

Conference Report

Science meets Parliament Canberra, Australia 17-18 March 2009

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Science meets Parliament (SmP) is an annual event that brings scientists and parliamentarians together in the illustrious setting of our national capital. For the scientists, it is primarily a professional development activity. They gain insights into the very different worlds of politics, policy, parliamentary processes and administration. For the parliamentarians, SmP is an important awareness-raising exercise. It aims to show them what Australia gains from public investment in science, and allows them to educate themselves about issues of concern to their constituents.

SmP takes place over two days, with the focus of day one being on professional development. In the historic surroundings of Old Parliament House, we heard scientists, politicians, journalists, policy advisers and analysts speak on a range of issues. Topics covered included the competing rationalities of science, politics and policy; understanding the advocacy process; understanding the breadth of issues with which science competes for policy attention and funding; and coverage of some of the main issues in science and research policy. By the end of the day, one of the things that I had learnt was that politics is a very demanding profession, with politicians and their staffers often working very long hours.

However, the primary emphasis was on training us to convey a message, and providing us with practical tips on engaging with politicians. I found this information particularly valuable, and it prepared us well for our meetings the following day. We learnt that the ideal presentation conveys a clear and simple story, with two or three distinct messages and a key point. The importance of advance preparation was emphasised, with it being absolutely critical to bring a one-page summary to meetings. Politicians are busy people, and are unlikely to read anything longer than a few dot points! The importance of following up on a meeting was also stressed – even if this just means sending a “thank you” email. One of the aims of SmP is to build trust and relationships between scientists and

politicians, and thus the meetings are seen as the beginning of an ongoing process.

In the evening, a formal dinner was held in the Great Hall of Parliament House. Despite their hectic schedules – this year's event came in the middle of the Government's attempts to get its “alcopops” legislation passed and both houses were sitting until late into the night – I was impressed by the number of parliamentarians that participated. Almost half of all senators and MPs joined us, providing a unique opportunity to discuss our work in a relaxed and informal setting. It was also an invaluable networking opportunity and, for me, a new collaborative research project was one of the outcomes of the evening. The fine food and wine was complemented by a rousing speech by Penny Sackett, Australia's Chief Scientist.

The second day consisted of meetings between scientists and politicians. Generally, participants in SmP will have two meetings, with three scientists and one politician in each. However, climate scientists were in strong demand this year and, like many of my colleagues, I found myself with three meetings to attend. These consisted of two with Shadow Ministers (Greg Hunt, the Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water, and Andrew Robb, the Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading Design) and one with an independent MP (Robert Oakeshott, the Member for Lyne in northern NSW). The meetings were all informal, and generally began with each of the scientists spending around five minutes describing their work. This would then be followed by questions and discussion. I was very impressed as to how enthusiastic and receptive each of the politicians were. The most productive meeting was with Greg Hunt, who demonstrated a genuine desire to understand the science behind climate change. Like a true scientist, he spent much of the meeting scribbling graphs on scraps of paper, and his enthusiasm caused the meeting to run way over time.

There was much to do during the long gaps between meetings. Four forums were held,

covering the topics of Strategic Leadership in Science; Nanotechnology and OH&S issues; Coasts and oceans into the future: Australia's Maritime domain; and Indigenous Australia and Science. There was also a National Press Club Lunch by Senator Kim Carr, the Minister for Industry, Innovation, Science and Research. I was unable to make this myself, but I'm told that it was well worth the effort.

Overall, I found SmP to be an enormously beneficial and insightful experience, and I couldn't recommend it highly enough. It was incredibly well organised by FASTS (the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies), who did an excellent job of providing us with relevant information before, during and after the event. The level of support that was shown by our federal

parliamentarians was impressive and this deserves to be reciprocated by the scientific community. One of the take-home messages from SmP is that it is important for us to take politicians seriously if we expect the same in return. I would recommend that everyone, and particularly early-career researchers, make the effort to attend SmP at least once. Based on my experience, the best time to attend would be when you have something novel to present. I found that the meetings with politicians were most productive when a scientist was able to show a figure and a few dot points that described a concrete and exciting new result.

On a final note, I would like to express my gratitude to AMOS for sponsoring me to attend this event.

Conference Announcement



2010 AMOS CONFERENCE
27-29 January 2010 ANU, Canberra

“Atmosphere, Oceans, Environment and Society”

Co-Hosts: Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU
Research School of Earth Sciences, ANU

Abstract submission

By 30th September 2009

Submission of final paper for review (optional)

By 31st January 2010 (no more than 4 pages)

Guidelines and instructions for submission can be found at the conference website: www.amos.org.au/conferences