

## **‘Critically evaluate the relationship between members of Parliament, political parties and pressure groups in the formation of legislation.’**

Written by Lauren Stone (Nov 2008)

In this essay I am going to critically evaluate the relationship between members of parliament, political parties and pressure groups in the formation of legislation. I will achieve this by taking a close look at each group and their involvement and influences in the legislative process. I will examine the relationship they have with one another and how that affects the way in which law is made.

### Legislative Process

Before a bill is introduced into Parliament, any interested factions, for example pressure groups and professional bodies, often participate in discussion of the new bill. The proposals for new bills are set out by the government in the form of what is known as, Green Paper. The government obtain comments from the public and due to this, the proposed bill is likely to change and develop. This is followed by White Paper, which is the firm proposal of the new law from the government. Following this stage, the Bill will be formally introduced into the House of Commons, where it will be debated through a series of readings. The First Reading is a formal process whereby the aims and objectives of the Bill are read out and a vote takes place on whether the House wishes to consider the Bill. The Second Reading is fundamentally a debate on the principles of the proposed law and as with the First Reading, a vote is taken. The Third Reading is the final debate and vote on the Bill. Upon approval from the MP's, the Bill must be passed to the other House, to pass through the first stages again. For example, if a Bill was introduced in the House of Commons it must be passed to the House of Lords, and vice versa. The final stage is approval from the Monarch, Royal Assent, after which, the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament.

### Roles and Influences of Members of Parliament

In the UK, the public elects Members of Parliament to represent their views and concerns in the House of Commons. These concerns can be raised in the House of Commons and made known to the public. If there is sufficient publicity, the Government may be persuaded to act.

A significant influence which Members of Parliament have on the formation of legislation is their authority in introducing Green and White Papers which can proceed to become law. The House of Commons consists of all the MP's from various constituencies. This allows MP's to have further influence on proposed Bills, as they are the ones who will be debating, voting on and amending the Bill. The ability to do so, means that the bills introduced are subjected to their parties certain manifestos.

MP's can also introduce Private member Bills, which affect specific individuals or corporations and on the whole do not affect the general public. Private Members' Bills rarely become law, but can often provoke a public response which may have an effect on legislation indirectly. There are two

different methods of introducing a Bill into the House of Commons; the Ballot and the Ten Minute Rule.

Ballot bills usually have a better chance of becoming law. Twenty backbench MP's are selected who then take turns to present their Bill to Parliament. There is a limited amount of debating time available and usually, only the first seven ballots will be able to have a day's debate. A significant example of law passed through Private Member Bills Ballots, is the Abortion Act 1967, which legalised abortion in the UK.

The alternative method of introducing a Private Member Bill is the Ten Minute Rule. These possess a smaller chance of becoming law, and are commonly used to express views on existing legislation. Members make a speech, lasting no more than ten minutes to argue the principles of their bill. If there is no opposition then the bill stands a possibility of being successful. However this rarely occurs. Some Acts of Parliament have been introduced this way, for example, the Bail (amendment) Act 1993 which allowed the prosecution the right to appeal against a defendant being granted bail, was introduced through the Ten Minute Rule.

The MP's decision to introduce such a Bill may be influenced by individuals or pressure groups. The greater amount of influence of the pressure groups, then the more pressure the MP is under to pass/amend the Bill. This demonstrates the relationship between Members of Parliament and pressure groups in the formation of legislation. A recent example of this relationship is the Hunting Act 2004. This was the subject of an ongoing intense debate. Pro-hunting organisations lobbied against the Bill and applied a great deal of pressure on MP's. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the anti-hunting organisations were also lobbying for the bill to be passed and applied vast amounts of pressure upon MP's. The pressure put on the MP's was successful and 2005 hunting with dogs and hare coursing became illegal in England and Wales.

This case is representative of the strong influence which pressure groups can have on Members of Parliament. These examples reveal that MP's have a strong influence on the formation of legislation, but they themselves are influenced by pressure groups and political parties.

