

Visiting Politicians

Visiting a Member of Parliament can be a daunting experience for those who have never done it before. Yet if a few simple steps are followed, the outcome can be very positive for both the visitors and the MP.

Who should we visit?

Australia has three levels of Government – Federal, State and Local. Each arm of Government has different responsibilities. Catalyst groups will normally focus on issues that are a responsibility of the Federal Government, so most of the time Catalyst groups will visit their representatives in the national Parliament.

To be elected to Parliament a person must secure a majority of the votes in their electorate. Each electorate contains around 80,000 people. When an election is held the members of that electorate, through their vote, select someone to represent them in Parliament. This person becomes the local Member for that electorate. Usually they belong to a political party such as the Liberal Party, Australian Labor Party, the National Party, or the Greens. Occasionally they may not belong to any political party and so are referred to as an 'independent'.

Catalyst groups are encouraged to discover the electorate within which their church is located and the electorates within which group members live. Group members should visit the MP's (Member of Parliament) for all of these electorates.

If you don't know which Federal electorate you or your church sits in, you can use the "[Find Your MP](#)" link in the resources section of the Catalyst website.

How do we make an appointment?

Simply ring your MP's electorate office and explain that you'd like to meet with your local Member. Electorate Office details can be found in the White Pages or by using the "Find Your MP" link of the Catalyst website. The staffer who receives your call may ask you what you want to see the Member about, where you're from and who is coming. Feel free to provide all this information.

It's a good idea to phone a month or so before you'd like to visit. Remember that your MP will not always be in the electorate office (eg when Parliament is 'sitting' she will be in Canberra).

It may be that you are unable to meet with your MP, particularly if she is a Minister. In this case ask to meet with an advisor. This can still be very effective.

What Will Happen When We Visit?

Your local MP has two offices, one at Parliament House and one in her electorate. Her time will be divided between these. Catalyst groups will normally visit their MP's in their electorate office.

When you arrive for your visit you will be greeted by a staff member, and when any previous meeting has finished, will go into your MP's office. A half hour time slot will normally be set aside for your meeting. After introductions your MP will invite you to share your concerns. Your group then has the opportunity to tell your MP what you are concerned about, why you're concerned about it, and what you'd like your MP to do about it.

Your politician will expect your group to ask for something and will assume that the 'ask' is the point of your visit. Politicians are elected to Parliament to represent their constituents, so meeting with members of their electorate, listening to their concerns, and taking action on them is a normal part of a politician's life.

Relationship Building

Catalyst groups are seeking to build a long term relationship with their MPs. Over time it is hoped group members will get to know their MP and that she will get to know them.

The simple reality is that a positive relationship is one of the keys to advocacy impact. People are inclined to listen to and act for those they feel positive toward and with whom they enjoy an ongoing relationship. If you are aggressive or rude you will have very little long term impact.

When visiting your MP remember that she has a very demanding job, and that this remains true whether or not you agree with her policies or political tactics. Most politicians are ambitious both to do good and to further their career. They seek to balance these two realities while operating inside a political system that is demanding and frequently toxic. Try to see your MP not simply as a means of getting what you want, but as a person with needs, feelings, hopes, strengths, and weaknesses. Offer your care to her as a fellow human (remembering the bible calls us to love everyone and to pray for those in authority) and treat her with respect and warmth.

This does not mean you should refrain from strongly stating your case and asking your MP to pursue your cause. It simply means to remember that you are dealing with a person not merely a position.

Get to Know Your MP

Before and after you visit your MP try to find out as much as you can about them. Some key things to discover are:

Political Party

Which party do they belong to? What is the party policy on your issue?

Personal Life

Is your MP married, single, a parent, etc? These realities should never be used to manipulate your MP or to make a political point, but by finding out a little about them as a person will help 'humanise' your MP for you.

Seat Status

Is the seat safe, marginal or somewhere in-between? A safe seat is one that is nearly always won by someone from your MP's party or that she holds by a large margin. A marginal seat is one that often changes hands from one political party to another, or is held by only a small percentage of votes.

At election times political parties are very concerned to target the burning issues in marginal electorates. In very marginal seats a handful of votes can be the difference between winning and losing. If your electorate is marginal and you can show a significant group of voters within the electorate will allow their vote to be influenced by what your MP and her party say on your issue, you stand an excellent chance of influencing policy.

Party Position

What is your MP's place within her political party? Some key things to look for are:

- Is she a backbencher or a member of the ministry/shadow ministry? Backbenchers do not have any special responsibilities beyond representing their electorate. A Minister (or 'Shadow' Minister if not in Government) has responsibility to lead the party's efforts in a particular area. This is significant for two reasons. First, Ministers and Shadow Ministers have much more influence on policy than backbenchers. They are right at the heart of political power. Second, Ministers and Shadow Ministers are bound by party discipline to support the policies of their party. A backbencher will feel far more free to critique the policies of their party, whereas a Minister/Shadow Minister will feel bound to publicly support the official party position even if they personally disagree with it.
- What networks does your MP belong to within her party and across the Parliament? Political parties are made up of factional groupings, networks and alliances. Where does your MP belong? Is she seen as a significant 'player' or is she on the margins of influence within the party? Beyond the party, does she belong to any cross-party networks – for example, is she part of a network of Christians in the Parliament, or a member of a group of women working to advance the cause of women?

Personal and Political Passions

What are your MP's personal and political passions? How might knowing these help you campaign on your issue? For example, if you are campaigning on overseas aid and

you discover your MP is passionate about the welfare of children, you could focus on the fact that 30,000 children die every day from easily preventable diseases. If, however, your MP's passion is small business, you might focus on the lack of income earning opportunities for the world's poor and the potential of aid to build the capacity of the poor to generate their own incomes.

With regard to personal passions, if you discover your MP is a passionate football fan and you have a professional footballer in your congregation, take the footballer with you when you visit your MP.

Where to find information

There are a number of ways you can find out more about your MP.

- Australian Parliament website ["who's who" section](#). Click on your member's name and you'll discover basic information about your member and see links that will help you discover more. Especially helpful are the electorate profile link (will let you know how marginal or safe the seat is), the biography link (will give you info about your Member's political career), and links to the Member's personal home page (if she has one).
- Local newspapers
- Google search
- Ask your MP or her office for information about the MP.

What Should We Say?

When visiting your MP it is good to think of your time as divided into four slots: (1) welcome and introductions; (2) making your case; (3) discussion; (4) wrapping up. In a half hour visit you could expect welcome and wrapping up slots to take around 5 minutes each, leaving you 10 minutes to make your case and 10 minutes for discussion.

Welcome and Introductions

This is a brief period during which each member of the group can shake hands with the MP and introduce themselves. You may find it helpful to have some preliminary "small talk", but make sure this does not drag on. If the MP does not transition to the reason for your visit, the group leader should – "Well Bob, what we'd really like to talk to you about is..." Also make sure to clarify the time available (eg., "I understand we have half an hour.")

Making Your Case

Catalyst groups will be issued with a Talk Sheet. This is an excellent tool for making your case. It will allow you to briefly state who you are, what you are concerned about, why you are concerned about it, and what you would like your MP to do. Take the Talk Sheet with you, plus a copy for your MP. One person from your group should be given the responsibility to present your case. Give your MP a copy of the Talk Sheet then quickly run through it.

If you can start with a personal story before moving onto the Talk Sheet that could be helpful. For example, if your focus is Australian aid levels you might like to point out

that your church supports a community development project in Africa, and that as a church you've had a chance to see poverty and how it can be overcome.

Discussion

After the presenter has made the case ask your MP if she has any questions or comments. During this time of discussion group members should feel free to contribute as appropriate. Avoid contradicting each other, or talking over the top of your MP. If the MP seems to be getting off-topic try to gently bring her back to the topic at hand.

It will be helpful if group members to have familiarised themselves with the question and answer documents that are provided to Catalyst groups. Perhaps each group member could focus on one or two questions and be ready to answer if asked. Don't be afraid to have the Q and A document with you and feel free to leave a copy with your MP.

If there are issues to which you don't know the answer feel free to admit this and promise to find the answer and send it on. You might also like to offer to send on other material you think the MP may find helpful.

Wrapping Up

When your time has come to a close thank the MP for meeting with you and confirm what you and your MP have each agreed to do.

MP Visit Group Size and Roles

When visiting your MP there is really no set size that groups should be. Three to five people is a handy size, but if you have a large group and everyone wants to go, take them all. You'll certainly leave a strong impression!

There are five key roles to be played (one person could fulfil more than one of these). It is important that these are assigned beforehand.

Group Leader

One person should be designated as group leader. This person will take the lead, making sure everyone gets introduced, clarifying the time available for the meeting, moving discussion along as necessary, thanking the MP at the conclusion of the visit, and confirming what the MP and group have each agreed to do.

Presenter

The presenter is responsible to take 5-10 minutes to put the group's case, using the Talk Sheet provided to the group. Presenters should make sure they practise their presentation prior to the visit, and ensure it can be confined to 10 minutes.

Note Taker

One person should take notes. It is not necessary to record everything that is said but it is important to note briefly what the group asks for, outline the MP's response (eg enthusiastic support, disinterest, etc), and above all to record what the MP agrees to do and what the group agrees to.

Support People

Everyone else should see themselves as providing support, jumping in to answer a question or offer a comment as seems appropriate.

Follow-Up

One person should assume responsibility to follow-up after the visit. This involves writing a letter of thanks to the MP for meeting with the group. As well as saying thankyou, the letter should remind the MP of the topic of discussion and what the MP and the group each agreed to do. If the group has promised to track down and send on any material include this with the letter.

Before and After

Before visiting your MP it is a good idea to become as familiar as possible with your issue. A variety of resources are available to help Catalyst groups achieve this, including:

- Catalyst training days (held 1-2 times a year)
- Catalyst annual campaign video (available from the Catalyst website)
- Catalyst annual campaign briefing notes (available from the Catalyst website)
- Catalyst annual campaign bible studies (available from the Catalyst website)
- Catalyst annual campaign Q and A (available from the Catalyst website)

For the 2007 “More Aid, Better Aid” campaign the Micah Challenge (micahchallenge.org.au) and Make Poverty History (makepovertyhistory.com.au) also provide excellent resources.

It is highly likely that having prepared with these materials you will know much more about the issue than your MP and can be a resource to her.

Having spent time getting familiar with the issue meet at least once before your MP visit to:

- Assign roles and clarify expectations
- Give the presenter an opportunity to practise
- Pray for your MP and for the visit

After the MP meeting set aside some time to:

- Evaluate how the visit went
- Engage in appropriate follow-up
- Fill out a politician visit form (available from the resources section of the Catalyst website) and send it to the Catalyst Coordinator
- Pray

Make Use of The Catalyst Network and Coordinator

If you have any questions or need help tracking down information please feel free to get in touch with Scott Higgins, the coordinator of the Catalyst program.

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