
Corridors of Power

by Ted Graham

Our Parliamentary democracy is a wonderful institution - but depends on a little help from its friends to work effectively. This article is designed to explore or expose some of the by-ways or wrinkles which form part of the rich tapestry we call Westminster Politics or Whitehall Government. It is a world which is increasingly becoming better known and understood by more and more of the electorate. The assumption that automatically, the will of a Government with a majority in excess of 100 will prevail over the other Parties was shattered with the Second Reading defeat of the Shops Bill in April 1986. Now that the Government is actively considering reviving its desire to deregulate shopping hours during the lifetime of this Parliament, it may be timely to look at how such dramatic happenings can be arranged - or come about.

Members' Interests

It was during the 1974-79 Parliament that it was decided to request all Members of Parliament to enter their business interests in "the Register of Members' Interests". This was called for as a result of increasing signs that the activities of lobbyists and public relations firms were intruding into the normally pressure-free environment in which Parliament worked. That's not to say that hitherto there had been no such activity, but it is true to say that it had been more discreet. It was the performance of a company called "Bristol Ship Repairers" during the passage of the Ship Repairers Bill that provided the final nail in the coffin. The aim of all Parliamentary lobbyists is to secure the passage of legislation either in the interest of their clients, or to have it amended so as to be as acceptable to their clients as possible. The question to be looked at is whether this comparatively open use of Parliamentary lobbyists is ethical or not, and the Co-operative Movement has something to say here from its own experience over the past 60 years.

Current Pressures

The art (or science) of securing changes in legislation has developed at a breath-taking pace in recent years. The establishment of the Register of Members' Interests is our best source. More than 150 MPs record more than 500 directorships or consultancies with business interests. Some record directorships with 10 to 20 companies. Cecil Parkinson, for example, picked up 7 or 8 directorships with very prestigious companies when he left office in 1985, to be dropped when he returned to office. Whenever a Bill is before

Parliament we are told that big business is well represented on the Committee considering the details of a Bill. Sometimes the MP is a director, often a paid adviser. Robin Oakley writing in *The Times* in July reported on an Institute of Directors Conference on "Choosing and Using Lobbyists", and of the advice given that for the services of a good Parliamentary consultant one should expect to pay £2500 a month as a retainer and a further £2500 a month if there was a live interest in a Bill - £60,000 a year.

The cultivation of a member's interest at a specific time for a specific purpose grows. The Channel Tunnel Bill has unearthed many a hidden interest. British Airways, we are told, entertained upwards of 50 MPs to a range of benefits on a regular basis, from day trips to retainers. There is no doubt that business cultivates a relationship with Parliamentarians both for the direct benefits it can bring, and also for the image it creates that the company is "with it" in modern commercial conditions. There is clearly a path to be trod very carefully between shunning any use of political contacts, and abusing the privileges of Parliament.

Co-operative Politics

It is some time since the Movement accepted that if it failed to have its own means of protecting its interests it would suffer, while those of its competition who took steps to protect their interests would gain an advantage. Just how we resolved both the principle and the implementation in practice would take too long, but briefly, the Co-operative Movement decided to form an alliance openly and constitutionally with the Labour Party. This is reviewed after each General Election and gives us, at the moment, 9 MPs, while there are 6 Co-operative Peers. These 15 Co-operators from the Co-operative Parliamentary Group are recognised as one of the most effective lobbying groups in the business. What business? And how is it conducted?

The Example of Sunday Trading

My first illustration must be that of Sunday Trading. Since the law in this respect was consolidated into the 1950 Shops Act there have been at least 12 attempts to abolish the regulations governing the control of shops' closing hours in whole or in part. Until 1986 these had been by Private Bills, for the very good reason that all Governments had correctly deduced that to try to amend the law by Government Bills would run into trouble. The snag with Private Bills, however, is that they are attended by great pitfalls. For instance, in the Commons a Bill can be "talked out" if a speaker is on his or her feet when the debate closes.

