

PARLIAMENTARY CAMPAIGNING

Welcome to a new regular feature for *Change Your World*: four pages of handy tips for your group's campaigns.

Over the next few months we will profile different tactics you can use to win campaigns – using the media, influencing public opinion, mobilizing citizen action, building alliances with local community groups, influencing the planning system, and more. In this first feature, **Martyn Williams** of FOE's Parliamentary Unit explains the basics of parliamentary campaigning, and how we can all make a difference, no matter how far you live from the corridors of Westminster.

These pages will always appear in the centre of *CYW*, so you can pull them out and build up a useful resource of effective campaigning briefings – for experienced and new campaigners alike. If there's an aspect of campaigning that you'd like to see explored, do let us know – drop a line to Tricia Allen, *Change Your World*, at Underwood Street with your suggestions.



David Webb



Jennifer Bates / FOE

above: Ben Bradshaw MP joins Friends of the Earth campaigners at an RTRB stunt.
left: With photographic evidence of this kind, Brian Sedgemore MP will have no option but to vote in favour of the Road Traffic Reduction Bill!

Introduction

Friends of the Earth believes in, and frequently achieves changes through, the parliamentary process. A couple of years ago FOE set up its own Parliamentary Unit, to develop a mass mobilisation strategy to actively campaign for FOE's objectives to be enshrined in law. The success of such a strategy was illustrated with the passing into law of the Home Energy Conservation Act (1995), and more recently with the Road Traffic Reduction Act (1997). FOE's parliamentary campaigning is not about professional lobbying in the corridors of Westminster – rather, it is about mass mobilisation of citizens to bring about change. It is FOE's view that a sustainable society can only exist with the involvement and participation of citizens in decision-making, and this also means that citizen action is needed to achieve that society.

FOE's Road Traffic Reduction Bill has made enormous progress over the past two years because thousands of FOE supporters have lobbied their MPs. This pressure has forced both the last Government and the new Labour Government to support legislation aimed at setting first local and now national targets for traffic reduction. This is one of many examples where FOE has shown that people can make a difference through effective and targeted campaigns.

This guide explains what you can do to be an active citizen and play a part in building a system where individuals have a real say in decision making. It focusses first on explaining the parliamentary processes we aim to influence, then looks at how FOE local groups can play their part in effective parliamentary campaigns. Finally, there is a quick-reference list of jargon demystified, key addresses, websites, further reading, and other useful information.

The stages of a FOE parliamentary campaign

Most of FOE's parliamentary campaigns have used the Private Member's Bill procedure. A Private Member's Bill is simply a prospective piece of legislation (a Bill) introduced by an individual MP (a Private Member) rather than by the Government (whose Bills are known, unsurprisingly, as Government Bills).

There are three types of Private Member's Bill –

- Ballot Bills
- 10-Minute Rule Bills
- Presentation Bills.

They all have to complete the same stages, but the big difference is the time allocated to each. Ballot Bills are most likely to become law – as the MP who introduces them has been drawn in the annual Private Member's Ballot and has priority allocation of time on Fridays.

Current FOE EDMs (Early Day Motions)

EDM 18

Tabled in support of the Road Traffic Reduction (UK Targets) Bill

EDM 80

This EDM states support for the Warm Homes Bill, which would require the Government to instigate a 15-year programme of installing energy efficiency measures in the homes of people suffering from fuel poverty. This would end fuel poverty.

EDM 559

This EDM welcomes the Wildlife Charter, drawn up by 22 wildlife organisations, including FOE.

EDM 883

Supports the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill, which sets targets for increasing the amount of recycled paper used in newspapers.

EDM 1104

Supports the introduction of "Home Zones" in pilot areas. These are residential areas where traffic is restricted to 10 mph, and priority is given to cyclists and pedestrians. As well as providing safe areas for children to play, they are also a useful traffic reduction measure.

EDM 1114

Welcomes the limited reduction in the VAT rate charged on energy saving materials, and calls on the Chancellor to pursue the matter further with his European colleagues.

EDM 1226

Welcomes the Government's manifesto commitment to cutting CO₂ emissions by 20 per cent by 2010 (on 1990 levels) and the constructive role they played at Kyoto.

EDM 348

Calls for a re-examination of how to deal with Britain's stockpiles of plutonium.

EDM 1243

Calls for a full re-examination of Sellafield radioactive discharge authorisations.

EDM 1246

Calls for a halt to shipments of highly enriched uranium into the UK until a full debate has been held about the implications of such shipments, and calls for an international conference on nuclear materials disposition policy.

Ten-Minute Rule Bills and Presentation Bills both stand far less chance of becoming law, as they are always incredibly short of time. A 10-Minute Rule Bill enables an MP to make a 10-minute speech introducing the Bill (a useful way to raise a subject), while a Presentation Bill is simply presented to the House of Commons which then prints it.

To become law (i.e. an Act), all Bills, both Private Member's and Government Bills, have to complete the following stages.

First reading

This is simply a formal stage, where the title of the Bill is read out. After this has happened the Bill can be printed, and this must happen before the next stage.

