

Interest groups and policy

consensus. Thus the government gets only limited feedback and has the opportunity of explaining its policies to very few people who are themselves not at all representative of the community of people who are interested and well informed about the issues.

It is flattering for those involved in the process, but they should not feel that they are having any influence on policy. Typically, the agenda for such "consultations" is controlled by officials of External Affairs, any background papers are prepared by them and they make the major presentations. At best, therefore, consultation of this sort is a trial run, before groups that are part of the dominant class, for policies that have already been developed by the Department.

An example may illustrate the limited significance of this sort of consultation. In 1979 and 1980, at the highest levels in the Department of External Affairs, there was developed a fresh and significant theme which was intended to help shape Canadian foreign policy. This theme was given the title "bilateralism." It involved assigning a high priority to the cultivation of close and continuous relationships with states that have not been our traditional allies but with whom Canada might hope to be able to develop expanding economic links. Many of these states would be newly-industrializing states in the Third World with rapidly expanding economies. As a policy, bilateralism has real implications for our aid policies, for aid is one of the instruments that can be used to expand our relationships with these states. It also has major significance for our human rights policies, for some of the most obvious candidates for a concentrated bilateral endeavor by Canada are highly repressive regimes.

Neither before it was finalized nor after, was the policy of bilateralism ever presented and discussed with public interest groups concerned with human rights or with international development. It was, I believe, first presented publicly after it had been approved by Cabinet in a speech by the Secretary of State for External Affairs to the Empire Club in Toronto on January 22, 1981. It had earlier been alluded to without its being identified in a number of public speeches. It was also presented to one or possibly several carefully chosen and controlled consultations with business and industry including, in particular, CBIAC. These took place, however, after the policy had been approved by Cabinet. At the most, CBIAC was asked to make suggestions from the floor of the meeting of what countries might be included on the list of those with whom Canada would concentrate its bilateral relations. The discussion was brief and there was no follow-up or counter-presentation by CBIAC.

There was also a presentation of the policy at a consultation in June 1981 with the members of the National Council of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. It was the only, or at least one of the very few, consultations with a public interest group. It illustrates well the point being made. The National Council of the CIA can be said, without intended derogation or flattery, to be very much a

part of that section of the opinion-forming elite that is closest to External Affairs (though perhaps in its earlier Pearsonian image). The meeting received a four-page background paper that reads like an edited version of an earlier Cabinet paper. It was addressed by two senior officials. There was then a discussion. All of this took place four months after the policy had been announced. It clearly occurred as part of a limited exercise to explain the policy to circles whom External Affairs regarded as being friendly. My identification of this category of "consultation," as consensual but controlled and severely unrepresentative, does seem accurate.

Interpreting the imbalance

How is one to explain the fundamental difference in the nature of the relationship which government has with many public interest groups in contrast with its relations with business and industry groups? It is not to be explained as an unavoidable consequence of the different ways in which it is possible for a government to deal with economic interest groups in contrast to public interest groups. The government has a close identification with business and industry and has developed elaborate machinery to ensure close cooperation with them. There are other economic interest groups, consumer organizations for example and trade unions with whom it does not have close identification. It deals with these domestic economic interest groups quite differently and much less intimately. Similarly, I would argue, the government also does not deal with critical internationally-oriented public interest groups in the same way as it deals with business and industry because it neither attaches the same importance to the issues they raise nor is it seriously concerned to incorporate them into the government-led consensus.

There is in fact a pervasive bias in Canadian public life which gives to the corporate sector an access and an influence that no other sector of our society enjoys. Corporate interest groups bring to their interactions with government a primary interest in issues that are directly related to the returns to capital in their sector. One has only to examine the personal and financial linkages between the corporate sector and the two major parties, at the personal links of the senior civil service and the corporate sector, at the policies themselves and at the ideology that underlies much of those policies, to see evidence of the corporate bias.

A government that was differently oriented, and with a different political base, would deliberately involve public interest groups actively in policy-oriented consultations, in order to counterbalance the thrust of the advice it was receiving from business and industry. It would, for example, accept that human rights issues have a legitimate place in discussions of major policies towards Latin America, and that international equity considerations must be a factor in shaping Canadian policies toward NIEO issues. Because of that acceptance, it would give to the domestic groups that advocate such concerns a role equally important to that now reserved for the spokesmen of the corporate sector. □