



**SWP 42/87 CONSUMER BOYCOTTS AND CORPORATE
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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ABSTRACT

Pressure groups are increasingly becoming more active in challenging business. This paper looks at these challenges in terms of the business and society relationship and focuses on the use of consumer boycotts by pressure groups. Case examples are included. Conclusions are drawn on how pressure group use of the consumer boycott may be understood. Most notably, that it represents an attempt at the social control of business. These observations have a wider application to the many other forms of lobbying of business by pressure groups. The term social responsibility in business is shown to be potentially misleading, unless it is used to refer to corporate doctrines on social responsibility or the outcome of a conflict between (and accommodation of) corporate interests and other interests in society, including those represented by pressure groups.

Lobbying the Corporation

Pollution, nuclear disarmament, apartheid in South Africa and many other issues, are of concern to a lot of people. Quite rightly, they are interested in and worried about some of the major problems facing society. These people are - in a sense - represented by pressure groups. In the course of their efforts to tackle such issues, these pressure groups are likely to challenge business. This paper considers these challenges and how they may be understood, within the context of the business and society relationship.

There have been many instances of pressure group challenges of business in recent years and their incidence is increasing. Case studies are given later in this paper but other instances are worth mentioning. Anti-Apartheid and associated pressure groups, for example, have been prominent in campaigning against firms having links with South Africa since the Sharpeville shootings in 1960. Companies such as RTZ and Shell have become accustomed to their Annual General Meetings being disrupted by anti-apartheid protesters. But the main thrust of the pressure group activity is the international consumer boycott campaign. This has involved many UK companies in critical and damaging publicity, with quite severe consequences for some (1).

Long before the Chernobyl disaster, pressure groups were campaigning against nuclear power. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have been particularly active. The latter group, dissatisfied with efforts to influence government, chose to tackle the industry directly. It was Greenpeace who, while attempting to 'cap' a pipe discharging radioactive material from Sellafield (Windscale) into the sea, came across an extremely high level of discharge. This was well in excess of the level permitted by the government and which Greenpeace were (illegally) trying to prevent. The government investigation of this accident blamed the Sellafield management and made twenty-three recommendations for improvements. The outcome, in addition to the mobilisation of public opinion, was promises by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd., to reorganise its management, discipline some employees, spend an extra £12 million to improve safety, and accelerate plans to reduce radioactive discharges into the sea. Greenpeace observed that this accident may not have been the first and still sought an end to all radioactive discharges (2). Pressure group actions alone rarely achieve the aims of the group. However, Greenpeace has played a major role in creating the current public antipathy towards nuclear power. The industry, belatedly and clumsily, is at last responding to public concern over the issue. Greenpeace have also tackled other firms - again using

'direct action' - over environmental issues such as the dumping of hazardous chemicals at sea and whaling.

Another issue which greatly concerns many people is animal welfare. This has had an impact on many firms, from those marketing cosmetics and toiletries tested on animals to laboratories involved in vivisection. More recently, concern for animal welfare has, for a minority at least, changed to a concern for animal rights. Groups such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) are involved in around 2000 actions a year, from various actions involving stores such as Boots and against butchers, to bomb attacks on vivisectionists. They are said to be causing damage estimated at six million pounds a year. In November 1984, Mars chocolate bars were found containing notes warning against eating "cruelty-based products;" though the bars did not prove to be poisoned, as at first feared. This direct action by the ALF, because of Mars' funding of dental research using monkeys, cost the company £3 million (3).

These are just a few examples of the increasing lobbying of business by pressure groups in Britain. Their efforts reflect concern about issues of social responsibility in business: apartheid and company involvement in South Africa, environmental issues, animal issues, and so on. They may be interpreted as being protests at a perceived lack of social responsibility on the part of the firm.

This view of pressure groups and their actions involving business depends greatly on one's beliefs and interests, but also how one defines, and the limits to, social responsibility in business. Hence such an interpretation is considered here by, first of all, looking at the meaning of social responsibility in business. This is not as straightforward as it might appear. Indeed, there are many similarities to the confusion experienced by Alice in Alice in Wonderland, to whom Humpty Dumpty said: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

What is Social Responsibility in Business?

