

# Engaging Your MP

Your local member is your representative in Parliament and you're entitled to ask him or her to represent your interests.

This guide is designed to help you engage your Member of Parliament (MP) to talk about the issues important to you and your community.

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*"The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change. I am with you." - Pope Francis, Laudato Si'*

## Contacting your MP

### Getting in touch with your MP is easy.

#### Identify your MP

If you're not sure who your federal MP is, you can identify your federal electorate and MP through the Australian Electoral Office's website: <http://apps.aec.gov.au/esearch/Default.aspx>

#### Arrange to meet them in person

A face-to-face meeting is by far the best way to build a relationship with your MP. See 'Meeting your MP' (page 2) for tips on how to organise a private meeting. You can also look out for community forums your MP may be holding.

#### Or get in touch by email, letter or phone

You can also communicate with your MP by sending them an email, a letter or ringing their office.

MPs will respond to all communications from their constituents, but they are much more likely to sit up and take notice of a personalised letter, email or phone call as it shows that their constituent cares enough to take the time. Letters have more impact than an email, particularly if it is handwritten.

In your email or letter, explain why the issue matters to you and what you want your MP to do about it.

#### Find your MP's phone, email or postal details

Find your MP through the Parliament of Australia website: [www.aph.gov.au/Senators\\_and\\_Members](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members)

#### Know how to address your MP

There are certain protocols on how to address your MP, which differ depending on whether you're writing or speaking to them. For details see these [Guidelines for Contacting Senators and Members](#)



Kateia Kaikai from Kiribati and Alexandra Engel presenting a petition to former Climate Change Minister Greg Combet in 2011, calling for more support to help poorer countries tackle climate change.

### What do I do if I receive a letter back from my MP?

If you're happy with the response you receive, it's always good to write a thank you letter. MPs rarely get thanked so they will appreciate it. If you're not satisfied, don't be afraid to write back to your MP and ask them to follow up in more detail or meet you to discuss it. They're there to represent you!

## Organising a meeting with your MP

A face-to-face meeting is the best way to build a relationship with your MP. It gives you the opportunity to discuss issues you feel strongly about and encourage your MP to act on your concerns.

### Setting up a meeting

Call your MP's office and speak to one of their staff. Be prepared to explain where you are from, why you want to meet the MP and who else would be attending the meeting.

Be patient if you don't get a response immediately.

MPs are often busy and can take time to respond, so don't be surprised if you have to wait. If you think you're not getting anywhere, a reminder never hurts. If you keep contacting your MP, they will realise how important you feel it is to meet with them.

### TIP: Know when to lobby

**At key decision-making points** It's easier to influence the government before they make a policy decision rather than after it.

**At publicity peaks** Politicians are more interested in issues when media coverage is at its greatest and when people are most engaged. If you act on issues before or during these periods you are more likely to get their attention.

**Before an election** MPs really feel the heat where it hurts – the ballot box. As well as federal elections, there are also state, local and by-elections. MPs will be more receptive to any issues that secure them votes.

Caritas can send you campaign alerts ahead of key campaigning periods.

Sign up for our campaigns newsletter at [www.caritas.org.au/climate/icc-subscribe](http://www.caritas.org.au/climate/icc-subscribe)

### Before the meeting

So you've secured a meeting with your MP – well done! Now it's time to prepare.

#### Learn about your MP

It's important to find out about your MP so you can tailor your argument and anticipate their response. Find out:

- Do they belong to a Party?
- Do they hold any position in government or the shadow front bench?
- What speeches have they made?
- What issues and causes do they support?
- What are their interests outside parliament?
- Are they Catholic or another denomination?
- What are their views on international development, poverty, climate change etc?

Look at your MP's website, their Party website and other sources such as They Vote For You ([www.theyvoteforyou.org.au](http://www.theyvoteforyou.org.au)) and Open Australia ([www.openaustralia.org.au](http://www.openaustralia.org.au)) which provide an independent summary of a politician's policy positions.

### **Research your issue and know your key messages**

Know your key messages and research common counter arguments so that you can respond to these. Go into your meeting armed with a few powerful statistics. A well-chosen statistic can pack a punch.

### **Be clear about your ask**

Go into the meeting with a specific action that you want your MP to take.

### **Assign roles within your group**

Are there a number of you meeting your MP? If so, it's often helpful to assign specific tasks or roles

within the group. Decide who will introduce each member of the group, who will raise which specific points and in which order, who will make the request for action and who will take notes.

### **Rehearse**

Rehearsing what you say will really help you fine-tune your key messages and how you want to say them. Practice in front of the mirror, or even better, with a friend or family member who can provide feedback.

### **Prepare briefing material**

It's often useful to bring along some information to leave with your MP. Make it concise and no longer than a double-sided page. Your information should help your MP understand what the problem is, who is being affected, what can be done to tackle the problem, what specific actions you are asking them to take, and your contact details for further correspondence.



