

Meeting with your MP about the Treatment of Asylum Seekers in Australia¹

Planning to meet with your MP:

- Plan on a 20 minute meeting, maximum 30 mins, as MPs don't usually have a lot of time.
- In that time plan to raise no more than 3 or 4 points (maybe only 1 or 2 if time is really short).
- Photographs and first hand stories are powerful communicators – organise any beforehand. They help the listener to be able to identify with the issue.
- Find out if other MPs are interested/involved in the issue and plan to let the MP know.
- Work out where the MP is coming from in terms of their values and understanding of the issue and communicate from that angle. Find out the MP's background (business, farmer, lawyer, etc) but don't make assumptions. Find out if they have any knowledge of asylum seeker issues. Have they been involved in any other human rights issues?
- Search Hansard for information on the MP's track record.
- Find out what portfolio area the MP covers (the angle from which they might take the issue).
- Don't assume the MP knows their party policies concerning the asylum seeker issues.
- Work out ahead of time what you are going to say – use dot point notes for yourself in the meeting.
- Decide how this issue may be of value/importance to their constituents.
- MPs who have the same message reinforced by their colleagues are more likely to act on your concerns – this is more likely if a range of MPs are approached.
- Prepare facts, figures and information which will help the MP to make a stand on an issue (eg referenced statistics). This is particularly helpful if you know the MP is privately sympathetic on asylum seeker issues but not publicly.
- If possible, it is better for two or three people to visit an MP, rather than one, for moral support and to be able to better read an MP's response. Work out before the meeting who is going to say what.
- Before visiting any MPs, do role plays to practise delivering your case and to prepare for any likely questions.

¹ With many thanks to Giz Watson MLC for the basis of these notes.

Setting up the meeting with the MP:

- Write a letter to your local MP, stating what you want to talk to them about. Include that you are a local citizen who is concerned about the current treatment of asylum seekers and would like to discuss it with them. Suggest a suitable time for the meeting.
- Make the letter personal, using full names and signing letters by hand. Use short sentences and no more details than necessary. Make the letter attractive to the eye – no more than five lines a paragraph and use bullet points. Use easy to understand language and don't assume their knowledge of the area. Use a friendly tone but be firm in asking for a meeting.
- Follow up the initial letter with a phone call to show you are keen, but be polite. Ring MPs who are backbenchers after one week and ministers after two weeks.
- If you get no response from this, follow up again to find out why you are not being granted a meeting.
- If members are busy they may arrange for one of their staff to meet with you – sometimes it can be useful to meet with an advisor or other staff member, whose advice the MP may rely on. Weigh up the value of meeting with them as opposed to the MP.
- Talking to an MP by phone may be better than nothing if no meeting is to be granted.
- If no personal contact with an MP is forthcoming, write another letter to them and ask them to raise your concerns with the appropriate people in their party.

At the meeting:

- Thank the MP for their time at the outset of the meeting.
- The MP may have someone else with them (as note taker, advisor) – acknowledge them.
- Ask the MP if they would mind if one of you takes notes.
- Emotionally engage them at the outset by showing your genuine interest in the human rights issue.
- Be reasonably passionate about your cause but don't ramble. Make your 3-4 points concisely.
- Keep a positive atmosphere by actively listening and showing interest in understanding their point of view.
- Respond with interest to their responses; give them airtime by making reflective statements in response.

- Keep the discussion on track.
- Be ready for questions they may ask, have answers ready where possible. If you don't know the answer to some of the questions, say you will send the answer later and do so.
- Expect a defensive reaction from some MPs. Hear them out and show them you have heard their point of view to try to disarm their defensiveness. When pointing out information that contradicts their views, start with: "Not many people know..."
- Give the MP reasons why they should listen to you. Eg you are a local constituent who is in touch with many other local constituents (perhaps you are a member of a local, national or international group?)
- To wrap up the meeting, reiterate the points you have made and tell the MP what you would like them to do. Some of these actions may include asking the MP to:
 - Raise these issues and requests with their party, parliamentary or Cabinet colleagues.
 - Write to the relevant Minister and Prime Minister requesting them to raise your concerns.
 - Write to or question their own party leaders and front bench on the action they are prepared to take in promoting the rights of asylum seekers.
 - Speak out in adjournment debates and/or ask parliamentary questions with or without notice on the issues raised.
- Ask the MP to let you know once they have taken the actions you have requested of them. Ask for Hansard copies of any contributions they make in Parliament.
- Again acknowledge the MP's time and thank them.

After the meeting:

- Debrief after the meeting with each other to work out how to improve your technique. Compile a summary of notes taken during the meeting.
- Write a letter thanking the MP for the meeting and mention the actions they said they would take.
- Follow up with a phone call or letter 2-3 weeks later to see if actions have been done.
- Plan the next MP visit!