

[COMMUNICATION: ELIZABETH FELLS]

# The delicate art of convincing cabinet

## Cabinet submissions

Even great policy proposals can be stalled or rejected if they are written in an unpersuasive style

Good policy proposals don't always get a yes from cabinet, and the reasons for this may often relate to factors well beyond the control of policy officers in a government department. The cabinet room is a partisan world, and should be quite separate to that of public servants. However, departmental policy officers aren't entirely powerless in the cabinet process. Ensuring that submissions present policy advice in a way that is persuasive and helpful for ministers can certainly increase the likelihood of cabinet approving a new policy.

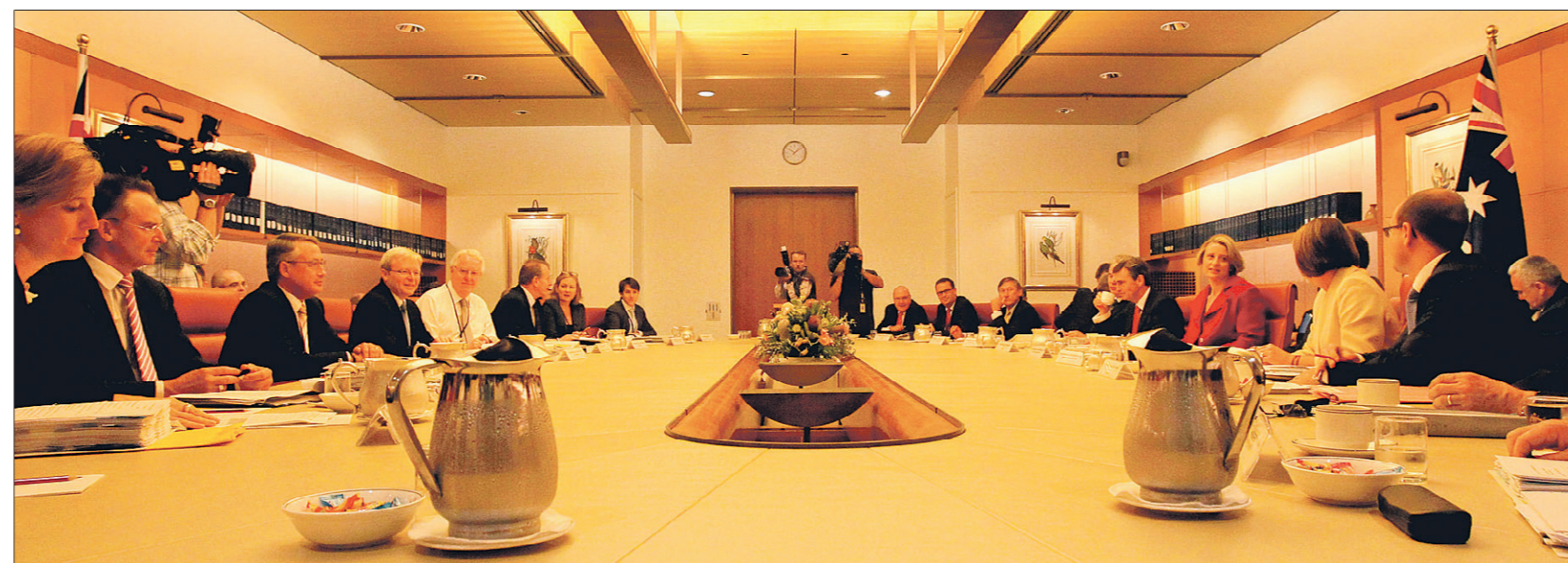
While some submissions are routine, many deal with complex matters. Often policy officers put a lot of effort into developing new policy to address a difficult issue, but minimal effort into presenting the proposal in a way that convinces cabinet to approve the idea. Regardless of whether the policy proposal is a

response to a ministerial request, or initiated by the department, following the steps outlined below when preparing a submission should help increase the chances of cabinet supporting a proposal.

### Is a cabinet submission needed?

First, consider whether a cabinet submission is even necessary. Policy advisers often prepare cabinet submissions for proposals that don't need cabinet approval. In some cases, a minister may have the authority to approve a new policy idea and cabinet does not need to be involved in the decision-making process. Most jurisdictions have cabinet handbooks that outline which issues need to go to cabinet. Matters that need to go to cabinet generally include those that involve several ministerial portfolios, require legislative change or are politically sensitive.

Ministers may also have other reasons for taking a matter to cabinet. For example, a minister may wish to gain the support of cabinet colleagues for a decision. Alternatively, a minister may want cabinet to reject a proposal, so that the minister has cabinet backing when telling stakeholders that a policy will not be pursued. Finding out whether



approval of a policy initiative requires cabinet involvement, either to adhere to the cabinet handbook or because the minister requests it, may end up saving much time and effort.

### Is the proposal well developed?

Presenting an inadequately developed

policy proposal may result in cabinet rejecting an initiative that, with more work, would receive cabinet endorsement. Following the key steps of good policy development – for example, ensuring there has been adequate consultation with stakeholders, and that all implementation issues have been properly considered – may sound like textbook stuff. However, ministers in cabinet will want to know that the policy has been thoughtfully crafted, and that risks associated with approving and introducing the policy have been assessed and managed. If the cabinet submission does not provide information that assures ministers that policy analysts have comprehensively considered all aspects of the policy, cabinet might not support the submission's recommendations.

### Carefully craft recommendations

Ministers often read a submission's recommendations before reading any other parts of the submission. In some cases, the recommendations may be all that a minister reads. Writing the recommendations before drafting the rest of the submission can help to clarify the submission's purpose, and guide what information it needs to include.

It's crucial that the recommendations are well written. They often form the final cabinet decision, which gives ministers and departments cabinet authority to implement a policy proposal. Recommendations must be succinct and clearly outline what ministers are being asked to approve.

They may also need to include who is responsible for implementing the policy. However, they generally should not include the rationale for the decision. In most cases, recommendations should answer "what?" and "who?" rather than "why?", providing clear guidance to the implementing department. Consider whether departments, when they receive cabinet's decisions, would have a clear understanding of what they have been authorised to do.

### A simple overview and options

When preparing the submission, keep the audience in mind. Cabinet ministers form a diverse bunch, with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, interests and capabilities. Cabinet submissions should clearly and succinctly present the policy problem, policy options and preferred solution. Some ministers may know little about the policy issue and need a simple overview of the policy problem; one that assumes no background knowledge and avoids technical terms.

In some cases, the submission should present policy options. Ministers often want to know that the recommended policy is not the only proposal public servants have considered. It is generally unnecessary to go into detail about various options that are not being recommended in the submission. However, if there are some alternative policies that have strong support from other ministers or external stakeholders, the pros and cons of these options should be presented. In addition, the rationale

holder reactions – and how these may influence cabinet decisions. For example, it may be important for a submission to clearly outline how a policy proposal may affect employment in particular regional areas. Also, if a submission is proposing a controversial policy or dealing with a potentially high-profile matter, it should outline how the media is likely to present the issue and include a media strategy. In some jurisdictions, providing attachments to cabinet submissions about these issues is mandated.

### Keep submissions brief

While it's important to consider and often to include information on all of the matters above, it's also important to keep cabinet submissions short. Submissions should present only relevant information, that ministers need or want to know. Generally, a lot of detail about an initiative is not required. While the responsible minister must be across the detail of a policy problem and proposed solution, there is no need for all of cabinet to receive this information.

There are a number of reasons why most jurisdictions have guidelines on how long cabinet submissions should be, and one of these is that, if cabinet submissions are too long, ministers will simply not read them. Presenting the right level of detail is a skill. It requires good judgement to provide enough information in a submission to answer ministers' questions, but not too much to make ministers stop reading.

Providing attachments to submissions is also often unnecessary. If there is information in an attachment that ministers should know, then this information should be included in the main submission. Of course there are exceptions, such as when a report needs cabinet approval and therefore must be attached to the cabinet submission, but in most cases attachments might not get read, and therefore need not be provided.

### Do all to avoid a delay

Meeting the requirements for the presentation of submissions outlined in the cabinet handbook helps to avoid delays in the submission being listed for cabinet consideration. The guidelines are designed to facilitate sound decision-making by cabinet. Submissions that don't meet the guidelines are generally returned to departments for amendment, delaying cabinet discussion of the issue. In preparing a project plan for policy development and cabinet approval, ensure there is enough time to meet the cabinet handbook's requirements for the timing of the submission's lodgement. Submissions that are submitted late and consequently do not go through proper consultation processes are often not supported by other ministers, who want adequate time for their departments to consider submissions before cabinet approval is sought.

### Conclusion

There are usually several issues to be discussed at cabinet meetings, many of which may be of more interest to ministers than proposals in a cabinet submission. If a submission does not present a proposal in a simple, convincing way, that addresses ministers' concerns, ministers may defer consideration of the matter or reject it entirely. The key to preparing a good submission is anticipating ministers' concerns and addressing them. Keeping the audience in mind and presenting the information that matters to ministers, in a way they find useful, might not ensure that cabinet approves the submission, but it certainly makes success more likely.

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