The Government and Politics of Wales
Questions for discussion and case studies

Chapter 8 – Civil Society, Pressure Groups, Lobbying and Local Government in Wales
Pages 162–201, Author Rob Southall

Teacher’s guide – in conjunction with the text book

Timing: Students should read the relevant chapter before undertaking the exercise questions and case studies, and discuss their answers. There are answer note suggestions behind all questions. The questions can be undertaken in class or at home with questions/answers and activities being undertaken in the classroom. The material is teaching material and NOT specifically material for answering examination questions.

Tutor guide: Tutors should familiarise themselves with the text, questions and answers before undertaking the activities in the classroom. For any unfamiliar terms an extensive glossary of key terms is provided on pages 206–22 of the book. The questions and case studies do not cover all of the material in the chapters. If tutors wish to cover this, they will need to set additional stimulus questions. Tutors and students may also wish to add material not provided in either the suggested answers or the text to the answers. Welsh politics is constantly changing, so answers provided now may well alter as these changes take place.

The questions for discussion and the case studies are found at the end of each chapter. The suggested answers and some ideas for teaching these are provided on the following pages. Tutors should seek to draw these answers from the students and also discuss their merits.

Suggested answers

Chapter 8 Questions for discussion

The questions cover the WJEC AS Government and Politics Specification Element 2.3 Participation through political parties, pressure groups and political movements, specifically aspects of 2.3.2 Pressure groups and participation in politics and 2.3.3 Social movements and participation in politics.

1. Is it true to say that there is a distinctive Welsh civil society?

Answer points: Tutors should note that the term ‘civil society’ refers to popular involvement in public life through non-state-led organisations such as pressure groups, social movements and the mass media. This activity may be about advocacy for change or simply about individuals or groups standing up for their own interests or expressing support for a multitude of causes. Whether Wales
actually has its own civil society is a moot point. Although it can be argued that there is a distinct Welsh civil society, this remains relatively weak and underdeveloped compared with other devolved nations such as Scotland. The weakest aspect of civil society in Wales is undoubtedly the limited nature of mass media with a limited ‘regional’ broadcast media and no truly national daily newspaper. Others may refer to the dominance of the Welsh Labour Party and the tendency towards corporatism as a cause of weakness.

Prior to the devolution settlement of 1999, Wales formed an integral, although distinct, part of English civil society with most pressure groups having London as their base for England and Wales, and group activity being within the wider context of group–governmental relations in the UK. However, there is no doubt that devolution has allowed for a ‘new politics’ which has been a major stimulus to the development of a distinct civil society in Wales. The Welsh Council for Voluntary Action, which represents the voluntary sector in Wales, states that it has membership of more than 2,500 organisations; and Public Affairs Cymru, which represents lobbying firms operating in the ‘Cardiff Bay Village’, currently has over 100 members. In addition, there are a number of formal coalitions of voluntary groups such as Age Alliance Wales, public affairs firms such as Deryn, and think tanks such as the Institute of Welsh Affairs, Bevan Foundation and Gorwel.

2. To what extent has Welsh devolution been of benefit to pressure groups?

Answer points: Devolution has brought major benefits for pressure groups and lobbyists operating in Wales. These benefits include increasing the number of access points to policy-makers and improved accessibility to decision-makers, and the fact that the Welsh government has better procedures for formally feeding into and responding to policies. In addition, there is an ability for groups and lobbyists to fashion policy and practice that more accurately reflects the needs of Wales and its communities. Further to this, devolved ‘social democratic’ government in Wales has an open approach to the third sector and to equalities work in particular. Finally, devolved government has provided opportunities to explore more radical policies that would be difficult to take forward on a UK-wide basis. The Welsh government, although constrained in its powers, has been willing to consider different approaches and to push boundaries.

3. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of pressure group activity in relation to the National Assembly and the Welsh government. Do pressure groups enhance or hinder democratic government in Wales?

Answer points: The main ways in which pressure groups enhance, or promote, democracy would be that they promote various avenues of democracy other than the ballot box – the groups keep government in touch with public opinion over and above election time and they also provide a voice for minority groups and diverse interests. Pressure groups also attract people with very specific interests who are not attracted to the very broad interests reflected by political parties.
Groups promote education by seeking to both educate and inform their own membership, the wider general public, and politicians and civil servants. They are especially good at this as they often have more specialist knowledge and expertise than others, including the government itself. The last advantage is that lots of groups competing for influence creates a pluralist democracy which promotes a fairer balance of power.

