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Insider and outsider pressure groups

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The literature on pressure groups has attempted to classify the many thousands of groups which exist in Britain into general categories. One of the more durable categorisations or typologies is that of 'insider and outsider groups'. Twenty years after it was first proposed, however, this categorisation has come under increasing criticism.

The distinction between insider and outsider pressure groups centres on differences in their *strategies* — that is, how interest groups go about achieving their goals. One of the associated ideas is that any attempt to pursue both an insider and an outsider strategy simultaneously is likely to set up serious tensions within the group and is ultimately unsustainable.

However, deciding which strategy to pursue is not an unconstrained choice by the group itself. The acquisition of insider status involves a decision by government as well as by the group itself: the group has to *want* insider status, but the government has to *grant* it. Some groups are more likely than others to be given insider status because their objectives and methods are more acceptable to government.

Insider and outsider groups

The original typology distinguished between *outsider groups by necessity* and *outsider groups by ideology*. Groups of the latter type do not consider that their objectives can be achieved by conventional political means. They want to avoid becoming ensnared in the political system.

The typology did not claim that outsider groups could never be successful, although the odds are stacked against them. It was also emphasised that insider groups have to pay a price for their insider status. They have to abide by established 'rules of the game' and have to moderate their demands so that they are accepted by decision makers as realistic. Insider status offers access to small, step-by-step change and for many groups that is simply not enough.

Criticisms of the typology

The typology has been criticised on various grounds, which may be summarised as follows:

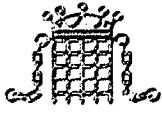
- Achieving insider status is not as difficult as the typology implies.
- Groups are more constrained in their choice of strategy than the typology implies.
- It is possible for groups to pursue insider and outsider strategies simultaneously.
- The typology was valid when it was first developed, but has been undermined by the emergence of new forms of politics in Britain in the 1990s. This might be regarded as the most important and challenging criticism.

Each of these criticisms deserves further consideration.

Achieving insider status

The basic argument from the critics is that it is not hard to get consulted by government. For example, 200 groups are consulted on matters relating to motor cycles, but this does not mean that all such groups are equally influential. 'Many groups are granted access to decision makers...but few have a significant influence over substantive policy outcomes' (Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin 1994).

It has been suggested that the original typology mixes up the dimensions of strategy and status, which should be treated separately. This could be achieved by 'explicitly attaching the insider/outsider term to strategy, and developing a complementary set of terms to distinguish status dimensions from strategy ones'



Insider and outsider pressure groups

Cause groups
Sectional groups
British Medical Association (BMA)
National Farmers' Union (NFU)
Chemical Industries Association (CIA)
Mass membership
Greenpeace
World Wide Fund for Nature
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
More limited, committed membership
Amnesty International
Council for the Protection of Rural England
Compassion in World Farming

Table 1 Examples of different types of pressure groups

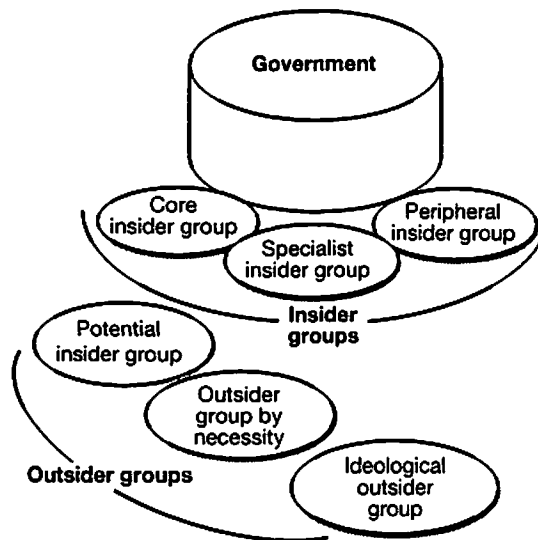


Figure 1 The insider-outsider typology

(Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin 1994). They offer a threefold classification of insider groups according to their status, which is shown in Table 1.

The general conclusion is that it may not be too hard for groups in the political mainstream to acquire insider status, at least in the sense of being placed on a consultation list, although many such groups will have only a marginal influence on policy formation, or their influence will be confined to a tightly restricted area. Getting insider status is much more difficult for those groups seeking to represent the 'socially excluded' (see Figures 1 and 2).

Constraints on the choice of strategy

Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin argue that most interest groups do not have a real choice of strategies but are constrained by a range of factors.

There is no doubt that the choice of strategies by a pressure group is constrained rather than free. There is a complex interactive relationship between the goals of a group, the acceptability of these goals to decision makers and the strategy the group pursues. However, this admission enriches rather than detracts from the insider-outsider distinction.

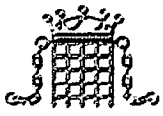
A 'new politics'?

The argument that the insider group/outside group distinction was relevant when it was first developed but is no longer applicable in a new era of politics is the most fundamental and important challenge to the categorisation. It has been particularly developed in the context of discussions of road protests and has been most coherently advanced by Dudley and Richardson (1998). They argue that politics is increasingly becoming a 'multi-level, multi-arena game'. They claim that 'the new politics is here to stay' and invite a 'reappraisal of the importance of policy "insiders" and "outsiders"' (Dudley and Richardson 1998).

