

How to make friends and influence parliament

It seems construction is getting the hang of getting government's ear. Specialists, for example, have gathered 150 MPs behind their campaign to scrap retentions.

Andy Pearson looks at how you, too, can have your way in Westminster.

Illustration by Andrzej Krauze

ON 15 NOVEMBER 2001, CLARE CURTIS-THOMAS, backbench Labour MP for Crosby, Merseyside, tabled early day motion number 428 in the House of Commons. Now, four months on, the motion to scrap cash retentions on central and local government procurement contracts has gained the support of more than 150 MPs.

The Constructors Liaison Group was the body responsible for getting the issue of cash retentions – whereby main contractors hold back cash for more than a year after a project's completion as insurance against defects – raised in parliament.

Theirs is just one of several recent lobbying successes by groups from within the construction industry. Others include the House Builders Federation's achievement in highlighting that fewer houses are under construction now than at anytime since 1924; the Concrete Block Association's triumph in delaying the introduction of stringent insulation values for walls under changes to Part L of the Building Regulations; and the Construction Products Association's successful lobbying of the European parliament over workers' exposure to noise and vibrations.

Add to this the CPA's part in getting construction moved from the DTLR to the DTI, and it is clear that after years of struggling to get its voice heard in the corridors of power, construction appears to have finally mastered the black art of lobbying. The industry, it seems, has learned to speak politics.

Rudi Klein, legal adviser to the CLG, says the group's successful approach to raising the issue of retentions was honed during the campaign to get contracts included in the Construction Act. "You need to be clear what you want to achieve, and you need to work out a strategy of how to achieve it," says Klein. "For anyone to lobby, they have to be sure the case is well thought-through

– ill-thought-out ideas will not wash and will not stand up to debate."

Getting the support of an MP was key to the CLG's campaign. Curtis-Thomas' involvement in the drive to scrap cash retentions followed a visit from a construction firm in her constituency. "Local MPs like to be involved," says Klein. "They like to be contacted by their constituents, they like to be seen on local TV and heard on local radio campaigning on local issues."

Having convinced Curtis-Thomas to table the early day motion, the CLG's next tactic was to

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Rudi Klein, legal adviser to Constructors Liaison Group

broaden its support base among MPs. "We had thousands of companies writing to their MPs," recalls Klein. However, he stresses that MPs have to be presented with the facts before they will commit to a campaign. "You have to be prepared to spend time and effort developing the briefing so that when you talk to your MP, you are fully armed," says Klein. "MPs like to be spoon-fed with the facts if they are going to take the case forward."

And once an MP has given their support, it is important to ensure that they remain informed

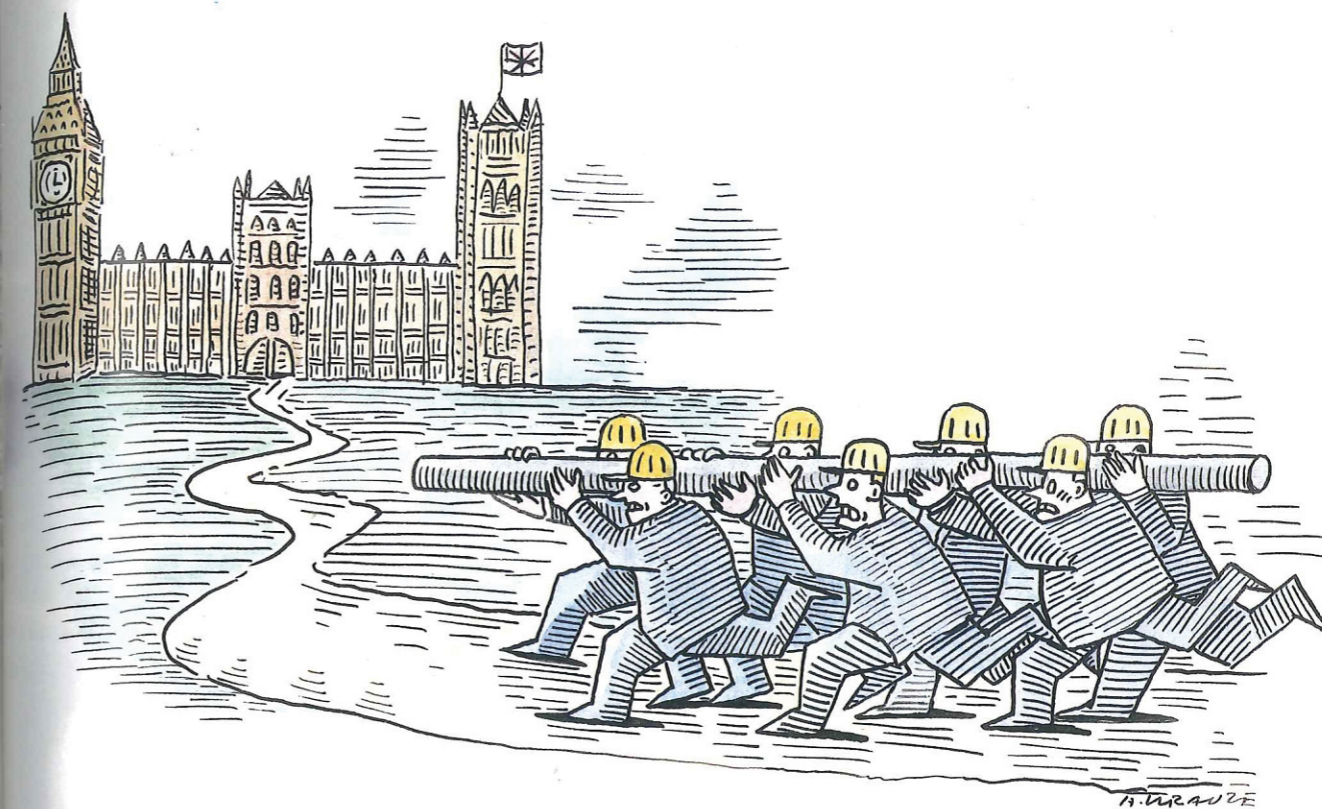
so that they can help with parliamentary tactics, particularly if support is garnered from MPs from different political parties. "Their help is absolutely immeasurable," says Klein.

