

Getting the message across in Canberra

Address to Catholic Social Services Australia Conference

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Thank you Catholic Social Services Australia for inviting someone from the 'Big End of Town' to address this forum today. I am very much honoured to be here on the podium representing my 135 members who hold almost \$1 trillion on behalf of ten million investors.

I note with interest that you have convened your meeting in Canberra. I lived in Canberra for 30 years and have heard all the jokes - and I can tell you it is not as boring as people make out. We have a 'rush-minute' at 4:51 pm every afternoon until ten-past five, instead of a rush-hour that really lasts for three hours.

Local Canberrans can always have a chuckle at out-of-towners who have been driving around Canberra, lost for days, either looking for a petrol station, circling the roundabout near the

Convention Centre, or simply on the way home after a night in Civic.

We have the Federal Parliament which livens things up for 20 weeks of the year, the leaves on most of the trees change colour and fall off at least once every 12 months, and we have the lowest unemployment levels in Australia. This is mainly because a lot of people seem to have been employed as parking inspectors or private sector speed camera operators to book tourists from other States so that the ACT can fund its self government - so be careful where you leave your car or coach! But down to business-how do you get your message across to the politicians who spend 20 weeks of the year here?

Your aims in broad terms are not much different to those of IFSA's – you want public policy outcomes that will assist the well being of your constituency. You represent a segment of the Australian population, just as we do....the only difference I guess is that our ten million savers and investors in all

probability are in much better social and economic circumstances than most of yours.

If CSSA and IFSA share a common goal then it would be that Australians should have a dignified retirement – and one further shared goal might be that Australians can engage in medium and long term savings to allow them to escape the vicious cycle of poverty.

IFSA has been very supportive of the Financial Literacy Task Force' efforts to teach people how to better understand money and how to manage it. As a former educator, I know that many people do not come from families that may be '*good with money*'. Managing money is a skill that can be taught, just as other important life skills, such as how to prepare a healthy diet can be taught – and both are of enormous long term benefit.

In order to boost retirement savings, IFSA is a proud promoter of the super co-contributions scheme under which low income

earners receive up to \$1.50 for \$1 of super savings up to a maximum of \$1500 annually. The recent Government data on this scheme shows that it has been accessed by 1.1 million, mainly lower income, working Australians.

IFSA also supports the non-partisan delivery of a means tested aged pension to give a safety net for those retirees most in need.

The first message that I would want to leave with you today is to always have a clearly thought out and articulated strategy. It is strategy which is the rallying point for your members, it is the basis on which policy is formulated, and it is strategy that provides a benchmark against which you can measure your success.

Lobbying is a somewhat imprecise science. It is about making as many effective contacts as possible and bringing a powerful and convincing message to the decision makers and particularly

their advisers. To lobby effectively, you need to know *who* to lobby, *how* to lobby and most importantly, *when* to lobby. .

You will note that I use the plural here, and that was deliberate. Decisions are never really made by a single person. Therefore, there is no perfect strategy and no perfect plan as the human variables are too unpredictable. I am guided by the great military strategic Clausewitz who said two simple but powerful things on strategy:

"The greatest enemy of a good plan is the dream of a perfect plan"

And once you enter the strategy game it is important that you think beyond the win that you seek....after you win, how will you be perceived and how will this impact your future relationships...Again good old Clausewitz assists – he said you should:

“Not to take the first step without considering the last
(Clausewitz)

And Sun Tzu provides further assistance;

“To win victory is easy, to preserve its fruits difficult”

A good strategy is useful for two fundamental reasons, first it is strategy which drives your political message, and, second, the principles in a strategy are the glue which should bind your constituents into a single and strong force.

When entering the realm of politics, it is important to have a unified voice, because divided, you will fall – and for not-for-profit associations, this is an expensive and dispiriting process indeed, both in dollar terms and in human resources.

At the IFSA Board table we have 14 competitors all vying for their slice of the superannuation and funds management dollar.

My members spend most of their waking hours, plotting and

scheming against each other in a never-ending battle to build their customer base.

