

Science meets Parliament 2009: Students perspective

Tiffanie Nelson

PhD Candidate, E&ERC, UNSW

8th May 2009

To gain some experience in how science shapes policy, I went along to the Science meets Parliament event 2009. I did my best to follow the formal dress code and attended the two-day workshop in Canberra. I was one of very few students at the event. The crowd was a mix of scientists, mostly from senior positions in university and government eager to network and learn how to engage with parliamentarians and communicate their scientific research. The experience was an excellent opportunity.

Day one was focused on preparing yourself to not waste the opportunity when meeting with a politician. We were briefed on how to engage and convey what we wanted in a relevant context. On the evening of day one a formal dinner was held at Parliament House. Senators and politicians were dispersed amongst the 300 scientists. Subtle flashing lights and ringing noises at several times throughout dinner caused each of the parliamentarians to jump mid-meal and speedily walk out of the hall. This was their three-minute window to cast their vote: a normal occurrence when parliament is actually sitting. Day two was reserved for meeting with politicians or their advisors. These meetings we learned, can prove fruitless if you waste precious time explaining 'why' your science is important and not 'how' your science is important. Conveying the socio-economic impact and the implications of your research are requirements and an important lesson for engaging. The experience allowed me to learn about the required angle of communicating science to politicians and gave insight into the shortness of a politicians' time. The key is to have a complete encompassing sentence covering your area and your suggested solution that you can say to Rudd when you catch him in the corridor: it has to be punchy!