

HOW TO LOBBY A PARLIAMENTARIAN

Why lobby?

Lobbying is merely the process of conveying community concerns to the politicians who represent us.

There are few instances in which our politicians have made strong decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, without some expression of public concern (on an issue) or some degree of public pressure being exerted. It is thus the will of the people which shifts political decision-making.

So how do you go about it?

Where to start?

There are two main ways of lobbying parliamentarians:

- meet them face to face
- write letters

FACE TO FACE MEETINGS

It is important to be informed about the person with whom you are to meet, including the parliamentarian's name, political party and electorate, and what their margin was at the last election.

Most MPs have electorate offices in their constituencies. Addresses and phone numbers are in the white pages telephone book in the Commonwealth Government section, under "Commonwealth Parliament Offices".

Making an Appointment

Usually a phone call to the electorate office will be all that's required, but you may be asked to put your request in writing. A short letter outlining who you are and what you want to talk about is all that is needed. If necessary follow this letter with a phone call. Be sure to make an appointment as far ahead as possible – politicians have many demands on their time.

Your phone call may also give you an opportunity to make contact with the MP's staff. Speak to them about the issues and leave material with them. Staff are important in reporting back the mood of the electorate. Suggest that you may be prepared to get a speaker for their next local party meeting.

Know your subject

Know what you're talking about. You don't need to be an expert – most politicians aren't, but you do need to be prepared for the sort of questions they are likely to ask. (Knowing what party they are from and what "faction" they are in, helps you predict the views they are likely to hold.)

Take with you a briefing paper or information sheet*. It is a useful way of maintaining a focus during the meeting. It serves as a reminder to you as to the points you wish to cover and it serves to remind the MP after you have gone, just what was discussed and what action your group wants of him/her. (*Use this kit when preparing your briefing.)

Be familiar with the political process

Make sure you also understand enough about the political system and process not to make mistakes as your MP may pounce on these to undermine what you are saying.

Familiarise yourself with what the Government is saying, and what the Opposition is saying on particular aspects of Reconciliation. This will suggest what strategy and arguments you might use to exert influence. Your strategy when talking to an MP in the House of Representatives may vary from your strategy when talking to a Senator.

Organise Your Delegation

If the parliamentarian is in the House of Representatives make sure either you or someone with you is from the MP's electorate.

Try to find somebody who is a member of their party who will come with you. Three is an ideal number for a delegation. Having others to share the discussion as well as to take notes can be invaluable.

The Meeting

Be presentable and respect formalities. There is no point in jeopardising your case by your manner or dress.

Make sure everyone in your delegation knows where the parliamentarian's office is and meet outside fifteen minutes early.

Be articulate and concise. Don't get sidetracked.

Be friendly and polite. Find out the parliamentarian's views on the issue. This is important.

Don't speak for too long. Remember, you are aiming to open up a dialogue and get them to do something about your concerns.

Listen to what they say and be prepared to start from their position. Do not display any surprise or antagonism to possible racist comments.

Give them good political reasons why they should be prepared to take a stand.

Remember, they like numbers, so be familiar with any useful polls (e.g., "40 per cent of people who rang in said they were confused about Reconciliation").

Remember you are talking with a politician and his/her personal beliefs may conflict with what their Party expects and/or what they think voters want, so they may agree but do nothing to support you.

If you are asked a question which you cannot answer, say you don't know and arrange to get back to them with an answer.

Ask them what they would be prepared to do. It is very important that you are able to draw a commitment from them that means you will have to get back in touch, and vice versa. Ask them what they would be prepared to do to take the issue further. Would they be prepared to:

- make a public statement,
- talk to a Minister on your behalf, or write a letter raising your concerns,
- talk to a fellow MP,
- ask a question in Parliament,
- table petitions,

- raise the issue at a Party Meeting?

Regardless of the meeting's outcome, thank them again for the opportunity to meet them and to air your concerns.

Leave them a summary of your concerns.

Find out about the local newspapers and where their sympathies lie and, if they appear reasonable, suggest they may be interested in the story of your visit.

After your visit

Good follow up is essential.

1. Follow up

If you have promised further information, ensure that it gets there as soon as possible. Make sure the Parliamentarian honours any commitment to you. If you don't hear anything within a week or so, phone or write and keep on until it's resolved.

2 Debrief

Talk it over with your group. Discuss what worked, what didn't, and what could be done better.

3 Communicate with ANTaR

This is important so that the network knows who has been seen and what sort of response we're getting. This feedback is essential for a successful strategic campaign.

WRITING TO PARLIAMENTARIANS

Although face-to-face meetings with Parliamentarians are usually the most effective way of influencing them, there can be little doubt that the number of individual letters/emails/faxes received on any issue is still a very real yardstick of the extent of public concern about that issue.

Your message must be clear and concise but also informative and persuasive. Some basics to keep in mind :

Try to have your message typed but if that is not possible make sure your handwriting is legible.

Put your name, address and telephone number on the message.

Introduce yourself – who you are and why you are making contact. If your message is to your local Member say so.

Refer to any recent news items, if possible, and then use the facts/issues and arguments as part of your briefing.

Outline your concerns firmly and clearly but do not be abusive as such messages are easily dismissed as irrelevant by the Parliamentarian.

Offer to provide further information. ANTaR can assist you with this.

It is important to ask your MP to do something about your concerns.

KNOW YOUR OBJECTIVES

Be clear about what it you are asking for. Use this kit to help identify the areas you want to concentrate on and to draft a briefing document which clearly states your objectives.