

**The role that individuals can play in forming public policy.**

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Individuals can have a role in influencing public policy development. This presentation will present the case for why public policy development benefits from informed input and how individuals can provide such input.

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Presentation to:

**Mining Exposed 2009: Our Nuclear World**  
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Mining Association of Nova Scotia Conference

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Thank you for inviting the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs (CCEPA) to speak about the role of individuals in influencing public policy. This opportunity to speak fits well with a critical element of CCEPA's mandate, which is to:

*promote open and respectful debate on contemporary public issues.*

CCEPA has always been active in promoting public dialogue on important issues. In fact those of you who know or know of CCEPA's first three Chairs (Eric Schibler, Bill Black and Allan Shaw) will certainly appreciate how much these three people have demonstrated that individuals can participate in and influence public discussion and policy – acting alone and as members of larger groups and organizations.

As you heard in the introduction, I was with CCEPA for over three years. During my tenure we learned that we can tackle some pretty tough and sensitive issues in a respectful manner. We also learned that debates can go astray without a broad range of participants. That is why CCEPA believes that the best dialogue, resolutions and solutions happen when the widest range of voices are heard.

The topic to which I am speaking is: ***The role that individuals can play in forming public policy.*** My conclusion is no secret – it appears in the brief description in the conference program - **Individuals can influence public policy development.** And they can do so in a variety of ways - as individual actors, as part of interest groups, as members of political parties and even as politicians.

Don't worry, I will not presume to tell **you** which issues **you** "should" become involved with. **You** have to make that decision. My message is simple:

*If you choose to act, then you **might** have some influence.*  
*If you choose **not** to act, then you will definitely have **no** influence.*

The choice is yours.

## The role that individuals can play in forming public policy.

As I am speaking, I would appreciate if you think about my comments in light of what you have heard, seen and learned over the course of this Conference. Please ask yourself three questions:

1. Are there issues that compel me to act?
2. If yes, how can I make use of what I've learned and of the connections I've made?
3. Now what should I do?

The structure of the presentation is in the form of responses to five questions:

1. What is policy?
2. Why should I participate?
3. What happens if I do not participate?
4. Can I have any influence?
5. What role(s) can I play?

### 1. What is policy?

About 15 years ago I was working in Jamaica on the creation of a Policy Ministry. Guess what our first problem was? Trying to find a definition for “policy”? You can imagine my surprise when we could not find a simple and clear definition. So we developed our own definition which did prove useful and which indicates the breadth and depth of what policy is...

Policy consists of ...
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Formal positions of the minister or government on BIG issues.</li><li>2. Proposals leading to legislation.</li><li>3. Proposals leading to regulations.</li><li>4. Positions, guidelines, and practices that interpret (1), (2), or (3) for implementation purposes.</li><li>5. Directives to a department or agency related to how it should perform a delegated function or duty.</li></ol>

The definition also shows the many places where we could intervene to try to “influence” public policy. It also gives us a sense for why change often can take so long.

As a result, we hear lots of excuses for why people either do not or should not get involved –

- there are already lots of organizations
- influential lobbyists,
- we are small
- it takes a lot of effort
- it might fail
- we will not be listened to and
- policy changes can often years - or not occur at all.

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So why do it? Why go through the lengthy and often frustrating process of trying to work with elected officials, bureaucrats, interest groups, lobbyists and political parties to shape public policy?

### 2. Why should I participate?

The basic form of individual input to public policy is through the electoral process. At a minimum, democracy cannot work if people do not vote. If democratic governance represents the will of the people, then the people have to let us know what their will is.

Unfortunately, in Canada, the people have been expressing their will less and less in this manner over the last 100 years or so. According to Elections Canada the voter participation rate declined from 75.7% in our 1968 election to 58.8% in our 2008 election. In other words, over 42.2% of eligible voters did not vote and unless the non-voters would have exhibited the same voting patterns as those who did vote, the result is not exactly what the people wanted. And I would argue that the non-voters would have voted differently from the voters.

For example, in 2005 Statistics Canada analysed voting patterns by age. The study found voter participation rates of 52% for the 22-29 year age group and 89% for those over 65 – a shocking 37% difference. It would be difficult to convince me that the voting patterns of 22-29 year olds would be the same as that for seniors. So, whose will is being expressed in our national elections?

After last year's federal election I called one of my daughters and thanked her and her peers for giving us another Conservative minority government. (I was being a little devious as I knew how much she disliked the person who became Prime Minister.) Her response was "Don't blame me, I did not vote". I said, "Not so..., by not voting you and your peers confirmed the result".

But even if everyone does vote, is this enough? I would argue that it is not. Our representatives have to be involved in so many issues (social, economic, environmental, health care, foreign affairs, aid, education, ...) that they cannot reasonably be expected to be completely well informed or to express our views in every matter. There has to be more input.

As Edward Broadbent stated so eloquently,

*To seize upon the election process alone is to commit two errors. It would be like picking out one dot from a painting by Georges Seurat. Not only would the selection fail to represent the whole, but the beauty of the work of art would be entirely missed.*

So, why should I participate?