Often competitive rivalry floats to the surface at our Board Meetings. When this occurs the Board ceases its discussions and goes back to first principles. This formula has been one of our bedrocks during our nine year history as an advocacy grouping. Before we go through the great brass swinging doors of Parliament House, we must make certain that we are united.

But strategy alone will not win the day in Canberra. Tactics also play a role.

You will need a simple and convincing story....the corridors of Canberra are crowded each Parliamentary sitting day. Politicians of all persuasions are bombarded with the full gamut of views on how Australia can be better governed.

Often, it is the simple message, the uncomplicated anecdote, or uncluttered table of costs and benefits that wins the day. It can even be the chance meeting at Ozzies café with a powerful Parliamentarian just prior to a party meeting.

Often these modes of interaction are better than the fully blown delegation in a Minister's office just prior to his or her attending a critical cabinet meeting or a politically-charged Questions without Notice in the House.

Resist the temptation to bring 15 people along with you. Always make sure that your delegation is *disciplined*, that they *do not stray 'off-message'* and after clearly and concisely outlining your issue or problem, make sure that you tell the politicians you are lobbying *what you expect them to do* in order to resolve the issue.

Getting an idea before a parliamentarian is the first challenge....broad engagement is the key. Three things are

needed: an engagement, a decisive commitment and then a further round of lobbying outside that parliamentarians office.

Once after he had received a business delegation, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt said:

"Okay, you've convinced me. Now go out there and bring pressure on me."

The pressure that needs to be applied to consummate the policy result needs to be applied in numerous quarters: the backbench and the media immediately come to mind...although one needs to be careful not to use the media as a means of megaphone or gunboat diplomacy. The sight of a politician choking on their Weetbix as they take in the daily papers is not a pretty one and will not endear them to your cause if you make ambit or hysterical claims via the media. The credibility of your organisation will also suffer terribly – and that is something that can take years to recover from.

Another critical pressure point, perhaps the most important is the public officials. An anonymous person once said:

"Nine times out of ten Ministers side with their officials. Do you want a 10 per cent or 90 per cent chance of success."

Convincing the officials is just as important as persuading the Minister or Shadow Minister. Remember that politicians come and politicians go through the revolving door of Parliament, but nobody elects the bureaucrats and many of them spend decades in Departments and have very long memories for people who make their lives unpleasant.

As for the backbenchers, a targeted approach is more often than not preferable to a 'broad brush' campaign.

Don't forget the Senate either. Currently, the Senate has 27 separate committee inquiries on its agenda. Of the 27 only 3 of these references have a social welfare flavour. The message here for you is that our Senators have a crowded agenda, so don't expect all of them to be on your case. It is likely that the number

will be less than 10 at any point in time. The Senate Community Affairs Committee is a good place to start on a quest to find the passionate pollie on social welfare issues. Make sure that you do your homework and read up about the politician that you are going to lobby. Most of them at some stage early on in their careers became involved in politics to make the world a better place. A tiny percentage might want to actually take over the world in order to try and do that, but most are genuinely still committed to making it a better place. Anyone with Internet access one can read an MP's first speech to get a sense of their beliefs and motivations and also other issues that they might have taken a position on in Hansard.

Measurement of success is the next matter that I would like to cover. At IFSA we measure it both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Some years ago now when the superannuation reforms were bogged down in the Senate, we introduced the retirement savings gap.....a story which first unfolded on page 1 of the

SMH with a banner headline of *'We are \$600 billion short of a cosy old age.'* Since that time, and not because of this headline alone, we have received some massive boosts to address this shortfall, viz: super co-contributions, abolition of super surcharge and more recently the plan to abolish benefits tax on superannuation.

In sticking to our strategy, two years after our first research we made another gap announcement which showed that good government policy had narrowed the gap by 15% or \$16,500 per Australian.

These were good results for retirees and also a good message for government. This action also reinforced the fact that the initial research that we used to lobby key politicians was sound in showing that incentives to save would be taken up by lower income earners – and by women in particular - who often spend time out of the workforce to have a family. In retrospect, our research was perhaps even a little conservative, but the co-

contribution has been utilised the most in the less affluent States by lower income earners.

