6 Civil society, pressure groups, and political parties

> There is a consciousness on the minds of leading politicians that the pressure from behind, forcing upon them great measures, drives them almost quicker than they can go, so that it becomes a necessity with them to resist rather than to aid the pressure which will certainly be at last effective by its own strength.
>
> (Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Redux*, 1874, chapter 4)

Pressure groups and civil society

Civil society is a fundamental part of the fabric of the modern state, yet it is a difficult concept to pin down. What Urry (1981) has graphically described as the sphere of struggle is an essential interface between people and government, which allows new ideas to be brought to public attention, debated, and put on the political agenda. In a sense, it is a wider manifestation of the governance, as opposed to government, discussed in Chapter 4.

Civil society is usually thought of as achieving its most developed form in democratic capitalist societies, broadly Western democracies. Totalitarian societies of any political persuasion seek to smother dissent, rather than encouraging it as part of the democratic process, though while this is undoubtedly true in practical terms, it is not to say that covert dissent and, by implication, a covert civil society does not exist under dictatorships. When Saddam Hussein won 100 per cent of the popular vote in the presidential election in Iraq in October 2002, it clearly did not reflect the real mood of all the Iraqi people, but fear kept any opposition totally beneath the surface. The subsequent US-led invasion in 2003 and the multiplicity of social, religious, and political factions that have emerged in its wake are ample testament to the variety of different views in Iraqi society about how the country should be governed.

Environmentalism

The steady growth of environmentalism from its radical beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century in the USA is a classic example of the way in which an alternative view of the world can gradually over time be incorporated into the mainstream political agenda. The most important initial spur was probably the publication in the USA of *Man and Nature* by George Perkins Marsh in 1864. It argued forcefully that there ought to be a much more sympathetic relationship between economic development and the environment, and that care for the environment should always be a key element of policy. The book caught the public imagination and certainly influenced campaigners like John Muir, who fought tirelessly to protect the environment of California, especially the magnificent redwood and giant sequoia forests, then as now under serious threat from commercial forestry (Figure 6.1). The crusade was also taken up in government by the USA's first professionally trained forester, Gifford Pinchot, who became Chief of the Division (now the Bureau) of Forestry at the US Department of Agriculture. He argued strongly for resource policies that ensured conservation and renewal and were sustainable in the long term. He was one of the most influential voices in rewriting the environmental agenda in the twentieth century (Runte, 1979).

Similar ideas were also taken up in Europe, especially in interwar England through organisations like the National Trust, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (now renamed the Campaign to Protect Rural England), and the national parks movement (Sheail, 1981; Lowe

Figure 6.1 *Giant sequoias, King's Canyon National Park, USA*

Source: Robin Hill, with permission.

and Goyder, 1983). Very rapidly the values of environmental conservation began to spread worldwide and became a global cause, though not necessarily one embraced with any enthusiasm by governments.

During the middle part of the twentieth century environmentalism languished somewhat as a result of the Second World War and its aftermath, but in the 1960s there was a strong revival of interest. A number of key events occurred, most notably the publication of two books, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) and *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich (1968), which together produced a huge shock wave and alerted people to the serious and present dangers posed by pollution and overpopulation respectively. As a direct result of these and a number of other publications, the first UN Earth Summit was convened in Stockholm in 1970, putting environmentalism very much back on the political agenda and generating a host of organisations whose main purpose was to promote it as a political cause.

These same concerns also led to movements across many parts of the developed world calling for greater environmental justice (Cutter, 1995). At an international level, there is increasing concern and outrage at the way in which the burdens of pollution are being borne disproportionately by the less developed world and there are growing calls for the balance to be redressed (see also 'Transnational corporations' in Chapter 11). Nor is the disquiet restricted to the international level, within states too there is a growing body of evidence that it is the poor and politically less powerful that are routinely exposed to the risks of environmental hazards and pollution (Bullard, 1993). Particularly in the USA, there is a growing concern at the way in which those who are politically weak, which often means people of colour and immigrants, are exploited when it comes to such dangers, leading to charges of environmental racism.

The development of environmentalism as a coherent concept has been charted in detail by Tim O'Riordan in a series of books and articles since the 1980s (1981, 1989, 1996). In his view, environmentalism has evolved along two quite distinct lines (Figure 6.2). On one side are the *ecocentrics*, who are convinced that existing government structures are incapable of being adapted to meet the challenge posed by environmental degradation and change and that, therefore, there will have to be a fundamental redistribution of power towards a far more decentralised and small-scale economy, with much greater local public involvement and control. On the other side are the *technocentrics*, who believe that
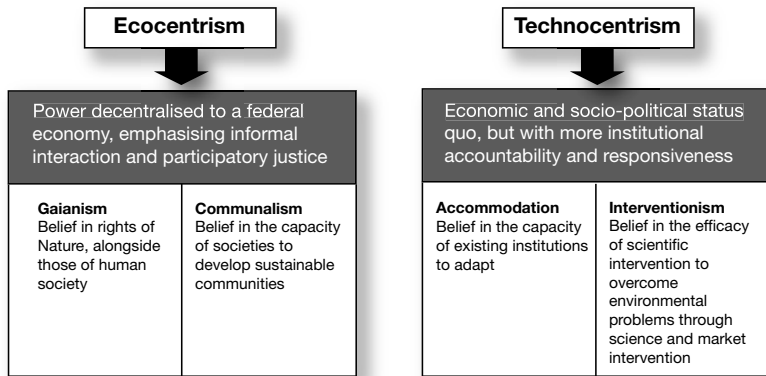
Ecocentrism		Technocentrism	
Power decentralised to a federal economy, emphasising informal interaction and participatory justice		Economic and socio-political status quo, but with more institutional accountability and responsiveness	
Gaianism Belief in rights of Nature, alongside those of human society	**Communalism** Belief in the capacity of societies to develop sustainable communities	**Accommodation** Belief in the capacity of existing institutions to adapt	**Interventionism** Belief in the efficacy of scientific intervention to overcome environmental problems through science and market intervention