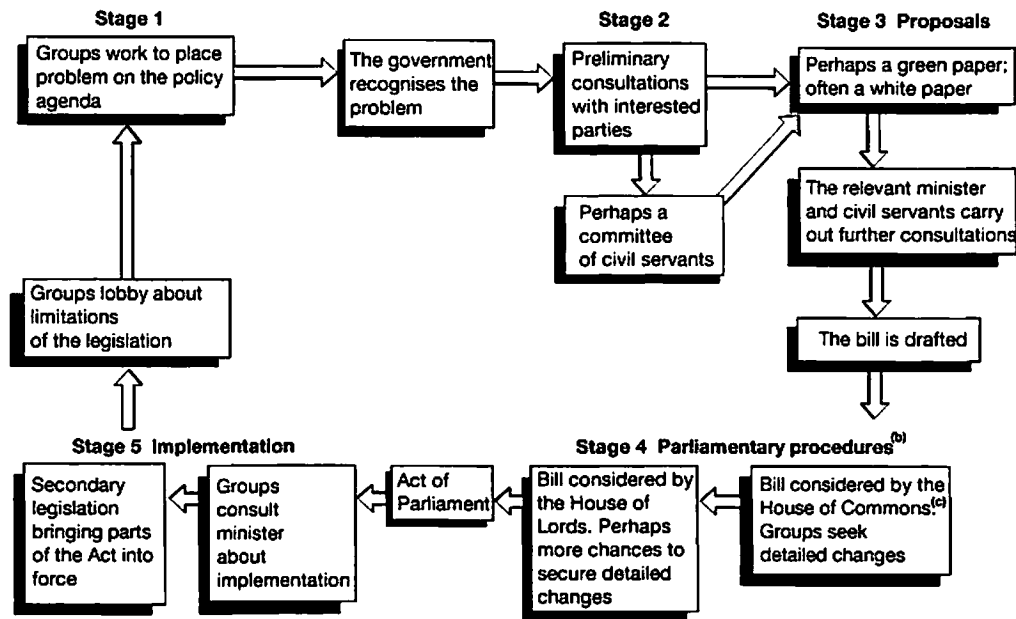
There is no doubt that the context of pressure group politics has changed throughout the postwar period. Pressure group politics in the late 1990s is not the same as it was in the Establishment-dominated era of the 1950s. Society has changed and, although the political process has been slower to change in response, it is more open than it used to be.

After the end of the Second World War, most pressure groups were organised around one of the great 'estates' that represented the pillars of society: business, labour, agriculture and the professions. Today, there is a far greater number and wider range of pressure groups, reflecting a more fragmented society in which personal identity does not derive from membership of a social class or professional grouping, but from a much wider range of possible identities.

There are more political arenas for pressure groups to operate in than before, although some of these new arenas, notably the European Union, can readily be analysed in insider/outside terms. The rules of the game are changing: trust in politicians is at a low ebb, and direct action by protest movements is seen



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Notes: (a) Not all the stages will necessarily occur in any particular policy initiative.
 (b) Many policy changes do not require new legislation; they may, for example, depend upon ministerial action.
 (c) Bills may, of course, be introduced in the House of Lords.

Figure 2 A simplified outline of group involvement in the policy process (a)

as more legitimate. However, the insider/outsider distinction remains a viable one: there is a new politics, but old political structures and practices persist.

Business as usual?

Conventional interest-group activity is flourishing under the Blair government. Indeed, one consequence of its election has been a closer relationship between business and government, while the trade unions have enjoyed little more influence on policy than they had under the preceding Conservative governments.

In part, this new relationship is influenced by the personal preferences of Tony Blair, which have led to what has been described as the most pro-big business government ever seen in Britain. In return, the CBI has adopted a classic insider stance, with the Director-General emphasising in a message to members that the CBI does not intend to adopt a confrontational strategy against Labour's employment agenda. The CBI sees the Blair government as working closely with it on major objectives such as preserving 'flexible' labour markets across Europe and making welcome concessions on points of detail on domestic legislation.

For all the talk of a 'new' Britain and a 'new'

politics, there is much that looks like 'business as usual' in the world of pressure group politics. That does not mean that nothing is changing. For example, devolution is set to open up a new arena for pressure group politics with the prospect of different policies being developed by the Scottish Parliament. Change is taking place, but the conventional wisdom cannot yet be set aside. There are still insiders and outsiders, included and excluded, and many of those who have always been powerful, such as business interests, continue to have a big say in policy making.

References and further reading

Dudley, G. and Richardson, J. (1998) 'Arenas without rules and the policy change process: outsider groups and British roads policy', *Political Studies*, Vol. 46, pp. 727-47.
 Maloney, W., Jordan, G. and McLaughlin, A. (1994) 'Interest groups and public policy: the insider/outsider model revisited', *Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 14, pp. 17-38.

At the time of writing, Wyn Grant was Professor of Politics at the University of Warwick and has written extensively on pressure group politics.