

Critically evaluate the relationship between Members of Parliament, political parties and pressure groups in the formation of legislation.

Introduction

In this essay I will be critically evaluating the relationship between Members of Parliament (MPs), political parties and pressure groups in the formation of legislation. I will be explaining each of their roles and the formation of the legislation itself. Members of Parliament, political parties and pressure groups all have an influence on Government and their decisions on a new law.

Formation of legislation

The great majority of Acts of Parliament are introduced by Government. When the proposed Act had been drafted it is published, at this stage it is called a bill. It will only become an Act of Parliament if it successfully completes all the necessary stages in Parliament.

The proposal for a new bill is firstly issued in the form of a Green Paper. This is where the Government's view is put forward and interested parties are invited to give their comments and therefore changes to the proposed bill or 'Green Paper' are made in consideration of all sides. Following this, the Government will issue a White Paper with its firm proposals for new law. The Bill will then be introduced to the House of Commons where it will be debated through a series of readings. The first reading is a formal hearing where the aims and objectives will be read out and MPs will make a vote whether or not to consider the Bill further. The second reading is fundamentally the main debate on the whole Bill in which MPs debate the principles behind the Bill. At the end of this reading a vote is taken in the same way as the first reading; there must be a majority vote for the Bill to progress further. The Bill will then be passed to the committee stage where a detailed examination of the Bill will take place by a committee between 16 to 50 MP's. At this point, if any amendments have been made to the Bill then it will be put forward to a report stage. At this stage the committee is able to report back the changes to the relevant House. There will then be a third and final reading where a final vote on the Bill will be made. The Bill then progresses forward for the whole process to be repeated in the House of Lords. Finally, the Bill will be given Royal assent where the monarch approves the Bill; it will finally become an Act of Parliament which will come into force at midnight of that day.

Influences of Members of Parliament

A Member of Parliament is elected by local citizens in the UK to represent them in the Houses of Parliament. They have many responsibilities within three main groups. These groups are their constituents, Parliament and their Political party. MPs represent their views and concerns in the House of Commons and these concerns can be raised in the

Charlotte Wallace

House of Commons and made known to the public. If there is enough publicity then the Government may be persuaded to act.

A major influence that MPs have on the formation of legislation is their authority in introducing Green Papers and White Papers. MPs also have the authority and power in voting whether or not a Bill should be considered further. The ability to do so means that all Bills introduced are subject to MPs own opinions and their parties certain policies.

MPs can also introduce Private Members' Bills; those that are designed to affect only individual people or corporations, not the general public. There are two methods of introducing a Private Members' Bill; the Ballot and the '10-minute rule'.

The Ballot is where 20 private members are selected who can then take their turn in presenting a Bill to Parliament. The time for debate of Private Members' Bills is limited, only the first six or seven members in the Ballot have a realistic chance of introducing a Bill on their chosen topic. A major example of a law passed through Ballot is the Abortion Act 1967 which legalised abortion in this country. A more recent example is the Household Waste Recycling Act 2003 which places local authorities under a duty to recycle waste.

The alternative method of issuing a Private Members' Bill is through the '10-minute rule', under which any MP can make a speech up to 10 minutes supporting the introduction of a new legislation. This method is normally rarely successful but some Acts of Parliament have been introduced in this way if there is no opposition to the Bill. An example of Act passed through the '10-minute rule' is the Bail (Amendment) Act 1993 which gave the prosecution the right to appeal against the granting of bail to a defendant.

MPs decisions to continue with a Bill or not is subject to the amount of pressure they are put under by the pressure groups. This is the relationship between MPs and pressure groups in the formation of legislation. The Hunting Act 2004 is an example of how MPs are influenced by individuals or pressure groups. This Act was an ongoing debate from pro-hunting groups and anti-hunting groups, putting vast amounts of pressure on the MPs. Finally, the pressure from the anti-hunting group was successful and in 2004 hunting with dogs and hare became illegal in England and Wales.

Influence of Political Parties

There are many political parties in Britain but throughout the whole of England, there are three dominant political parties; Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Currently, Labour are in power. A political party is an organised group of people who have similar ideas about how the country should be run. Their aim is to get their candidates elected to political power.

After a general election, the party with the most MPs usually forms the new government. The second largest party becomes the official opposition, with its own leader and

Charlotte Wallace

'shadow cabinet'. Most candidates in elections, and almost all winning candidates, belong to one of the main parties. If an MP doesn't have a political party, they are known as an 'Independent'.

