

## **Science meets Parliament report**

***Debbie Saunders***

I was lucky to be able to attend the recent FASTS Science meets Parliament (SmP) event at Parliament House on 17-18 March 2009 as a representative of the ESA. Although I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to get out of it, I have been finding myself dealing with increasingly political issues lately and thought it was about time I learnt more about how parliament works and how to better understand and engage with politicians. I had always felt quite daunted by the idea of approaching politicians about issues I was concerned about, however after attending this event I now feel like that barrier has been broken down enough that I can approach any parliamentarian I want. Whether or not I actually get to meet them may be another thing ...but at least I now have an understanding of how to go about it. In fact, I have prepared a one page summary of some points that I am planning on using at a meeting with a parliamentarian soon.

The SmP event consisted of two days of meetings/presentations – the first being a workshop/presentation day to provide insight and ideas on how to interact with politicians and the types of constraints they are often working under. The second day had workshops, minister briefings and meetings with parliamentarians. There was also a SmP dinner where both politicians and delegates intermingled and Professor Penny Sackett, Chief Scientist for Australia, gave an inspiring but sobering presentation on climate change. Another interesting and inspiring part of the event was that the entire panel of experts in “Strategic Leadership in Science” forum were women. I also got to meet and discuss a range of things with Prof. Sackett in person which I thoroughly enjoyed.

I found the presentation by Dr Richard Dennis (Director of the Australia Institute, former chief of staff for Natasha Stott Despoja and strategist for Senator Bob Brown) contained the most practical tips and insights for working closer with parliamentarians. Although I know the media can play a role in politics, media representatives and political advisors highlighted just how much the media drives politics so this was also a valuable lesson.

All the delegates were incredibly friendly and open to meeting and talking with anyone - much more so than any scientific conference I have ever been to – I suspect this was in part due to the fact that we all felt like we were out of our depth to start with and were there to learn from the whole experience. Something that surprised me a bit was that there were a lot of older, more senior scientists there as well as young ones, so it felt good to be getting in early in my career rather than later. I also learnt a lot about completely different fields of science to my own from talking to a diverse range of delegates. Overall, I would recommend members of ESA attend this event, be open to learning about all sorts of things you never knew about and to break down the barrier between ecological research and politics so that we can get the ecological perspectives of issues brought to the attention of more parliamentarians.