

Advocacy: a practical approach Dealing with politicians

From *Lobby for libraries*, Virginia Walsh, ALIA executive director

Advocacy campaigns require careful planning and execution. What follows is a practical guide to dealing with two of the major players in any advocacy campaign: politicians who formulate policy which affects libraries, and the media; who help shape the public perception of the profession.

Dealing with politicians

There are several ways to approach politicians. We can target: individual Members and Senators; parliamentary committees; personal staff; and bureaucrats. It is always best to use a combination of these targets to pursue issues.

Individual Members and Senators

A Canberra firm, Client Solutions, conducted a survey of Members and Senators to determine their lobbying preferences. The conclusions of the survey are very interesting and help us to formulate an approach which will meet with the best response.

Initial meetings

- Politicians agreed that they preferred meetings to take place in their electorate or Parliament House office.
- After initial contact, some politicians indicated that they would be happy to meet organisations at their premises but this was dependent on the time, location and nature of the event.
- The ideal size of the delegation was two to three members of the organisation.
- The meeting should last for less than half an hour.
- Most politicians indicated that their preference was for a written brief prior to the meeting, a more detailed submission

provided at the meeting and a summary of the issues discussed following the meeting.

- The majority of politicians objected to the recording of meetings by special interest groups.

Campaigns, petitions, letter-writing and surveys

Politicians indicated that campaigns which employed letters and petitions are not influential unless they specifically target electorate or portfolio issues.

Questions in Parliament

- Politicians indicated that they welcomed material that could be used for questions in both houses of Parliament.
- The majority of respondents preferred that the material be relevant to their specific areas of interest, although Senators indicated that they were keen to receive material on any matter.

Special Interest Groups and lobbyists

- Politicians indicated that special interest groups and lobbyists ask for too much.
- There was a particular concern that groups presented problems without suggesting solutions.
- Politicians indicated that they liked to be kept informed of developments on specific issues and this was particularly the case for small parties and independents.
- Face-to-face meetings and newspaper reports were the most useful source of information and no politician indicated that paid advertising was a preferred source of information.
- A very high proportion of politicians (eighty per cent) said that lobbyists performed a useful function in bringing special interest groups to meetings.

Tips for meeting with politicians

Many politicians have expressed the view that they feel that special interest groups are not aware of how busy they are. They will quickly lose interest in your visit if your thoughts are not organised and clearly expressed. Here are some important additional recommendations for any meeting with a politician.

- Agree on the points you wish to make before you meet with the politician.
- Nominate a spokesperson who will be responsible for leading the delegation.
- The spokesperson should introduce the members of the delegation and the capacity in which they are present.
- The politician should be advised

of the nature and size of the constituency you are representing.

- The spokesperson should have a plan of action which may or may not involve the active participation of all members of the delegation. The spokesperson should also have a fall-back position and be prepared to adjust if required.
- It is counter-productive to criticise or take issue with a colleague during a meeting — the politician is not interested in witnessing a debate or an argument. If the issue is substantial and requires correction this can be done following the meeting by letter.
- The importance of written material cannot be overestimated but don't overwhelm the politician because he or she will not read lengthy documents.

Committees

The work of parliamentary committees underpins much of the policy formulation and development within federal politics. ALIA regularly responds to parliamentary inquiries by making submissions on relevant issues. On a number of recent occasions we have been invited to appear before these committees to answer questions about specific issues raised in our submissions.

There are a number of different types of committees which have quite different goals and membership.

Parliamentary Committees draw on the membership of the broad cross-section of elected representatives and typically have a good mix of all political parties and independents. They may be categorised as follows:

- House of Representatives committees;
- Joint committees (comprise both Members and Senators);

- Senate Committees;
- Select committees (appointed for the duration of the specific project);
- Standing committees (appointed by resolution for the life of the Parliament); and
- Statutory committees (appointed by legislation for the life of the Parliament).

There are also a number of powerful **Cabinet Committees** which deal with the detail of policy issues before decisions are made by Cabinet.

When committees are charged with the task of holding a public inquiry there is a fairly standard cycle of activities:

- Terms of reference are determined;
- A short discussion paper is often prepared;
- The inquiry is advertised;
- Submissions are received;
- Submissions may be published;
- Public hearings are held in a variety of centres;
- A draft report is released;
- Comment is sought on the draft report;
- Final report is tabled in Parliament; and then
- The Government publishes its response.

When individuals and associations participate in committee inquiries there are a number of procedures which must be followed and these are usually distributed with the initial advertisement of the inquiry. For committees of the Parliament the ownership of the submissions sits with the Parliament. In appearances before these committees the rules of privilege are extended to the 'witnesses' and a record of proceedings is taken by Hansard reporters. Sometimes there is a video recording made of the proceedings which can be a bit unsettling if it is unexpected because the hearing room resembles a television studio. The chair of the committee will give a witness an opportunity to provide an opening statement to the committee. It is a good idea to be prepared to make such a statement because it represents an opportunity to make some key points and introduce any recent material that may be of value to the committee.

The major advantages of participating in committee inquiries are that: the profile of the organisation is raised; your views will be considered by the committee; and these views may well influence the outcome of the inquiry.

Submissions should be brief and to the point. At ALIA we use a standard cover sheet which includes some important information about the Association and about contact persons within the organisation. The text of the submission is usually about four pages and has an introduction which outlines the Association's interest in or standing on the issue. The conclusion clearly summarises the outcomes sought by our Association. ■

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