There are also considerable dangers involved in pressure group activity within a democracy such as Wales, and an overly corporatist approach can both hinder and threaten democratic processes. Some groups, because of their specialist knowledge and expertise, high-status membership, money, institutional leverage and privileged links to government, are often more influential than other, more legitimate, groups. In addition, some pressure groups, because of their large membership and popular support, can also have a powerful hold on government. Pressure groups can strengthen the voice of wealthy and privileged interests and drown out the legitimate voices of large sections of society. Some critics of pressure groups also doubt the legitimacy of groups, as they do not democratically elect their leaders and when they are elected, this is often as a result of very low turnouts.

Many groups, such as trade unions and charities, are now dominated by a small number of professional managers and lobbyists who often move from group to group, and these may be seen by government, and sometimes their own membership, as self-appointed spokespeople. Insider pressure groups are also often accused of exerting influence ‘behind closed doors’, and this might be seen as illegitimate and unaccountable, promoting a decision-making process which is not open or transparent. By their very nature pressure groups often represent sectional interests or minority groups and, as these groups become more powerful, democratic government may find it difficult to make decisions which reflect the public interest and do what is best for society as a whole. Some groups also seek to exert influence through unorthodox methods or direct action, and these are sometimes seen to be operating against the democratic process by ‘holding the country to ransom’ through their use of strikes, blockades, threat of violence or actual violence.

Case studies

The questions covers the WJEC AS Government and Politics Specification Element 2.3 Participation through political parties, pressure groups and political movements, specifically aspects of 2.3.2 Pressure groups and participation in politics and 2.3.3 Social movements and participation in politics.

Case study: working together to exert influence
Read the text in the case studies in Boxes 8.3 and 8.4 and answer the following questions:

1. Explain why membership of policy networks, policy communities and issue networks might be beneficial to (a) ministers, civil servants and AMs; and (b) pressure groups and lobbyists.

Answer points: Policy communities are small, stable and consensual groups of senior civil servants and key members of specialist pressure groups while policy networks (formal relations) and issue networks (informal relations) are more open and inclusive and typically include ministers, civil servants and key members of the legislature, along with specialist pressure groups, lobbyists, sympathetic academics and sections of the media.

All of these are descriptive of the relationships between government and civil society and they have considerable advantages for both.

(a) Some of the advantages for government might be:

- drawing on groups’ knowledge and experience;
- ability to source specialist knowledge and staff;
- provides a means to overcome limited capacity in government;
- provision of a pool of expertise to produce quality responses to consultations;
- influencing pressure group policy, strategy and campaigns;
- independent hosting of training events and conferences.

(b) Some of the advantages for pressure groups might include:

- regular (and occasional ad-hoc) opportunities to engage with government;
- opportunities via consultations, evidence to committees and by sitting on working groups;
- provides opportunities for groups to influence policy at an early stage by feeding in the specialist knowledge and experience;
- use of government relationships and channels is more effective than campaigning;
- an ability to help shape government policy;
- better and more effective representation of members;
- provides opportunities for government funding;
- provides an opportunity to work with groups with similar aims and objectives, for example, Shelter’s membership of ‘Homes for All Cymru’ and ‘End Child Poverty Network’;
- room to expand – joint working has allowed organisations in Wales to expand and offer more services to government and members.
2. Identify and describe the disadvantages for pressure groups working in formal coalitions, partnerships and networks.

Answer points: The disadvantages for pressure groups are:

- Some groups have more influence than others.
- It can be very difficult for new or small organisations, who do want to develop their presence in Wales, to break into the bubble that is the Cardiff Bay village.
- The requirement for a Cardiff office and Cardiff-based staff can be expensive for small groups.
- The small cohort of organisations who can and do work together are not necessarily representative of stakeholders at large.
- There is a tendency for groups to become incorporated by government, which is not always healthy in a democracy.
- Joint working requires constant compromise, which is not always beneficial to the group or its members.
- Groups can become over-reliant on government funding.

All of the above groups work collectively for their members by campaigning, leading and running projects, securing funding, hosting training events and conferences and engaging in advocacy in meetings with government ministers and civil servants and with Assembly members on a personal level, in Assembly committees and in cross-party groups. They have become very much a part of the machinery of government in post-devolution Wales and an essential component of what is now termed the ‘Cardiff Bay Village’.

