

Demystifying Political Advocacy

Gerardine Blee

Abstract

This article aims to provide an overview of the importance of political advocacy to our profession and offers practical guidance on how to effectively engage in it. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide on what is a wide and varied subject matter but instead seeks to draw on personal experience to provide information and assistance to those wishing to explore the subject.

Keywords: *Political Advocacy, Libraries*



Introduction

On 28th August 1963, before a crowd estimated to be in the region of 250,000, Martin Luther King stood in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. and delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech which included the immortal words:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

King was one of the most famous political figures of the twentieth century and became a key advocate for the American Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s. The campaign helped secure greater rights for minority communities in the United States and illustrated the positive consequences which can flow from well-orchestrated political advocacy.

Political Advocacy

Political advocacy is an activity which can be undertaken either by individuals acting alone or by an alliance of larger groups. Its general aim is to increase awareness of certain issues and educate politicians on the benefit of aligning public policies accordingly. Indeed, Dr Ken Haycock sought to define advocacy as,

"A planned, deliberate, and sustained effort to develop understanding and support incrementally over time¹."

Political advocacy is similar to, but subtly different, from political lobbying which generally involves attempting to influence politicians to take a particular stance on a specific piece of legislation. Those involved in political advocacy in the Republic of Ireland should nevertheless be aware of the *Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015* which can be accessed at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/5/enacted/en/pdf>. If you are undertaking advocacy individually or as part of a small group you may well be exempt

from having to register your activities with the Register of Lobbying but, for further guidance on the implications of the Act, visit the Regulation of Lobbying website at www.lobbying.ie.

In its simplest form, advocacy is about speaking up and making your voice heard and anyone can do it! As Martin Luther King and leaders of many other effective campaigns throughout history have shown the approach taken does not need to be complex in order to be effective.

Reasons for Advocacy

There are essentially two main reasons why we advocate. Firstly, to educate those making policy decisions and secondly to educate those making funding decisions. The recent economic recession has hit libraries in all sectors across the island. As both governments have sought to reduce their deficits, cuts to public spending have inevitably impacted on budgets and libraries are increasingly required to do more with less. By now, we are generally familiar with reviews and restructuring of staff and services within our organisations, so it is becoming more important than ever to demonstrate the value of our sector.

Despite experiencing modest recovery it is fair to say that the economic outlook remains challenging. Indeed the position has become more uncertain following the recent "Brexit" vote, the impact of which has yet to become fully clear. Against this backdrop, it is critical that we focus strategically on advocacy if we are to effectively communicate the significance and impact of our services in order to secure support and maintain funding. The importance of securing this support and funding cannot be underestimated as, without these key ingredients, we are unable to maintain future investment in library services across the island.

During his keynote speech at the LAI/CILIP Ireland Joint conference in Killarney in April 2016, Nick Poole, CILIP CEO stated:

"Our environment is changing – socially, technologically and economically. And libraries have adapted to these changes. We have the services and skills people

¹ Ken Haycock, "Advocacy and Influence," Ken Haycock and Associates: Training and Development, Apr. 26, 2011, accessed July. 4, 2016.

need to succeed in today's complex, information-rich world. We need to make sure they know it!²

The concept of political advocacy has the capacity to generate substantial publicity and is often the brand of advocacy people most readily identify. That being said, engaging in political advocacy can be perceived as intimidating; with many feeling they lack sufficient skills, experience and confidence. Fortunately engaging in political advocacy does not require extensive knowledge of the structures of government but rather good quality interaction with key decision makers. The message does not need to be a complex one; simply hearing libraries mentioned by multiple constituents shows politicians that this is an issue that matters within their communities. The cumulative effect over time can be significant.

There are many high profile examples of successful political advocacy. We

have all witnessed the global impact of social media campaigns such as "#Bring Back Our Girls" which followed the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by the militant Islamic group Boko Haram. Indeed, even the American First Lady Michelle Obama was happy to get involved and advocate on behalf of the victims.

Practical Examples of Advocacy

Within the context of libraries CILIP launched the "My Library By Right" campaign earlier this year which called on the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to fulfil their legal duties under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. At the time of writing almost 15,000 people have signed the "#MyLibraryByRight" online petition whilst activists are also tweeting their support and contacting their local MP. A combination of high-level engagement with government and grassroots activism has helped place the need for public libraries to be treated as statutory services in England and Wales firmly on the agenda of Karen Bradley, the recently appointed DCMS Secretary of State at Westminster.

² <http://www.slideshare.net/CILIP/surviving-and-thriving-presentation-at-ciliplai-2016-conference>



Similarly, the “Right2Water” campaign to abolish the introduction of water charges in the Republic of Ireland saw the issue shoot up the political agenda ahead of the recent general election and it continued to prove a major factor in the formation of a government thereafter. These advocacy campaigns all succeeded in getting their message across to policy makers in government.

