CHAPTER 5

Public relations and democracy

Introduction

'Government of the people, by the people, for the people' was US President Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy. Democracy is now taken for granted over much of the modern world, although for nearly all states it is relatively recent, fragile and imperfect. Throughout recorded history, a single ruler (monarchy or dictatorship) or rule by a privileged few has been far more common. The growth of public relations has been linked to the growth of democracy, as the need arose to communicate persuasively with voters. Today, political communications is an important aspect of public relations work, some of which is described in Chapter 23. Public relations activity is often particularly scrutinised during election campaigns, providing many useful insights into the links between public relations and democracy.

Democracy emerged gradually in some countries (e.g. Sweden, the UK and the USA), more suddenly and dramatically in others. It was only the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that enabled the peoples of eastern Europe behind the 'iron curtain' to throw off communist dictatorship and establish (or re-establish) democracy. It was only in 1990 that Nelson Mandela was released from his long imprisonment and South Africa began the transition from white minority rule and the racist system of apartheid to a democracy representing all its peoples.

Most states today claim to be democratic, sometimes in their official titles, more commonly in written constitutions. Yet the extent of real democracy in the modern world is contentious. There are different interpretations of democracy (Held 1996) and different views over the extent of real power and influence that ordinary people have over the

decisions that affect them. The word democracy comes from ancient Greek, and means literally 'rule of the people'. A form of democracy was practised in the fifth and fourth centuries BC in Athens, where the citizens assembled together to decide on major public issues, including peace and war. This 'direct democracy' was feasible in relatively small city-states, but hardly practical in the more extensive empires or nation-states of later periods. How could the people rule themselves in such circumstances? The answer to this question was apparently provided with the development of representative democracy over the last two centuries. Rather than govern themselves, the people at periodic intervals elect representatives to govern for them. As governments are subject to re-election, they have (in theory) to pursue the interests of the majority rather than their own interests. Yet the majority can only exercise that power effectively if they have some knowledge of government and public affairs. Democracy, more than any other political system, presumes an effective two-way flow of communication between governors and governed, between those entrusted with immediate responsibility for key decisions and for the delivery of public services, and the wider public who supposedly wield ultimate power. Good public relations can make an important contribution to this process.

This chapter will explore the theoretical and practical implications of varieties of democracy for political communication and public relations. It will seek to identify key democratic institutions and processes within modern multilevel systems of governance. It will examine the opportunities of citizens to influence and actively participate in decision making and the role of good public relations in assisting the democratic process, promoting effective communication between governors and governed. It will also highlight some of the conflicts of loyalty, interests and responsibility that can arise for the professional communicator.

Conditions for representative democracy

There are some essential conditions that any representative democracy worthy of the name must meet. These include:

- regular elections
- a universal franchise – all adults have a right to vote
- secret ballot – to ensure voting is free from intimidation and bribery
- an effective choice of candidates, parties and potential alternative governments, competing on a fair and equal basis
- fair elections – each vote should, as far as possible, count equally
- freedom of speech and expression through free and diverse media to enable voters to make an effective choice based on knowledge of the issues and arguments.

Most of these conditions are largely met in well-established modern representative democracies. Virtually all adults have the right to vote regularly and in secret. They normally have a choice of candidates and parties, although that choice may be relatively limited. Elections are fair in the sense that they are generally free from the grosser forms of ballot rigging and fraud. However, some electoral systems, such as the 'first-past-the-post' system used in the USA and the UK, may be considered unfair as they do not offer each party a proportion of elected representatives roughly equivalent to their share of the vote. Most countries now use other electoral systems, involving more proportional representation (Denver 2002), and such systems have recently been introduced in the UK, but not for elections to Westminster to form the national government (Curtis 2003; Leach 2004) (see Box 5.1).

While the right to free speech is formally guaranteed in modern democratic states this does not ensure a full and well-informed public debate. Ownership and control of the mass media is highly concentrated and the range of views expressed is relatively limited and often highly partisan (as noted in the last chapter). A much wider range of political information and views is now available on the internet, but this has had only a relatively limited impact on the political attitudes and behaviour of the masses so far, although it has proved very useful to minority interests and causes and some extremist groups. (For discussion on political e-communication, see pp. 84 below.) Faced with an unreliable mass media, politicians, parties and those responsible for delivering public services have always sought to get their own message across, but this raises some legal and ethical issues (see

Voting systems: key terms

First past-the-post (simple plurality)

Under this electoral system, individual representatives are elected by winning more votes than any other candidate in each electoral area (or constituency) but do not need a majority of the total vote. The system is simple, helps establish good links between elected members and their constituencies and generally delivers strong governments with clear parliamentary majorities. Yet such majorities may be won with a minority of the total vote and the system penalises smaller parties, particularly those whose support is dispersed over the country as a whole rather than concentrated in certain areas. Thus some argue it is unfair.

Proportional representation

An electoral system that gives political parties a share of seats closely proportional to their share of the total vote. Such systems include regional party list systems (e.g. as used in elections for the European Parliament), the single transferable vote (as used in Ireland) and the additional member system (as used in Germany, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly). Proportional representation is often linked with a multiparty system and coalition government.

below). Moreover, attempts by politicians and their advisers to put their own selective interpretation (or 'spin') on news stories has sometimes proved counterproductive, leading to some public cynicism and distrust of government, discussed later in this chapter.