Thus, on a Friday which is Private Members Bill day, if a speaker is speaking as 2.30 pm chimes, automatically the debate is adjourned to a later date. The

only way this can be circumvented is for a supporter of the Bill to rise at least 15 minutes before time and cry out "Mr Speaker, I beg to move that the question be now put". Thus debate is stopped while a vote is taken. However, to establish that the calling of such a vote is not frivolous, 100 members must vote in support. Not 100 voting in both lobbies - 100 in the Aye lobby. Many an attempt to force a vote has foundered because the supporters failed to muster that number, not least because getting MPs to be at Westminster on a Friday instead of in their constituency is very difficult.

Checking the Private Bills

When Ray Whitney MP was lucky enough to draw a high place in the ballot for Private Members Bills in 1982, he was prevailed upon to introduce a Bill to deregulate shop hours. This came before the Commons on February 4th 1983 for its Second Reading. If this had been won it would have gone into Committee, but the first major hurdle would have been surmounted. Thus, it had to be stopped at Second Reading. As a Private Bill it was not officially whipped, so Co-operative MPs did unofficial whipping - so effectively that the Bill failed to get a Second Reading by 120 to 193.

If a Bill is due for a Second Reading and has not got "prime time" it stands with others in a queue at 2.30. When the Clerk reads out the title of the Bill, unless it is challenged it gets its second Reading "on the nod". However, it requires but one shout of "Object" for it to fail to do so, and then to try again on a later day. I have cheerfully been the "objecting" voice many times, especially on Sunday Trading Bills!

Defeating a Government

In 1984 the Government announced the setting up of a Committee to take evidence and make recommendations concerning shop hours. This was "The Auld Committee" and in 1985 it recommended total deregulation of all controls over shop hours - 168 hours a week if desired. Thus began a classic battle between lobbying groups. The most vociferous pro-abolitionists were the do-it-yourself retailers, but joined by some large retailers like Tesco and Woolworth, and by the National Consumer Council. Opposed to total deregulation was a coalition of church groups, trades unions (particularly USDAW), traders such as specialist and small traders, John Lewis Partnership, Marks and Spencer - and the Co-operative Movement. A Bill to give effect to the Auld Report duly appeared in The Queen's Speech in November 1985.

Due to pressure for time in the Commons, the Bill was started in the Lords. Those of us who opposed its thrust introduced a series of amendments designed to change and blunt its effect. All shops, as now, should close; or all

except for small shops; or shops distinguished by size or trade; or local authorities should decide if shops would open; or shops should open just for mornings; or for afternoons; or for any four hours. The variations were many. All failed, but they served the purpose of this particular exercise. Our purpose was delay. With no guillotine in the Lords, the Government could not curtail debate. Thus I spoke at length - and often on every amendment possible. It was the plan of the Government to have the Bill out of the Lords by mid-January 1986. It left us on February 26. As it reached the Commons awaiting a Second Reading, our tactics for further action were beginning to have an effect.

Further Tactics

In the end, all that really matters is the vote, so we had to consider how to peel away some of the support the Government could normally rely on. In many constituencies where the MPs were Government supporters but not Ministers, they were subjected to intense pressure, especially from the Churches. As the Bill crawled its way through the Lords, our tally of Tory MPs who had indicated that they would vote against its Second Reading mounted. As this information was gathered by Tory Whips, they warned the Government that it was in trouble. Sadly, Martin Stevens, a Conservative backbencher, died in March and it was decided to hold the by-election in early April with the Second Reading for the Bill to follow on April 14th. At that stage, with an overall majority of 100+, it was inconceivable that the Government would be defeated - but stranger things have come to pass!

As the date of April 14th loomed nearer, the Home Secretary had to contemplate how to placate his rebels. He first of all announced before the debate that if the Bill was given a Second Reading, there would be a free vote on Third Reading. Sensation! Unheard of, but the man was desperate. During his speech on Second Reading he was asked if there would be a guillotine while the Bill was in Committee. When he replied that there would not, this so angered his own supporters that even more decided to withhold their support by abstaining. For, if once the Bill got into Committee it could not be guillotined out: it could be kept there for ever!

