

How to Influence Government Policy – a Civil Servant’s Advice

1. Timing is vital.

Policy making is seldom a smooth process but there inevitably comes a time when analysis and debate gives way to decision making. Ministers and officials then begin to focus on promoting and defending the decision. You should therefore aim to get in early, well before opinions harden.

2. Target opinion formers.

Do not start at the top. They have very little thinking time, even if they do not already have a strong opinion. Focus on those around them: Junior Ministers, Special Advisers, middle-ranking civil servants.

And talk to the media, of course. Even opinionated commentators do not want to be ill-informed and those appearing on TV/radio or writing for the broadsheets and particularly keen to avoid factual and scientific errors.

Within the civil service, focus on Directors, Deputy Directors and policy analysts. The latter in particular will be particularly keen to learn from you.

Remember, too, that today’s Special Advisers and policy analysts are tomorrow’s Ministers and senior officials. Start building your network of mutually trustworthy contacts.

3. Adopt a respectful tone.

Ministers and officials respond very badly if you suggest that they are engaged in “political posturing and moralistic positioning” (Professor David Nutt) or demonstrate “total lack of leadership” (Sir Paul Nurse). Remember Sir William Harcourt’s advice that “The Minister exists to tell the civil servant what the public will not stand.”

It is vital, therefore, that you demonstrate that you are trying to help both Ministers and their advisers achieve their aims (better health, education etc.); that you recognise that policy making is a difficult, imperfect and highly constrained process; and that they must start from where they are, and not from scratch.

Bear in mind, too, the need to avoid endless analysis (‘analysis paralysis’). A decision to delay a decision is often much worse than a decision based on imperfect information.

4. Communicate effectively

- Avoid jargon.
- Avoid detail unless absolutely necessary to understand your argument.
- In particular, make it clear how your work fits into the larger picture. Policymakers are often more interested about where your advice fits within the wider body of evidence, than with the specific evidence itself.

- Stress that you empathise with your audience and want to help them succeed.
- Recognise the constraints within which they work.
- Social media can be very effective in fostering engagement between scientists and politicians, in particular through signposting more detailed research for those who wish to delve into the detail.

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