

ADVOC8

White Paper Series

Part 1: Engaging the Backbench

Executive Summary

Engaging government ministers who have portfolios relevant to your organisation's activities is a fundamental part of any sound government relations (GR) strategy. A key group of political stakeholders which is often overlooked however is backbenchers: Members of Parliament (often in their first or second term) who have been elected by their constituents but not yet reached the Ministry or previously appointed Ministers who may have lost their positions for whatever reason (scandal/poor performance/factional deals etc.) as part of a cabinet reshuffle.

This paper outlines the importance of backbenchers, identifying key backbenchers for businesses to engage with, and using practical strategies to build political capital with backbenchers over time.

In summary, what can you do to engage backbench MPs successfully?

- Ignore backbenchers at your peril – it may only be one or two Ministerial reshuffles before they are in a powerful position in government.
- Do your homework on backbenchers – who are they? What issues do they care about? Read up on the parliamentary profiles of MPs and pay particular attention to their past occupations and work experiences to gain an idea of who might be able to be a 'backbench champion' for your particular issue.
- Go through Hansard and read through backbenchers' maiden speeches to Parliament to understand what kind of policy areas backbench MPs are passionate about and gauge how receptive they will be to your issue.
- Take every opportunity you can to engage with backbench MPs, write them letters, invite them to local charity and community events that you're hosting. This is all part of building political capital. Identify up and coming backbench MPs and develop individual strategies for engaging them.
- Provide a clear articulation of what kind of benefits your organisation brings to a local MPs' electorate and be as specific as possible e.g. job figures/investment. Backbench MPs are always looking for ways to build their profile in local communities and deliver benefits for their communities so they can be re-elected down the track.

The importance of backbenchers

The impact of backbenchers on government decision-making is often dismissed as being non-consequential. 'Why would I bother with a backbencher when I should be talking to the Minister' is what many organisations may ask themselves. Aren't the Ministers the ones who are in charge of making the decisions that will affect me? Whilst this is true to an extent, backbenchers can exert a significant degree of influence over the decision-making process which ultimately decides the final outcome of a policy. The recent debate in NSW on short-term holiday letting (see case study below), is an example of how Liberal Party backbenchers ultimately changed the outcome of this policy debate.

Ministers will listen to backbenchers as they are typically marginal-seat holders whose constituents' views are critical to governments being re-elected. Backbenchers are often a good barometer of the government's success and cut-through with the electorate. An effective and successful government will have a buoyant and energised backbench, whilst a government struggling to connect with voters will have dispirited backbenchers who are worrying about trying to retain their seats (and their jobs) at the next election.

How do I know which backbenchers to engage with?

Backbenchers can be a valuable source of political capital. Given the multitude of backbenchers in elected parliaments (e.g. in July 2018 the Federal Coalition Government for instance had 23 Ministers and 53 backbenchers), it can be difficult to decide on which ones to engage with first or most often.

Ideally, you want to target backbenchers who will be most sympathetic to your cause and who can advocate your case to the wider government. Let's refer to these backbenchers as 'backbench champions'.

A good way to ascertain how sympathetic a backbencher might be to your organisation's policy goals, is to read their maiden speech. At some point during their first term, all Members of Parliament deliver a maiden speech which is then recorded in Hansard and publicly accessible online. Often, backbenchers will use their maiden speech to outline a policy area which they are particularly passionate about and may want to pursue during their parliamentary term. For instance, an MP from a rural area may be passionate about addressing youth unemployment in country towns, or an MP from a coastal region might feel strongly about promoting interstate tourism to stimulate that region's economy.

It is often useful to delve into a politician's previous career to uncover their individual motivations. MPs will typically have a biography section in Advoc8 and on their parliamentary profiles where you will be able to see their qualifications and prior work history.

CASE STUDY: The Airbnb Debate in NSW

The importance of backbenchers in influencing government decision-making was demonstrated in the recent debate the NSW Government had on short-term holiday letting laws (STHL). Originally, the NSW Government planned on releasing a policy which would not have allowed strata bodies to ban STHL in individual unit blocks and apartment buildings.

During the party room discussions on the policy, at least six backbench MPs opposed these reforms and the policy was abandoned. Following the voicing of concerns from backbench MP, a revised policy was announced shortly afterwards which included provisions allowing strata corporations the power to ban STHL in their buildings. The final policy also included a 180-day cap on properties used for STHL in greater Sydney when hosts are not present.

Often MPs will have cut their teeth in political offices as junior or senior staffers or will have gained relevant political experience serving on their Local Council, however this is not always the case. For instance, the Hon John Barilaro MP, owned and operated a small business which manufactured energy efficient timber windows and doors prior to entering NSW Parliament in 2011. Backbench politicians, like Barilaro, may feel more sympathetic to policies that will be of benefit to other small business-owners such as lower payroll tax or reductions in red tape.

In addition, you need to consider MP's personal circumstances. Personal factors such as age, gender and ethnicity may contribute to a politician's worldview or their approach towards a certain policy area. An MP's perspective on certain policies may also be influenced by the experiences of a close relative or family member. For instance, Federal backbench MP Mr Julian Leeser discussed in detail during his maiden speech to Parliament how the suicide of his father at a young age shaped his personal development and his passion for policies implementing programs targeted at suicide prevention.

CASE STUDY: The Hon Dr Anthony Lynham MP

The Hon Dr Anthony Lynham MP is currently a Minister serving in the Palaszczuk Government in Queensland. Prior to becoming an MP, Lynham was an experienced maxillofacial surgeon. Once elected to Queensland Parliament in 2014, he was a staunch advocate for one-punch laws.

In his maiden speech to Parliament, Lynham spoke about how he operated on many Queensland teenagers who had been violently assaulted on a night out. The Queensland Government later introduced one-punch laws in 2016.



Engaging 'Up-and-Comer' MPs

Any sophisticated GR strategy will focus not just on Ministers and Shadow Ministers but a broader network of political stakeholders. This wider group of stakeholders should always include backbenchers who can be considered as 'up-and-comers' within their respective political parties.

'Up-and-comers' are typically young (usually in their mid-30s or early-40s), strong media performers and may have experienced significant success in their past vocations or already have a public life.

Both Andrew Hastie (Federal Member for Canning, WA) and Kristina Keneally (Federal Senator for NSW) are good examples of backbenchers who have 'up and comer' status within their parties. Both these backbenchers fit this description neatly – Hastie is a decorated former SAS officer whilst Keneally is a former Premier of NSW.

It is crucial to focus on talented backbenchers as they are likely to be promoted to a Ministry within a short space of time of being elected and potentially to a portfolio of direct relevance to your business. It is common for State and Federal Governments to have several Ministerial reshuffles (both minor and major) throughout their parliamentary terms which result in the elevation of backbench MPs to Ministerial posts.



ANDREW HASTIE MP AND SENATOR KRISTINA KENEALLY

For instance, the Hon Dominic Perrottet MP became NSW Treasurer within five years of being elected. This is all part of the political lifecycle. Ministerial reshuffles will become necessary for a whole host of reasons – some Ministers may resign from the Ministry or indeed the entire parliament, (like Joe Hockey in 2015). It is rare for a Government Minister to occupy one portfolio throughout their entire time in Parliament. Indeed, the majority of Ministers will occupy a number of portfolios throughout their career or may even hold multiple portfolios at the same time.

Up-and-comers will typically hold seats that are winnable or 'safe'. This however is not to say that talented, up-and-coming MPs won't find themselves in elections contesting marginal seats. For instance, the Queensland Deputy Premier and Treasurer, the Hon Jackie Trad MP, was elected at the last Queensland State Election by a margin of just 3.6 per cent in her seat of South Brisbane. Trad, much like her NSW counterpart, was only elected to Parliament a relatively short time ago in 2012 and was promoted to the Ministry very quickly. Understanding electoral politics can be very helpful in forming an idea of which backbench MPs are worth targeting.

Ideally, the backbenchers who you choose to target as part of your GR strategy will have a strong likelihood of being re-elected at the subsequent election. An effective backbench MP will often 'buck the trend' during elections – they will increase their margin (i.e. how many people voted for them at the election) despite an overall swing away from the government of which they are a part. You can easily look online at the AEC website to see polling figures from all previous elections.

Occasionally, you will lose backbench MPs from Parliament who you have spent a significant amount of time and energy cultivating relationships with. From time to time, there will be unforeseeable shifts in the political landscape which necessitate drastic changes to the personnel (both backbenchers and Ministers) involved in government decision-making. Whilst it's impossible to predict exactly what these changes entail and when they will occur, it is useful to have an awareness of this and incorporate it into your overall GR strategy.

What can I do to engage with backbenchers?

In their first term in Parliament, most backbenchers will focus on two main things – firstly, delivering tangible results for their local community, whether it be a new primary school, more frequent bus routes or upgrades to the local hospital. This is so that they can go back to their constituents at the next election and say "here's what I've done already and why you should vote for me again."

Secondly, backbenchers will often hone in on one particular policy area (which will most likely have some kind of connection to their electorate) and lobby for some kind of significant policy reform or investment in this area. This is where the opportunity for them to be a 'backbench champion' comes into play. Achieving a policy outcome will often require one (or indeed multiple) 'backbench champions' or 'policy entrepreneurs' to champion the benefits of legislative reform or change.

When engaging a backbencher, it is critical to emphasise what benefits your organisation brings to that MP's electorate, as this is what they will be most concerned with – whether it be the number of people your business employs in the community or the number of vulnerable people your organisation has supported in the area. You need to explicitly articulate the kind of benefits your organisation (or a particular policy reform) will bring to their electorate. Be as specific as possible and make sure you identify what you actually want!

You may find that backbench MPs are more willing to engage with you than Ministers as they aren't overburdened by the responsibilities of a ministerial portfolio. If your organisation hosts local community events, this is the perfect opportunity to invite your local MP regardless of whether they are a Minister or not. Even if the MP is too busy to attend, the very act of actually inviting the MP in the first place is all part of the process of building political capital. Whilst they may not turn up in the end, it is more likely that they will show up next time.

Remember that establishing and maintaining relationships is at the core of every government relations strategy. Going to the effort of making contact with a backbench MP, even just a simple letter congratulating them on their election to Parliament, all builds vital political capital which you may be able to 'cash in' later down the track. Successful political careers are often formed over many years and the longer your organisation's involvement, the more receptive that particular Minister will be once he or she reaches a higher level of decision-making. A Minister who has never had any past communication or contact with an individual or organisation is far less likely to be receptive to their ideas than someone who has gone to the effort of supporting them whilst they were still a backbench MP.

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