Case study: the advantages and disadvantages of pressure group influence in Wales

Read the text in Boxes 8.12 and 8.13 and answer the following questions:

1. Identify and describe three examples of Welsh government policy areas where group influence has taken place.

Answer points: Three policy areas from the source are education, environment and the elderly. Groups engaged in education such as NASUWT saw their influence most clearly with the development of the Foundation Phase curriculum. Environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth had achieved success in keeping Wales free from GM crops, gaining annual cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, strong support for renewable energy, the carrier bag charge and the 70 per cent recycling target. Finally groups representing the elderly such as Age Concern (now Age Cymru) had lobbied successfully over a range of important sectorial issues including the development of the Strategy for Older People and the establishment of the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales.
2. Drawing on examples from the sources explain why pressure groups have been influential on the development of Welsh government policy.

*Answer points:* Pressure groups have been influential in the development of Welsh government policy because of the limited capacity of the civil service in Wales and the limited amount of policy specialists in discrete areas such as housing, the environment and education. This is best illustrated in the area of housing and homelessness and this is the reason why the housing sector was seen to be a key area of group influence in Wales. On the issue of homelessness Shelter Cymru said it was ‘instrumental in calling for the first National Homelessness Strategy’ and that ‘this had now led to the Welsh Government’s ten year homelessness plan’. Several housing groups, including peak organisations such as CHC and specialist groups catering for disabled people’s housing needs, also referred to ‘Better Homes for People in Wales’, which was Wales’ first national housing strategy. The Essex Review of Affordable Housing, carried out by Sue Essex on behalf of the One Wales Coalition between 2009 and 2011, is perhaps the best example of group influence because of the involvement of groups such as CHC in the consultation, composition and implementation of Welsh government policy.

3. Explain why Community Housing Cymru was so important to the One Welsh coalition’s strategy for delivering affordable housing.

*Answer points:* The Essex Review and its implementation provides an example of successful lobbying by one pressure group: Community Housing Cymru. CHC requested it, lobbied for it and when it was not in the One Wales agreement they had a meeting with Jocelyn Davies AM, the Deputy Minister for Housing, responsible for housing. The Welsh government invited Sue Essex to carry out the review at their request. CHC were also involved with the work streams which were made up of Welsh government officials plus stakeholders including local authorities, housing associations, representative organisations from the sector plus mortgage lenders, the Principality, The Council of Mortgage Lenders, Association of Housebuilders and landlord’s organisations. However, once again the role of CHC was instrumental to success as they steered it and got everybody on board to cooperate and, even with the recession, managed to help the Welsh government meet its targets. Not only that, but later the former Chair of CHC became the Welsh government’s special adviser on housing.

4. Using both sources draw a two-column table to identify the advantages and disadvantages of pressure group influence on government in Wales.

*Answer points:* Most A Level Government and Politics textbooks will have a section covering this particular question and students should aim to draw what they can from the sources. However, the points might include:

**Advantages:**
• Groups act as an effective and efficient channel of communications between the public and the government.
• Groups act as important checks on the power of government by mobilising opposition against measures which might have negative effects upon sections of the community.
• Groups can aid government by providing specialist knowledge and staff when and where required.
• Groups facilitate greater democracy by providing opportunities for active participation by the public in the political process and by ensuring that minority groups and interests are properly represented.
• Groups provide a tension release function by institutionalising peaceful political discourse thus avoiding possible violent conflict or disorder.
Disadvantages:

- The biggest criticism of groups is that they are sometimes seen as the vehicles for sectional special interests who are only concerned with their own welfare and thus ignore the broader common good.
- Government can sometimes become over-reliant on assistance from certain groups and these can become institutionally incorporated into government policy-making and implementation, sometimes to the detriment of both parties. ‘Iron triangles’ are an example of this tendency from the USA while there are also examples in the sources which might lead us to believe that it is already a problem in Welsh politics, most obviously as a consequence of the limited capacity of the Welsh civil service.
- Some groups might wield disproportionate influence due to links with the Labour Party who have dominated government in Wales in the devolution era. This influence might also be a consequence of specialist knowledge, financial resources or their place within the economy.
- Many groups have internal structures which are not democratic and the views of their leadership may not represent those of the wider membership; as a result, government may not consider these as legitimate, for example, some trade unions.
- Some groups adopt methods and strategies, such as direction action or violence, which are not considered appropriate by government.

(Source: Adapted from Neil McNaughton, Success in Politics, 2nd edn, John Murray, 2001.)

Summary – Reflective learning questions

These should be used either at the end or between the questions for discussion and the case studies to reflect on what has been learned. The students should be given sufficient time to discuss their answers.

1. Create a quiz, based on today’s topic, which you could use to test other students.
2. What is the most important thing you have learnt today and why?

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