

family

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Abstract

This is a paper from a workshop held in June 1992 aimed at helping community groups understand the processes of government decision making. The paper begins with a list of golden rules of lobbying followed by a description of various levels of government and government process. Different types of lobbying strategies for carrying out a campaign are described. **Keyword: Government**

UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY PROCESS

LOBBY AND BE HEARD

This workshop is designed to inform participants about the processes of Government decision making. By knowing how this happens, community groups can understand how the system works and also how to intercede effectively. Often the community sector is the only voice for groups who are not otherwise heard when policies are being developed, and therefore their needs should be represented.

The main objective of any politician is to stay in power or to get into power. Secondary are the possibilities of using the power to achieve whatever is required /desired by that person or party. Lobbying is the process you use to convince the person or party that they should support /oppose/ introduce/ something which will be both electorally acceptable and of benefit to the community. These are not necessarily the same things!

There are a few golden rules in lobbying if you are to be credible:

1. Know whom to lobby!

With three levels of Government, political party structures, involvement of major power brokers such as unions and employer groups, it is often difficult to determine who is responsible for a particular issue. A first step is to decide which government, if it is government, is responsible for the area.

2. Know what you are talking about!

Making errors is the worst sin but being caught out being ill informed is the easiest way of allowing the issue to be trivialised or ignored. In most cases what comes from women and community groups is not the most popular approach, so they are mostly waiting for you to show you are no threat.

3. Pick your time and place!

It is much harder lobbying to have a decision changed after it is made than before it is taken; it is of little use lobbying for funds, once the budget has been finalised. So find out what stage decisions go through and who is involved and approachable.

4. Be prepared to go public!

A campaign behind closed doors may work for the CAI and RSL, but for community groups, the story on TV is often the only way the politicians can see the power of opinion. And in the final analysis it is power that counts, and competing with unions, employers and groups like the RSL, is very hard.

The following material is designed to help you gain an understanding of the system and be able to comply with the rules. While it is possible to be effective without following this process if you are powerful and influential, if you are part of the community sector this is unlikely.

Logic, reason and justice tend to lose out to power in the political process.

LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Government in Australia is complicated. Understanding which level of government is responsible for deciding policies is hard and it becomes even more complicated when some programmes have decisions made by two or three levels of government. This makes it very difficult for those in the community to identify the appropriate place to start.

Take childcare as an example. The Commonwealth Government provides funding for childcare services which meet certain guidelines, e.g. run long days and provide for working parents. The States regulate childcare services generally and decide how many staff are required and other such issues. Local governments plan land use and control buildings.

One of the confusing paradoxes of Australian politics is that we have a system that upholds states' rights within a federation, yet it is the Federal Government that to a large degree holds 'the purse strings'. The States receive their funding through the Federal Government, by means of direct payment. The amount of money the States may borrow is also restricted by Federal review. Consequently, we deal with State governments who implement their own political agendas on such things as childcare, health and education, yet can claim it is Federal government funding that determines how they deal with these issues. At the same time of course, the Federal Government can cite the States' mismanagement for any deficiencies in the delivery of these services rather than acknowledge any inadequacy of funding on their own part.

Local government derives its revenue base mainly from the collection of rates but receives a cut of the Federal Government's tax collection. The State Government restricts the level of rates. One area of funding which both community and Local Government share is specific purpose grants, where money is allocated in Canberra for specific use, e.g. roads, childcare, health care. Some of these are also joint programs such as HACC (Home and Community Care, which is administered by the State but funded by both State and Federal contributions).

Constitutionally the House of Representatives is where the Federal Government is formed. A majority in the Senate or 'upper house' is not necessary to form a government. The Senate was created to act as the 'States House'. It could well be argued that it no longer performs this role as the voting generally goes along party lines. However, it has been unusual in the last forty years for the Government to control both houses. At present the Democrats hold the balance in the Senate.

State parliaments are also having problems as they are almost all dependent on minor parties or independents to maintain their hold on Government. This type of situation is hated by major political parties, but does offer community groups more options than a Government with full control over upper and lower houses, e.g. NSW where the Government can control neither the upper nor lower house.

CHANGING THE JURISDICTION AND INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

When there is major conflict over who has jurisdiction in a given field, such as in an environmental dispute between Federal and State governments, the High Court is the final arbiter. The Constitution gave the Commonwealth specific powers over a range of areas considered important in 1901, and a few have been added by constitutional change through referenda or by States voluntarily ceding power to the Commonwealth.

Both these are rare however and we are often lumbered with inappropriate divisions of responsibilities. Occasionally the Commonwealth using its foreign affairs power e.g. shifts these, having signed an international convention through the United Nations (UN) or International Labour Organisation (ILO) and therefore claiming power to enact legislation.

