

Science meets parliament came in the week after I had attended the Fenner Conference on the Environment. At the Fenner Conference I learnt from senior public servants exactly where science fits in the decision making scheme. That is, alongside all of the other clamouring lobbyists. The bureaucrats also indicated that there was room for developing personal relationships with public servants as a way of having science influence policy. However these relationships, they said, were conditional on wearing the same gag that public servants legally sign up to. No comment.

So I was not as surprised as I might have otherwise been when I attended Science Meets Parliament. While it was previously clear that science doesn't have a strong influence on policy, it was refreshing to have this frankly stated in the training day prior to meeting parliamentarians. Although some of the panel discussions were a bit slow, generally the training day was valuable for putting us in our place and introducing us to the paradigm in which parliamentarians operate. It's a paradigm based on winning the next election. Ten fossil fuel-based labour electorates = 5% emissions target. It is a parliamentary calculation.

I met two Liberal senators. My point (we were taught that you should only meet a parliamentarian if you have a point), was that climate change interacts with existing threats to biodiversity, so any reasonable response to climate change must involve addressing these existing threats. They appeared interested, asked questions and generally were very polite. Senator Ferguson agreed that climate change was definitely happening, but wasn't sure if it was human-caused. Apparently some other Liberal party members took this line as well. In my follow up to the meeting I sent him some quotes from the IPCC 2007 report. I guess the coal industry will send him the same quotes, emphasising that we are now only 90% sure that it is human induced; there's still a 10% chance that business as usual won't do us any harm, and in fact, some of us (them) could get quite rich.

Science Meets Parliament was great for smudging out my weakly held delusion that science is a weighty weapon in policy debate. You need to know the lay of the land if you are going to enter a fray. It also gave me confidence to role up to Parliament house and meet with politicians to explain about the state of our environment. The need is greater than I feared.