Criticisms of modern democracy

There are other, more fundamental, criticisms of modern democracy. Most of the formal conditions outlined above relate to elections, implying that this is the essence of democracy. Some argue that placing a cross on a piece of paper every four or five years does not amount to real democracy, which should enable people to participate more directly and fully in the political process and to influence decisions that affect them (Pateman 1970).

In many countries there is some scope for more direct citizen participation. Several countries, such as Australia, Denmark, France and Switzerland make regular use of referendum on particular issues, particularly constitutional reform or moral issues, such as abortion. In the USA, some states (e.g. California) allow voters by their own initiative to put issues (such as taxation or the legalisation of cannabis) on ballot papers (Hague and Harrop 2001; Game 2004). Many countries have sought to extend citizen or consumer participation in the delivery of public services (see Lowndes et al. 1998, 2001, for initiatives in UK local government). It can prove difficult to persuade people to become involved, perhaps because of the costs in time and energy or perhaps, as some critics

complain, the participation offered is little more than token. However, direct citizen involvement may also contribute to the erosion of representative democracy by giving too much influence to active minorities, self-appointed spokespersons and unelected organisations at the expense of the elected representatives chosen by the majority (Skelcher 1998; Weir and Beetham 1999) (see Activity 5.1).

Democracy implies political equality; each person's voice should count equally. It also assumes that the view of the majority will prevail. Not everyone agrees that this is the case in practice. While *pluralists* suggest that power and influence is relatively widely dispersed,

activity 5.1

Encouraging participation

You are a public relations officer advising on a campaign to encourage parents of pupils to become more involved in the affairs of their school, or patients to participate in decision making on local health services.

What would you propose? What do you think might be the obstacles to the success of such a campaign to encourage more participation? Is there any risk that some voices may not be heard?

Feedback

The starting point is research. This is needed to find out what might enable people to become more involved and what currently prevents their doing so. Possible obstacles to the success of a campaign will be perceptions: that only the voices of the 'powerful' will count; that minority opinions will make no difference; and that public meetings will be held at times when only people with time to spare, and the means to get there, can attend.

elitists argue that it is in fact highly concentrated even in supposedly democratic states.

> **Definition:** *Pluralists* suggest that power and influence are widely dispersed in modern democracies, not just by the right to vote and checks and balances in the political system, but more particularly through the activities and effective influence of countless freely competing pressure groups.

> **Definition:** *Elitists* argue that real political power is effectively concentrated in the hands of an elite few (perhaps an ethnic group or educated minority or big business), who dominate the decision-making process.

There is a long-running debate about the relationship between democracy, on the one hand, and capitalism and free markets on the other. While *Marxists* have long argued that real democracy is impossible in a capitalist system where income and wealth are concentrated in the hands of a dominant class, others (sometimes called *neoliberals*) argue by contrast that democracy and free markets go hand in hand (Downs 1957). To them the real threat to democracy comes from politicians and public officials ('bureaucrats') who seek to increase state intervention, public spending and taxation, thus restricting the free choice of individual consumers and producers (Niskanen 1971, 1973). Indeed, it is often alleged (fairly or otherwise) that effective power is in the hands of 'bureaucrats' (civil servants, local government officers or other appointed officials; or '*quangos*' – such as arts or cultural bodies – rather than the elected representatives of the people) (see Think about 5.1).

> **Definition:** *Marxists* accept the analysis of Karl Marx (1818–1883) that political power reflects economic power. Thus the masses cannot have real power when income and wealth are highly concentrated in the hands of the few (e.g. in capitalist economies).

> **Definition:** *Neoliberals* believe democracy and free market capitalism are mutually dependent and that both are threatened by the growth of state intervention and bureaucracy (the rule of public officials in their own interests).

> **Definition:** *Quango* is an acronym standing for quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation. In practice quangos are appointed (rather than elected) public bodies. Examples in the UK include the Health and Safety Commission, Learning and Skills Councils, Primary Care Trusts.

Majority rule, even if it is a reality, can present problems for minorities. Democracy assumes that conflicts can be resolved by debate and compromise and that minorities can become majorities if their arguments are sufficiently persuasive. Yet where communities are deeply divided on ethnic, linguistic or religious grounds, there may be permanent minorities who are effectively second-class citizens, excluded from many of the benefits enjoyed by the majority. In such circumstances, minority groups may opt out of democratic politics, using other methods (sometimes including violence) to promote their interests (see Activity 5.2).

It does no service to democracy to ignore some of its serious shortcomings in practice. Political realities fall short of the democratic ideal. Power and influence are unevenly distributed. Public servants may not always serve the public interest. The public itself may be ignorant and apathetic. Minorities can face discrimination. Yet, as the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once observed: 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms of government that have been tried from time to time' (speech, *Hansard* 11 November, 1947, col. 206). Whatever the deficiencies of democracy, the alternatives, as Churchill noted, are worse. Good public relations may help this 'least bad' form of government to conform more closely to democratic ideals, particularly by improving the quantity and quality of two-way communication between the people and their elected governors.

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think about 5.1   **Influencing political decision making**

Is modern representative democracy really government 'of the people, by the people for the people'? How much influence do ordinary people have over decisions that affect them? Is political power largely concentrated in the hands of the few or relatively widely dispersed, as pluralists suggest? What evidence might be cited in support of either view?

