

## Under The Centre's Skin

Does the heat and dust of policy making and government relations press your buttons? Yavnika Khanna examines the ins and outs of this niche option

IT WOULD perhaps be surprising — if not a bit shocking — to realise that some part of what we know of the 1990 Kuwait War was choreographed by a strategic communications consultancy firm called The Rendon Group. John Rendon, founder of TRG, has been quoted as saying "If any of you either participated in the liberation of Kuwait City... or if you watched it on television, you would have seen hundreds of Kuwaitis waving small American flags... Did you ever stop to wonder how the people of Kuwait City, after being held hostage for seven long and painful months, were able to get hand-held American flags? And for that matter, the flags of other coalition countries? Well, you now know the answer. That was one of my jobs."

If that's perception management and lobbying at its most public, it's certainly not a random example. Government lobbying is something that has existed for almost as long, some would say, as governments themselves. Government relations, or lobbying, involves individuals and organisations whose work involves monitoring legislative and executive activities to influence policy, legislation, regulations, or negotiations, on behalf of governments, industries, specific companies, interest groups or constituencies.

"In India, by and large, there is no established pattern for the operation of lobby groups, unlike in the US where lobby groups essentially function as service organisations and can be harnessed, even commercially, to push or promote a particular issue," says Ashoka Chandra, who has held many senior positions in the government including special secretary to the ministry of HRD. Still, the broad career arena of government relations offers a host of opportunities for those with an interest in the field of policy-making.

If you want to work within the government, you can opt for all-India services like the Indian Administrative Service, the Indian Police Service, or the Indian Foreign Service. Other options include joining government services like the Indian Economic Service or Indian Statistical Service; or working within organisations under the aegis of the government. The government itself indulges in mass communication through public service campaigns. It must also deal with diplomatic relations and international protocols. This is what is on offer in the government domain.

Besides this, private organisations, political parties and special interest groups also liaison with government at various levels. In a private company, the job is akin to that of a strategic planner and consultant. Paresh Gupta, a strategic consultant (finance) at PriceWaterhouseCoopers elaborates on his work profile. "At the ministerial level we have to conduct various presentations on reforms in the government sector and work closely with multilateral funding agencies like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. At the government utility level we interact both formally and informally with government officials. At the client level, we assist these utilities in their back-office work like preparing presentations for finance commissions, planning commissions, ministries and other governing bodies."

Despite liberalisation, firms still have to obtain several approvals and require extensive liaison work. Here, retired government officials, some chartered accountant firms and other small indigenous firms or individuals with 'good contacts' in government departments step in.

One can also enter the public affairs domain by being associated with non-governmental organisations in the social sector. NGOs usually campaign for causes or assume a welfare role at the grassroots level under the guidance or aegis of government schemes.

Another avenue for aiding the government's policy decisions while remaining on the periphery is working as a policy analyst in a 'think tank'. Think tanks are essentially policy-oriented research and advocacy organisations. "Think tanks are buckets full of ideas for politicians to pick up. In fact, many think tanks in Britain are under the explicit patronage of leading politicians. For example, the Foreign Policy Centre in London launched by Tony Blair," says Fabien Curto Millet, non-executive director of the Oxford Council on Good Governance, a think tank based in Oxford.

Bharat Karnad, a research professor with the Center for Policy Research and advisor to the government on nuclear weapons and security, feels that "think tanks basically do the necessary link work through research and advocacy. Think tanks are mainly concerned with content and the outcome of the policy and not how it is actually implemented at the administrative level." He points out that there are very few think tanks in India, unlike in the US where government bodies, universities and think tanks form a 'revolving door'.

One must be careful not to confuse think tanks with lobby groups.

"A think tank may be set up consciously based on a formal decision by the concerned authorities, or it may evolve organically around a group of individuals or an institution that specialises in a particular thematic area," says Mr Chandra. Lobby groups, on the other hand, would actively push a particular issue or line of thought. They may, however, draw upon a think tank for expertise and information.

Prof Karnad feels that the government is starved on insight especially on special matters. "It is at this moment that we step in to aid in the decision-making process. It is no doubt a niche field and it takes a long time to actually see your recommendations implemented, but the fact that one is instrumental in framing the country's policy is very gratifying," he says.

### DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT GEAR?

PARTH J Shah, president of New Delhi-based think tank, Centre for Civil Society, believes that the most important qualification in this field is the ability to

distinguish opinion from facts and the capacity to search for relevant facts. At the Centre for Civil Society, incumbents typically join as research interns, research associates, research fellows or policy analysts. Candidates come from diverse backgrounds: engineers, economists, sociologists, accountants, commerce, law and even medical graduates. A master's degree in public policy, law or political science may help, but many feel that experience in government and networking is what lends authority. Public policy experts suggest that the field is a meritocracy making it imperative for one to build a reputation over time. Prof Karnad, who has been an advisor for the 10th Finance Commission and on defence expenditure, advises aspirants to gain credibility by producing quality and consistent research work. "People in power knew me from my writings and these do have an impact on the ideology of the political party in power... In this career, it all happens through a cascading effect." Of course, networking, harnessing and maintaining contacts works to one's advantage in government relations and allied fields. So, if perseverance is your forte and you have the heart and mind to make a difference in how the country is run, a career in government relations could indeed be your calling. A dream career option for all policy wonks.

(The author has interned under the 'Researching for Reality Programme' at the Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi)

