

How To Do It

Run a pressure group and change the law

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My own experience of law reform is confined to a quarter of a century's work with a single political pressure group, the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA); what I have to say will inevitably be influenced by my experience with this particular cause, which I will draw on for examples to illustrate more general points.

First essentials

Three things are initially required; a clearly defined cause; a group of lively, intelligent, and committed people; and money—preferably lots of it.

A CLEARLY DEFINED CAUSE

The broad aim of ALRA in the early 'sixties when I joined it was clear and straightforward and could be understood without difficulty by everyone: to change the law to enable women to obtain legal and safe abortions more easily. Nevertheless, when a group of lively people get together they are bound to have some differences of opinion, interest, and emphasis. Thus, some of our members simply wanted to extend the medical indications for abortion; others were concerned to introduce social grounds for abortion; others were chiefly anxious to help women avoid giving birth to handicapped babies; while the more radical favoured abortion at the request of the patient. So a degree of consensus needs to be established. People must be prepared to compromise on acceptable minimum aims and to work as a team. Those who demanded too much or were satisfied with too little eventually dropped out or formed their own splinter groups. There is room for all opinions to be expressed, though not necessarily within the same organisation.

A LIVELY, COMMITTED, AND INTELLIGENT GROUP OF PEOPLE

These are the core and lifeblood of any political pressure group. They need to be intelligent in order to recognise the need for reform, to be able to translate it into political terms, and to argue and debate their case in public. They have to be committed because once they are attached to the cause their private lives may cease to exist for a number of years, as flexibility and the ability to seize the moment are of the essence in this kind of political activism. Political crises do not always occur at convenient moments. This means that spouses or partners must also be sufficiently committed to put up with a high degree of domestic disruption. Behind nearly every effective lobbyist there is a long suffering, unflappable, tolerant, and committed partner.

MONEY AND POWER

In this respect ALRA was largely a failure, as by comparison with the huge sums raised more recently by some religious and antifeminist pressure groups with national networks based on parishes, ALRA had no natural source of either organisation or money other than individual relatively low paid women and the occasional philanthropist—a rare bird indeed. We never solved the problem of money, as successful fundraisers are like gold dust and we were not the sort of fashionable cause likely to attract them. Money is power in politics. It enables you to print elegant, illustrated, easy on the eye literature with a distinctive house style, expounding your cause to many different types of reader. It enables you to take influential political figures out to lunch to put your case in civilised surroundings. It enables you to invite distinguished speakers from far and wide to add their experience to your own on public platforms. It enables you, the committed lobbyist, to travel round the country in reasonable comfort spreading the word, meeting influential supporters, cheering on the troops. It enables you to commission films aimed at a variety of audiences—medical students, women's clubs, schoolchildren, and so on. Lacking the necessary kind of resources and organisation, ALRA members could do only a little of any of this, and what they did do was generally undertaken at their own expense—hence the importance of commitment.

The second stage

Having defined the cause, gathered the core of the committee that will run the organisation, and collected such money as is available from well wishers, the next stage is to distribute the jobs.

WHO DOES WHAT

An effective chairman or woman must be elected who commands the total respect of the small group initially assembled, who is clear-sighted about the aims, shrewd in assessing the character and available talents of the team, and able to pour oil on troubled waters when this is required—as it often will be in a group of dynamic activists; able also to judge situations coolly and impartially, and to enforce a degree of internal discipline and uniformity when necessary—no small task among a group of unpaid, opinionated volunteers. Such a paragon is hard to find, because ALRA with singular good fortune did find one in the person of Lady Houghton it was ultimately successful.

Other key posts are those of secretary and treasurer. The secretary needs to be down to earth, practical, efficient, methodical, and able to use common sense and initiative. The treasurer has the hard and thankless task of trying to raise money from whatever sources might be thought to have some natural sympathy with the cause, and of using whatever is raised to maximum effect. This often puts paid to bright ideas produced by other members of the committee, so the treasurer is not always deeply loved and must not

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mind this too much. The membership secretary works in close association with both the secretary and the treasurer making sure that membership files are kept up to date and that the particular talents and qualifications of the members are carefully noted in case they are needed, answering queries about membership, ensuring that speakers at meetings remember that recruiting new members is part of their task, and constantly trying to think up new ways of increasing the membership.

There needs to be someone interested in undertaking the research, information, and editorial function, to find out the facts, both historical and current, which have a bearing on the present political campaign and to communicate these to the membership at large so that it can deploy them in local contexts. Thus, some kind of newsletter or house journal is essential for providing information and exchanging news and even gossip.

Two other key officers are required for this committee. One is a press and public relations officer who will mastermind and organise the public aspects of the political campaign, helping to educate the public and being on tap for the media. Publicity stunts and demonstrations may also come into this person's sphere of operations though ALRA in the 'sixties always rather priggishly scorned such activities as being in bad taste and inappropriate to the subject, until members saw with astonishment how effective in crude publicity terms the mass demonstrations of the antiabortion lobby in the 'seventies were.

Finally, the committee needs a political secretary or parliamentary officer who will regularly communicate the views of the association to a group of key parliamentary supporters, feed them with the latest information and statistics, which they have not the time to search out for themselves, and write first drafts of speeches for them on request and often at short notice. During parliamentary debates the political secretary has to ensure that enough sympathetic MPs are present in the house to make speeches in support of the cause and are prepared to stay late, even all night if necessary, in order to be present to vote.

EMINENT PERSONS AND EXPERTS

Above and alongside the executive committee are the eminent persons who will serve as presidents and vice presidents and occasionally perform ceremonial, media, or even down to earth advisory functions for the pressure group, and the outside experts who will command respect and influence in the relevant professions. In the 'sixties, ALRA was fortunate in having the loyal and energetic support of one of the most eminent doctors and one of the most distinguished lawyers of their generation in Sir Dugald Baird and Professor Glanville Williams QC, and their active presence encouraged many able young doctors and lawyers to lend their support also. This was long before publicly supporting abortion law

reform was considered safe or respectable, when the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists were still opposed to reform, and when *The Times* refused to publish letters in support of abortion law reform even if they merely corrected the inaccurate figures produced by the other side. Only the signatures of VIPs could, on rare occasions, break through this embargo if they were eminent enough or had smart enough addresses such as the House of Lords or the posher gentlemen's clubs. The aspiring social reformer will have to learn the hard way that from the point of view of much of the press it is not what you say that matters, however true or important, but who says it. So having eminent names on tap to append to letters will more than anything else determine whether or not they are printed.

Planning and patience

Once all these officers are installed, they need to draw up a realistic plan of action involving parliament and the media, prepare pamphlets, train speakers, encourage people to write letters to the press, and respond to correspondence from the public. And they need to exercise constant vigilance with regard to the stunts, scandals, and disinformation that opponents will try to perpetrate. In the week before an important parliamentary debate on abortion the gutter press could always be relied on to produce alarming abortion headlines about "scandals" that generally shrivelled out of sight on closer examination. Meanwhile the damage, in public relations terms, had been done. An educated and informed membership can help to counteract propaganda of this type.

Patience and determination and long term commitment are the essential qualities that social reformers need. In a democratic society changes do not come quickly. Years of public education and public debate precede any major reform. The Abortion Law Reform Association was founded in 1936 by a group of far sighted and courageous women. Only one of them, Alice Jenkins, lived long enough to witness the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act. Fighting for social reform is like planting a great tree. You are unlikely to see the full results in your own lifetime. It is the next generation that will benefit. So a long view is necessary, as is the conviction that in the very long run rationality and benevolence will prevail.

Further reading

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Should patients with emphysematous bullae be allowed to fly?

The short answer must be that passengers with emphysematous bullae, often undiagnosed, can and do fly regularly. The risks of altitude relate to reduced atmospheric pressure and consequent reduction in the partial pressure of oxygen. Commercial passenger aircraft are pressurised to about 1500-2500 m rather than to sea level and ascent and descent therefore cause considerable changes in cabin pressure. Trapped or slowly emptying volumes of gas such as bullae or pneumothoraces will expand as the plane gains altitude and atmospheric and cabin pressure falls. Completely obstructed air spaces could theoretically increase in volume by as much as 35%.¹ This amount of expansion could lead to mechanical embarrassment—for instance, of cardiac output. Bullae containing gas at high pressures would be at risk of rupture. Little information is available in this respect but the few measurements of intrabullous pressure that are reported are low,² but attainable large pressure changes could result in rupture. Rapid

decompression would obviously be associated with greater risks. Patients with large or tense bullae, with apparent compression of surrounding lung, should not be allowed to fly on commercial aircraft, though flights in small planes or helicopters at low altitude should be safe. Flying may be contraindicated in severe chronic obstructive lung disease unless supplementary oxygen is available.³ Doctors may get advice about individual patients from medical officers of British Airways. Aircrew with bullous disease would not be allowed to fly commercial aeroplanes and airforce crew would be at much greater risks of rapid decompression.—P W IND, honorary senior lecturer and consultant physician in medicine, London.

- 1 Preston FS, Denison DM. Aerospace medicine. In: Weatherall DJ, Ledingham JGG, Warrell DA, eds. *Oxford textbook of medicine*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987:6.106-20.
 2 Morgan MDL, Morris J, Matthews HR. *Direct measurement of pressure and gas concentrations within emphysematous bullae*. London: British Thoracic Society, 1987.
 3 Mills FJ, Harding RM. Fitness to travel by air. *Br Med J* 1983;286:1269-71.