Feedback Look at election turnout figures. In the Iraqi national elections of 2005, 60% of the population voted. Just fewer than 60% voted in the UK national elections of 2001. In the UK, a large number of people do not vote – especially young people and black minorities. During local elections in the UK, turnout is sometimes lower than 30% (see also Table 5.1 on European elections). By way of contrast, people can make their voices heard in other ways, such as a group of mothers campaigning to introduce traffic-calming measures around their local school.

Minority groups and politics

Can you think of any examples of minorities opting out of democratic politics? Why do they act in this way?

Feedback

Young people and black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are examples in the UK. There might be similar trends in your own country. Being registered to vote is essential in exercising the *right* to vote but there may be many reasons why some people's names are not on the electoral register – including ignorance, inefficiency (having moved house), alienation from the political system or fears about how the register will be used. Not voting may be due to a number of reasons: disillusion ('it makes no difference who wins'); lack of interest in politics; a lack of knowledge about politics; and a view that voting is too time consuming (Electoral Commission 2002a; 2002b).

What would you do to encourage these groups to participate in the democratic process?

Elections and voting

While democracy is not just about elections, they remain crucial to modern representative democracy. The Ukrainian elections in 2004 saw the national elections rerun after mass demonstrations challenged the validity of the incumbent president's re-election. Amid accusations that elections had been rigged and that the opposition party leader had been poisoned (together with visible evidence that he had quickly developed a serious skin condition) the outcome was the majority election of the opposition party.

Elections can matter a great deal. They can change governments, with significant implications for policies. Thus the unexpected socialist victory in the Spanish elections of 2004 led to the withdrawal of Spanish soldiers from the Iraq War. Some elections mark a watershed in a country's history. The result of American presidential elections can have massive implications for the wider world.

But there is a threat to modern representative democracy from public apathy and alienation. Democracy demands involvement in public affairs (see also Chapter 23). In many modern democracies there is a pattern of declining interest and involvement in politics, even in the most simple and limited form of political participation – voting. It was not always so. In most countries the right to vote for whole categories of the population was only conceded after a long struggle. It was therefore highly prized (see Box 5.2, overleaf).

To Mkhondo, the vote involved 'a voice' in his country's affairs, membership of the 'congregation'

PICTURE 5.1   Supporters of Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko. (*Source:* Jeremy Nicholl/Alamy.)

Eye witness account of the first post-apartheid election in South Africa in 1994

Voting in my township began with whistles by the men, ululations by women, and a three quarter hour wait to end apartheid and usher in democracy. As a thirty-eight-year-old black South African, I had never until today had any voice in the affairs of my country. I awoke at 5 a.m. to be in the front seat of history. It was like getting ready for baptism as a new congregation member. Hours later, tense and excited while inscribing a long denied 'X' on the ballot paper, it was like a heady first romance. It ended what once seemed an impossible journey . . . my dignity and self-worth had finally been restored.

Source: Rich Mkhondo, quoted in Marr 1996: 22

and full citizenship, 'dignity and self-worth'. The suffragettes who campaigned for votes for women in the UK and other countries felt similarly. Yet the 'heady first romance' with the ballot box has worn off. Austria, France, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the UK are among countries that have suffered a decline in turnout of over 10% in national elections over the last half century, with most of the fall occurring recently (Hague and Harrop 2001). Less than half of the American electorate have bothered to vote in some recent presidential elections, although turnout rose to 60% in the close contest of 2004.

Turnout in elections for other levels of government such as local councils can be much lower. In the elections for the European Parliament in 2004, turnout levels were abysmally low, both among some established EU states, such as France, Germany and the UK, but also among some countries that had only recently enthusiastically endorsed EU membership (see Table 5.1). The only countries with a high turnout were those where voting was compulsory (e.g. Belgium).

Turnout levels may be improved by using modern communication techniques, including better publicity for elections (see Chapter 7). A generation familiar with text messaging, interactive television and online shopping may find marking a cross with a pencil on paper in some remote hall or schoolroom used as a polling station both old-fashioned and inconvenient. Some countries, such as the USA, have long used voting machines, although these can create problems as the 2000 presidential election demonstrated, particularly in the state of Florida, where many votes were not recorded, leading to the result being challenged in the US Supreme Court. In the UK, there have been experiments with other methods of recording votes, using the telephone or internet, although to date 'e-voting' has made less difference than extending postal voting (see Activity 5.3).

activity 5.3

E-voting

Can you think of any groups that would benefit from e-voting? Try making a list of different groups and the effects e-voting may have on them.

Feedback
The disabled are one group who might benefit from e-voting. However, accessibility to websites for some disabled people is a barrier and postal voting is the preferred choice for this group (Scope 2002).

TABLE 5.1   Turnout for selected countries for the European Parliament elections, 2004

Country	Turnout level	Notes
Belgium	90.8%	Compulsory voting
France	43.1%	
Germany	43.0%	
United Kingdom	38.2%	Improvement on 23% in 1999
Sweden	37.2%	
Estonia	26.9%	New EU member state
Poland	20.4%	New EU member state
Slovakia	16.7%	Lowest turnout in EU for this new member

think about 5.2   Personal voting

Did you vote in the most recent elections in which you were entitled to vote? If not, why not? If you did, how did you feel about it? How might higher turnout be encouraged? Is there a role for public relations in improving electoral participation and, if so, how?

