

Science meets Parliament, 18-19 March 2008

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Science meets Parliament (SmP) is an annual event organised by the Federation of Australian Science and Technology Societies (FASTS), and has been running since 1999. It has grown to become one of the most significant opportunities for Australian scientists to understand, interact with and influence federal politics. The Ecological Society of Australia (ESA), as a member of FASTS, has been a supporter of the event since its inception. In 2008, the ESA paid for three members to attend SmP, including me. In this we joined about 160 other delegates from a range of disciplines and science societies affiliated to FASTS. Delegates were selected on the basis of their expertise or interest in a number of issues put forward by FASTS and by participating politicians, which vary from year to year. This year, there were about a dozen issues up for discussion. Those in which I felt I might be able to make a contribution included climate change; environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity; extreme weather; research infrastructure; private and public sector research and development collaboration; environmental risks; carbon emissions and renewable energy; biomass fuels versus food versus environment; and science education.

SmP is broken into two days. Day One, held in Old Parliament House, is designed to explore the art of political lobbying and getting messages across to politicians, and to prepare for Day Two when delegates get the chance to meet with one or more politicians in Parliament House.

The first few presentations of Day One were by FASTS staff. These reminded us that science research had received a progressively lower share of public funding, and of GDP, over the previous decade. On the other hand, things looked set to change for the better in the years ahead, although not every branch of science was likely to be equally favoured by the new government, and it must also be recognised that funding level is only one measure of scientific activity. An Innovation review is in progress, to be developed into a White Paper in time for the 2009 budget. For measuring institutional research performance, the much-disliked RQF (Research Quality Framework) looks set to be progressively replaced with a more holistic metric, ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia). Science education in schools is also likely to get a boost.

Later presentations on Day One were by a range of people involved in various aspects of science policy, government, lobbying and the media. We were reminded of some key themes of our age that were likely to preoccupy the new government as it develops new policies, given its determination to 're-engage with modernity' on a footing of social justice. Themes include rising prices for food, water and energy; a change in the global power balance; an increase in human migration; the need to meet Millennium Development Goals (on poverty reduction, health improvement, education, water, sanitation etc); and tensions in the balance of responsibilities of States and Commonwealth. While scientists may have some influence in helping to resolve these issues, the higher up the political agenda an issue becomes, the less influence individual scientists will have; hence the value in finding ways to get the science in there as early as possible.

Presentations by the lobbyists and political strategists were particularly enlightening. Politicians get lobbied all the time, and are wise to the lobbyists' tricks. They are extremely busy, and are quick to recognise when someone is trying to sell them snake-oil or to otherwise waste their time. Notwithstanding the point that scientists may consider themselves to be on a higher ethical plane than other lobbyists with vested interests, it is still necessary to play by the same rules. The presenters emphasised the need to hone a message down to a few key points, and to frame those points in terms of their relevance to solving a problem faced by the politician (or their constituents), not forgetting to set the context first (to ensure mutual understanding). Following up by providing further information soon after the meeting reaffirms the message. Like all of us, politicians expect to be treated with politeness and respect (in lobbying situations, if not during Question Time). It is advantageous if the politician can take ownership of the idea the scientist is promulgating, so that the politician, rather than the scientist, can become its champion and public face. We were also reminded that 'scientific rationality' is only one of many forms of rationality in society. To stand a chance of influencing politicians, one has to learn to communicate one's science in terms of political rationality.

Engaging with politicians and the media early in the research cycle is also useful (so they know whom to turn to when they need to). This may require time, money and effort, but if so this should be seen as an investment. Policy windows open and close, so timing of lobbying is critical. For instance the lobbying may be required to pre-empt or coincide with the release of a report or related news item, or to coincide with a particularly significant event (such as the anniversary of the birth of Darwin; or a solar eclipse). Scientists can help set the agenda here by reminding politicians and the media of forthcoming events.

Scientists are generally held to be honest brokers and therefore held in relatively high esteem by the media and by politicians, if not by some non-governmental interest groups. In this regard it is worth noting that the concept of 'scientific independence' is different from the concept of 'scientific integrity', and it is the latter that we should be most concerned about maintaining. Being media-savvy can help to ensure that one's integrity remains unscathed through any episode of heightened exposure; media training courses can help here. It is also worth remembering that the media will often get the minutiae of the message wrong, but this is not worth getting upset about since few will notice and the main thing is to ensure that the big picture comes across correctly. Even if a journalist wants an instant answer, it's often worth asking them to call back in twenty minutes. This can give you time to compose your response in suitably straightforward language, and to check out whatever the latest news is that may have inspired the journalist to contact you, the details or political ramifications of which he may have neglected to inform you.