At the outset, in order to be an effective advocate, you must have a clear understanding of your purpose and identify your target audience. It is worth remembering that many key decision-makers at local and national government levels may not necessarily have full understanding of the role and value of libraries to communities and businesses. This has reflected negatively in the allocation of funding. In order to reverse this trend, we must become better at communicating our value and importance in order to increase the knowledge and engagement of decision-makers. Some of the most powerful arguments that we can advance surround our positive impact on local communities, businesses and society as a whole. At an early stage consider gathering examples which demonstrate how libraries and their services are delivering on key government policies.

There is unquestionably merit in recruiting others to assist your cause. Many users avail of our services and we should not be afraid to seek their support and positive testimonials as these can form useful evidence to present to decision makers. Furthermore, your colleagues can be good ambassadors for the work you undertake and its benefit. Also try to recruit those with local influence including school principals, business people and trade union representatives. If you are able to build a loose association like this, then the strength of your combined voice will carry greater weight.

Advocacy: Practical Steps

There are then a number of practical steps which can be taken in terms of advocating in the political sphere. The first step in effective advocacy is to identify the right person to contact. You should think strategically rather than simply along party political lines. Where possible, identify local Councillors, T.D.s or M.L.A.s who have previously shown an interest in or appetite to learn

about the areas on which you wish to advocate. It is strongly recommended that you make contact by email or in writing and highlight the matters you wish to raise before requesting a meeting to advance matters further. If you do not receive a response after three to four weeks follow up with a phone call, or another letter which references the first.

In a further effort to ensure your message gets through you should consider producing a short briefing note which highlights your key points. Policymakers can have significant demands on their time, therefore state your points clearly and concisely. When approaching a specific T.D. or M.L.A it will be helpful to include examples from their local constituency as they will, in turn, be keen to demonstrate their responsiveness to their constituents. Endeavour to highlight the positive outcomes for the politician’s constituents of adopting your proposals as this will render them considerably more attractive to the politician. Be sure to include specific and accurate facts and statistics to back up your position and arguments.

When you have successfully engaged with political representatives you can ask them to table questions in the Dáil or the Assembly, write to relevant Ministers on your behalf or, where appropriate, arrange meetings with Ministers and their staff to explore issues further. This can have the desirable effect of highlighting a particular problem to a minister and holding him/her accountable. It is common courtesy to express your gratitude in the event you receive help and support so remember to send a letter of thanks.

It is important to build relationships with those whom you wish to influence. When you have successfully established a line of communication with politicians the focus shifts to maintaining those links and you should consider issuing invitations to any events you are hosting. You could perhaps make your library available for local politicians to host press briefings or photo opportunities. It is also incumbent upon you to keep a watchful eye for any useful events politicians are organising and you should make a point of attending these and advocating directly to your local representatives and their advisors.

For those who wish to go the extra mile in terms of their advocacy efforts, it is well worth focusing on Committees. Engaging with the functions of a Committee can be a good way to get your voice heard, directly influence the work of the Dáil or the Assembly and potentially change legislation as its being made. You can regularly check online to establish the areas being examined by Committees in forthcoming meetings and use appropriate opportunities to contact the Committee with your input. Committees generally issue a call for evidence before launching inquiries into specific policy areas and those with an interest are encouraged to place their thoughts in writing and submit their views at that stage.

The following are some helpful tips to successfully get your message across when making a submission to a Committee enquiry:

- Work out what you want to achieve before you begin.
- Carefully think about the best way of achieving your aim. Simple opposition might not be the best strategy.
- Your submission must be relevant and deal with the issue, policy or proposal.
- State your points clearly and back them up with explanation, reasons and evidence.
- A clever style and verbose wording might sound good but be careful as these submissions are summarised by Committee staff and the key message could be lost.

Library and Information professionals on this island have a uniquely strong position in terms of advocacy support as both the Library Association of Ireland in the Republic of Ireland and CILIP Ireland in Northern Ireland present

a powerful united voice in relation to a wide range of issues of relevance to members. The political and economic backdrop in which both organisations currently operate means that they need to be as strong as possible to ensure libraries are not overlooked in terms of government funding and support. You are encouraged to get actively involved in these organisations because ultimately the more people they represent, the larger their voice and the stronger their mandate to press an agenda for the benefit of the profession.

Conclusion

Advocacy is already, subconsciously, a part of our everyday lives. We must therefore be opportunistic in our approach and resist the temptation to view political advocacy as complex. Instead let us join our voices together in a combined effort to build influence. Almost four years after delivering the "I Have a Dream" speech and exactly one year before his death, Martin Luther King provided another pearl of wisdom which is applicable to the present position. On 4th April 1967, at Riverside Church in New York, he stated,

"We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now... this is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action."

Now is the time to grasp all available opportunities to engage in advocacy. If we all do so both individually and collectively we can help shape a bright and positive future for libraries throughout Ireland.

Gerardine Blee is Development Officer, CILIP Ireland