

The long game in policy engagement

By Ajay Khanna, ET CONTRIBUTORS Last Updated: Feb 23, 2026, 03:44:00 PM IST

Synopsis

Government processes often appear slow, but this is a feature, not a bug. Decisions undergo extensive scrutiny for legal, political, and fiscal impacts. Effective public affairs requires understanding this system. Businesses must engage consistently, offering insights and acknowledging trade-offs. Patience and professionalism are crucial for navigating policy, as competence, not just connections, drives progress.



Agencies

The meeting had gone well.

The presentation was concise, the data robust, and the room receptive. There were nods around the table, thoughtful questions from senior officials, and even suggestions on how the proposal could be refined further.

As we stepped out, a colleague remarked quietly, "This should move quickly."

It didn't.

Weeks turned into months. Follow-up emails received polite responses: "Under consideration." "Being examined." "We will revert." The file seemed to have entered the vast administrative ecosystem where good ideas often pause—sometimes indefinitely.

Frustration crept in, followed by a familiar question: If everyone agreed, why hasn't anything moved?

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Anyone who has engaged with government long enough has experienced this moment. In my own work and in dialogues at the [Public Affairs Forum of India \(PAFI\)](#), this pause is often where impatience sets in—and cynicism begins.

Yet, more often than not, this silence is not indifference.

It is the system at work.

When Slowness Is a Feature, Not a Bug

In the corporate world, momentum is visible. Decisions are tied to quarterly results. Timelines are explicit.

Government operates differently.

Years ago, a senior bureaucrat explained this candidly over tea. Pointing to a stack of files, he said with a half-smile, “Each of these could become a headline, an audit query, or even a court case. My job is to ensure they don’t.”

Before a proposal moves forward, it is examined through multiple lenses: legal viability, political implications, administrative feasibility, fiscal impact, precedent value, and unintended consequences. A seemingly small policy tweak can affect states, regulators, competitors, consumers, and future litigation.

What appears to be delay is often due diligence at scale.

Understanding this shifts engagement—from asking “Why is this stuck?” to asking “What questions does the system still need answered?”

Why ‘Small’ Changes Rarely Feel Small

This difference in perspective becomes clear when businesses seek “minor” policy changes.

A company once approached policymakers seeking a narrow exemption for a specialised input. From its perspective, it affected only one plant and a limited supply chain. From the state’s perspective, it raised broader questions: Would it set

a precedent? Would it distort competition? Would auditors question it later?

The proposal stalled.

Through sustained engagement, it eventually evolved into a structured clarification with built-in safeguards. It took longer than expected, but it proved more durable.

What feels tactical to business often feels systemic to government.

Public Affairs as Interpretation, Not Persuasion

Early in my career, I believed strong advocacy meant powerful presentations.

Over time, I learnt otherwise.

During one meeting, an official interrupted a detailed pitch and said, “Don’t just explain how this helps you. Explain how it strengthens the system.” That shift—from private benefit to public logic—is the essence of professional public affairs.

It involves translating business realities into governance language and translating policy constraints back into corporate strategy, especially when answers are delayed or incomplete. The most productive engagements are those where trade-offs are acknowledged openly, not argued away.

Beyond Transactional Engagement

Over time, policymakers distinguish between transactional and institutional engagement.

Some organisations appear only when something is blocked. Others engage consistently—participating in consultations, sharing research, and flagging risks early. A senior policymaker once remarked, “We know who is here for a transaction and who is here for a conversation.”

That distinction matters. Familiarity builds comfort. Comfort builds trust. And trust shapes how proposals are received.

When the Answer Is ‘Not Yet’

Few responses test resolve like “not yet.”

For leaders accustomed to decisive timelines, it often feels like resistance. In reality, it reflects political timing, fiscal constraints, or implementation readiness. I recall a reform that enjoyed broad support but remained dormant for nearly three years due to electoral cycles and administrative transitions. Many disengaged. A few stayed patient. When the policy window reopened, their groundwork resurfaced.

Escalation may create noise. Patience creates space.

Why Boards Must Rethink Public Affairs

All of this leads to a crucial conclusion for corporate India.

Policy is no longer peripheral. It shapes markets, investments, supply chains, and competitiveness. Regulatory shifts can

redefine sectors overnight. Treating public affairs as a support function is strategically risky.

Boards must increasingly view public affairs as a core governance capability—not through the outdated lens of who they know, but what they know. Connections may open doors. They do not move systems.

What moves systems is understanding: of legislative processes, regulatory architecture, federal dynamics, and political economy. Professional public affairs is about analysis, not access. It is about anticipating policy trajectories, stress-testing strategy, and sustaining engagement across political cycles.

In a regulatory environment that increasingly defines opportunity, competence must replace proximity.

Playing the Long Game

Policy engagement rarely rewards speed.

It rewards patience, preparation, perspective, and professionalism. The long game is not passive. It is deliberate. It is about staying engaged without being transactional, consistent without being insistent, and credible without being confrontational.

Over time, it remains the only game that truly works.

Ajay Khanna is Co-Founder of the Public Affairs Forum of India (PAFI).

Views are personal.

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