By-election Bonus

The Government had lost the April by-election. Nick Raynsford had given Labour a seat, and he had made opposition to the Bill a major plank in his platform. This had inspired even more Tory MPs to heed the warning of the poll for their own seats - and having listened even more carefully than ever to the voice of their constituents, they decided to vote against. Yet, even then, analysing the prospects for the vote, the Government could still have expected to scrape home - but for one final unexpected twist. Ulster Unionists had

boycotted Westminster for the past three months as a protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They had been absent and silent. But on April 14th, 14 of them came across to vote against the Bill. It was defeated by 14 votes.

It was a famous victory in which a coalition of interests combined to beat the money of big business and the power of the Government machine. No one factor was dominant except a belief that it could be done - and it was.

Premium Relief and All-night Sittings

There was the time when the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Nigel Lawson) abolished life assurance premium relief in a Budget on March 13th 1984 and announced it would have effect at midnight. This had been an inducement worth 15% of premiums paid, and worth having, but had been abused. Thousands of policies were written before midnight and brought in much extra business, but for the CIS it was disaster. By the nature of our business, it is written over a period of a month, and so our competitors were given a distinct advantage. Along with the CIS were the Pearl, the Pru and what were called "Life Offices". They had tried to plead their case with Civil Servants to no avail; then they came to see me. I listened, and then took them to meet Labour's spokesman on the Finance Bill, Terry Davis MP.

He well understood their case, and put down an amendment to make the date for the abolition in the case of Life Offices, March 31st. When he and his colleagues, by keeping the Committee up night after night were asked by the Minister (John Moore) for their price for progress, it was that amendment. It was given. It saved the CIS millions of pounds, for they had decided to give the Tax Relief in order to match their competitors. It was worth many more millions to the Life Offices, but what was equally important was that the insurance companies knew that where they had failed, the Co-op had demonstrated its ability to deliver the political goods.

Arguing the Case

Because the interests of the Co-operative Movement are not confined just to commercial considerations, opportunities arise to use Parliamentary influence in many ways besides the intervention in debates and in Questions. Taking Co-operative officials to argue a case with a Minister is one. Working as a member of a Parliamentary Committee and putting a Co-operative view is another. Assuming responsibilities amongst colleagues in All-Party Groups is still another, for as the Co-operative Parliamentarian creates goodwill, some of it rubs off on his Co-operative connection.

Opening Doors

There is a world of difference in the scope for influencing affairs if there is a Government of your persuasion in office. The door to the Minister is open, the Civil Servants are more aware of their Minister's need to help you and your interests if he can. Nevertheless, the "out of office" condition need not be wholly unproductive. From it, one can still give a Minister a hard time - or not. If he has some scope to concede, he is more likely to do so if his supplicant has proved to be reasonable and realistic in debate or at Question Time.

Extra-Parliamentary Advisers

Rest assured that Parliamentarians do not lack either advice or pressure from interest groups from outside Parliament who are in the business of making legislation work for them. My experience both before entering Parliament and since is that many, many of our large national commercial, industrial and financial organisations recognise the part that a political input can play to a greater extent than the Co-operative Movement does. Our problems arise from the way we are, and as a consequence the way that we do it. For them, they simply find a way of funding their political party - the Conservative Party - by one means or another. They then, either from their own organisation or with outside help, concentrate on providing Civil Servants, Ministers and Opposition with as persuasive a case as possible.

What *we* do is nail our flag publically to the mast of the Labour Party and fund that declaration and the machinery to get our interests protected and advanced, by Parliamentarians in both Houses. I am the stoutest of defenders of the value we give for the money spent on our Parliamentary machine, but I would like to see a far greater perception at all decision-making centres within the Movement of the benefits of taking on board the fact that we can make better use of Parliament not least because our competitors do not hesitate to do so.

We are not restricted to affecting changes in the law. There are hundreds of public bodies which impinge on the fortunes of Co-operative societies. They are served by men and women who are appointed in the end by a Secretary of State - a politician. I have in mind such as Development Corporations, the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, Health Authorities, Broadcasting and Television Boards. Alas, Labour and Co-operative nominees are sparse indeed these days, but a word in the right ear at the right time can make the membership of such bodies understand the better the views of the Co-operative Movement.

Power and influence is earned more than it is bought. That's why the performance both of societies and our Parliamentarians is the ultimate determining factor in all this.

The Author

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