*"We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family."  
- Pope Francis, Laudato Si'*

## During the meeting

During the meeting, the main aspects that you want to cover are:

- Making your case
- Understanding your MP's point of view
- Recording what they say
- Getting a promise on what action they will take
- Building a relationship with your MP
- And last but not least, you may wish to get a photo with your MP, to use in your communications

### 1. Approach it as a relationship

Rather than thinking of your meeting simply as about extracting a promise from your MP, think of it as having two primary aims – one is to convince your MP to take action, and the other is to build a relationship with them on a human level.

As a social justice activist, it's often necessary to take a long-term approach. Your first meeting with your MP may not be the last time you'll want to see them, so take a long-term approach. Even if you don't agree with their policy stance on a particular issue, you're more likely to influence your MP if you can connect on a human level. Go into the relationship wanting to make friends with your MP.

### 2. Get to the point and keep it simple

You may only have 15 minutes of their time (even if you have a longer meeting scheduled, MPs often have to change their schedule at short notice) so you'll need to make your point and leave enough time for them to respond.

Keep it simple. Your MP isn't likely to be an expert (unless they also happen to be a minister with a relevant portfolio) as they have to keep up-to-date on a wide range of topics. Make use of simple but strong statistics to illustrate what you are saying.

## After your visit

### Follow up

Write to your MP to thank him/her for meeting you. Take the opportunity to restate your main points and confirm what action you agreed on. Send them further information (if any) you promised during the meeting.

### 3. Stay on subject

Experienced politicians are able to change the subject – especially when they're on the defensive. A good response is: "I know your time is very valuable; we really only came here to discuss how you can help us on this issue. If you have more time, we can discuss the bigger picture."

### 4. Talk about real people in real countries

Human stories help us understand the impact of an issue at a transformational level, far better than any statistic can. Human stories remind your MP that they can take action to help stop the suffering of others. We'll share stories you can use to make your case in our [campaigns e-newsletters](#) and on our website.

### 5. If your MP is Catholic, use the Church's teachings

Use quotations from Papal statements or other Church teachings to show how your faith impels you to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable (but avoid lecturing your MP about his or her faith). This is a powerful and specific contribution you can make as a Caritas supporter.

### 6. Don't worry if you don't know

If your MP asks a question that you don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to say so. You only need to express your beliefs, they don't expect you to be an expert! You may offer to provide more information by email after the meeting and can always contact the campaigns team for support at [act@caritas.org.au](mailto:act@caritas.org.au)

### 7. Don't be intimidated

Your MP is only human! As a constituent you have a right to speak to them, and your MP has a duty to listen to you.

### Tell our campaigns team!

We want to know if you lobby your MP. If your MP responds or takes action, please tell us (email us at [act@caritas.org.au](mailto:act@caritas.org.au)). You'll help us to track MPs' positions and target them better, and you can also help to inspire others!

### TIP: Media stories

Send your MP any relevant media stories (particularly from local media) or reports on the issue, especially if the situation changes.

## Other FAQs

### Do I need to be a constituent to write to/visit an MP?

Parliamentary convention means that MPs can only act on behalf of their own constituents. It is likely that, should you write to the wrong MP, they will pass your letter on to the right person. But it's better to get it right first time.

### What if my MP has no interest in my issue?

Just because an MP may not be personally interested in a certain policy area doesn't mean they won't respond to or represent your views. Show them how much it means to you and their interest may well increase. Always remember that MPs are there to represent you.

### What if my MP already supports my issue? Should I still contact them?

If your MP supports your issue, consider them a powerful ally and work to maintain a relationship with them. Are there ways in which you can help each other to raise the profile of your issue?

### Do I need to be an expert about the issues?

Not at all. It helps to understand the subject, but your passion for an issue is what will leave a lasting impact on your MP.



St Joseph's Hobart created and submitted their own petition to the House of Representatives in 2015. They asked their MP, Andrew Wilkie, to present the petition to Parliament, which he did. This photo shows representatives of St Joseph's meeting with Mr Wilkie.

*Left to right: Fr Peter Addicoat, St Joseph's Catholic Church Parish Priest, MP Andrew Wilkie, Doug Fry, Parishioner at St Joseph's Catholic Church, Margaret Donaghy, Resource Officer, Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission.*

*Reproduced with permission of the Archdiocese of Hobart*

If you would like to run your own petition to the House of Representatives, check out our step-by-step guide to running your own petition:

- [Petition Guide for schools](#)
- [Petition Guide for communities](#)



*"We need to participate for the common good. Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader can govern." - Pope Francis*

# Inviting your MP to an event

MPs generally welcome opportunities to meet groups out in the community. For you, a visit by your MP will provide an opportunity to:

- Strengthen your relationship with your MP
- Raise the profile of your event by having a local dignitary
- Get photos and media coverage
- Have your MP publicly demonstrate their support for the issue

## Before the event

### Decide what role your MP will be invited to take

What do you want your MP to do at your event? Common requests include asking your MP to make a speech about the issue, join a discussion panel, present awards to volunteers working on the issue and/or launch a new initiative.

