

✓ A noble cause, or a 'breeding ground for discontent'?

# Anatomy of a HK pressure group

PRESSURE group politics have always been a part of administration in Hongkong.

By definition, a pressure group is a body which, in lobbying particular interests for its members, exerts pressures on a target for concessions.

For many years, powerful business concerns have been exerting pressure on the Government on many issues through their representatives in the Legislative Council. Other bodies as the General Chamber of Commerce, promoting businessmen's interests, date back to as early as 1861.

In recent years, Hongkong has seen the further rise of pressure groups, particularly those springing from grass-root levels.

The more active ones, such as the Hongkong Professional Teachers' Union (1973) and the Conservancy Association (1969) were only formed in the past decade.

A few, as the one which campaigned to have Chinese as an official language, have faded out, while others are assuming important roles although they are late comers.

Special Committee on Pressure Groups' (SCOPG) existence highlights the growing importance of these bodies, now prompting the authorities to conduct constant surveillance over them.

Since the exposure of SCOPG, more questions are being asked about pressure groups. Are they really, as SCOPG describes, "breeding grounds for discontent and trouble makers"? What are the motives for setting up pressure groups? What changes do they seek? How do they operate to bear pressure upon the Government?

To understand the new generation of this pressure group phenomenon, the Hongkong Christian Industrial Committee (HKCIC) presents a good case study. Its set-up, aims, and strategies are characteristics of many other similar bodies.

A pressure group may be set up to protect an occupational or sectional interest or to promote a cause. With HKCIC, its brief is with workers.

"It remains one of the major challenges to the Committee to fulfil the responsibilities and commitment to enhance the workers' movements in Hongkong," the HKCIC's 1979-80 annual report states.

Its director, Mr Lau Tinshek adds, "Through our activities, we hope to raise the worker's awareness of the society he is living in. Our ultimate goal is to enable the worker to have the power to decide what he wants to do."

The HKCIC, set up in the late 60s, grew at a time when Hongkong was undergoing rapid population growth, intense strains on existing facilities, and constant overseas attacks on child labour and other sub-standard labour conditions.

Assistant director, the Rev Hans Lutz said in a 1970's annual meeting, "Today a worker has no say. His wage is so low that a man needs overtime work in order to earn enough to support his family."

It was against this background or because of it that the HKCIC, and many other pressure groups, emerged.

Over the years, the HKCIC has evolved into an organisation. Though small, it is highly-efficient, rich in mature political skills—typical features shared by the new breed of pressure groups.

The HKCIC has a small, young and dedicated workforce. Aside from a 15-member central committee, the day-to-day work falls on a team of seven workers. Their average age is 26 to 28, most of whom have already been with the Committee for several years. Its director, Mr Lau, 33, has been with HKCIC since 1972.

According to Mr Lau, workers are getting two-thirds of the salaries offered by other organisations for similar duties.

The small team has an incredibly heavy workload. Last year, they provided counselling for 3,000 labour disputes, or almost one case for each worker daily. In addition, they also organise seminars, surveys and training camps.

The HKCIC's small size gives it considerable advantages in fast reaction and flexibility. Unlike a thousand-member union, HKCIC does not have to go through cumbersome general meetings to decide on a policy or action.

Like a small nucleus, HKCIC operates on a contact network, built up through the years and so can easily call on workers for support and assistance.

While some may be sceptical of the motives of an organisation which claims to do good for no materialistic rewards, the HKCIC openly states that

its main motivation stems from a sense for justice. "...the church's role is to set ways and means to make distributive justice a permanent feature of our society," the HKCIC said.

And in striving for this distributive justice, the Government, and sometimes business concerns, is the target.

"Our work as a pressure group is to present public opinion, build up sufficient power, impose pressure on the Government and seek changes in policies, changes that will benefit the general masses," Mr Lau says.

The HKCIC's strategies in fighting for changes in policies are also common among other pressure groups. Pressure is built up, by demonstrations, seminars, mass rallies, press conferences and petitions.

Last year, the HKCIC organised five exhibitions on labour law and two on industrial safety, attracting some 50,000 people. A mass rally with more than 1,000 was held on May Day.

Last September, its assistant director, the Rev Hans Lutz went to Britain to petition on the rising number of industrial accidents.

"Basically, I am against violence. Any escalation of action will depend entirely on the mass, and on how much concern they have for an issue," Mr Lau says.

Another significant feature of the HKCIC is its maturity in coalition politics, a power strategy now frequently adopted by its other political partners.

Last year, the HKCIC organised an industrial safety consultation with 14 trade unions. This resulted

in a proposal signed by 42 representatives from various bodies totalling 170,000 workers.

This year, the HKCIC is moving even faster in this direction. It is actively involved in the 1.4 million-member strong Coalition Against Bus Fare Increase and the 350,000-people committee fighting for raising personal tax allowances.

"The major thrust of the HKCIC in the 80s is on alliance work," Lau said.

Precedences have been set and concessions won through coalition politics. Obviously, Hongkong can expect to see more united action among pressure groups in the near future.

And this probably is causing concern among officials in a Government accustomed to have its paternalistic decrees obeyed and followed.

So far most pressure groups have conducted their affairs wholly within the limits of the law. But despite this they are regarded as hostile to the establishment.

The SCOPG for instance, thinks the PGs make only "destructive criticisms" and regard their leaders only as people with "strong political and unionist ambitions".

A sociologist, Hongkong Polytechnic's Social Work lecturer, Mr Lee Mingkwan

says: "It is improper to regard these organised bodies as subversive; they are working for major political power, but only hope to attain benefits for the particular groups they represent in the coalition game."

Mr Lee says the Government dilemma now is how to handle demands from these groups in a fair and efficient manner. "This is the time of explosion of entitlement claims, when every party says they have good reasons for their cases."

The solution, he believes, is to "institutionalise" these claims, with systems to direct these demands into proper channels.

Chinese University's Government and Public Administration lecturer, Mr Andrew Wong is more concerned of a potential danger.

"When we speak about pressure groups, the unfortunate connotation is that the most important thing is power: It doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong; if you have the might, you've the right."

"And unfortunately, both the Government and pressure groups are now adopting such an attitude towards politics."

On many public issues, Mr Wong adds, reason has not been deliberated fully on both sides, so power emerges as the main strategy. "If this continues, it will only create greater turmoil, and spilt. I only hope that the situation will not develop to the stage when both sides think that a naked showdown of power is the only solution."

A pressure group activist, Conservancy Association's spokesman, Mr Albert Lai says: "We are only standing on one end of a lever with the business concerns on the other end. The centre point is the Government which is always shifting away from us. Sometimes, it makes no difference whether we're standing there or not. But I think we have the duty to stand there anyway."

SCOPG  
CIC