This is the basis for the **Sex and Race Discrimination Acts**, and as the Government has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there may be other possibilities.

Another possibility for lobbying is the **ILO Convention 156** on the **Rights of Workers with Family Responsibilities**, which is also relevant for some exercises.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT & REVIEW

Many people in the community have a limited idea of how political processes work. They assume in many cases that there is a formal and organised way, and that there is a logical way to lobby.

This may occur in some limited areas but generally the political process is one of negotiation between what are known as '*stakeholders*'. These are the organisations and individuals that are seen as able to deliver votes or resources in the political processes and/or those who may be affected by the policies, either adversely or favourably.

So the first stage is to look at some of the places where policies come from. These include:

- The budget process

Bureaucrats review programmes and policies in the 'budget context', i.e. between November and March as this is the time that budget bids are developed for the August/September Federal and State budgets. By April the process of negotiation is under way and it is hard to get new items considered. By June the frameworks are set and many main decisions have been taken, so only changes at the margin are possible unless there is major political crisis which requires a response.

- Interdepartmental task forces

These can be established to consider issues, which affect a range of portfolios. They are usually ineffective as no one pushes the issues hard enough and people from the various areas are more concerned with protecting territory and bureaucratic warfare.

- Policy development division of branches

These do exist but are not generally held in high repute. They often put out interesting papers but rarely are effective in recommending policy changes unless the Minister has already indicated that this is what is wanted.

- Special interest 'offices' like OSW and OMA

These were originally established to offer advice within government on the needs of special groups. However these days they tend to be used by the Government for PR and justifying what is done, but can be useful as lobbyists on the inside.

- Advisory Councils and Committees

These are very rarely effective but again are useful as lobbyists with access to Ministers or senior bureaucrats. They are also useful sources of information as they are often well briefed

- Parliamentary Committees

These often review legislation and can sometimes be effective as Government may refer issues to them. They are particularly useful in cases where minority Governments are dependent on opposition, minor parties or independent votes and therefore may use this process to negotiate agreement. However, there are a myriad of backbench Committee reports which have had no influence. Again they can be useful for information resources.

- Public enquiries

These are usually a way of delaying decisions and defusing the situation. They rarely lead to major changes and are often simply expensive exercises in keeping lobby groups involved in writing submissions and giving evidence.

- Consultancies

These are occasionally used to look for policy options as they allow independent kite flying for Ministers to see whether proposals are politically possible. However, they rarely influence the process in any major way.

- Party policy making

In theory this is used as a way to influence the political process. However both major political parties have ways of avoiding implementing policy when they are in Government. The Coalition is explicit that party policy is only advisory and the ALP,

which is supposedly bound to implement conference decisions, uses various means to avoid the issues when it wants to.

Caucus and party room decisions are however much more powerful. While most decisions are taken in Cabinet, the views of the party as a whole are often important, as it is a foolhardy Government, which risks a discontented backbench. So when Labour is in power Caucus committees are useful entry points, but still with limited power.

– **Accords and compacts**

These are agreements with outside bodies such as employers and unions and tend to hold because the other party is in a position to enforce the agreement or to promise unpleasant consequences.

TAKING ACTION

Now you know how complicated it is. So the next section is designed to help you take action on your issues.

LOCATING RESPONSIBILITY

Finding out who is responsible for what can be the first hurdle in influencing government policy. Two or even three levels of government (e.g. Federal, State and Local) may handle the issue you are concerned with. If you are unsure about who does what, refer to the front pages of the telephone directory for the general information numbers of government departments.

GATHERING SUPPORT

Contact the relevant politicians and find out who supports your lobby proposal and who doesn't. Draw up a list of contacts that includes the following:

- the Minister or Mayor responsible
- the Minister or Mayor's aides and top bureaucratic advisors
- the Opposition critics, aides and advisers
- contacts at any government agency or council involved in the issue
- contacts at non-government groups working in the area
- MP's, members of state or territorial legislatures or City Councillors who have been most vocal on the issue, and their aides

- business people whose commercial interests are involved
- media people who are reporting or commenting on the issue
- interested unions or professional associations

You should have a CHECKLIST that tells you the following:

- Where responsibility lies
- Who the relevant contact people are
- a record of their views on the topic
- a list of your supporters and opponents

STRATEGY

You need to communicate:

- your definition of the issue
 - your facts and statistics
 - your suggested solutions

Your brief should be **succinct** and **well presented**.

If delivering the brief in person a **spokesperson** should be nominated.

Distribute a **news release** and encourage any media involvement.

When you need to prove the strength of your support to the target/s of your campaign the following direct means have been successfully used by many groups.

- Telephone lobbies
 - a quick response that can dominate the recipient's entire day.
- Fax lobbies
 - a speedy way to leave a written message to several people at the same time. Each Member of Parliament could be contacted in a very short space of time.
- Letter lobbies
 - the target is usually obliged to respond to each letter received. This is a tangible way of securing a consideration of your issue. A good one-page letter may stimulate an interview with your target.