The evening of Day One concluded with a banquet in the Grand Hall of Parliament House. The 160 delegates were joined by a score of politicians. I was allocated a seat next to Fran Bailey MP, LIB member for McEwen (VIC). The atmosphere of the evening was very informal – despite the guest speaker Professor Neville Nicholls delivering a sobering speech on climate change. Fran proved to be good company for dinner, involving me and neighbouring scientist diners in conversations on nuclear power, water politics, forestry and fine furniture, amongst other subjects. I also got to

meet and greet Dick Adams MP, ALP member for Lyons (TAS), which was important for me as I had to inform him that I wouldn't be able to make my appointment with him for the next day because of the timing of my flight back to Hobart.

Day Two started early for me, as I attended a breakfast launch of a report in one of the many function rooms at Parliament House. The report was on what needs doing to get taxonomy in Australia out of its current parlous state, and was launched by FASTS and the Australian Biological Resources Study. Unfortunately most of those present seemed to be taxonomists or at least scientists rather than politicians, so it is not clear to me whether the launch will have made much of an impact in the corridors of power where it matters most.

Much of the rest of the day was given over to a succession of meetings with politicians by groups of three or so scientists each. Not all federal politicians choose to participate in Smp, but sufficient numbers did so this year to give us all the chance to have meetings with at least one and up to four of them during the course of the day. We were warned that any of these meetings could be cancelled or rescheduled at the last moment, and that a meeting could be interrupted by the politician being called to a Division.

My first meeting was with Sid Sidebottom MP, ALP member for Braddon (TAS). With Sid's electorate being in NW Tasmania, he was familiar with the Tasmanian forestry situation. He had even been to our Warra Long Term Ecological Research Site, so my lobbying point about the need for secure government funding for a network of LTER sites like Warra had at least some resonance with him. While Sid was prepared to discuss some of the biofuel and carbon issues I had prepared myself for, he was more interested in our views on ways to improve science education. I left the meeting with the feeling that there wasn't anything that we discussed that was likely to be of immediate consequence for him, but that I hadn't made a fool of myself either. At least I was able to leave him some Forestry Tasmania and Warra leaflets and notes; I followed up with a thank-you email on my return.

My second meeting was with Kelvin Thompson MP, ALP member for Wills (VIC). Kelvin had a strong interest in the issues surrounding the development of a viable and sustainable biofuels industry for Australia to provide an alternative to fossil fuels. All three of the scientists in the meeting spoke with one voice when we gave our qualified approval to the need to develop such an industry, while highlighting some of the environmental and social concerns that would arise from a single-minded approach to biofuel industry development. Kelvin appeared very receptive to our ideas, and I got the impression that he was already well-informed in this area but was looking to us for validation of his understanding. Unfortunately, our meeting was twice interrupted by calls for a Division. I left Kelvin with some Forestry Tasmania and Warra leaflets and notes, and followed up with a thank-you email on my return. He in turn replied, thanking me for my input, and in particular for the notes that I left him which he claimed to have read and found interesting.

Besides these two meetings, FASTS also provided us with the opportunity to attend a press conference / lunch at the National Press Club, at which the new Minister for Innovation, Kim Carr, spoke. While the Minister's speech was suitably up-beat and

science-and-innovation-focussed, it was quite sobering to note how most of the questions from the media were on more mundane issues, such as the Minister's relationships with other politicians and his views on Australia's automotive industry. It was a reminder of the important role the media play in both acting as a conduit for matters of public and political interest, but also as a filter.

Before heading for the airport, I ended my day at Parliament House by visiting the public gallery during Question Time. On the television one generally only gets to see tightly-cropped images of whichever minister is speaking. This excludes most of the peripheral action going on elsewhere in the Chamber (the chatting, the passing of notes, the shouting...), and therefore masks much of the theatrical nature of the event. At least having had a glimpse into the working lives of politicians beyond the Chamber I am now able to put their all-too-familiar TV performances into perspective. I am now aware that politicians spend much more of their days in parliament behind closed doors, hard at work meeting lobbyists, reading reports, sitting on parliamentary committees, etc.

I doubt that my one day of lobbying will have made much difference to any political processes. Nevertheless, at least I have developed some better insights into the workings of parliament and the role of lobbying and the media in influencing these. As a scientist working in an area of intermittently intense public and political interest, I am almost guaranteed of many chances to use the skills that my attending this event has helped me to develop.