Presenting a campaign as a pan-industry issue will help increase its kudos and persuade MPs that it is worth backing. This is one reason that construction has failed to get its voice heard in the past, according to Douglas Smith, managing director of lobby group Westminster Advisor. "The problem with construction is that it never presents a united front. The only things its various factions can agree on is that construction should get more money – which is not going to convince government to do something."

The CPA's successful campaigning on the physical agents directive was achieved by extending membership of its lobbying group outside construction to include the CBI as well as the Employers Engineering Federation, the UK Mining Association and other industry groups in the UK and across Europe.

But MPs will only fight on an issue if it will present them in a good light, so it is important to ensure that the issue is packaged in a government-friendly manner. "You will never win an MP's support by saying you don't agree with the government's agenda. Instead, sell your agenda as a way of enhancing the government's government procurement policy is wrong; instead the group has sold its motion as a way of "revolutionising the way government procures construction".

The CLG's aim is to persuade 250 MPs to sign Curtis-Thomas' early day motion. It is a tough call, since such a motion only lasts for a one parliamentary session. Again, understanding how parliamentary works is crucial to the success of this sort of lobby. A campaign will have more chance



of success if an MP raises the motion early in the parliamentary session – for the simple reason that this will allow more time to persuade others to sign it. And it is equally important to manage the signing process to maximise awareness in the Commons by ensuring that at least one MP a day signs up to the campaign. "The secret of raising an early day motion is to get a new name added every day so that it appears in the order paper of the house every day," says Smith.

But raising this sort of motion is not the only way to get an issue debated in the House of Commons. In fact, an early day motion is unlikely to be the focus of any parliamentary debate – its main purpose is to highlight an issue to MPs. An alternative tactic is to get the issue discussed at an adjournment debate – an MP-initiated event that takes place at the end of the day. "You might get an hour-and-a-half's debate, usually late in the evening – but the minister will have to be there to respond," says Smith. And to do this successfully, they will have to talk through all the industry issues with their servants.

Another option is to identify which, if any, of Commons' select committees will be discussing issues relating to your cause: this is because these committees can question MPs and therefore offer another opportunity to bring your cause to their attention. One final option is to get the issue raised in the House of Lords. Sometimes, you may need a little extra push to get your message across to the minister who matters – which is where lobbyists come in. "On occasion, we've used them to get a meeting," says Smith. "They have friends and contacts amongst members and ministers, they know what interests are and often they can smooth the way for a quicker meeting."

Waizey, a lobbyist for Consolidated

Communications, and who has worked with Amec in the past, explains: "We are well plugged-in; we bring an instinctive understanding of what the government is trying to achieve so we can advise on strategy. The language of government is like a foreign language, and we are the interpreters."

Klein says lobbyists should only be brought into a campaign once it has been decided exactly which MPs need to be aware of your cause. "Lobbyists are very expensive," he warns. Westminster Advisors' Smith says his fees vary, but clients can pay between £30,000 and £100,000 a year. "You can get more out of people if they are panic-stricken."

But in these days of devolved government, Westminster is not the exclusive focus of a lobbying campaign. "You cannot now think of Westminster as the sole focus of your effort; you have to include the Welsh assembly, the Scottish parliament and the Northern Ireland assembly," explains Klein, adding that the CLG has spent time with members of each of these assemblies. But lobbying a devolved government comes at a price. "Lobbying costs have increased tremendously as a result," he says ruefully.

However, political lobbyists' days may soon be numbered as the influence of the internet starts to be felt, even in the House of Commons. "Things are starting to move over to digital campaigning," asserts Michael Hepburn, director of communications at politics portal ePolitix. The portal either hosts or has links to most MPs' websites, and has the latest news from Westminster, the Scottish parliament, the European parliament and the assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales. There is also an area for industry groups to respond to government proposals, which Hepburn claims is popular with parliamentary researchers.

The CPA is already using the website as part of its lobbying strategy. "We have a micro-site on the ePolitix portal, and we make full use of the speed and flexibility of the internet to ensure our campaign keeps up with the pace of political change," explains Jean Emblin, external affairs director at the CPA. The website now forms part of the association's lobbying strategy. "We publicise our key messages to a wide political audience and respond to the latest legislation, events or reports that affect the construction products industry," she adds.

For the CLG's campaign, there are only a few months left before the current parliamentary session ends. And, if the issue of scraping cash retentions is to be successfully adopted by government, now is the time for the industry to pull out all the stops.

Ten tips for successful lobbying

- Know what you want to achieve and prepare a campaign strategy to do so
- Get your local MP on board
- Get your MP to raise an early day motion
- Consider other routes to getting the issue debated, such as adjournment debates and the House of Lords
- Consider lobbying using the internet
- Set aside sufficient resources for your campaign
- Ensure that you sell your case: tell ministers your proposals will make their job easier
- Garner cross-party support
- Use lobbyists to speed access to key personnel
- Do not focus exclusively on Westminster: Scotland, Wales and North Ireland have policy-makers, too

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