Most managers, and many other people, have an idea about what the term social responsibility in business means. After all, there has been a considerable amount written on the subject (4). Hay, Gray and Gates, for example, write: "a modern view of social responsibility ... would encompass not only a deep commitment to social problems, but also an understanding of the firm's responsibility to its contributors and, most

importantly, a realistic comprehension of the need for profit as an essential prerequisite for operating at higher levels of social responsibility" (5). While two leading members of the American clergy have commented that "corporate decision-makers should begin to consider the social implications of their decisions as carefully and with as much weight as they do the economic ... life and death are more important than profit and loss" (6). And Philip Sadler, from Ashridge in England, has said, "society has the right to require industry (which is part of itself) to pursue social objectives" (7).

Much of what has been written about social responsibility in business is in this sort of vein. As an admonition to management, it's well-meaning but often excessively value-laden. Heilbroner has observed that this is an area in which "syrup flows freely" (8). This syrupy quality isn't the only problem, these statements give very little guidance on what managers should actually do.

Reasonable definitions of social responsibility in business can be found. Farmer and Hogue suggest corporate social responsibility involves "actions that, when judged by society in the future, are seen to have been of maximum help in providing necessary amounts of desired goods and services at minimum financial and social costs, distributed as equitably as possible" (9). However, they give no indication as to where managers may find a suitable crystal ball. A more useful approach is to define social responsibility in relation to the firm's stakeholders. So Jones suggests it involves "the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law or union contract" (10). Similarly, Powers and Vogel write: "In its more sophisticated forms, corporate responsibility has come to mean that the interests of the several corporate constituencies are no longer seen as constraints on corporate activity which must be managed; instead these constituencies are seen as stakeholders, groups which have legitimate interests, and at least some of whose claims should be met and reconciled in the management process" (11). Both sources, however, acknowledge the problems in understanding corporate social responsibility.

The position of this author is that if one accepts that firms have a social role then clearly they have social responsibilities. Yet this does leave four fairly major questions: How may these responsibilities be defined or identified? How does management determine their relative priority? How far does corporate social

responsibility extend? (That is to say, over what issues and to what extent?) How do managers actually act in practice?

So, for all these reasons, it is sensible to exercise considerable caution when people start talking about social responsibility in business. The term doesn't actually mean anything. Within the literature, there is a great variety of definitions to be found. Substantial differences are elicited if managers are asked to give their definitions or if one examines corporate statements on responsibilities. A term so debased has no meaning. All firm's say, or would say if asked, that they are socially responsible. It's difficult to see how one can disbelieve them. Not surprisingly therefore, David Clutterbuck has advocated total corporate social responsibility:

"The chief executive who assumes that his company is a good corporate citizen because it has well-meant policies towards some social issues is making the mistake of assuming that social responsibility is something to add on to a company's activities - an external veneer aimed at keeping the outside world happy. The moment social responsibility becomes part of the company's public relations activities, it is a dead duck. Not only will outsiders frequently see through the sham, but people inside the company will soon get the idea that social responsibility does not really matter, that it is only for show, and that they are at liberty to slide around social responsibility issues if it becomes convenient" (12).

For the current author, the term social responsibility in business is best used to refer to managements' attempts at self-regulation of their activities; to corporate doctrines on good practice. There is a more useful way of looking at the relationship between business and society and the role of pressure group activity within that.

Corporate Power in the Business and Society Relationship

One person's view of business social responsibilities not as yet considered is Milton Friedman's; a view often espoused - though probably less often practiced - by managers. He has said "there is one and only one social responsibility of business - to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud" (13).

He, along with Hayek, Theodore Levitt, and others, argues the social responsibility of business is to make a profit. This isn't the sort of 'wishy-washy' position earlier found and it actually gives guidance to managers. Often, however, it is summarily dismissed without any thought given as to why Friedman and others should advance it. This author doesn't subscribe to Friedman's position - principally because of the inaccuracies of and disagreement with, his model of capitalism. However, his arguments against social responsibility beyond profit maximisation are worth noting. Six principal arguments may be identified:

1. Spending someone else's money. The costs of social actions are involuntarily borne by shareholders, customers or others.
2. Competing claims - the role of profit. Other claims involve the deliberate sacrifice of profits or at least muddy decision-making.
3. Competitive disadvantage. Social actions have a price.
4. Competence. How are firms to know what their social responsibilities are? Do firms have the skills to deal with social issues?
5. Fairness - domination by business. Do we want corporations playing God?
6. Legitimacy - the role of government. Social actions are the legitimate concern of government not business.

The last two arguments are particularly interesting in that they point to an alternative perspective on the business and society relationship. Friedman asks: "Is it tolerable that these public functions of taxation, expenditure, and control be exercised by the people who happen at the moment to be in charge of particular enterprises, chosen for those posts by strictly private groups?" (14). This highlights the problem of the social control of business. Unlike Friedman, this author believes business has social responsibilities beyond profit maximisation. Indeed, business has responsibilities thrust upon it which it can today no longer avoid. To ensure that business deals with these responsibilities and in a way that society would approve, there must be social control of

business. A focus on the social control of business is a far more useful way of looking at the business and society relationship (15).

So, not only is the social responsibilities approach to examining the business and society relationship weak - and best seen as providing a doctrine for management in the absence of any other basis for action - but it also diverts attention from the real issue, that of corporate power and the control of it. With meaning for the term social responsibility in business proving elusive, it is preferable to examine pressure group actions, including consumer boycotts, from the perspective of the business and society relationship and in terms of a focus on the core issue, the social control of business.

Social Control of Business

Studies of power, while acknowledging the complexities of the concept, generally identify three types: force, inducement and manipulation. Bertrand Russell, who defines power as "the production of intended effects" (16), neatly illustrates this:

"The most important organisations are approximately distinguishable by the kind of power that they exert. The army and the police exercise coercive power over the body; economic organisations, in the main, use rewards and punishments as incentives and deterrents; schools, churches and political parties aim at influencing opinion. But these distinctions are not very clear-cut, since every organisation uses other forms of power in addition to the one which is most characteristic" (17).

Similarly, Galbraith identified condign, compensatory and conditioned power, in looking at the types of power business exercises (18). However, one can, conversely, look at the types of power society exercises over business. This gives rise to a simple model of the social control of business, shown in Figure 1. The weaknesses of each form of control are also given.

So, legislation over business is society exerting power by force. Business has to act within the law or face sanctions. The market as a mechanism for the social control of business is society exerting power by inducement. Simply stated, it is a method by which society rewards corporate social responsibility with profits and irresponsibility with losses. Social responsibility by virtue of market forces assumes

FORM OF CONTROL	TYPE OF POWER	WEAKNESSES
1. Legislation (government intervention)	Coercive Force Condign	Overloaded Limited effectiveness Threat to market system
2. Market forces	Remunerative Inducement Compensatory	Insufficient
3. Moral obligation (self-regulation)	Normative Manipulation Conditioned	'Unfair'/elitist Inadequate

Figure 1. Social Control of Business - A Simple Model

the exercise of purchase votes, as Gist puts it:

"A fundamental tenet of our economic system is that scarce economic resources are ultimately allocated by the preference patterns of final consumers; that is, we as consumers vote, as it were, for particular types of institutions and for particular types of products and services. We vote by purchasing things we wish to encourage in institutions we wish to encourage. We vote by not buying things we wish to discourage" (19).

The market does provide a big incentive for business to do as people (customers) want. So, in response to critics of business practices Weidenbaum writes:

"The fiction that business does not care about people because profit comes first should be exposed for the errant nonsense that it is. Business has all the incentives to take actions that result in improving human welfare. The reasons for doing so arise, of course, not out of benevolence but out of hard-nosed, practical and effective economic incentives. More purchases by willing

customers do tend to generate more profits and greater accumulation of capital" (20).