Therefore, you need measurable objectives, objectives which can be seen as wins for your organisation and also for any politician who delivers them.

I would now like to make a few remarks on the advocacy cycle.

First and foremost it starts in the office of the MP with portfolio responsibility representing the party in those warm and cosy light green leather benches on the right hand of the speaker – that is the Minister. This might seem to be a somewhat partisan approach but ‘them’s the breaks’ in politics.

Initially, all discussions initially should be through this office.

Should the opposition be advised?...of course, but when and how is a moot point. Governments since Federation like to have

monopoly ownership and control on views put to them, but sooner or later, those in Opposition will get to jump up and down on the back seats of those big white cars and be calling the shots- and they know very well who their 'fair-weather friends' are.

Oppositions need to be in the information loop – and the timing of this depends on the circumstances. Sometimes it occurs after Government discussions have broken down. On other occasions it will be after a favourable Government announcement has been made. On others it will be when you are called to a parliamentary committee and asked to give evidence, or it might be when you have advised the government of your intentions.

Oppositions are poorly resourced and appreciate facts and figures for their files if you can assist them – even if they can't make immediate use of them. Their researchers have to cover many issues and can't be expected to be totally up to speed with your issue, particularly when the theatre of Parliament is in full swing.

Gaining access to a Minister's or Shadow's office can be assisted by two key factors.

Positive branding for your association....they need to know you as a reliable, trustworthy and helpful association...wild and inaccurate media statements and policy reversals are never helpful and ambit and hysterical claims will quickly see you crossed off the credibility list by political operatives AND the media, which is in essence, the beginning of the end of your organisation.

Remember that: "A reputation once broken may possibly be repaired, but the world will always keep their eyes on the spot where the crack was." -- Joseph Hall.

Branding is important to listed companies just as it is to NGOs...your brand is your people, your lobbyists, your research, your policies and your actions.

Your brand and your reputation is measurable. It needs to be plumbed periodically. Post any brand measurement, decisive actions may need to be taken to rectify problems.

At IFSA we measure our branding with our Members and also our stakeholders. We also use external surveys which measure our brand through the prism of politicians, public servants and the media.

Should this be a substantial expenditure item...the simple answer is no, particularly for 'not-for-profits'. Often this material can be gleaned from other players who have paid full tote for this research.

Political branding is driven by the quality of the public policy engagement, the calibre of media exposure and also the quality of the so called 'soft side' of an industry lobby.

In relation to the softer side of the community interface, we at IFSA are proud of our successes. In the past few years we have raised funds for the Inspire Foundation (a suicide prevention internet service for young Australians) – this year we raised more than \$450,000 for Inspire.

Furthermore, we are a signatory to a world first MoU with the Mental Health Council of Australia to give a better life insurance experience to those unfortunate Australians who have endured a mental health condition. Around 800,000 Australians experience depression each year and the cost of treating depression is estimated at \$600 million a year.

Our industry recognises that just because a person may have experienced a mental health problem such as depression at some stage in their life, the vast majority DO make a full recovery and as such, should not suffer discrimination when they seek insurance from our members.

And even closer to home in December IFSA staff will again be the official deliverers of St Vincent de Paul Christmas Hampers to those less well off Australians who reside in the Parish covered by St Brigid's Marrickville in Sydney. We also donate the proceeds of the industry's Christmas raffle to St Brigid's.

We value these social welfare interactions and we endeavour where possible to do this work in conjunction with local and interested Members and Senators from both sides of the political fence.

In conclusion.

In 8.5 years at IFSA I have never had the opportunity to give an address such as this – so putting pen to paper has been both a challenge and a pleasure.

Our approach at IFSA has been Board and Member driven – the secretariat has been the executor of policy as members drive our

policies. We have taken risks and made some mistakes, but on each occasion these have become learning opportunities.

Patience in advocacy needs to permeate the entirety of an organisation. Getting the message across and having a government deliver on your special project can take years. In relation to one initiative we took five years, another took ten and spanned two associations. The first advocacy essay is usually the first of a four or five stage iteration.

So best wishes in your advocacy and may your hard work prevail for the benefit of your constituency.

Thank you for your attention today.