### Talk to your MP's staff

Don't be disappointed if an advisor is sent in the place of your MP. The advisor may become a very useful ally if you build a relationship with them.

Give plenty of advance notice about your event as MPs are often busy and away from their electorate to meet in Federal Parliament.

The first step is to ring your MP's office, explain that you'd like to invite your MP to your event and ask about your MP's availability on the proposed date. Then follow up with a written request with all of the

appropriate details:

- Aim of the event and activities planned
- Date/time, location, duration, directions to the event
- Estimated number of attendees and details of other guests invited
- Details of a designated contact at your end
- Information about your group hosting the event

### Invite local media and issue a pre-event media release

MPs welcome publicity, especially in their own constituency, but ask your MP if they are happy to have the media attend. Issue a media release (see Caritas Australia's [Media Engagement Kit](#)) and follow up with a telephone call to your local media in the week before the event.

## On the day of the event

### Meet and greet your MP

Schedule a 'meet and greet' of your MP at an appropriate time (e.g. before the official start of the event if they are opening it) and allow time for introductions. Make sure they know the order of the event and where they slot in.

### Introduce your MP

Give a brief explanation of why he or she is there. It may also be helpful to announce whether or not there will be a question and answer session.

### Take lots of photos at the event

Organise for someone at the event to take good quality photos. These can be used for your own communications and for the media. Your MP's staff may also take photos for their own communications.

When taking photos that include members of the public, be mindful of asking their permission, especially if children are present. It's a good idea to ask before you take the photo and explain how you would like to use it. You may also like to record some quotes from attendees at your event.

Photo: Caritas Australia



The then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd speaking at a Make Poverty History event in 2011

## After the event

### Send a post-event media release

Local media thrive on stories of community events and activities. Send photos and a media release with details of what happened at the event, who was there, what your MP and others said, and be sure to highlight key information about the issue (see our [Media Engagement Kit](#)).

### Thank your MP

Send a letter or card to your MP, thanking them for their participation. Include any follow-up information you may have promised them.

### Reflect

It's a great idea to sit down with your fellow organisers and reflect on what worked well and what could be improved next time you decide to hold an event and invite your MP.



"We need to communicate with each other, to discover the gifts of each person, to promote that which unites us, and to regard our differences as an opportunity to grow in mutual respect."

- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*

## Support from Caritas

### What support can I expect from the Caritas Advocacy Team?

As our most committed campaigners, you are a priority for us. We can provide you with the statistics, stories, facts and policy information you'll need to write a letter, go to a meeting or hold an event. We can provide you with an 'Advocacy Buddy' – a Caritas staff member who will be more than happy to provide ongoing mentoring support. We'll support you in any way we can! Please get in touch with us on [act@caritas.org.au](mailto:act@caritas.org.au) or 1800 024 413.

### Are there other groups or individuals lobbying my MP in my electorate?

The larger the group you represent, the more likely the MP is to listen. We can speak to other groups in your area to find out if they would be happy to provide their contact details. If so, we'll put you in touch with them to share information, collaborate and maximise your grassroots advocacy. Contact the advocacy team at [act@caritas.org.au](mailto:act@caritas.org.au)

### Understanding how Parliament works

The Parliament of Australia has many online resources that will tell you more about the work of MPs and Senators, how legislation gets passed and how Parliament works: [www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament)

These [House of Representative infosheets](#) are helpful in describing the work of MPs.

Photo: Caritas Australia



On behalf of people across Australia, students from Daramalan College took over a thousand 'Hearts 4 Climate' letters to Parliament House a week before our political leaders went to the historic COP21 Paris climate talks.

### Political Parties

The main political parties have websites with information about their policies, representatives and contact details.

#### Liberal Party of Australia

[www.liberal.org.au](http://www.liberal.org.au)  
[libadm@liberal.org.au](mailto:libadm@liberal.org.au)  
02 6273 2564

#### Australian Labor Party

[www.alp.org.au](http://www.alp.org.au)  
Online contact form: [www.alp.org.au/contact\\_us](http://www.alp.org.au/contact_us)

#### The National Party of Australia

[www.nationals.org.au](http://www.nationals.org.au)  
[federal.nationals@nationals.org.au](mailto:federal.nationals@nationals.org.au)  
02 6273 3822

#### The Australian Greens

[www.greens.org.au](http://www.greens.org.au)  
[greens@greens.org.au](mailto:greens@greens.org.au)  
02 6140 3217 or 1800 017 011

### For further information:

Email [act@caritas.org.au](mailto:act@caritas.org.au)

Phone 1800 024 413

Visit [www.caritas.org.au/act](http://www.caritas.org.au/act)



**Caritas**  
AUSTRALIA

End poverty  
Promote justice  
Uphold dignity