

## Lobbies and Lobbyists

You will meet a lot of people who are trying to get the Government to act in a way which will be to their advantage. A small number will lobby on behalf of others – and especially on behalf of those who cannot lobby for themselves. And occasionally – but probably not very often – you will come across a professional lobbyist working on behalf of a client.

The key thing to remember is that, in one respect, they all want the same thing – which is for their message to be understood. They will therefore react very badly, and pester you much more, if they think that you are being over-defensive, or cannot be bothered with them, or that they are being fobbed off. So always put yourself in their shoes, emphasise that you do understand their concern, and that their views will genuinely be taken into account.

Campaign letters – hundreds or thousands of them – can be a logistical nightmare. You first need to decide whether they need a response. It is better, of course, if you can reply to each one, especially in view of the principle outlined above. But individual responses are usually out of the question. Maybe you can send a really well-written response to the organisation that has organised the campaign, and they can distribute it in their newsletter? Or even better, these days, you might use the internet.

Serious lobbyists will ask for a meeting and you should generally agree to such requests, partly to show that you have not closed your mind, and partly because a good discussion can often lead to surprising insights which might help you crack the underlying problem. And don't get upset if they ask to see 'someone senior' or a Minister. After all, they want to know that their message is getting beyond you, and how better than to deliver it in person? If the person lobbying is sufficiently senior, or the campaign is high profile, then you should ensure that they are seen at an appropriately high level. The exact level is always a question of fine judgement, but the aim, as always, should be to reassure the caller that the department and its Minister are taking them seriously. If that needs a Minister, then so be it. Equally, however, I have often pointed out to lobbyists that they will only get a few minutes of a Minister's time, or of the time of a senior official, whereas they could spend much longer, and have a more fruitful dialogue, with the departmental expert.

Status can be a problem the other way round. Some large companies have middle or senior managers who lobby hard in support of their particular responsibility. A research director, for instance, might press you to spend huge sums supporting research & development in their area, whilst a property manager might want you to relax planning laws. It is always worth checking that they have the full support of their own senior colleagues. For instance, does their chairman, who so often rails against excessive Government expenditure, really support the proposed £100m Government research programme? Or does he really want rid of green belt controls, bearing in mind his vehement opposition to the expansion of a computer laboratory in his pleasant Cambridgeshire village? If so, let him come in and tell Ministers to their faces. Such meetings add small pleasures to otherwise dull days.

You need to be more tough with those who ask for repeat meetings when they have

very little new to say. Consider carefully whether you have yourself done what you should to keep them in touch with developments. If so, then you may simply have to refuse a meeting which is going to be a waste of everyone's time – but maybe soften your refusal with an offer to meet again at a more sensible time.

And watch out that a meeting does not backfire on the lobbyist, particularly when the Minister is acting in a quasi-judicial capacity. For instance, a Minister who agrees to see a party to a planning application may either then have to see all the other parties or decide against the said party in order to avoid being judicially reviewed. Much the same applies to competition and merger cases. It can be amazing how quickly the meeting idea is dropped, once the implications are explained.

Professional lobbyists (and their in-house equivalents, public affairs directors) are generally a good thing, particularly because they ensure that all the arguments are marshalled together and clearly presented. They also provide a helpful service to industrialists and others who are often surprisingly terrified of Whitehall and all the strange beings that stalk its corridors. But they can be very pushy, so you sometimes have to be quite firm in response, especially if they want repeat meetings when there is little more to be said. Luckily they are pretty thick-skinned – and why would you care if they never trouble you again? But take care to ensure that you are not refusing a meeting which might indeed have taken the debate in a useful direction. And make sure you see their client, and not just the lobbyist.

Finally, do not let anyone outside government, however important they are, get the impression that policy is being framed with only their interests in mind. Colleagues elsewhere in government are understandably on the look out for signs of 'departmentalitis' and all too willing to believe that you have 'gone native' and become the unwitting (and unprofessional) advocate for a particular interest. Take care that you frame your arguments in such a way as to make it clear that this is not so.

It follows that you should take particular care to ensure that no-one is allowed to bully either you or a Minister. Conversely, you need to be conscious of the value of the good name of the British Government. The Government sets out to deal fairly and straightforwardly with everyone. In particular, civil servants never bluff. If we say that we will take certain action in certain circumstances then we must mean it. Failure to do so damages the Government's credibility.

Finally, you should never rely on oral representations when important principles, or large amounts of money or careers or reputations, are at stake. Telephone communication is particularly unreliable, for you lose the visual clues that add texture to face-to-face communication. So get everything written down, either in the form of a contract or as your record, copied to the other party, of what they said. For instance, if someone comes in for a meeting (with you or a Minister) as a result of which the Minister might make a controversial decision, ensure that there is an accurate record of what is said, and send it to the person before the decision is made. He or she will not then be able to deny it, or claim that they were misunderstood.