The third form of control, moral obligation, is where the social control of business is achieved by virtue of society exerting power through conditioning, resulting in self-regulation. As Berle writes, "corporate managements ... are constrained to work within a frame of surrounding conceptions which in time impose themselves" (21). There will inevitably be cultural precedents to business action. In the UK, the Confederation of British Industry has commented, in recognition of this: "While the law establishes the minimum standard of conduct with which a company must comply if it is to be allowed to exist and trade, a company, like a natural person, must be recognised as having functions, duties and moral obligations that go beyond the pursuit of profit and the specific requirements of legislation" (22). So, under the third form of control, managers are guided by social norms. Self-regulation also involves, as Berle conveys above, the unconscious guidance of what society expects. Put crudely, managers, like all members of society, are conditioned in such a way that constrains their behaviour, according to the social conditioning limitations on all human choice behaviour.

The model of the social control of business is useful in that it not only distinguishes between all the different ways in which society controls business, but also suggests how control may be increased (23). If one recognises that business and society can have different interests, how can it be ensured that society's interests are paramount? Legislation seems overloaded and, because of the difficulties in defining social responsibilities, limited in effectiveness. It is also, as a market intervention, considered a threat to the market system, as Weidenbaum and many others argue (24). Market forces are generally considered insufficient because they emphasise efficiency (and a freedom of sorts) above other criteria such as equity or altruism and don't take externalities - especially social costs - into account. Finally, moral obligation, firms' deliberate attempts at self-regulation according to a doctrine of social responsibility but also manager beliefs about what is 'right' arising from socialisation, is considered unfair and elitist and, partly for that reason, inadequate. The considerable weaknesses of the first and third forms of control suggest greater use might be made of market forces, the second form. It would, after all, be in keeping with the current politico-economic climate.

This is where consumer boycotts, of all the various forms of pressure group action, fit in most aptly. Markets operate through and are legitimised by consumer sovereignty. Why shouldn't that power - the authority of consumers in the marketplace - be harnessed in the social control of business on social responsibility issues? And, of course, it has. The first black American presidential candidate, Jesse Jackson, has used boycotts in his campaigning for civil rights. He has commented:

"We have the power, nonviolently, just by controlling our appetites, to determine the direction of the American economy. If black people in thirty cities said simultaneously "General Motors, you will not sell cars in the black community unless you guarantee us a franchise here next year and help us finance it," GM would have no choice but to comply" (25).

There are many other illustrations of this (26).

Consumer boycotts involve not buying from a firm in protest at a perceived lack of social responsibility. This is illustrated in the two cases which follow. They are then examined to see whether consumer boycotts may be understood as a form of social control of business. Both cases are presented in summary form, but may be found in more detail elsewhere (27).

MAN-VW, Tarmac and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

The boycotts in Britain of Tarmac and MAN-VW over their links with cruise missiles were organised by what at the time was probably the largest and most influential promotional pressure group in Britain. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) comprised around 1,500 local groups and 400,000 people. Moreover, a majority of the population supported their opposition to cruise. Yet the boycotts were clearly unsuccessful.

The 1979 decision by NATO's European members to site cruise missiles in Europe, provided a focal point for the peace movement and CND achieved a forty-fold increase in size. At its previous peak in popularity CND had been divided on the use of direct action, this time its leadership was prepared to tolerate different forms of protest. CND endorsed non-violent direct action (NVDA) and set-up working groups to devise suitable campaigns. The more extreme forms of direct action, such as the peace

camps, received most publicity, but CND did, in May 1983, announce their intention to boycott MAN-VW, Tarmac, and the National Savings Bank (NSB), and this received extensive coverage. Even at this stage however, CND had its doubts about the suitability of these targets. Yet although the NSB action was never initiated, the other two boycotts went ahead.

Tarmac was the main contractor for an £11 million contract to provide cruise missile storage facilities at Greenham Common airbase. A peace camp protestor had approached the Nuclear Free Zone (NFZ) local authorities about Tarmac, and Southwark Council had already responded to her boycott request prior to CND's announcement. CND were simply picking up this campaign. Tarmac's response to CND's announcement reiterated its position as expressed when Southwark had reported that it would no longer be using the company. This emphasised that many firms were involved, sought to direct attention towards government, and hinted at unemployment or legal threats. NFZ authorities felt they couldn't publicly support the campaign because of the likelihood of legal action, but some surreptitiously boycotted Tarmac, not including the firm - one of the largest contractors in the country - on their tender lists.

