In other words, one directs help where it is most needed, rather than to those who shout loudest.   The language of the single issue pressure group is that of personal priority or that of small, narrowly defined groups of individuals with a common interest.

The need for a debate

Politicians occasionally engage in bouts of hand wringing about single issue pressure groups.   Riddell notes (1996, 5) that politicians 'are really complaining' about the proliferation of cause and single interest groups as a larger share of a growing market for political activism.   Jack Straw has argued that measures to cap donations to political parties 'could lead to undue influence being wielded by single-issue pressure groups.'   In the United States 'The effect of campaign finance rules has been to channel money away from mainstream political parties into single-issue organisations, which are becoming increasingly powerful.'

http://politics.guardian.co.uk/funding/story/0,,1865455,00.html, accessed 29 June 2007)

Constitutional reform has been a key theme of the Blair Government and it looks like being one of the Brown Government as well, as is reflected in its green paper on governance.   Yet constitutional reform usually means changes in the processes and institutions of government: devolution, reform of the House of Lords, greater transparency etc.   It is interesting that a Smith Institute volume *Towards a New Constitutional Settlement* produced to accompany the transition from Blair to Brown

includes two chapters on political parties and even one on the establishment of the Church of England but nothing on interest groups.   (Bryant, 2007).   The green paper on governance contains only two paragraphs on pressure groups and one of these is about the very specific issue of voluntary organisations that are registered as charities. This compares with other two pages that are devoted to relations between the state and the Church of England.   'Debates on constitutional and governance issues have hitherto largely neglected the role of pressure groups and these two paragraphs do not provide an adequate basis for such a debate.'   (Grant and Elcock, 2007, 27).   Except in relation to electoral reform or perhaps state funding of political parties, the wider polity is much less considered in these debates.   In particular, there has been very little attention to the role that interest groups should play in the political process although it is generally agreed that they have become more important over time and political parties less so.

     The formation of such groups is, of course, consistent with a fundamental principle of democracy, that of freedom of association.   Moreover, there has been a long tradition in Britain, consistent with its liberal traditions, of regarding voluntary associations as something that lie outside the remit or responsibilities of government. For example, archival research by Greaves (2004) found that civil servants were even less willing to intervene in the affairs of trade associations than a pluralist perspective would lead one to suppose.

    One approach would be to encourage the development of alternative forms of participation.   Reinvigorating political parties would be one approach, but this may not be feasible given the loss of their social base.   Indeed, campaigning activity may lead to the emergence of narrowly based political parties such as the Save Kidderminster Hospital Campaign which elected a MP.   Citizens' juries would be an

alternative means of involving individuals in the decision-making process. However, one wonders if passionate campaigners would be interested in a more evidence based and deliberative approach to reviewing the issues they care passionately about. For example, there are often local campaigns against the siting of mobile telephone masts, no doubt conducted by individuals who regularly use cell telephones. Even the least suggestion that there might possibly be some such health risk from such masts would be enough to confirm their opposition, regardless of the overall balance of the evidence.

It might be argued that government, with all its resources, should simply face down single issue pressure groups. For example, a civil servant in interview distinguished between 'Nimbyism' and 'genuine issues' and while admitting that the two could be mixed, made it clear that his department did not want to be seen to be giving way to 'Nimby' pressures. However, in practice, it is often hard to resist a well organised campaign that captures the media's imagination. Ministerial reputations, and even that of the government as a whole, can be damaged.

Conclusions

What has been presented here is a three phase model of interest group activity in Britain since 1945. These are ideal typical phases, so that there is an element of temporal overlap and the reality is more confused than presented here. Nevertheless, they serve as an aid to understanding. The first phase was characterised by the predominance of producer groups, so ably chronicled by Beer, eventually leading to an experiment with a weak form of liberal corporatism or tripartism. This experiment failed and corporatism eventually collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, even in the smaller European countries where it had been most successful. However, this transition took some time and gave Britain something of a

head start in economic recovery, although many underlying problems of the economy persisted.

A second phase saw the emergence of a new generation of other regarding cause groups with mass support, very different from the elite based cause groups of an earlier era. These were concerned with causes that did not immediately benefit their supporters, e.g., third world debt, environmental issues, prisoners of conscience. In large part they were 'other regarding' movements. In a sense, like Victorian associations, they were characterised by 'moralism, or moralistic reformism.' (Beer, 1969, 45).

The third phase of single issue interest groups is more characterised by inner directed behaviour. It is perhaps necessary to set to one aside those groups that seek to shape an identity and find a common purpose for minorities that still suffer discrimination in society, e.g., sexual minorities. Their activity is in part necessary because there are still elements in society who want to deny them their identity or at least an easy enjoyment of it. One does not want to go back to the traditional masculine agenda that was at the heart of corporatism.

The majority of single issue groups are, however, concerned with very particular and narrow sets of interests which can often only be satisfied at the expense of someone else. However, they do not have to balance these pressures; that is left to government. That, of course, is government's traditional role. However, the more demands are made, and the more these demands are of a non-negotiable kind, the more difficult it is for government to cope. A self-reinforcing cycle of disillusionment with the political process then sets in. This does not mean, of course, that no new other regarding campaigns with broad ranging goals are not formed, *Make Poverty History* being a case in point. However, this was a transient campaign

that 'contributed more to issue definition and awareness than policy action.' (Jordan and Maloney, 2007, 108).

These issues were not thought about all during the Blair government, reflecting Tony Blair's lack of interest in process. Gordon Brown's commitment to constitutional reform provides a window of opportunity to raise them again, but the issue was neglected in the green paper on governance. Trying to stimulate a debate about them is not an easy task, although this article seeks to be a modest contribution to that process whilst also refining our understanding of how interest group activity in Britain has developed over time.

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