It is sometimes argued that the introduction of pro-portional representation (see above) would encourage higher turnout, as voters would be more confident that their vote could make a real difference. Yet although proportional representation may make the system fairer, there is little evidence that it boosts turnout (e.g. in elections in the UK for the European Parliament, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly). Indeed, some systems make voting more complicated and confusing and may discourage participation. New systems require effective communication to explain the reasons for change and provide clear guidance to voters over how to register their preferences. Here there is a clear role for public relations in providing information on voting options to the electorate (see Think about 5.2).

Democracy is, or should be, about more than just voting, which is the easiest and most basic form of political participation open to the ordinary citizen. Only a small minority who are actively involved in local community organisations or campaigning groups belong to political parties. Such public apathy not only reduces the legitimacy of governments but also undermines the vitality of democracy itself.

Elections and political parties

If electoral choice is central to our modern concep-tion of democracy, political parties lie at the heart of electoral choice. For some, parties involve everything they find distasteful in politics. They appear divisive,

magnifying differences, sometimes seeming to oppose each other for the sake of it. Politicians infu-riate by sticking to the party line, refusing to admit their own side has ever done anything wrong or their opponents anything right. Indeed, it is often sug-gested that particular issues should be 'taken out of politics', meaning party politics. Perhaps we could manage without parties. Why cannot voters just choose the best men and women for the job and the best policies, regardless of party labels?

Yet political parties have developed in just about every modern representative democracy, which sug-gests we cannot do without them. Indeed, competi-tion between parties has become almost a defining condition of modern democracy (see Box 5.3).

Today, not all these functions are fully met. Thus, the choice offered by parties can be quite narrow, particularly in those countries such as the USA and the UK which still use the first-past-the-post electoral system (see above). This has tended to create and maintain a two-party duopoly of Republicans and Democrats in the USA, Conservative and Labour in the UK (although here other parties have more re-cently made headway). In other countries, a number of parties may be represented in the national parlia-ment or assembly, but often the effective choice of a government is between two broad coalitions. Thus in Germany since the Second World War, choice has gen-erally been between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, although both these parties have generally needed support from smaller parties such as the Free Democrats or Greens to form a government.

box 5.3   Functions of parties in modern democracies

- *Political choice* – parties are the main means by which voters are given an effective choice between dif-ferent teams of leaders and between different policy programmes and principles.
- *Political recruitment* – parties recruit, select and train people for political office.
- *Political participation* – parties provide a chance for ordinary citizens to participate in the political process; members choose candidates and may influence party policy.
- *Reconciling interests* – a successful party must represent a range of interests, classes and communities, and seek a balance between conflicting interests.
- *Communication* – parties provide a two-way channel of communication between political leaders and people.
- *Accountability and control* – because successful parties take responsibility for exercising power (at var-ious levels) it is chiefly through parties that governments are held to account by the public.

Some of the other functions of parties are effectively weakened by a widespread decline in active party membership from a peak in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, parties no longer offer a significant channel for political participation for most people. However, party leaders cannot afford to ignore their dwindling active membership, if only for fear of losing the valuable support that members provide, particularly at elections. Yet if they listen to their members they may risk alienating the broad mass of voters, as party activists are often untypical of ordinary voters, both in their social background and in their political views. The UK Conservative Party has recently suffered from the policy preferences of its elderly members who do not resemble the electorate. Similarly, in the USA both major parties have sometimes chosen candidates and policies which delighted their own activists but alarmed voters.

Parties need to put themselves and their message across effectively if they are to be successful and many seek professional advice from advertising agencies and public relations consultants.

Although voter choice has been extensively studied, there are still hotly contested theories of electoral behaviour. Some argue that voters choose at the ballot box in much the same way as consumers choose in the marketplace; indeed there is an economic theory of democracy based on that assumption (Downs 1957). Political marketing may, therefore, have much in common with the marketing of goods and services. Many voters remain loyal to particular parties, just as many consumers stick with familiar brands of goods, with relatively few changing their allegiance between elections. Often a marked correlation can be observed between party support and various social indicators (such as occupational class, region or age in the UK, religion, language or ethnicity in some other countries). More recently the electorate in many countries has become more volatile, with more 'swing' voters influenced by issues, particularly economic performance. Winning elections may involve first identifying and then persuading these potential swing voters. In the UK, the 'grey vote' or over-55s, whose concerns include pensions, the health service and the economy, are more likely to vote than younger people (Age Concern 2005), but their decision on which party to vote for might be delayed until election day itself. Some of the same considerations apply to the promotion of parties as with marketing any good or service, as one pioneering study recognised a century ago:

Nothing is more generally useful than the party colour . . . A party tune is equally automatic in its action . . . Only less than automatic than those of colour and tune come the emotional associations called up by the first and simplest meaning of the word or words used for the party name . . . From the beginning of the existence and activity of a party, new associations are, however, being created which tend to take the place, in association, of the original meaning of the name. No-one in America, when he uses the terms Republican and Democrat thinks of their dictionary meanings . . . Long and precise names which make definite assertions as to party policy are therefore soon shortened into meaningless syllables with new associations derived from the actual history of the party. (Wallas 1908)

Much of this analysis applies today. Name and colour remain crucial in establishing the image of modern parties and in maintaining the loyalty of supporters. Party tunes can still stir emotions, but party emblems, symbols or logos seem more significant in modern political marketing. Some parties are associated with animals, birds or flowers, others with more abstract symbols (see Mini case study 5.1 and Activity 5.4).