Second reading

This is when there is debate on the main thrust of the Bill. While it is possible to block Private Member's Bills at this stage by "filibustering" and using up the time available, it is also possible to end debate if at least 100 MPs vote to do so. Ensuring your MP attends FOE Bills' Second Readings is therefore vitally important.

Passing this stage indicates that the House of Commons supports the Bill in principle. The Bill can then go on for detailed scrutiny and amendments.

Committee stage

A committee of MPs studies the Bill in detail and makes amendments to ensure the Bill is workable and loopholes are closed.

Report stage

This gives the whole House of Commons the chance to make further amendments. This is the easiest stage at which to scupper a Private Member's Bill, as MPs can table hundreds of amendments so that there is no chance of completing debate on all of them.

Third reading

This usually follows immediately after Report stage, and is often a short debate on the Bill as it now stands. Again, this stage can be filibustered, but again 100 MPs can prevent this (as at Second reading). On completion, the Bill goes on to the House of Lords.

House of Lords

The Bill goes through the same stages in the House of Lords. A Bill can only become law when the two Houses agree on it. If amendments are made, the Bill must return to the Commons for "Consideration of Lords amendments". If these are agreed to, the Bill becomes law. If further changes are made, or the Lords amendments are simply changed back again, the Bill must go back to the Lords again. Controversial Bills can go back and forth several times!

Being effective

To win a campaign in Parliament, a lot of MPs must be brought on board. As a local group, your influence will primarily cover your local MPs. As the people who elected these MPs, you have far more influence with them than the Parliamentary Unit have at Underwood Street. Many MPs simply ignore letters from national organisations. If FOE sends a letter to all 659 MPs, we usually receive about 100 – 150 replies. If 659 local constituents across the country send letters to their MP, more than 650 of you would receive replies. You are the people with influence. This is a crucial point to remember.

Ask your MP to sign an Early Day Motion

For most of FOE's parliamentary campaigns, an "Early Day Motion" or EDM has been tabled. This is simply a statement which one MP has put forward, to which other MPs can add their names to indicate support. EDMs therefore show the support a measure has, as well as being a public commitment from an MP on an issue. See the box on

p. 12 for a current list of EDMs supporting FOE's current campaigns.

The first stage in most campaigns is to contact your MP (by letter, phone or visits to their surgery – see the list of contact details at the end) and ask them to sign an EDM. Hopefully they will agree. However, there are the more difficult ones who won't at first.

If you get a negative reply it is important to decide whether the MP supports the campaign but does not want to sign the EDM, or whether they simply do not support the campaign. MPs give many reasons for not signing EDMs, either because of their position in Parliament, or because they disapprove of EDMs. These are often untrue and just excuses.

The true situation is this: there is a convention that Government ministers and Shadow Cabinet members do not sign EDMs. Claims by those MPs who act as ministers' assistants (PPSs) that they cannot sign them are just excuses, and any objection "in principle" is simply the choice of the MP concerned. About 80 per cent of claims by PPSs and refusals to sign "on principle" are actually lies. Except in the case of ministers and shadow spokespeople, always check if your MP sticks to his/her so-called rules by phoning the House of Commons Public Information Office and asking how many EDMs your MP has signed so far this year.

Dealing with negative replies

If your MP will not sign an EDM, ask them instead to state whether or not they support the campaign. Written confirmation of their support is as binding as signing the EDM – though unfortunately not so public. However, it is a good fall-back position.

To assess a negative reply, ask yourself: "Do I now know what my MP thinks about this?". MPs often use supportive-sounding phrases which are totally non-committal. Saying, "Many people have expressed their support for this Bill, and I have taken it up with the minister" means absolutely nothing. If your MP does not explicitly state their support, s/he almost certainly doesn't support the campaign. So keep chasing them for a clear response.

Remember, the power you have is that your MP is obliged to respond to your requests, and to listen to your concerns. Your MP must explain their views on issues which matter to you. If they fail to do so – keep on at them. Don't think "I'm being a pain about this" – your MP is the one being a pain by refusing to answer your questions. S/he wants you to go away – so don't!

If your MP tells you they do not support you, the next route is to try and change their mind. Two things will help you achieve this. The obvious one is good arguments in your favour. Bringing new reports to the attention of your MP, sending copies of research papers, questioning your MP closely to ensure s/he has read the reports, meeting your MP to put the case – all these are useful tactics.

But that is only half of it. Even if you have irrefutable proof that your campaign should be supported, if you and your MP are the only two people who know about it, you may find your MP refusing to change his/her mind. If hundreds of other people also start to raise these points – then things may move your way rather more quickly. Start to persuade individuals, local groups, local media and so on to lobby your MP too.

You can also bring people on board by asking them to sign an open letter to your MP. You can use pre-printed postcards, though these are far less effective than individually written letters. Many MPs have told FOE that they have been impressed and influenced simply because all the letters were personalised. Handing out leaflets explaining your MP's position can also be effective – even if people do not actually write, your MP will be concerned that so many people

are finding out that s/he is not prepared to support, say, a campaign to protect local wildlife sites, or to increase newspaper recycling.