Figure 6.2 *Forms of environmentalism*

Source: after T. O'Riordan (1989) 'The challenge for environmentalism', in R. Peet and N. Thrift, *New Models in Geography*. Unwin Hyman, London, pp. 77–101. Reproduced with permission of Thomson.

existing political structures can be modified to meet the needs of environmental conservation through technological solutions allied to improved regulation and education.

The incorporation of environmentalism into the political mainstream was given a huge boost by a second Earth Summit, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. This global event committed 118 countries to the twenty-seven principles of the Rio Declaration, thus ensuring that the world economy was managed in such a way as to promote sustainable development and the wise use of resources (Box 6.1). The key mechanism has been Agenda 21, a commitment to decentralised decision-making and the formulation and implementation of policies for sustainable development at all levels of government, from the world community, to the state, right down to the smallest division of local government. The true impact of Agenda 21 on policy-making is difficult to gauge, but it has certainly awakened people to the concept of sustainability, making the principles widely talked about, if not always acted upon. In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, as democracy was beginning to take root again in the early 1990s, Green parties and policies for sustainable development were initially very prominent. No doubt this was heavily influenced by the chronic environmental problems inherited from the Communist era, as well as Agenda 21, though their importance has subsequently faded somewhat in the face of apparently more immediate social and economic challenges (Tickle and Welsh, 1998).

Box 6.1

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The UN Conference on Environment and Development met at Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992. It reaffirmed the Declaration of the UN Conference on the Human Environment, adopted at Stockholm on 16 June 1972, and seeks to build upon it, with the goal of establishing a new and equitable partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key sectors of societies and people. The conference will work towards international agreements which respect the interests of all and protect the integrity of the global environmental and developmental system. Recognising the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home, the conference proclaims that:

Principle 1

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

Principle 2

States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant on their own environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

Principle 3

The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.

Principle 4

In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.

Principle 5

All States and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world.

Principle 6

The special situation and needs of developing countries, particularly the least developed and those most environmentally vulnerable, shall be given special priority. International actions in the field of

environment and development should also address the interests and needs of all countries.

Principle 7

States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit to sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

Principle 8

To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.

Principle 9

States should cooperate to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, and by enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of technologies, including new and innovative technologies.

Principle 10

Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided.

Principle 11

States shall enact effective environmental legislation. Environmental standards, management objectives and priorities should reflect the environment and development context in which they apply. Standards applied by some countries may be inappropriate and of unwarranted economic and social cost to other countries, in particular developing countries.

Principle 12

States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation. Trade policy measures for environmental purposes should not constitute a means of arbitrary or

unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade. Unilateral actions to deal with environmental challenges outside the jurisdiction of the importing country should be avoided. Environmental measures addressing transboundary or global environmental problems should, as far as possible, be based on international consensus.

Principle 13

States shall develop national law regarding liability and compensation for the victims of pollution and other environmental damage. States shall also cooperate in an expeditious and more determined manner to develop further international law regarding liability and compensation for adverse effects of environmental damage caused by activities within their jurisdiction or control to areas beyond their jurisdiction.

Principle 14

States should effectively cooperate to discourage or prevent the relocation and transfer to other States of any activities and substances that cause severe environmental degradation or are found to be harmful to human health.

Principle 15

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Principle 16

National authorities should endeavour to promote the internalisation of environmental costs and the use of economic instruments, taking into account the approach that the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution, with due regard to the public interest and without distorting international trade and investment.

Principle 17

Environmental impact assessment, as a national instrument, shall be undertaken for proposed activities that are likely to have a significant adverse impact on the environment of those States. Every effort shall be made by the international community to help States so affected.

Principle 18

States shall immediately notify other States of any natural disasters or other emergencies that are likely to produce sudden harmful effects on the environment of those States. Every effort shall be made by the international community to help States so afflicted.

Principle 19

States shall provide prior and timely notification and relevant information to potentially affected States on activities that

may have a significant adverse transboundary environmental effect and shall consult with those States at an early stage and in good faith.

Principle 20

Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.

Principle 21

The creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilised to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all.

Principle 22

Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognise and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development.