Good public relations could, in theory, enable all parties to communicate more effectively with voters, thus improving the quality of political debate, assisting voters in making their choices and enhancing the democratic process. However, this ideal seems far removed from the promotion of parties today. Much party advertising, unlike commercial advertising, is unashamedly negative. It is commonly less concerned to communicate the values and polices of a party than to vilify and ridicule the opposition. Parties have long relied on such negative advertising, largely because it is believed to be effective, exploiting the fear factor – the dire consequences to personal and national prosperity should the other side 'get in'. It also offers fewer 'hostages to fortune' arising from party promises that prove difficult to deliver. Examples of negative campaigning include the UK Conservative Party poster of the Labour Party leader with 'devil's eyes' and, in the run up to the 2005 UK election, Labour Party posters showing the Conservative Party leader and shadow chancellor as flying pigs. This was seen as anti-Semitic, as both men are Jewish, although the Labour Party insisted it was only anti-Conservative (see Picture 5.2).

activity 5.4

Communicating political parties

Consider the names, colours and logos of UK political parties or of any other parties around the world with which you are familiar.

Feedback
How effective do you consider these to be in conveying the values of the party concerned?

Party political communication in action

The professional marketing of political parties has a long history, although not everyone approves of this activity. When the UK Conservatives employed the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi with notable success in the 1979 election campaign, their Labour opponents (who then distrusted advertising and marketing people) accused the Conservatives of selling politics like cornflakes or soap powder (Butler 1980; Worcester and Harrop 1982).

Yet Labour then was simply failing to get its message across, a lesson it subsequently learned, perhaps almost too well. Following further defeats, the party introduced a new red rose logo (in imitation of the French socialists) under the leadership of Neil Kinnock in the 1980s. Then, under Tony Blair, the party dropped its formal commitment to nationalisation in 1995 and was rebranded as 'New Labour' (but without a formal name change), which paid handsome electoral dividends in 1997 (Butler and Kavanagh 1997). Some old Labour stalwarts complained that New Labour was all marketing, with little substance.

A more striking example of party rebranding is provided by the Italian communists. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which heralded a general collapse of communism, the old Italian Communist Party (PCI) became the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), with an oak tree symbol. Subsequently, it moved further away from its communist roots, abandoning the hammer and sickle and combining with other centre-left parties in the Olive Tree Alliance. Yet, as with the Labour Party in the UK, some old party members objected to the transformation, and broke away to establish the *Rifondanzione Communista* or 'Refounded Communists'.

Source: Hellman (2000) in Kesselman and Krieger 2002: 484–486.

Yet if negative advertising works at one level, it may have a corrosive effect on faith in politicians, governments and even democracy itself. The pervasive negative message is that politicians are 'all the same' – incompetent, untrustworthy and 'sleazy'. Perhaps this is one reason for the apparent growth of political apathy and alienation. If those who advise parties cannot agree on some voluntary code of practice in their own promotional work (be it advertising or public relations) there may be a case for *watchdog* bodies (such as the Electoral Commission in the UK) to take a more proactive role in drawing up rules of acceptable party campaigning.
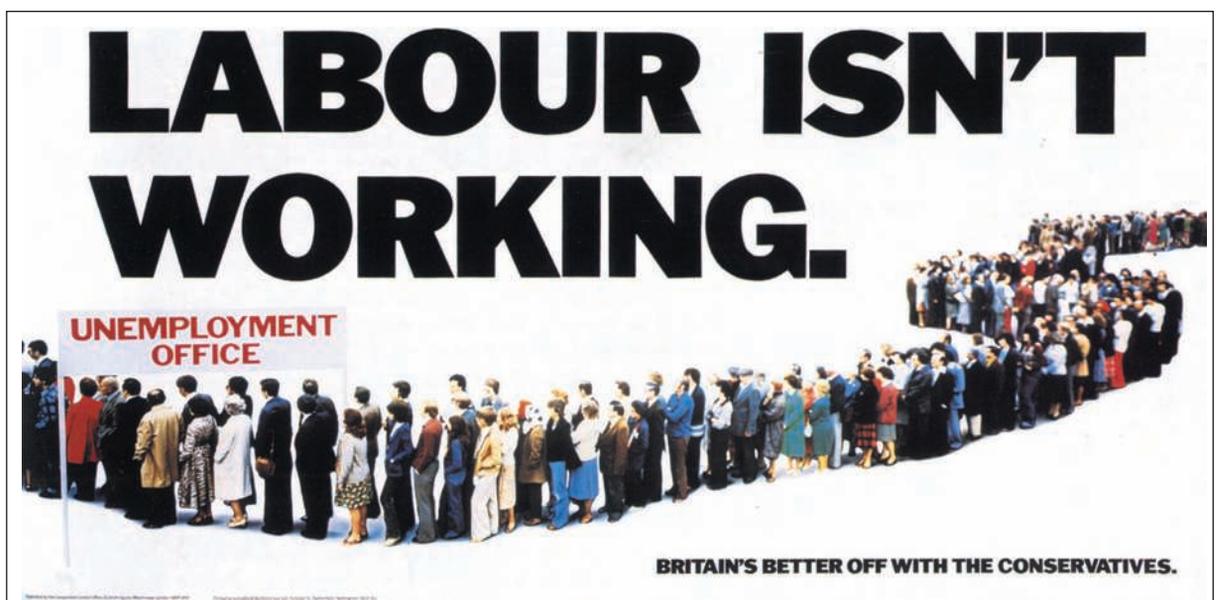
PICTURE 5.2   This poster, from the 1979 Conservative election campaign, is one of the most celebrated examples of effective negative political advertising. The image of a 'dole' (unemployment pay) queue reminds voters of rising unemployment under the then Labour Government. The brief slogan involves a double message. 'Labour (or the workers) are not working' and 'The Labour Government isn't working'. The positive message 'Vote Conservative' is relegated to a small-print sub-text. (*Source*: Advertising Archives.)