A particular way in which to pressurise unsupportive MPs is to ask members of his/her own political party to lobby them, e.g. councillors (a list is available from your town hall), party officials (addresses in Yellow Pages under political organisations) etc.

The power of the local media

Most MPs are far more concerned about their local media coverage than about their occasional appearances in the national press. MPs work hard maintaining a high profile in their local media. They read local papers avidly, as they have to be on top of local disputes and events.

So if you generate a series of letters in the local paper, or there are a number of reports on related problems – combined with good coverage of the possible solutions and a comment that your MP is not backing them – you may find the MP begins to shift their position.

Never underestimate just how influential local papers are. Make good use of them.

Other routes to apply pressure

The most frequent request you are likely to make on your MP is to sign an Early Day Motion. However, you can apply pressure in different ways by asking them also to do one or more of the following:

Ask Parliamentary Questions

MPs can ask Ministers Oral and Written Questions. As well as sometimes eliciting useful information, this helps raise the profile of an issue. If you ask your MP to put down a particular question for you, be specific about the issue and the question: Ministers are more likely to, say, give a specific statistic on a road-building programme than say why they support a particular scheme, although you can add at the end of your question, "and if [the minister] will make a statement" to elicit a more general position. Ask your MP to put down a written question, as the oral questions are drawn in a ballot – meaning you may wait months before your MP gets lucky!

Writing to/meeting with ministers

If you think it is important an issue is raised with the appropriate minister, you could ask your MP to take it up with him/her. This guarantees a reply signed (and therefore seen) by the minister – whereas a letter direct from you to the minister is more likely to be answered by a civil servant.

Meeting the minister may be useful, perhaps in combination with other local MPs affected by the same problem. Additionally, the MP can organise a delegation from a FOE group to meet the minister concerned.

Adjournment debates

This is a debate with the relevant minister instigated by an MP. These are drawn out of a hat, but it usually takes no more than a few weeks at most before an MP is chosen. Most of those on local issues last half an hour, although longer Adjournment Debates are available. The MP speaks first, followed by the minister. If you persuade your MP to hold an Adjournment Debate, suggest that a summary of what s/he intends to say is sent to the minister in advance. This makes it more likely that the minister is briefed on the points the MP plans to raise.

Meet the Parliamentary Unit



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Parliamentary Co-ordinator



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Jargon buster

Adjournment Debate – A debate initiated by a backbench MP in which s/he gets a chance to debate an issue with the relevant Minister.

Bill – A Bill is a proposal for law, which must pass several stages before becoming law, whereupon it becomes an Act. Private Member's Bills are introduced by a single MP rather than by the Government.

Early Day Motion – A House of Commons resolution to which MPs can add their names to demonstrate support for the sentiments it expresses. Among other things, this gives a list of supportive MPs and shows support a particular measure has.

Green Paper – Consultation document asking for responses on a particular policy area. After the consultation period the Government will pull together the results and draw up their policy – published in a White Paper.

White Paper – Document setting out Government policy on an issue. Often followed by legislation to enact the policy.

PPS – A Parliamentary Private Secretary – an MP who acts as an unpaid assistant to a Minister.

Useful addresses and phone numbers

All MPs: House of Commons London SW1A 0AA. Switchboard: 0171 219 3000 (If your MP is not available, ask to leave a message "on the board" asking him/her to call you back) Local addresses can be found in the Yellow Pages under "political organisations".

House of Commons Public Information Office: 0171 219 4272 (Can tell you if your MP has signed a particular EDM, which way s/he voted etc)

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Eland House Bressenden Place London SW1E 5DU Switchboard: 0171 890 3000

Useful Web Pages

Houses of Parliament

www.parliament.uk/

Lords and Commons Hansard (transcript of debates), Bills, future business and much more. Unfortunately, not EDMs though...

Open Government site

www.open.gov.uk/

Links to all Government departments, many local councils, quangos and much more.

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions www.detr.gov.uk/

Press releases, publications, details of who does what and much more.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office

www.hmsso.gov.uk/

Acts of Parliament, Statutory Instruments

Further Reading

Lobbying Guide – this explains parliamentary campaigning in more detail, though it focusses mainly on the Road Traffic Reduction Bill. Order your copy from Ron Bailey, Parliamentary Unit, FOE (costs minimum £2; please make cheques payable to Friends of the Earth)

Parliamentary Profiles by Andrew Roth. Political and career profiles of each MP, election results etc.

Dod's Parliamentary Companion 1998 – A comprehensive annually-published guide to the careers, interests and voting records of MPs and members of the House of Lords, Parliamentary committees, election results, and the ministries and civil service, as well as the European Parliament. Try your local library for this expensive tome.

Vacher's Parliamentary Companion – Cheap paperback version of highlights from Dod's, updated quarterly: MPs and their constituencies, election results, as well as contact details for all ministers and senior civil servants.

Sign up

If your group wants to join in with FOE's parliamentary campaigns, the Parliamentary Unit in Underwood Street would like to hear from you. Contact them with a named contact for your local group, and they'll add you to their database for future calls to action. Write to the Parliamentary Unit at Underwood Street: