



Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers)

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Visiting Your Member of Parliament: A Friendly Encounter

(two-sided handout)

Introduction

There are a number of policy issues that concern Friends. In order to promote positive changes, we are often asked to contact our elected officials. To begin this resource handout, here are a few general principles:

Friends' approach is "**plain speaking**". It is not rhetorical or polemical, but presents the concern sincerely from the heart and seeks truth. You do not have to have all the answers. A few solidly based points are all you need to open the conversation. You are **starting a relationship**, and both you and the MP will learn from each other.

If the MP that you are visiting is from a party whose policy on the issue is very different from what you hope for, it can be hard to feel like you have enough in common to be able to converse naturally. Try to remember that the MP is an individual who may disagree to some extent with the line that his or her party has taken. You are there to speak to the Light in this person, and to listen for it. It may be good for the MP to have been exposed to a different point of view and to know that some of their constituents feel strongly about this. Every MP has a role to play, regardless of party affiliation.

If you have an opportunity to speak to non-elected government workers in a department related to your concern, go ahead. It is also possible to catch a few minutes of an MP's, even a Cabinet Minister's, time if you turn up at their local constituency occasions, whether it be opening a women's shelter or a bridge. Trevor Chandler relates: "Our MP has constituency office time during which any constituent can make a short appointment. We have had up to an hour with a cabinet minister because no-one else turned up!" The preparation and approach on our handout will help you take advantage of any opportunity.

Preparation

There should be more than one person going to a meeting with an MP. Sharing witness is Friends' practice, and it will be important to have more than one person's memory of the conversation. Your visiting team (max. 5 people, including some voters in the MP's riding) should take time to prepare together, designating roles and points. Specify what action you will request the MP to take. Inform yourself enough on the issue that you are clear in your mind, and you have learned what the typical opposing arguments are, and bring texts or evidence to the meeting. For the issues that CFSC is working on, issue information and specific actions are identified in the materials on our website. Try to be aware of your own prejudices, as well of those of the MP. Consult the parliamentary web site (webinfo.parl.gc.ca). From the MP's own website, you can find out their background, voting history and what committees he or she sits on. MPs will likely prefer to meet for 30 minutes, and you want time for interchange. You can plan

to meet more than once. Fax or e-mail a one page letter requesting an appointment and identifying the topic, and yourselves, noting if you are voters in the MP's riding. This helps the MP's support staff keep track of your request. Having a good human relationship with them is important!

Face to Face

Be on time. Use waiting time to read the promotional material in the office, build rapport with support staff. For the conversation itself:

- Be respectful at all times, be affirming and curious. Show your awareness of the MPs existing statements or connections to the issue and build on them. Ask questions to thoroughly understand the MP's point of view. What common ground can you find?
- Lots of eye contact is good. Taking notes is good. So try to share the note-taking role among the team.
- Confidentiality may be a consideration in the conversation. Ask what information can be shared, or set ground rules as appropriate.
- Ask the MP's advice about how the concern can be pursued and what they think they may do.
- Sum up your points at the end and ask how they would like to receive further information. What is the easiest channel for them?

Follow-up is extremely important. After thanking them for their time, inform the CFSC staff member who is working on the issue of the results of your visit. Be sure to send any information that you have promised.

Finally, don't be discouraged! Be encouraged by the human interaction of the encounter. Look for signs of hope, and follow them up. ***Remember: you don't have to be an expert on the issue. Members meet with you because you elect them. They represent you, acting and speaking on your behalf. Focus on your shared moral values and how they impact on the issues. Your MP will not be an expert on the issues either!***