Definition: *Watchdog* is a term used to describe a body that monitors behaviour and activities in different sections of society to protect the consumer or citizen.

Pressure groups and democracy

If the role of parties in modern democracy has become more problematic, the contribution of *pressure groups* is now generally viewed positively. It was not always so. Such groups have sometimes been seen as sinister 'hidden persuaders', insidiously pushing the interests of unrepresentative and self-interested minorities and subverting the democratic processes of elections and representative assemblies. There is something in the criticism. Some political cultures (the French, for example) remain suspicious of the role of such groups in frustrating the will of the people. Americans, however, have tended to emphasise the crucial contribution of countless freely competing groups to the democratic process.

Definition: A *pressure group* may be any organised group that seeks to exert influence on government (at any level) to influence particular policies or decisions.

There is extensive literature on types of groups, tactics and behaviour (e.g. Grant 2000; Coxall 2001). This is explored later, in Chapter 29. Here we will concentrate on the contribution of pressure groups to democracy and the more general implications for public relations.

The role of pressure groups may be distinguished from political parties in the democratic process in that they do not normally contest elections, although it is a tactic occasionally employed. They seek influence rather than formal positions of power. Unlike parties, they do not aspire to form the government. Yet they can offer more extensive opportunities for public participation in the political process than elections or parties. Today, many more people are actively involved with groups than parties. Compared with the broad, blunt and occasional electoral process, group influence is often very specific, relating to particular causes, interests and decisions, and continuous rather than sporadic. The information, arguments and supporting evidence supplied by groups helps educate politicians and people. On many issues, groups representing opposed views and interests are in competition. All this can be said to contribute to the democratic process and improves the quality of decision making. In the USA, in particular, a pluralist theory of democracy built substantially around pressure group activity has developed to supplement the formal representative institutions process (Dahl 1961).

Critics suggest that while some interests, particularly business interests, are well resourced and influential, other interests including the poor, the sick, and consumer interests are relatively neglected. Some sections of the community are more actively involved than others. Pressure group bargaining favours better resourced and more easily organised interests. In practice, it is often group spokespersons, permanent staff and a small minority of dedicated activists who exert effective influence rather than the mass of members. Spokespersons are rarely elected and sometimes virtually self-appointed and may not speak for ordinary supporters to whom they are not fully accountable. In larger pressure groups, however, there may be an executive committee that oversees communication and campaigning. In most, communication is a central part of the pressure group's activities, whether that be running websites, organising media events such as scaling buildings or working behind the scenes to establish contact with decision makers. Whether they employ professional public relations staff or simply attract activists with good communication skills, how a pressure group presents itself to the wider public will be a critical aspect of its strategy. For example, some claim to speak for the 'silent majority', although that claim is difficult to validate as long as the majority remains silent!

More seriously, governments are rarely neutral arbiters. They ignore or reject some groups but listen to others, granting recognition and privileged 'insider' status. The most effective influence may be exerted in the 'corridors of power' out of public scrutiny. Indeed there may often be an inverse correlation between influence and noise – the more noise the less influence. Big public demonstrations may sometimes have less effect on policy than a quiet word in the right ear behind the scenes (see also Chapter 23 on the tactics employed by business and pressure groups in influencing or 'lobbying' governments).

All this is not to deny the immense value of pressure groups to democracy. Yet pressure groups are an important supplement to, rather than a substitute for, the formal democratic machinery of elections and representation. Elections can sometimes enable the wider public interest or the will of the majority to triumph over well-financed and well-organised minorities.

As groups are in the business of influencing decision makers, the media and the masses, public relations has much to contribute. Larger groups employ sympathetic and suitably qualified public relations staff. Such work can be hugely rewarding although it

can raise ethical issues. Groups are inevitably partisan, concerned with their own specific cause or interest, but some can be so narrowly committed that they become fanatical and intolerant of other interests or views. They may be prepared to ignore, suppress or distort evidence that does not suit their case. Such attitudes clearly present ethical problems for anyone professionally committed to a two-way symmetrical view of public relations (for further discussion on pressure group tactics, see Chapter 29) and even those following the advocate model, which is more appropriate for campaigning, still need to be conscious of ethical considerations.

Democracy and multilevel governance

Most modern democratic states are large and complex, spending two-fifths or more of total national income and employing directly or indirectly a similar proportion of the workforce. While the study of politics tends to focus on central government, national parliaments and ministers responsible for the direction of national policy, this is only a tiny part of the vast apparatus of government in the modern democratic state. Although some of the most important decisions affecting us are still taken by national governments, the process of modern governance involves many other levels (see Table 5.2). These include supranational bodies, such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union, and, at the sub-national level, regional, local and community government. Some of these levels may involve effective democratic control and accountability (e.g. elected regional assemblies and local councils), while others (e.g. most supranational institutions) may involve at best a measure of indirect democratic accountability or none at all (Rhodes 1997; Pierre and Peters 2000).

