



The Role of Pressure Groups

Many Queenslanders are members of interest groups: as participants in a church society; school association; conservation group; trade union or business organisation. Interest groups, acting as pressure groups, have become increasingly important as a means by which individuals can attempt to influence governments regarding their particular requirements. Although individuals within a representative democracy possess rights, allowing them to lobby parliamentarians and governments concerning pertinent issues, a collective approach can often exert more powerful pressure on decision-makers, as well as consolidating a range of similar ideas and opinions into a cohesive format.

There are difficulties in defining the many types of pressure groups. For example, political parties are sometimes included. However, a common definition excludes political parties, concentrating on those groups wishing to influence government policies and activities, whilst remaining apart from government. There are two types of pressure groups:

1. sectional; and
2. promotional.

Sectional Lobby Groups

This includes self-interest groups such as: trade unions; business and farming associations; churches; ethnic associations; pensioner groups; and returned service personnel.

Promotional Lobby Groups

This category promotes particular causes, beliefs or values such as: conservation; women's issues; Aboriginal; civil; or moral rights.

Both types of lobby groups can overlap, since an organisation established on a sectional basis can also promote issues based on particular causes, beliefs or values. For example, the Returned Services League was established to sectionally represent the repatriation interests of returned service personnel, but it also promotes particular value policies regarding Australia's defence and immigration needs.

Pressure groups vary in size and organisational structure, which may not necessarily represent the amount of influence exerted upon a government's policies. It is obvious that trade unions, business organisations and professional associations can exert considerable pressure upon governments. On the other hand, a small ad hoc committee, established because of a local issue, may rally sufficient supporters for mass demonstrations or marches, and thus, pressure a government into quickly altering its policies. The anti-Vietnam War



A protest rally outside Parliament House.



marches of the 1970's organised by small groups quickly mushroomed into large, mass demonstrations which eventually culminated in a newly elected federal government acting on an election promise and withdrawing the remaining Australian troops.

How do Pressure Groups enhance the political system?¹

1. Pressure groups are a vital link between the government and the governed. They keep governments more responsive to the wishes of the community, especially in between elections.
2. Pressure groups are able to express the views of minority groups in the community who might not otherwise receive a hearing.
3. Pressure groups are able to use their expertise to provide the government with important information. This has often been the argument in relation to motoring organisations such as the RACQ. It is also applicable to issues such as Indigenous reconciliation.
4. Pressure groups offer an alternative source of advice to the government, separate from that coming from the Public Service.
5. Pressure groups generally promote opportunities for political participation for citizens, without the need to join a political party. Moreover, they allow for the democratic rights of freedom of speech, assembly and association to be upheld.

How do Pressure Groups distort the political system?²

1. Pressure groups may represent a powerful minority force in society and exert political influence to the detriment of the majority of society. This is an argument often leveled at trade unions and business groups.
2. Some pressure groups exert influence because of their financial position,

membership or organisation. This influence may be out of proportion to their position in society.

3. The use of direct action by pressure groups (eg. strikes by unions, demonstrations, blockades, pickets) can cause hardship to the community in general.
4. Some pressure groups are not democratic in themselves. Some have powerful, but unrepresentative leaders who may not be representative of anyone but themselves. Some leaders do not reflect the opinions of their organisation's members.

How do Pressure Groups exert their influence?

Pressure groups may use a variety of methods to pursue their requirements. These include -

- (1) lobbying state members and the Parliament via petitions, letters and deputations;
- (2) consulting with ministers or senior public servants;
- (3) hiring professional lobbyists;
- (4) taking legal action through injunctions or appeals to higher courts;
- (5) campaigning for, or opposing, certain candidates at elections;
- (6) demonstrating outside Parliament and government offices or marching in the streets; and
- (7) using the industrial muscle of strikes for political purposes.

Because of the complexities of modern government, and the pluralistic nature of Australian society, pressure groups provide a means by which ordinary citizens can participate in the decision-making process, as well as maintaining a check on government activity. Similarly, governments can be better informed of the electorate's sensitivities to policies, because of the pressures articulated by these groups.

¹ AustralianPolitics.com, "Pressure Groups and Democracy" <http://australianpolitics.com/pg/impact/> (last accessed 19/06/08)

² AustralianPolitics.com, "Pressure Groups and Democracy" <http://australianpolitics.com/pg/impact/> (last accessed 19/06/08)