THE CAMPAIGN

1. During the campaign you should organise numerous meetings to ensure that

- Everyone is being kept informed
- Information is being shared and agreements are reached
- Common goals are determined

To be effective the group must form into a **cohesive unit**.

2. **Network** with other groups who may have relevant information. If necessary spread your network over new groups or individuals.

3. **Keep a written record** of all pertinent details such as names, addresses, telephone numbers of all people involved as well as all decisions taken, and all letters written. Accurate records can prevent confusion and disagreements further down the track.

4. **Write to the appropriate Ministers, politicians and bureaucrats**. Again, keep copies of all correspondence. Where possible use letterhead paper and type all letters. Keep letters succinct and support them with documentation where appropriate. Ensure the correct spelling of all names and titles etc. If necessary ring the switchboard.

5. Have a **meeting scheduled** for when you estimate your target will reply to your letters and other contacts. That way the group's response will be prompt.

6. Consider issuing a **media release**. These can be used to inform the media of a coming event, to highlight a speech or meeting or for any other occasion where you want the media to be informed. Remember the following points:

- only put one or two ideas across
- keep it to one page
- have a heading
- an introduction, middle and an end
- address it to one person or an entity call for something definite
- sign it and put a contact person's name and telephone number at the end
- send it out to all relevant media outlets - TV, radio and newspapers
- have the contact person fully briefed and prepared to speak to the media
- contact any known sympathetic journalists before the release and keep them informed.

The name of the group issuing the release should appear in the last paragraph along with contact details. Follow up the release a day or two later offering to clarify any points.

7. Consider a **letter campaign**. Remember to use personal letters rather than a form letter.

Make sure all letters are correctly directed to the politicians concerned. Consider letters to the editor of all relevant newspapers. Have material ready for the journalists to use for articles etc. Always view the article before it goes to print.

8. When using a petition, ring the office of a local politician to ensure that the correct wording is being used. Neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate will accept petitions that are incorrectly worded or incorrectly filled out

Keep a list of who you distributed the petition to, and collect, to ensure they are properly completed, then send them to the politician/s of your group's choice

9. Street rallies or theatre can inform the public of your cause. They also can provide good copy for the media. Any media coverage encourages a response from politicians.

10. Where possible develop **reliable contacts** in the bureaucracy or Minister's office. Junior staffers can become reliable sources of information. This also extends your network.

11. Keep **opposition politicians informed** as well. Send them press releases and any other information. Press releases can be sent to a range of people.

12. **Seek allies** wherever relevant, for example, trade unions. If the exercise requires a picket, obviously the union would be invaluable.

GETTING AN INTERVIEW RIGHT

When lobbying Ministers; politicians or bureaucrats:

- Remember only **present one or two ideas** at any one time. Be prepared on those points.
- **Nominate who the main speaker will be in advance**. Perhaps she should practice.
- **Others in the group are not to speak** unless it is agreed on beforehand. Too many speakers project an image of disorganisation.

When interviewing politicians and senior bureaucrats there are a few points to observe including:

- Ring for an appointment.
- Write a letter of request, if so asked, and state clearly the reasons for the requested interview.
- When given an appointment say who will be going.
- Always be represented by more than one person. Support is good to have. Sometimes a witness will be necessary.
- Be punctual
- Dress appropriately. It is unfortunately true that some politicians or bureaucrats cannot hear arguments if the person speaking to them is not dressed "right!"
- Take notes - designate one person for this role.
- At the end of the interview, try to get a summarised version agreed to.
- Send a copy of your version of the meeting, particularly highlighting any agreements etc to the person you saw.
- Be polite and never argue. Never be rude to anyone as one day you may wish to lobby that person again.

MEETINGS

While you are doing all or some of these things, once or more than once, remember that it is most important to hold meetings to:

- Pool all available information.
- Keep every one informed.
- Keep sight of goals.
- Modify goals where necessary.
- Keep networks alive
- Share all information straight. There is no room in a lobbying exercise for hidden agendas and people playing funny games to further their own cause or power base etc.

Remember all of the time that lobbying is, of course, primarily about winning.

It is important to keep up the momentum, support each other, to listen for cries of overload/help etc. And it does help to remember when everything looks gloomy just what a win will mean.

Promise you and your group something nice when the whole exercise is finished.
Celebrations are most important.

If you don't get everything or anything that you set out to achieve, well, there is always another day, and another lobbying campaign. Count what you have achieved. Maybe you had a partial success. You probably set up contact with other groups and persons - this means you have established networks that will be useful in the future. You probably learnt a lot (i.e. how to work together as a group) and the next time round will be much easier and smoother.

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