As the campaign did not materialise as CND had threatened, Tarmac maintained a low profile; but it would have used legal action otherwise. It is possible that customer resistance to Tarmac remains over their involvement with cruise, as revealed in the firm's decision in August 1985 to close their Peterborough office, but the boycott seemed to fade away. This probably has as much to do with the NFZ authorities' other problems and higher priorities as with CND's failure to actively promote the boycott. Though it is worth noting that in October 1986, the Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, announced legislation to stop councils imposing political conditions on their contracts. He specifically referred to discrimination against construction companies involved in nuclear missile sites (28). This suggests the boycott had some impact, even if it did not significantly affect the commissioning of the cruise missile base.

CND put far greater effort into the MAN-VW boycott, though it did not have its unqualified support. The launch of the campaign was a series of blunders. CND's announcement of its intention to boycott MAN was made without having had any contact with the firm. The announcement suggested MAN were involved in supplying the cruise missile launchers, whereas MAN (in Germany) were supplying 400 allegedly standard military tractor units. This confusion was repeated when the boycott was

subsequently launched and after the company had been in contact with CND to clarify the point. Moreover, the vehicles were to be delivered by air not road, and would therefore not be as visible as expected. Finally, when seeking a meeting with the company, the letter from CND Chairwoman Joan Ruddock was sent too late and to the wrong person. Yet this latter blunder was unimportant anyway as the group's demands of MAN could not have possibly been realised, at least through MAN-VW (UK), an independent concessionaire. The boycott did not get off to a good start!

MAN-VW were initially quite concerned by the campaign, particularly with the threat of demonstrations outside their VW car showrooms. When it seemed likely to go ahead they urged their dealers to be careful not to provoke further publicity. Yet the launch, which CND said involved 10 truck centres, proved to be a "damp squib" in the firm's eyes. Although there was further picketing, this boycott also faded away. The impact of the boycott was negligible. Its failure is attributed, by the firm, to the tenuousness of its link with cruise and the recognition of this by CND supporters. The firm's response was to be as open as possible, emphasising the tenuousness of the link, with legal action, although possible, as definitely a last resort. CND was found to be poorly organised but it had essentially got it wrong. As one MAN-VW manager explained: "It doesn't matter how effective a publicity or PR machine is, if it's spreading things that are basically not valid, it won't get any further."

Douwe Egberts and Angola Coffee

The Angola Committee were far better organised and more committed to their boycott of Douwe Egberts than CND were on the Tarmac and MAN boycotts. Their demand was also realistic. They wanted the firm to stop processing coffee from Angola, then (1972) seeking independence from Portugal.

Before launching its action, the pressure group contacted the company to arrange a meeting. The company agreed to this but did not feel it could give in to the pressure group. This was despite the scale of the action planned, public concern about Angola, and Albert Heijn, the second largest coffee roaster (to Douwe Egberts) and the largest Dutch supermarket chain, having agreed not to process Angola coffee. Two more

supermarket chains followed suit before the campaign was launched amid much publicity.

Consumer support for the pressure group was clearly demonstrated in feedback from the sales force and in a market research study. Picketing of shops and supermarkets ensured that consumers were likely to express this support in purchase. But pressure on the firm also came from other directions. Some of the media supported the Angola Committee, a quasi-government body provided it with funds and the Dutch Labour Party registered its support. Meanwhile, Douwe Egberts' employees had been under pressure, from picketing by the Committee, but also criticism from friends and family; the union found it could no longer support the management and threatened action. Under all this pressure, Douwe Egberts finally capitulated and agreed not to process any more Angola coffee because "consumers have objections."

The company received some criticism for deciding to capitulate, but sales in the long-run did not suffer because of this. The management wished they'd followed Albert Heijn's example. The pressure group's success prompted a similar, also successful, action against Gulf Oil.

Conclusions

The events described in the two cases are fairly typical of the sort of pressure group inspired consumer boycott that firms are ever more likely to face. The contrast between the unsuccessful and the successful boycotts, highlights many of the factors in pressure group success with this tactic which can be briefly commented on here. First and foremost, however, there is the requirement to examine these boycotts in terms of the business and society relationship. More specifically, can they be understood as attempts at the social control of business?

