
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