The effectiveness of the party system in Parliament relies on the relationship between the government and the opposition parties. The opposition parties contribute to policy and legislation through constructive criticism, oppose government proposals that they disagree with and put forward their own policies to improve their chances of winning the next general election. The party system in the legislation formation is very important and significant. Leaders of the government and opposition sit opposite each other on the front benches in the debating chamber of the House of Commons. They work together to form new Acts of Parliament.

Each political party also has a strong influence on their MPs. Each MP belongs to a certain party, unless they are an 'independent', and therefore their thoughts and beliefs are representative of their particular party. In some cases, if an MP goes against their party's beliefs and policies they will be expelled. The majority of MPs would want to secure their seat in Parliament and thus it is a rare occurrence if they go against their party. Therefore, political parties have a substantial influence on their MPs.

The media coverage of a particular party can be influential also. Political issues are communicated through the media and this is how the public keeps an eye on the formation of Bills. The way in which the media portray a party has an influence on how the public view that party. People known as 'spin doctors' are a political press agent or publicist employed to promote a favourable interpretation of events to journalists to attempt to portray the party in the best possible way to the public.

Influences of Pressure Groups

A pressure group can be described as an organised group that does not put up candidates for election, but seeks to influence government policy or legislation. They can also be described as 'interest groups', 'lobby groups' or 'protest groups'. In Britain, the number of political parties is very small, whereas the number of pressure groups runs into thousands; as the membership of political parties has fallen, that of pressure groups has increased. The aim of all pressure groups is to influence the people who actually have the power to make decisions. Pressure groups do not look for the power of political office for themselves, but do seek to influence the decisions made by those who do hold this political power. Often pressure groups find themselves competing with rival pressure groups with the aim of gaining an advantage over them, but sometimes groups work together to achieve a common aim.

For example, in 1994 the A452 Coordination Group campaigned to block plans by Warwickshire County Council to make the A452 a dual carriageway. After the group's intense pressure, the council dropped the plans. Pressure groups also act as a source of specialist knowledge, and often have access to information that is highly valued by decision makers. For example, MENCAP and MIND – groups campaigning on behalf of people with mental disabilities – are often invited to give government briefings.

Charlotte Wallace

Sometimes pressure groups will campaign against a proposed change to the law. This was seen when the Government tried to restrict the right to trial by jury. Pressure groups, such as Justice and Liberty, campaigned against this as they believed the changes would infringe human rights.

There are three types of pressure groups; single cause, multi cause, protective and promotional. Single cause pressure groups focus their attention on specific issues, such as the London Cycling Campaign who successfully improved facilities for cyclists. Multi-cause groups are those who focus their attention on a wider range of issues often under a generalised heading. For example, Trade Unions seek to influence policy in relation to workers. Protective pressure groups are those who seek to protect the interest of members, for instance the AA (Automobile Association) for car owners. Lastly, promotional pressure groups seek to promote issues of interest to its members and supporters in relation to the particular topic. Such as Greenpeace which seeks to promote environmental issues.

Some pressure groups try to persuade individual Members of Parliament to support their case. This is called lobbying because members of the public can meet MPs in the lobbies of the House of Commons. If a pressure group is successful, it may persuade an MP to ask questions in Parliament about a particular problem. It is also possible that a backbench MP may use the Private Members' Bill session to introduce a Bill trying to reform the law in the way that the pressure group wants. It is, however, very unlikely that such a Bill will be passed by Parliament unless there is a widespread support for it.

Pressure groups are normally successful in getting coverage in the media and therefore the public become aware and are usually most sympathetic to their case. Political parties want to attain as many votes as possible and if they go against a pressure group's campaign then they may become unpopular with the public. For that reason, political parties try to take into consideration the pressure group's opinions to show that they are concerned of the matter and that they take interest. This reveals the direct relationship between pressure groups and political parties.

Pressure Groups can be criticised if they appear too powerful, they are powerful enough to represent minority interests at the expense of the majority, they focus on their own agenda at the expense of wider issues or if they take direct action that breaks the law. However, some argue that such a system is healthy because it encourages political participation, it ensures that people can exert influence over decision makers, it ensures that power is dispersed rather than concentrated into the hands of a few and, at the same time, it allows the view of minority groups to be voiced.

Conclusion

In this essay I have critically examined the relationship between political parties, members of parliament and pressure groups. I have found out that they all have influence on each other in the process of forming legislation. MPs are influenced by their parties policies and also by pressure groups. It can be argued that this system is unfair as MPs are often made to restrain their own views to promote those of their party and when they are put under vast pressure from a pressure group. However, the relationship

Charlotte Wallace

between them at present seems to work well, although it would possibly be beneficial to review the relationship and to improve it.