In both cases, the pressure groups concerned - CND and the Angola Committee - were seeking to exert some control over business. CND were saying to Tarmac that their involvement in the building of cruise missile silos was not in society's interests. Tarmac were not particularly vulnerable to action by consumers, but a number of local authorities chose to respond by considering whether they wanted to give business to the firm. It seems likely that Tarmac did suffer as a consequence, though the extent of this would be difficult to quantify even for those in a position to do so within Tarmac.

However, if CND's objective - assuming there was one - was to stop Tarmac building the silos, then they were unsuccessful. Their success seems limited to tarnishing Tarmac's image with some of its customers (and others), to probably denying them contracts with some of the 147 NFZ local authorities, and to generating publicity. The action illustrated the recognition by CND that a pressure group needn't restrict its activities to the government. As an activist commented at the time in Peace News: "it may well be easier to influence a firm than the government. And if we break one link in the chain, the whole will be weaker."

In targetting MAN-VW, CND was at least tackling a firm potentially more vulnerable to consumer action. MAN and VW in Germany had only the slightest of relationships (joint manufacture of a light commercial vehicle), but the concessionaires for MAN in the UK (VAG, a Lonrho subsidiary) handled both MAN and VW vehicles. However, largely because of the tenuousness of the link between MAN-VW (UK) and MAN (Germany), little support could be found for the action against MAN in the UK, let alone VW. (Local authorities were not major purchasers of MAN vehicles.) If VW had been a major supplier of vehicles for cruise missile convoys, then, particularly given the 'liberal' profile of VW's customers, the outcome of the boycott may have been very different. As it was, the boycott proved to be a minor irritation to a firm which, although part of a parent company with a less than unblemished record, seems sensitive to social issues.

With both Tarmac and MAN-VW, CND were attempting to exert some control over business. For the most part, and especially in the case of MAN-VW, their efforts were unsuccessful because they were unable to command wider support. In contrast, the Angola Committee achieved widespread support. Consumers could readily associate Douwe Egberts with the oppression in Angola - a matter of great public debate - and they were presented with a relatively straightforward means by which they could register their concern. Pressure also came from other quarters: employees, the union, the media, and politicians. The outcome was that the firm was brought under the control of society, principally through the use of market forces. As the Douwe Egberts sales director commented in response to difficulties reported by the firm's sales force:

"We told them that the company could not take a political position. On the other hand, they know that they should follow the customer - the customer is always right. This was Ok as long as the customer was only interested in the taste of

coffee. Now, for the first time, the customer expressed an opinion about something very different."

In other words, consumer sovereignty need not be restricted to the product itself. The consumer may vote in the marketplace against a firm for any activity it is involved in, in any sphere of its operations, which the consumer is aware of and concerned about. Most recently, of course, with consumers having chosen to vote against Barclays Bank, prompted by anti-apartheid pressure groups, Barclays has been forced to withdraw from South Africa (29). Again, other pressures played a part, but it was principally the social control of business through market forces which brought about this quite considerable success for anti-apartheid groups.

So in sum, the cases illustrate pressure group use of the consumer boycott in efforts to achieve control over business on social issues. In the Douwe Egberts and Angola Coffee case (and with Barclays and South Africa) this became social control of business, as the group succeeded in attracting wider support for its campaign. As these and many other cases show, pressure group success with the consumer boycott is dependent on public response to the action. However, it is not sufficient for a pressure group to be active on an issue of great concern to the public at large. As the CND case illustrates, the choice of target - specifically, the appropriateness of the firm and the product to be boycotted - is also important. So too, is the organisation and strategy of the pressure group (30).

The consumer boycott is not the only tactic used by pressure groups against firms. There are many others. However, they are also efforts to seek control over business on social issues. The aim is corporate social responsibility as these groups define it. If they succeed through the support of society at large, then the outcome is corporate social responsibility as society would define it. Perhaps the term social responsibility in business cannot be defined in the abstract, but only in the concrete reality of conflict resolution. Hence, social responsibility in business can refer to corporate doctrines on good practice, but also be seen as the end-result of an accommodation of different interests within society over a social issue.

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