

Cana Conference 2010

Notes from Open Space on equipping citizens to visit Local Members
regarding Climate Change issues and policies
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Participants: Richard Maguire, ParraCAN, unfolding@smartchat.net.au, Cara Bevington, OXFAM, carab@oxfam.org.au; Paddy Cullen, OXFAM, paddyc@oxfam.org.au; Tricia Small, SEARCH Foundation, staff1@search.org.au; Andrew Cox, Total Environment Centre, ascox@ozemail.com.au; Graeme Jessup, Pittwater CAN, graemejessup@optusnet.com.au, Claude Mostowik, Edmund Rice Centre, mscjust@smartchat.net.au

Almost all of the people in the group had visited local members, from one time to organising visits statewide to many members over a longer period of time. Paddy and Cara had engaged in a campaign of visiting state and federal MPs for some time in Western Australia and Sydney. Many of these ideas come from them, and the materials relating to these visits had been on Oxfam's website. It seems they have moved it however Paddy will send the materials to everyone who gave him their email or who contacts him.

Benefits of visiting local members

- Educating them about your area of concern, they often have not understood it well
- Letting them know that at least you, others in your group and others in the community have the concern.
- Your raising issues and asking questions can stimulate them to think more about the issue themselves, raise it with other members or the relevant ministers. Thus the visits can have a multiplier effect.
- If the member already shares your concern, they will sense more community support for their taking action on the matter, and can even begin to take initiatives beyond what you have requested.
- Those who do the visits find that they gain confidence in dealing with politicians and are more willing to engage in related activities in the future.
- Informing yourself on government policies and actions

Benefits beyond the immediate issue or person

- Paddy reported about a politician who had understood what they had told him during visits about the Millennium Development Goals. That person went so far as to get on the committee that dealt with overseas aid so he could do more and called Paddy to tell him so.
- If you, or others raise an issue, it can well happen that the member will ask the minister and if several members do so this can affect the minister's thinking.
- You can assume that the politician will realize that he/she is not just dealing with one person but others who haven't been able to come. Its can be especially effective to visit a number of MP's. They do talk to one another and will realize that there are many concerned people. If you ask questions that call for some information from the minister that will alert them also that many people are interested in the issue.
- Richard reported that their State MP in the western Sydney expressed her surprise and unhappiness that this was one of the very few times that anyone come to see her about climate change. The local federal member also was unhappy that few people raised climate change with her for she sees it as an important issue. Cara also said that when they went to visit Tanya Plibersek she noted that this is the first time she had had a visit about this in her inner city electorate. MPs usually hear about the more immediate concerns people have like schools and roads or personal matters.

Preparing for visits

- It's very easy for people to feel intimidated about visiting an MP, even for people who have some experience of talking with politicians in other situations. Preparation and support are very important.
- Paddy organized preparation of people to visit politicians in WA about concerns relating to development. They targeted 27 members and 14 appointments were held. Many who came to the training finally did not visit for other reasons—such as can't get time off work during the day, or not feeling confident enough to go. In some cases the politicians (or their staff) would not give them an appointment.
- People often find that the MPs can be quite willing to talk, personable and willing to be cooperative. Though this is isn't always the case, it happens very often. It's important to keep in mind an important to tell people about this beforehand.

Getting appointments

- The responses of the MPs in WA were quite varied there was no overall difference between willingness of Labor or Liberal members to see the people who asked for an appointment or in their responsiveness.

- Seeing these visits as potentially the beginning of a long-term relationship makes it important to maintain as far as possible a friendly relationship. If they do not are not willing to see you on the first try, keep at it without making a large fuss. Sometimes the staff protects them even though the politician might be open, so it requires persistence and making sure that they understand how important these visits are. It is always an option to use tactics that can embarrass the politician into meeting with you (like demonstrations, placards, letters to the editor), but it is important to remember that a forced meeting might not get any results, and could limit the likelihood of building a long term relationship that could be useful regarding other issues.
- It's also a great idea to ask around in your circles to learn who knows the politician or the staffer. Sometimes the personal contact can help you get in.
- If they say it's not a local issue, tell them that it is a concern of yours as one of their constituents and they are responsible to represent your views in parliament on all issues. Also you can mention ways in which this is a local issue. Climate change affects everyone.
- It is helpful to get to know beforehand what you can about the person you are visiting, what committees they are on, how they have voted on issues that concern you, what they have said in their maiden speech that might be relevant. Knowing any of this can lead to connections to the concern you are raising, and at least signal that you are interested in what they are doing or concerned with. On our visit to a western Sydney state MP we were all surprised to learn during the visit that she had studied environmental science. This would have been good to know at the outset.
- It's advantageous to have the meeting in their local office if possible. The likelihood of interruption is lower, and they will have less on their minds regarding the immediate parliamentary activities.

Preparing for the meeting

- Once you have the appointment, be sure to send the politician an agenda for the meeting which names the concerns you will be raising, and questions you will want to discuss. This not only helps the MP be more prepared and comfortable with you, but helps you keep on track during the meeting and not forget important concerns.
- Make a script for the visits, what each person would ask/say, and in what order. They always make sure to ask the MP a question or do something. After the meeting they send a thank you letter and remind the MP of a what they have committed themselves to. Be sure to follow up on what you have asked about, with a visit or at least a phone call.
- When they had visits they created occasions to take a photo of the politician doing something with the group that could be put into the local paper with a story.
- **Planning for the meeting** can also include creating occasions for informal photo ops and stories. Some groups brought along something for the politician to sign something like a globe or world map naming areas of concern or gave them a small gift that symbolises the concern.. Taking a picture of the event and putting it into the paper and sending it around to other supporters can be valuable motivation for you and gives you and the politician good press. It can be that they will keep the gift as a reminder of the visit. It's best to do the photo events at the beginning of the meeting, because you might run out of time or there might be an interruption at the end.
- It's important to give the politician a space to talk and let them come out and say what they think
- It's helpful to have 3 or 4 people on the visit and also tell them you are visiting on behalf of a group, since this shows that more than one person is concerned. It is great if your group can have some diversity of age, gender, occupation, etc. since this signals that the concern is not one of a particular sector of the community.

During the visits

Those who had made visits reported that

- During the visits it became apparent that the politicians are not clear about the science or the UN or many of the issues involved so these visits have a great educative role today are the beginning it's becoming more aware of possible with the use visits to move people along so that they become to doing things beyond what the visit was about.
- It's better to visit them in their office then try to see them at Parliament House because in the office they are going to be called out for various other things Gorby have people dropping by to see them and interfering
- It is important to make one or more of requests for information from or action by the member. It can easily happen that the politician will talk around the issue and avoid committing themselves. If you notice this is happening, be sure to ask directly if they will do what you are asking. If they do not agree to what you ask, it can be useful to ask what they are willing to do about the issue.
- Some of the politicians might try to bait you, debate, argue or act as devil's advocate. It is important not to pick up on the bait, stay with your message, and not get sidetracked.

Follow-up

- Be sure to send a follow up letter thanking them for the visit, reminding them of the concerns you raise and what they have promised to do for you.
- One form of follow-up was to hold forums where the issues are discussed with the public and candidates or politicians are invited to speak
- Other things you can do to build a long-term relationship to consider a sending of a card for Christmas or even Easter if appropriate.
- It's also important to let your supporters and group members know about the meeting and its result. Celebrating even small wins is very important for motivation, to keep going on these big important and challenging issues.

Wider effect

- Taking action to ensure that more than one MP is visited can be useful. Members of your local group might live in different electorates so they could arrange visits in those electorates to visit with their MPs. As well you can invite friends or relatives that live outside your electorates. Keep in mind that they will usually require the same sort of support and preparation that you and your group did.
- It might be possible and useful to find others in your electorate that will go on a visit with you, even if they are not part of your group, if they share your concern.
- One group recruited 300 girl guide to come to an advocacy Day. They wrote small notes about the issue on different colored papers, stapled them together and sent them to the MP. A picture and story went into the paper about this and symbolized wider community concern as sending a message to the MP

Other options for contact

Some states have local cabinet meetings. These are not usually publicised much, especially beyond the community where they are to be held. It is often possible at these meetings to be able to have a 5-10 minute meeting with a minister or even the premier as well as participate in the general meeting. It might be that the meeting will be held in a community that you can not get to, but you might know someone there who can go on your behalf.