> **Definition:** *Multilevel governance* is a term that captures the complexity of modern government, which involves many layers or levels. 'Governance' emphasises the process of governing rather than the institutions of government. The term includes all those who contribute to public policy and the delivery of public services.

Although key parts of government are headed by elected politicians, these are heavily outnumbered by appointed public officials who both advise on policy and are largely responsible for implementing it. Thus there can be doubts over elected politicians' real con-

TABLE 5.2   Multilevel governance

Level	Examples
Global	World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund, United Nations
Continental	European Union, North American Free Trade Area, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
Nation-state	France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom
National/regional	German Länder (e.g. Bavaria), Scottish Parliament and executive, autonomous communities in Spain (e.g. Catalonia)
Local/community	Elected local councils (sometimes involving more than one level – e.g. counties, districts and parishes in parts of England)
Institutional/service	Governing bodies of schools, universities, hospitals (often appointed, but may have elected element)

trol over decision making. Which is really stronger, democracy or bureaucracy?

Furthermore, parts of government are not controlled directly by elected politicians or accountable to voters through the ballot box but involve appointed bodies (commonly termed 'quangos' in the UK – see the earlier definition in this chapter on p. 82). While there are sometimes good reasons for removing particular functions from the control of partisan politicians, the growth of the 'quango state' has aroused considerable criticism from across the political spectrum (Skelcher 1998).

It is not even always clear what exactly is government and what is not, as the public sector today often engages in partnerships with the private sector and works closely with the voluntary sector in a complex network of organisations. This complexity poses further problems for democratic accountability.

The larger, more complex and multi-layered government becomes, the more difficult it is to ensure real democratic accountability at the appropriate level. The delivery of public services requires an extensive local machinery of administration and many crucial decisions may be taken at institutional level, by appointed staff within individual schools and

hospitals, for example, with little effective local democratic accountability. While partnerships and networks enable many more people to participate actively in governance, they may blur lines of responsibility, so it is not clear who is really in charge. The sheer complexity of modern multilevel governance provides considerable problems of coordination. Unsurprisingly, there may appear to be a 'democratic deficit' in key institutions and processes.

For example, an academic report commissioned by a quango that criticised the way Scottish Water (a private utility company) communicates with its customers was itself 'suppressed', according to *The Scotsman* (16 August 2004, see http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/opinion.cfm?id=946522004).

The European Union is one very important supranational organisation which is sometimes accused of having a 'democratic deficit', not altogether fairly. The EU is a complex hybrid institution with both indirect accountability, through the governments of member states in the Council of Ministers, and more direct accountability through the elected European Parliament. It used to be argued that this Parliament had little influence over European laws and no effective control over the European Commission, the EU executive whose members are nominated by national governments. However, the European Parliament now has a greater say on legislation, while in October 2004 a substantial majority of Parliament refused to accept the proposed new European Commission and forced changes (see the EU website, www.europa.eu.int). The EU also conducts pan-European communication campaigns on issues such as health, workers' rights and giving up smoking (see Chapter 7 for details). For insight into the range of campaigns, look at the youth portal, www.europa.eu.int/youth/index_en.html

Public relations and modern democracy

Complex modern multilevel governance requires good communication, not least within and between the range of departments, organisations and agencies involved. And as Cutlip et al. (2000) suggest, effective democracy requires effective communication between citizens and government at all levels:

> In a very real sense, the purpose of democracy itself closely matches the purpose of public relations. Successful democratic government maintains responsive relationships with constituents, based on mutual understanding and two-way communication. (Cutlip et al. 2000: 448)

Citizens need full and accurate information on which to base their daily lives and ultimately assess a government's record. However, the presentation of government information and statistics (e.g. on taxation, crime, education and health) is often contentious. Government claims do not always match the public's own experience. Sections of the media and opposition parties frequently complain the figures are misleading and fail to give the true picture. Democracy is or should be a two-way process, giving multiple opportunities for members of the public to communicate their own interests and concerns to government at all levels, to influence and sometimes transform public policy.

Thus democracy requires open government and freedom of information, which provides massive opportunities but creates some problems for those engaged in public relations. The opportunities should be obvious: better communication between all parts of government and the publics they serve and better communication both within the public sector and between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Indeed an increasing number of public relations practitioners find themselves working directly for public sector organisations, for government departments, local councils or hospitals, while others employed by the private and voluntary sectors will have extensive dealings with the public sector at one level or another.

But there are inevitably some conflicts of loyalty and interest, particularly for those employed within the public sector (see Chapter 30). Although democracy implies that the ultimate loyalty should be the wider public interest, there are various stakeholders to consider – the public as voters and citizens, the public as taxpayers and funders of services, the public as service users. Although these categories clearly overlap, they are not identical. The interests of taxpayers (in lower taxes) and service users (in improved, better funded public services) may clearly conflict. (Meeting the communication needs of different stakeholders is explored more fully in Chapter 30.)

Furthermore, public relations staff are employed and paid by particular departments, agencies and services and this can lead to difficult ethical choices. The image and reputation of the employing organisation, such as a hospital, university or police force, may in practice loom larger than the wider public's 'right to know'. Crises may be managed in the interests of institutional damage limitation rather than what may be seen as the public interest.