1. Governments do not have all the answers. They need to hear from you.
2. Your "intelligent" input might be heard – i.e. you have some valuable insights that can improve policy
3. You might have an influence. Government policy making can be influenced (through media coverage, data, research and evidence; party politics; advice of public servants; community leaders and groups).
4. There might be better a policy/result

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5. Building positive relationships pay long-term dividends. You may not always be successful in getting the policy change you want today but a consistent, well thought out and executed approach builds goodwill that you can bank and use tomorrow. In addition, pursuing policy change garners on-going intelligence about government strategies, plans, opinions and perceptions that often cannot be otherwise obtained.
6. You just might feel better – for making this a better world

**3. What happens if I do not participate?**

1. Policy makers and others will not benefit from your thoughts
2. If you do not share your views, other people’s views could prevail
3. You will not have any influence. You default to power.
4. You are in tacit support of the decision/policy
5. You will not be connected to key policy influencers and makers and definitely not to the most current thinking
6. You could lose moral ground – much harder to complain

**4. Can I have influence?**

Can you have influence? Yes, of course. There are many examples of how individuals and organizations have influenced policy development.

Federal	Provincial	Municipal
Environmental Policies (EIS) Medicare Economic Dev (Free trade, VAT) Fisheries Policy	Environmental Policies PEI Fixed Link Sable Gas Development Education Health Care	Environmental Policies Pesticide spraying Municipal development plans Point Pleasant Park Bicycle friendly cities Cat By-Laws

To me though, the more meaty question is: How do we define “success” in achieving influence? And it is in defining of success that we often get so hung up:

- On one extreme, success could be viewed as getting the policy result to look exactly as you would write it.
- At the other extreme, success could be viewed as being heard.

The final answer, of course, depends somewhat on which type of policy initiative we want to influence – obviously it is “easier” to have an influence on the lower levels of government, where there are fewer interests, than on the really big national questions.

My view is that success should be seen as a series of steps starting with getting a “good hearing” and building up all the way to having the policy congruent with your position.

In fact, I favour defining success in influencing policy like defining success in a baseball game. In baseball, success for the hitting team is defined first as getting on base – so a walk is good, a single slightly better, doubles and triples better still and home runs even better. I believe that this

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is a good analogy with policy influence since there are so many elements in a policy making process and the policies themselves.

Of course we want to “win” and the final result, some would argue, is all that matters. However, that final result can take some time to achieve – many years in policy development (and many innings in baseball) – however, a few good innings can facilitate a good result. My experience is that you will be saved a lot of heartburn if you think of influencing public policy more like a marathon or a 10k run rather than a sprint.

### 5. What role(s) can I play?

As I said earlier, you have to decide this. I suggest a five step process:

1. **Find your moral compass** – ask yourself: What really gets me going? (Is something being done or proposed that really needs to change? Is there something not being done that really needs doing?)
2. **Pick your battles** - Decide on which of these issues to get involved with
3. **Pick your sport** - Decide on your favoured approach, essentially positive vs negative – Confrontation vs collaboration; hierarchical vs consensual, constructive vs antagonistic (There is a push to extremes in our debates)
4. **Pick your team** - Decide on whether to go it alone (write letters, meet Ministers, run for election) or to join a group.
5. **Be ready for a long season** – Be content with lots of walks, singles, doubles and occasional home runs. Remember the key to winning the season is lots of small successes.

However, if you do decide to get actively involved, I offer the following advice:

- Understand the system and its imperatives and constraints (when to see a Minister or bureaucrat; who has the authority and power, ,...)
- Plug into a process at the appropriate place
- Recognize that there will be others with differing views and interests (find out who they are and what are their arguments,...)
- Remember, you are dealing with real people – politicians, public servants, entrepreneurs, employees, employers and private citizens are really just us. No one has a monopoly on the best ideas. Very, very few public issues are one-sided
- Remain committed and in touch with those who can effect change (remember this is a marathon, not a sprint).
- (Above all), be patient, consistent and ethical.

As a famous US lobbyist, Bryce Harlow said in 1984 -

*Corporate representatives who are effective and principled advocates of the interests of their companies and of the business community as a whole help government arrive at better-informed ... decisions."*

I would slightly change the statement to read -

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*principled advocates of the interests of their communities help government arrive at better-informed decisions*

Being effective at influencing public policy involves hard work, dedication and consistent, open, honest, relentless approach in combination with a skilful advocacy process. I am not aware of any “overnight success” stories. However, I do know of many successes.

In closing, I want to reiterate the three key questions for you to consider:

1. Are there issues that compel me to act?
2. If yes, how can I make use of what I’ve learned and of the connections I’ve made?
3. Now what should I do?

I recognize that not being compelled to act is a valid response. In that case you would be leaving the policy influence to others and you may be comfortable with that approach. Everyone cannot get involved in every issue.

But remember, on any single small or large issue:

*If you choose to act, then you **might** have some influence.*

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