Principle 23

The environment and natural resources of people under oppression, domination and occupation shall be protected.

Principle 24

Warfare is inherently destructive of sustainable development. States shall therefore respect international law providing protection for the environment in times of armed conflict and cooperate in its further development, as necessary.

Principle 25

Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.

Principle 26

States shall resolve all their environmental disputes peacefully and by appropriate means in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

Principle 27

States and people shall cooperate in good faith and in a spirit of partnership in the fulfilment of the principles embodied in the Declaration and in the further development of international law in the field of sustainable development.

Concerns about the future of the environment have become embedded into the formal political process through a number of different channels. NGOs, such as Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature, have been instrumental in promoting environmental causes internationally through campaigns on specific issues, such as that to stop whaling and to protect the habitats of other endangered species. Through their activities, they seek to influence national and international policy to come into line with their own agendas. There are also a multitude of environmental organisations focused on a more limited range of national issues, such as the Sierra Club in California, which has worked tirelessly for more than a century to protect the Rocky Mountains from commercial exploitation and to return the whole cordillera region to a state of pristine wilderness.

The activities of these, and a host of other organisations, have forced environmentalism into a position of much greater political prominence, which in turn has seen the emergence of Green parties in a number of countries, in some cases enjoying sufficient popular political support to enable them to participate in government at national level. In Germany, the Green Party has been in coalition with the Social Democrats since 1998, occupying several senior posts in the government, including the foreign office, and putting it in a position to have a major influence on the direction of international negotiations on the future of the environment.

High levels of popular support also have an effect on the behaviour of the public. Consumers demand goods and services that are environmentally friendly, which in turn encourages producers to demonstrate that their production processes do not offend environmental ethical principles. The true robustness of this commitment on the part of both consumers and producers is often open to question, faced with the competition of a global marketplace (see Chapter 11), but undoubtedly the public in most of the developed world expects there to be a much deeper and more explicit political commitment to environmental principles.

Along with the growing global concern for the environment, there has been mounting pressure for more real progress on environmental justice (Cutter, 1995). There has been a growing realisation that the burden of the consequences of environmental degradation has not been shared equally, falling disproportionately on the poor and marginalised, especially in the developing world (see 'Transnational corporations' in Chapter 11). They are at much greater risk of being exposed to the toxic

effects of pollution and lack the resources to protect themselves. This has created a growing movement for environmental justice, especially in the USA. It is geared to exposing and combating the inequities to which people of colour, immigrants, and other groups who for one reason or another lack political clout, routinely have to suffer. Many environmental justice campaigns have also been concerned to bring to light what they see as the self-serving agenda of parts of the environmental movement, criticising it for seeking to limit access to resources for the privileged few, rather than for the many. This criticism has been particularly levelled at organisations whose main aim is landscape protection, because it is argued that the benefits are only available to very restricted portions of society.

Environmentalism is a particularly clear example of the way in which a rather esoteric minority philosophy can come to influence profoundly public attitudes and, eventually, government policy. Once a certain level of momentum is achieved in the ranks of civil society, governments have to take notice and either incorporate the new philosophy or counter it by argument or suppression. No matter how they respond, however, the process is invariably ongoing. Environmentalism, for example, has now begun to turn from wise resource use to other forms of human–environment relations. The rights of animals and a code of ethics related to the use and abuse of wild and domestic animals is a growing issue in the early part of the twenty-first century and, in many developed countries such as the UK and the USA, animal liberationists are a growing political force (Francione, 1996).

Voluntary bodies and social infrastructure

States and the infrastructure of government are inevitably the dominant influences in society, but they are self-evidently far from the only ones. Most societies, especially those with any pretensions to being viewed as democratic, are also at pains to encourage the church and the law as independent, counterbalancing institutions. Part of their role is to temper and keep a check on the power of the state, but in neither case is their prime function to cover those parts of the social infrastructure that are poorly served by both the public and private sectors. These gaps tend to be filled, at least partially, by a whole range of voluntary bodies, most of which emerge spontaneously and carve out niches for themselves, often rapidly becoming an indispensable part of the fabric of society. In many instances the value of voluntary bodies is also quickly recognised by

government, which moves to support them by formally recognising their role and contribution by direct or indirect funding, or by other means.

In England and Wales the vast majority of such voluntary bodies are designated as charities under the control of the Charity Commission, which ensures that they only work in support of their designated charitable purposes, that they keep properly audited accounts, and that they do not engage in any activities that could be construed as political campaigning (Charity Commission, 2002). In return for operating within these prescribed limits, the government allows the organisations to reclaim any tax paid on their income, a powerful incentive for ensuring compliance. There are over a million registered charities in England and Wales, covering every conceivable type of non-political social activity and encompassing organisations from small local trusts with an annual income of just a few hundred pounds, to national bodies like the National Trust with over three million members, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds with over one million members.

Voluntary bodies are, thus, an integral part of the fabric of society, but they suffer from a chronic inherent weakness in that when it comes to providing a service their geographical range may be very restricted. This can be the result of their mission, which may be limited to a particular area or group, or to the funds available to them. Usually, it is caused by a combination of these and other factors, but the outcome is the same, namely uneven provision. Overcoming this limitation is usually very difficult and makes it hard for voluntary organisations to provide a geographically comprehensive level of provision and quality of service.

Citizens Advice

No organisation illustrates better the role that the voluntary sector plays in society than Citizens Advice, the operating name for the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Blacksell *et al*., 1991). As the umbrella body for over 2,000 independent bureaux, with 2,800 outlets, across the three countries, it coordinates a national network of free advice centres, largely staffed by volunteers and open to all on a first come, first served basis. Coverage across the whole of the UK is complemented by Scotland's equivalent organisation, Citizens Advice Scotland, which has 70 bureaux and 199 outlets (Figure 6.3).
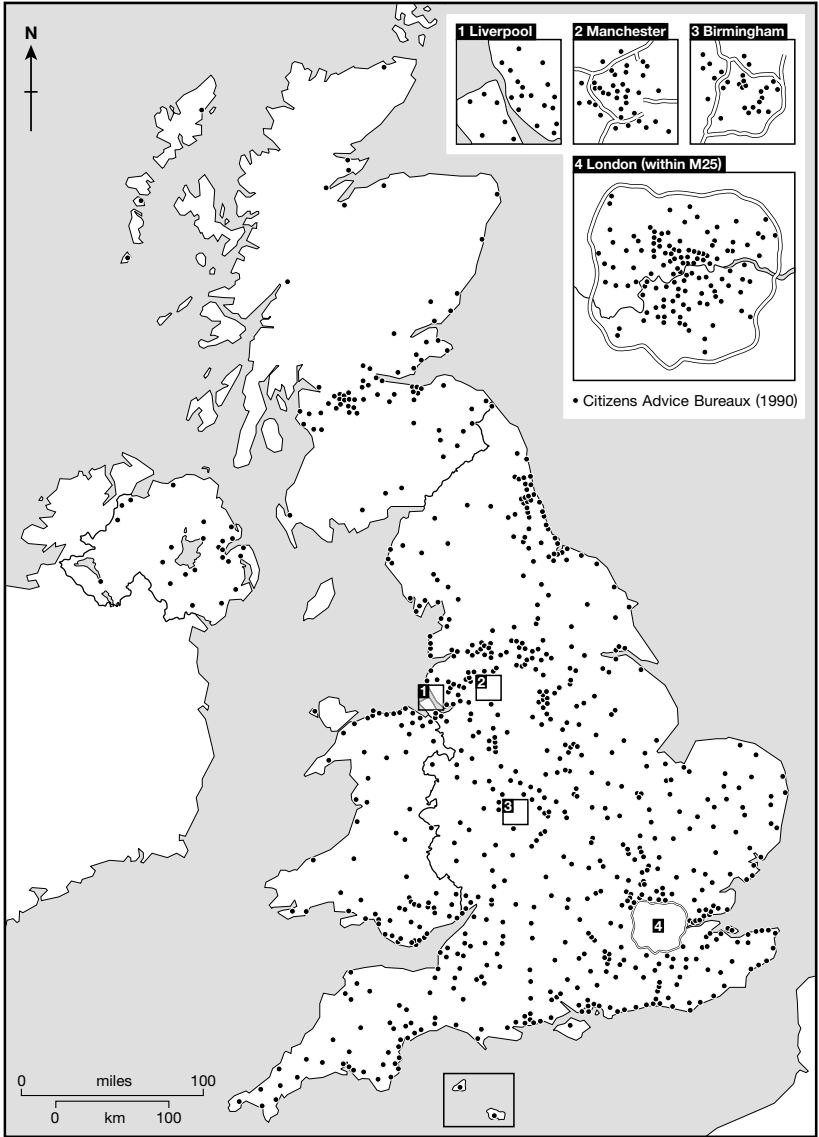
Figure 6.3 *Citizens Advice Bureaux in the UK*

Source: M. Blacksell, K. Economides, and C. Watkins (1991) *Justice Outside the City.* Longman, London, p. 47. Reproduced with permission of Pearson Education.

The service has earned widespread respect for its professionalism and the quality of its advice services, and as long ago as 1979 the Royal Commission on Legal Services recommended that it should form the basis of the primary level of advice-giving nationally. Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) have since become an accepted part of the national infrastructure of social provision in the UK and, in 2002–3, they dealt with more than 6 million client problems covering a wide range of social and economic issues. The main focus has always been on helping clients navigate through the labyrinth of social security and housing benefit systems, ensuring that they receive their full entitlements, but other areas, such as employment law and managing personal debt, have also become increasingly important. The quality of the advice offered is recognised to be of such a high order that invariably the intervention of a CAB adviser brings immediate resolution of a dispute. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon for central and local government agencies to actually refer to the CAB service to help resolve difficult cases. It is no exaggeration to say that the service is a prime example of the voluntary sector providing an indispensable initial gateway to a raft of statutory services in the UK.

The scale of CAB operations and the value placed upon them is immediately apparent from their level of public funding. In 2002–3 their total budget in the UK was in excess of £150 million, more than 50 per cent of it coming from local authorities, with most of the rest coming from central government and EU sources. Although the service guards jealously its independence and its predominantly voluntary ethos – in 2002–3 there were more than 20,000 volunteers as opposed to just over 5,000 paid staff – such a heavy reliance on government funding makes it hard for it not to be seen in practice as part of the public sector social provision.

The voluntary ethos at the heart of the original concept is, therefore, proving increasingly difficult to sustain as the expectation rises that standards will be of the highest professional order and the level of public funding continues to increase (Blacksell *et al.*, 1990). All volunteers now have to undergo rigorous training and the standard of advice provided is subjected to the sharpest scrutiny by paid professional staff. Finding volunteers of sufficient calibre, who are prepared to assume such a high level of responsibility and commitment and who live in the places where they are needed is extremely challenging. Inevitably, the areas that tend to lose out are the more sparsely populated and remote rural areas, and other places where access poses problems (see Figure 6.4). It has even been seriously debated whether there should not be paid volunteers, a
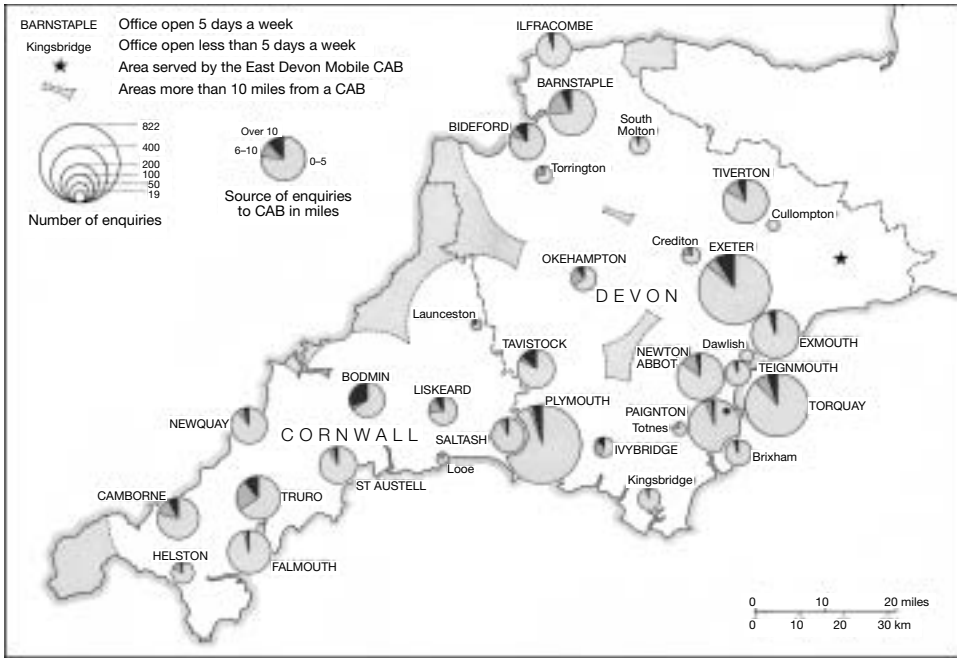
Figure 6.4 *Demand for CAB services in Cornwall and Devon*

Source: M. Blacksell, K. Economides, and C. Watkins (1991) *Justice Outside the City*. Longman, London, p. 109.
Reproduced with permission of Pearson Education.

rather contradictory concept, but clear evidence of the crisis facing the
CABx and other voluntary services (Blacksell and Phillips, 1994).

Nevertheless, in his review of 2002–3, David Harker, the Chief Executive
of Citizens Advice, proclaimed confidently that: 'A strong civic society
needs a CAB' (Citizens Advice, 2003) and the service illustrates vividly
the key contribution that the voluntary sector makes to the governance
of society. The difficulties facing the CAB as a service dependent on
volunteers also reveal the dangers of relying on it too much: if the
volunteers are not forthcoming in a particular area, for whatever reason,
then the service cannot be provided; the struggle for funding always
threatens the scope of the service; and offering the service completely
free, although it enhances access in one respect, is also a restriction,
because it means that those using the service have no direct control over
whether or not it is available.

Political parties

Political parties are the ultimate pressure groups, seeking to become the government, or at the very least have a share in it. They are the oil that enables the political process to function smoothly. Although public representation and regular elections are essential for democracy, they are rendered largely meaningless in the absence of organised political parties. Indeed they have been described as 'the primary institutions of representative democracy' (Dalton, 1988, p. 127).

People view political parties as the main agency through which they can influence government. At election time, parties are central to the whole process and governments rely on their support for retaining power. In societies new to democracy, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s after the collapse of Communism, the creation or re-establishment of a range of different parties to replace the tyranny of the one-party state was one of the most pressing tasks in the process of social reconstruction (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995).

Political parties must, therefore, reflect all the different views in society, while at the same time simplifying and consolidating them, so that a degree of order can emerge. They have, therefore, been at the forefront of the struggle in Europe to achieve evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. When political parties have been weak, as in the short-lived and ill-fated Weimar Republic in Germany between 1919 and 1933, or in the former Yugoslavia after the death of Josip Broz (Marshall Tito) in 1980, totalitarianism has tended to have the upper hand. When they have been strong, as in most of Western Europe since the middle of the twentieth century, they have generally been a creative and positive force, underpinning political stability (Blacksell, 1998).

Most political parties never succeed in forming a government, though all probably dream of the possibility, and see their main role as representing different shades of opinion to government. Historically, many have little success in doing even this, acting as no more than a safety valve for specific groups and interests, though as societies have become ever better educated and sophisticated, minority parties have developed increasingly effective means of making their voices heard and ensuring that their agendas are incorporated into government policy.

The influence of political parties is by no means always viewed by governments as benign and action to ban them is a regular, if infrequent, occurrence. The right-wing Socialist Reich Party (SRP) and the

Communist Party (KPD) have been banned in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1952 and 1956 respectively, because they are seen as being hostile to the *Grundgesetz*, the German Constitution. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin, the nationalist party that campaigns for a unified and independent Ireland, has been banned in the past for its advocacy of violence and the force of arms to achieve its political ends. Similar restrictions have been imposed by the Spanish government on ETA, the military wing of the Basque nationalist party, Herri Batasuna, and by the French government on the FLNC, the Corsican independence party, and there are many other examples.

Outlawing political parties is, however, no panacea. If a banned party actually commands substantial public support, it can become a vehicle for revolution and the overthrow of the established political order. The 1917 Revolution in Russia saw the Communist Party move directly from illegality to power and the consequences of that lesson have not been lost since on governments elsewhere in the world. They ignore the force of public opinion at their peril and, where outlawed political parties are steadily gaining support, ways and means are almost always found to modify policy and incorporate them into the political mainstream, though sometimes with disastrous results, as in Germany with the Nazi Party between the two world wars.

Regionalism and political parties

The most striking feature of the way in which political parties are organised is the extent to which they are tied to national boundaries. Every country has its own collection of parties, the majority of which have at best very weak links beyond its frontiers. Equally, the realities of power mean that unless parties aspire to achieving a national mandate they will be consigned either to opposition, or to a relatively minor supporting role in government. Nevertheless, regionalism in party politics is important for two reasons. The first is that party popularity is frequently uneven across a national jurisdiction and, although a party may not be part of the government, it is perceived as representing particular regional interests. The second is that parties are often formed specifically to represent and promote a regional minority.

The effects of uneven national support for political parties in Italy, especially after the electoral reform that preceded the 1994 elections, show that only the socialist PDS (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*) and

the newly formed *Forza Italia* were truly national parties (Agnew, 1996). All the other significant players depended heavily on regional power bases, tainting their credentials as guardians of the national interest. The most obviously regional of these minority parties is the Northern League (*Liga Nord*), which was formed in 1991 by amalgamating a number of small parties in the north of Italy, but the National Alliance (*Alleanza Nationale*) also has a clear regional focus, being heavily concentrated in the *Mezzogiorno* to the south of Rome. The astonishing success of *Forza Italia* in 1994, when it emerged from nowhere to seize power, was based largely on the way its leader, Silvio Berlusconi, managed to forge workable electoral alliances with both the Northern League and the National Alliance, thus bolstering support in those areas where it was weakest (Agnew, 1997). Nor was this success just a flash in the pan; despite losing popularity and power in the late 1990s, it won back power and again formed a national government in 2001.

It is always difficult to encompass the full gamut of regional minorities, even those that are sufficiently organised to have a political party to represent their interests. The main stumbling block is the enormous variation in the internal organisation of central states themselves. In Europe, there is at one extreme the case of Switzerland, where decentralisation to *canton* level is such that the national government has only limited power and the main rivalries are between the *cantons* themselves. At the other, in the UK for example, where there is heavy emphasis on central decision-making, regional dissatisfaction is very much more pronounced.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Figure 6.5 attempts to depict those areas where regional parties have gained significant political power in Europe. In a few cases they have managed to forge an alliance with a national party and have created a genuine national power base, the outstanding example of such manoeuvring being the alliance between the Christian Socialist Union (CSU) in Bavaria and the national CDU. This has endured for more than half a century and the only other alliance approaching this success is the Northern League in Italy, though it is nowhere near the secure position achieved by the CDU/CSU coalition in Germany.

More commonly, regional parties prefer to act more as pressure groups for change. In Belgium, a country chronically divided by both religion and language, both the Flemish majority in the north and the French-speaking Walloon minority in the south have their own nationalist
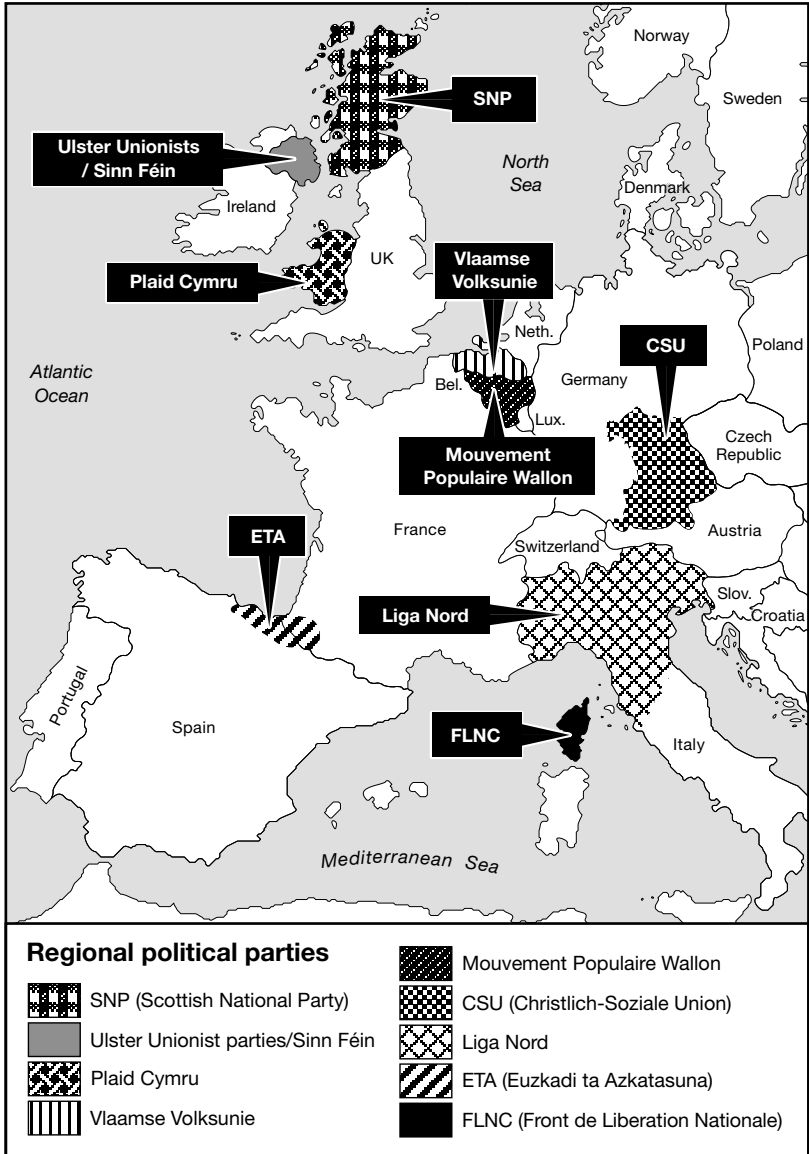
Figure 6.5 *Regional political parties in Europe*

Source: T. Unwin (1998) *A European Geography.* Longman, Harlow, p. 123. Reproduced with permission of Pearson Education.

parties. In the early years of the twentieth century, Flemish separatism was much more strident in the face of French domination of the education system and the civil service, but since the 1950s they have used their majority steadily to turn the tables. In terms of both the economy and society, the Flemish north is very much in the ascendancy and its regional party, *Vlaamse Volksunie*, is in relative abeyance. By contrast, the Walloons in the south are represented by several regional parties, all of which have, or have had, elected members in the national parliament in Brussels. The most important is the *Mouvement Populaire Wallon*, founded in 1961, but has subsequently been joined by the *Partie Wallon des Travailleurs*, the *Front Commun Wallon*, the *Front Démocratique des Francophones*, and the *Rénovation Wallonne* (Lorwin, 1966).

The European Parliament

Despite the dynamism of economic integration in Europe, not to mention cooperation in defence matters and social affairs, it is surprising that party politics have remained somewhat uncompromisingly national. Nevertheless, there are broader trends and slowly they are becoming a more significant element in the political landscape. The touchstone for this has been the European Parliament, which for all its historical constitutional weakness is gradually growing in importance (Bardi, 1996). Partly this is simply a reflection of the growth in membership of the EU itself. The original six signatories had a combined population of over 190 million, but with twenty-five countries it now embraces 457 million people. It also, however, reflects a change of status. Initially the members of the forerunner of the European Parliament were appointed by member states, but since 1979 six successive direct elections, the most recent in 2004, have considerably enhanced its stature, even though its powers are still very limited in comparison with those of national parliaments and there are still widespread complaints of a 'democratic deficit' at the heart of the EU (Lodge, 1991 and 1996) (Box 6.2).

The most recent elections for the European Parliament were held in 2004, returning 732 MEPs from the twenty-five member states, the number from each depending on the size of its population (Figure 6.6). The parliament incorporates 171 different political parties and for it to be a workable institution, it has had to align itself into larger, simplified groupings. Seven major clusters have emerged, the largest being the

Box 6.2

The European Parliament, 2004

Since the elections in June 2004, the European Parliament has had 732 Members elected in the twenty-five states in the EU for a five-year term of office. Most of the time, the Parliament and the MEPs are based in Brussels where its specialist committees meet to scrutinise proposals for new EU laws. For one week a month the Parliament meets in Strasbourg in full plenary session to amend and vote on draft legislation and policy. The headquarters of the Parliament's civil service is located in Luxembourg, though many of its officials are based in Brussels.

In addition to their growing role as legislators, MEPs approve the appointment of the European Commission, decide the EU budget with member states, monitor spending, approve international agreements, question EU Commissioners, and appoint the European Ombudsman. Citizens have the right to petition the European Parliament.

MEPs do not sit in national delegations in the Parliament, but in multinational political groups. The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the European Democrats, which includes the British Conservatives, is the largest political group. British Labour MEPs belong to the Party of European Socialists, the second biggest group. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), where the largest national contingent is from the UK, is the third biggest, closely followed by the Green/European Free Alliance which has brought together Green MEPs from 13 countries, including Britain's two Green members, and nationalist parties, including Plaid Cymru and the SNP.

British members elected for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) joined the Independence and Democracy Group. The other groups are the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, which brings together the Left and Green members from a number of countries, including France, Greece, and Italy; and the Union for Europe of the Nations. There is also a small non-aligned group whose members sit as independents.

EPP–ED Group (European People's Party – the Christian Democrats – and the European Democrats) with 268 members on the political right, and the PES (European socialist parties) with 200 members on the left. In the centre sits the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) with 88 members. There are then smaller groups on both the right and left wings of the political spectrum, including the Green–European Free Alliance and the Independent Democrats, both of which are left of centre, as well as 29 completely non-aligned members.
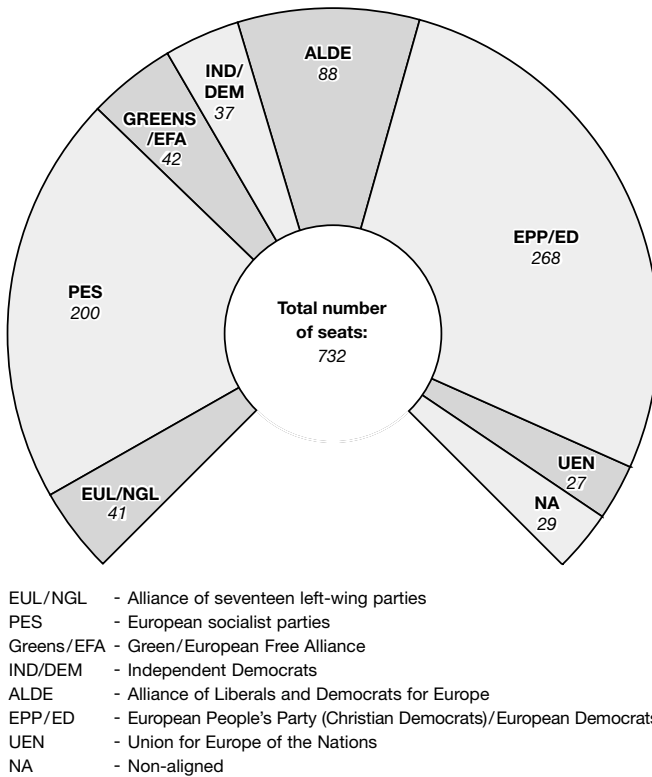
EUL/NGL   - Alliance of seventeen left-wing parties
PES   - European socialist parties
Greens/EFA - Green/European Free Alliance
IND/DEM   - Independent Democrats
ALDE   - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
EPP/ED   - European People's Party (Christian Democrats)/European Democrats
UEN   - Union for Europe of the Nations
NA   - Non-aligned

Figure 6.6 *Membership of the European Parliament, 2004*

The European Parliament, in common with all those in other parts of the world where there is a large number of parties represented and a governing majority has to be fashioned through negotiation and bargaining, only gels as a governing force after the elections themselves are over. The various national parties all campaign on national issues during the elections with little reference to the eventual structure of the parliament itself. Producing an effective democratic force out of such a complex mix of interests is thus extremely difficult, though if the experience of most national parliaments is taken as a guide, then there will be a process of gradual amalgamation over time and the tentative party groupings will steadily become more formalised. If this does not happen, then the parties are poorly placed to exercise power and there is a danger that their national electorates might become disillusioned and either desert them for one of their better organised competitors, or search for other, perhaps violent, ways of making their voices heard.

Key themes and further reading

Formal government and its structures are only one aspect of states; civil society provides an essential interface between people and government. Such pressure groups take many forms and embrace many causes. One of the most important, with close links to several aspects of geography, is environmentalism, which is represented at all levels in society, from international NGOs, to local groups campaigning about very specific issues. Appreciation of the role of voluntary bodies of all kinds in sustaining social cohesion is essential. Some social movements, over time, broaden their political base and become formal political parties, Green parties being a recent case in point. The role of political parties at the regional, national, and international levels as channels for reflecting public attitudes in government should be clearly understood.

The nature and workings of civil society is such a broad topic that there are any number of good, but very different, introductions to it. However, a very clear and well-argued analysis is provided by John Urry (1981) in *The Anatomy of Capitalist Societies*. Environmentalism is likewise a broad church, but one to which geographers have contributed much more fully and directly. By far the most thorough and thought-provoking treatment of the subject is *Environmentalism* by Tim O'Riordan (1981). The role of law and voluntary organisations in civil societies is discussed by the author, together with Kim Economides and Charles Watkins in *Justice Outside the City* (1991).