Within organisations headed by elected politicians there may be further conflicts of loyalty. Many government departments and agencies devote escalating budgets and staffing to make the public aware of new initiatives, laws and benefits that affect them. Yet this necessary publicity for policies can sometimes become inextricably linked with the promotion of the

case study 5.1

Government communication: information or propaganda? Events leading to the Phillis Report (2004) in Britain

When Labour entered government in 1997 it brought in a team of special advisors headed by Press Secretary Alastair Campbell to direct their communication strategy. This led to some friction with the civil service, a more antagonistic relationship with the media and increased public distrust for government communication, which became associated in the public mind with 'spin', involving a partisan or distorted interpretation of news. Labour did not invent spin. It was practised, sometimes very effectively, by the previous Conservative government. Indeed, the activity (but not the term, which is a recent US import), is as old as politics. Media criticism of government 'spin' ignores the obvious point that the media also 'spin' news stories through their own selection, emphasis and interpretation. Yet criticism of Labour's news management understandably intensified after the publication of a leaked email from special advisor Jo Moore, suggesting that 9/11 was 'a good day to bury bad news'.

The ensuing scandal ultimately led to the resignation of Moore herself and the minister, Stephen Byers, who had unwisely stood by her. Yet it also raised wider questions about government information and communication that led to the appointment of an independent review, chaired by Bob Phillis. While the review was in progress, a massive political row over the government's use of intelligence information to justify the war with Iraq further dramatised some of the issues surrounding government communication and relations with the media.

The Phillis Report, published in January 2004, described low and diminishing public trust in both politicians and the media (particularly the press), with damaging consequences for public participation in the democratic process. Yet the report, while critical of government 'spin', substantially endorsed some of Labour's dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to communication in the civil service. There was 'a narrow view of communication . . . often limited to media handling'. Communication was 'not seen as a core function of the mainstream civil service'. The Government Information and Communication Service did not cover all those in communication, lacked resources and status and was defective in recruitment and training. There was poor coordination of communication across government departments and agencies. Despite the passing of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (effective in 2005), there was still a pervasive culture of secrecy that should be replaced by a culture of openness. There was a need for more direct two-way communication between government and the public. On the specific issue that had led to the review, the role of special advisors, the report acknowledged that they performed a useful role in modern government and were here to stay, but their relationship with the civil service required new guidelines which protected the principle of civil service impartiality.

Specific recommendations included:

- A redefinition of the role and scope of government communications, involving a 'continuous dialogue with all interested parties' and a 'broader range of skills', with the general public being the focus of attention (R1, p. 3).
- A strong central communications structure, headed by a new permanent secretary, Government Communications, to be head of profession, and provide strategic leadership for communications across government (this recommendation accepted following publication of an interim report in 2003) (R2, p. 3).
- Replacement of the Government Information and Communication Service by a new network including all those involved in communication activity, led by the new permanent secretary (R4, p. 3).
- Recruitment and training to raise professional standards and maintain civil service impartiality (R6, p. 4).
- New rules governing the conduct of special advisors and their relationship with civil servants (R7, p. 4).
- Effective implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, to end the culture of secrecy. 'The overriding presumption should be to disclose' (R8, p. 4).
- Clearer rules for the release of statistical information, which 'should be automatically, routinely and systematically made available'. There should be a new statute to control the publication of official statistics to restore public trust (R9, p. 4).
- More direct communication with the public, including televising daily briefings from the prime minister's office, with ministers and press officers answering questions (R10, p. 4) and better customer-driven online communication, involving a redesign of the central government website (R11, p. 5).

politicians and parties responsible for their introduction. Politicians in government naturally want their achievements to be projected in a positive light and may consider that the overriding allegiance of communications staff is to themselves, as the people's elected representatives. Sometimes politicians bring in their own party experts on temporary contracts to take charge of communication and this can lead to serious friction with permanent staff committed to a less partisan approach to publicity. One example is the news management associated with Britain's Labour government from 1997 onwards (see Case study 5.1 earlier).

The Phillis Report thus raises issues not just for the UK's Labour government but for government news management and media coverage of politics in all democracies. While democracy may depend on effective communication, not all communication is in the interests of government. Inevitably, there are stories and figures that a government would prefer to hide or play down, while there are successes that it would wish to emphasise. Opposition parties and interests and sections of the media just as naturally prefer to highlight government problems or failures and discount apparent successes. Even public servants, who may claim to serve the public interest impartially, are inevitably influenced by organisational, professional and personal interests that may not always coincide with the public interest. In addition, there are often fierce differences within public sector organisations, rather than a single impartial public service view. While the wider public want less partial sources of information, including statistics they can trust, information overload can prevent important messages getting through. Likewise, selection and simplification can lead to accusations of omission and distortion. While the Phillis Report is right to emphasise the crucial role of communication in modern democracy, and there is much good sense in its specific recommendations, there are few easy answers to some of the broader questions on which the report touches. These are the issues with which professional communicators will continue to wrestle.

Summary

This chapter has defined and discussed the broad context of democracy in which public relations operates. It has discussed systems of democracy, the role of elections, political parties and the different institutions of governance. It has identified, in particular, the problems facing modern democracies where people are not voting in large numbers and how effective public relations might encourage more people to take part in political decision making. Throughout we have raised issues for the public relations practitioner in both supporting the relationship between public institutions and voters, as well as interacting with these institutions from the vantage point of campaigning organisations. Finally, we have identified, through the case study of the Phillis Report, the issues of personal, professional and organisational allegiances that may conflict with serving the public interest in modern democracies.

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