### Roles and Influences of Political Parties

In England, there are three main political parties in the House of Commons; the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats.

Currently, Labour is in power; however that does not necessarily mean that the other parties have no influence on legislation. It is quite the contrary to that in fact. In the process of formation of legislation, opposing parties are very influential and significant. The main opposition party at present is the Conservative Party, who is led by David Cameron. The opposing parties play an important role in the procedure of introducing new laws. If the conflicting parties never questioned the government in power then that government could theoretically pass any laws they wanted to. This situation is prevented from happening due to the constant criticisms of rival parties. For instance, if the government in power put forward a Bill to Parliament, the opposing party could try to prevent it from being passed as law, by voting against it. If there was significant opposition then the Bill would be abandoned.

Each political party also has a strong influence on their MP's. Each MP belongs to a certain party, and therefore their beliefs are going to be representative of the party they support. Sometimes, the individual MP's ideas may conflict with those of the party; however they usually will suppress their own beliefs and follow those of their party. On some occasions, if a member of parliament goes against the ideologies of his/her party they are expelled from that political party, this is known as 'withdrawing the whip'. The majority of MP's would seek to retain their seat in the House of Commons; therefore, the political party they support would have a major influence on their decisions and actions.

The nature of the coverage in the media of a certain political party can be influential also. The way in which parties are portrayed in the media has a direct effect on how the public view that party. People known as 'spin doctors', steer the media coverage in an attempt to portray their party in the best possible way, to appeal to the public. Alistair Campbell was viewed by many as a 'spin doctor', to Tony Blair, between 1994 and 2003.

The media is a key element in the portrayal of the relationship between MP's and their political party. An MP and their political party have a very notable relationship, due to the influence the party has on its MP.

#### Roles and Influences of Pressure Groups

A pressure group is an organisation or group of people, who share strong beliefs about a certain subject and take action on these beliefs, hoping to influence political decisions. The importance of pressure groups should not be underestimated as their impact on decisions in parliament is surprisingly significant.

The relationship between pressure groups and political parties is one which plays a major role in the formation of legislation. A pressure group will be willing to fund the electoral campaign of a cooperative legislator (a party who agrees with their cause) which means that the party will be more prepared to assist the group in having an effect on the law. If political parties refuse to help these groups, the members of these groups will threaten to vote in union. This means that they will promise to help/support a cooperative legislator but will threaten to harm a non cooperative legislator.

Pressure groups are often successful in getting coverage in the media and therefore the public become aware, and usually sympathetic to their cause. A political party aims to acquire as many votes as possible, so if they publicly show a lack of interest or concern in the pressure groups principles, it could lead to them becoming unpopular and disliked by the public. This reveals the distinct relationship between political parties and pressure groups in the formation of legislation.

An example of an instance where the government has succumbed to the efforts of pressure groups was in 2000 when after extensive protesting, the government agreed to lower the age of consent for homosexual acts from eighteen to sixteen. On some occasions, there are two pressure groups with conflicting concerns. This causes a lot of political tension, especially if two opposing parties back either group. This was the case with the Hunting Act 2004, mentioned earlier. The League of Cruel Sports was lobbying to ban fox hunting and the Countryside Alliance was trying to prevent it from

becoming outlawed. The act was passed and since, it has become illegal to hunt deer, foxes and such, with dogs.

This shows that pressure groups have a very influential stance on political parties the legislation that they decide to pass.

### 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 each have significant influences on each other in the process of forming legislation. The MP's are influenced by the values of their own political party and also by pressure groups. However, it is dubious and questionable whether this is fair. MP's are often made to restrain their own personal beliefs in order to present those of their party instead. Also, only certain pressure groups will have an effect on legislation as many are not in government channels and therefore do not obtain the necessary support from important political figures. The relationship at present, between these three factions appears to work well, although it would be possibly beneficial to review it and make an attempt to improve it.

### References

<http://www.revision-notes.co.uk/>

<http://www.parliament.uk/>

<http://www.supportfoxhunting.co.uk/#>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/>

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk>