

Chapter

“SCIENCE MEETS PARLIAMENT”

Australian researchers visit Parliament

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Abstract: Australia has a problem when it comes to the relationship between science and members of Parliament. Few Parliamentarians understand the possibilities of science. They do not understand the limitations of science, or the long time scales it can take to develop an idea into something that will benefit the community. Nor do our scientists understand the work of members of Parliament. They do not have a clear idea of the political processes. They do not appreciate the pressures or the time scales Parliamentarians work to. Both sides, the scientists and the Parliamentarians recognise the importance of each other. But there is no natural dialogue between the two sides, because they come from different worlds. This paper describes three ways to build a new dialogue between scientists and MPs.

Keywords: Parliament, political, Researchers, Policy, Meeting

Australia is a country of 20 million people and 226 members of Parliament; and the problem lies in the fact that only 10 MPs have formal qualifications in science.

The lack of scientific expertise can become a problem when Parliament discusses some of the big issues like water, energy, greenhouse, genetic engineering, waste disposal, or the environment. All of these issues are strongly bound up in science. Solutions and the possibility of new industries or new jobs will have a basis in science and technology.

Parliaments all over the world have to deal with these issues whether the individual MPs have any understanding of the science, or the language science uses, or the scientific method. Their lack of expertise forces Parliaments to rely on the views of the bureaucracies advising them, or a few chosen outside experts. It makes Parliamentarians vulnerable to pressure

¹ Further details about CHASS are available at: www.chass.org.au

from interest groups, or to plausible ideas that may have little scientific validity.

This is one side of the problem. Just as Parliamentarians understand little about science, our scientists have little appreciation of the work of a Member of Parliament. They do not have a clear idea of the political processes. They do not appreciate the pressures on an MP, from many different sources. They do not appreciate the time scales, the need for information NOW, because new legislation is to be voted on today. This will happen whether the scientists have had time to do their experiments, accumulate their results, and test through publication in the international journals.

The gap between Parliamentarians and science applies to all areas of research. There is an uneasy relationship generally between the world of research, and the world of Parliament. Parliamentarians are often irritated by what they see as the protected and privileged world of the universities and other research organisations, and the inability of this sector to provide the advice they need when they need it.

Australia has tried to bridge this gap by opening up new channels of dialogue between Parliamentarians and researchers. Two of the processes described below are currently operating, and the third is an idea we hope to introduce. The three processes are:

“Science meets Parliament”
 Policy dinners for MPs
 Parliamentary Science Fellows

‘Science meets Parliament’

There have now been eight annual events which bring researchers into direct contact with Parliamentarians. Six of these events have been for scientists, and they are called ‘Science meets Parliament’ (SmP). The other two have been for people in research and education in the humanities, arts and social sciences; and called “Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences on the Hill”, or “HASS on the Hill”. (The Australian parliament is built on a prominent hill.)

These events bring researchers into our national capital Canberra for one-on-one meetings with federal politicians. These people may be nominated by their university or research organisation, or they may be self-nominated. We seek a combination of senior researchers and others in the early stages of their careers. All registrants pay a registration fee, and all are responsible for their own airfares and accommodation in Canberra.

SmP is organised by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS)². It runs over a day and a half, and about 200 scientists from across the nation will register for the event. The first day is a Briefing Day, devoted to strategy, tactics and issues. Briefing Day features a range of speakers, including senior Parliamentarians and bureaucrats, journalists and successful lobbyists from other groups. The purpose of this day is to discuss ideas and to advise participants on the best way to approach MPs. What are some of the mistakes people make in meeting MPs? How should you prepare for the meetings?

Included in the day will be a panel discussion. Three MPs are on the panel, one from each of the major parties. They are asked questions by a journalist about the different approaches of their party to science and technology issues, and the most prominent concerns of their colleagues.

Another panel will consist of people who work in the offices of MPs. These people normally take notes at any meetings their MP has. At our event, they advise registrants on how to prepare for their meetings with MPs. Should they bring anything? How long will the meeting last? What is the best way to start the conversation? What will the MP want to get from this meeting?

We also invite top level bureaucrats, to explain their role in advising the Government and then implementing the Government’s policy decisions. How can scientists contribute to this advisory process?

The Briefing Day may also hear advice on Parliamentary procedures, such as the committee system. It will cover practical issues: our registrants will have time between their appointments on the day and need to know the best place for coffee, or how to visit the Parliamentary Library or the Press Gallery.

It is also a chance for participants to practise a simple explanation of their work. We ask volunteers to come to the front and explain what their work is and why it is important, in 60 seconds flat. Then the expert panel – a staff member from a politician, a journalist and a professional lobbyist – will comment on the speaker and give general advice on how to approach the meetings with MPs.

The day culminates in a reception at Parliament House hosted by the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate, and the Cabinet Minister responsible for science. All 200 registrants will attend, as well as representatives of sponsoring groups. About 50 MPs will also attend, to meet the scientists in a social environment and to hear brief speeches from the hosts.

The second day is devoted to one-on-one meetings. We arrange individual meetings between a pair of scientists and individual MPs.

² Further details about FASTS are available at: www.fastso.org

Normally these meetings last about 30-40 minutes, although some have stretched out to 90 minutes. The meetings take place in the office of the MP. Normally there will be four people present: the MP, a member of their staff, and two scientists.

Meeting with scientists is an optional activity for MPs. We write to them 6 weeks before the event, inviting them to participate. Usually somewhere between one half and two-thirds (113 to 150) of all MPs agree to meetings, including some members of the Cabinet (all Cabinet members are also Parliamentarians in the Australian system). More MPs want to meet natural scientists than social scientists or humanities people – this is probably a reflection of their own background in with social sciences and humanities and their assumed familiarity with issues in these areas.

Gaining this wide access to Parliamentarians is unprecedented in Australia. This is not because researchers are so highly regarded, but probably because the idea of lobbying in this way does not seem to have occurred to other groups. This is in sharp contrast to the position in the US, where lobby groups come through Congress in regular waves. SmP was originally modelled on the American ‘Congressional Visits Day’; and in Washington the scientists have to contend and compete with all sorts of other lobby groups, such as 1000 teenagers wearing blue overalls emblazoned “Future Farmers of America”.

What sort of issues are discussed at our meetings? There are three broad areas the conversation can cover. The first is nominated by the MP. We provide a list of twelve possible topics – like a menu – and ask all Parliamentarians to nominate issues they would like to discuss. A typical list of natural science issues follows, with the number indicating how many MPs nominated this topic. (Note that MPs could choose more than one.):

- 37 Water quality and Salinity
- 26 Energy sources of the future
- 26 Education and training - school, university and industry
- 24 Commercialisation, innovation, industry research
- 23 Climate, climate change and greenhouse
- 19 Broadband, Telstra and the bush
- 19 Agriculture and agribusiness
- 18 Health and medical issues
- 18 Environment and biodiversity
- 17 Sustainability and the triple bottom line
- 16 Defence science and biosecurity
- 16 Science in the local electorate
- 15 Stem cells and tissue engineering
- 14 Emerging technologies: nanotechnology, photonics, bioinformatics

- 14 Medical and agricultural biotechnology: benefits and risks
- 10 Nuclear power, and the storage and disposal of radioactive waste
- 10 Mining and resource industries and exploration
- 10 Brain drain, recruiting
- 10 Oceans and the Great Barrier Reef
- 9 Feral animals, noxious weeds and quarantine

A second topic of conversation is the research interests of the scientists attending the meeting, and the third is an agenda prepared by the organising body. This will focus on a big issue, such as the level of the national investment in science and research.

The meetings between scientists and Parliamentarians are arranged and scheduled by the office of the organization running the event. The events I have run initially matched a scientist with an MP according to where they lived or worked, because we wanted to link them with a politician who had an interest in them as electors. In later versions of the event, we have tended more to match by area of interest, seeking to find experts on the issues nominated by MPs.

This whole event is normally run by three or four people. Two of them are casuals employed for one or two months specifically for this event, and the others are permanent staff. We also need a good web person to manage the registration system, and a bookkeeper to handle the financial side.

There are three sources of funding: from the participants, the sponsors and the Government. The participants pay a registration fee of about € 120, and this covers most of the direct costs: hiring venues, all refreshments, and printing. The second source of funding is from sponsors. These include the research councils, some universities, even industry. We generally raise about € 40 000 from sponsors.

The Government has also provided modest support, about € 12 000 per event. The Minister is a keen supporter of the event because he has 200 ambassadors meeting MPs, and telling them what a wonderful thing science and research is. It makes it easier for him to get his budget through Parliament! Normally the event will run at a slight profit.

It is a very challenging event to run. The small team of staff has to organise speakers and venues; schedule meetings; arrange transport and printing; and deal with sponsors. MPs are not always easy to deal with, and can be slow to respond to the invitation. The volatile nature of Parliament also presents a special challenge. It is not uncommon for our scheduled meetings to be disrupted by an emergency convening of a Parliamentary Committee or some other unexpected event, and then our meetings have to be re-scheduled. Registrants are warned in advance that Parliament is unpredictable, and they cannot expect everything to run smoothly.

The event brings together a wonderful slice of Australian science, from all institutions and regions, and the participants find the opportunity to meet colleagues very attractive.

Feedback from participants has always been positive. They regularly score the overall event at about 8.2 out of 10. We ask them to complete an evaluation form, and here is a sample of their comments:

- *Very well organised. The impact is becoming obvious.*
- *I have no doubt that past events have helped put science on the political agenda.*
- *A valuable experience as a young scientist.*

We asked for separate feedback on the meetings with politicians. There was a wider range of views on these, with many reporting interesting meetings with many opportunities for follow-up activities. Others had a less productive experience

- *An excellent introduction to the person and a good first meeting*
- *MP certainly tried to direct it - said we needed to be more aggressive with media, need a publicly recognised media advocate*
- *Very positive, interested in what we had to say. Interested in nanotechnology.*
- *My MP listened but expressed no great enthusiasm for science.*
- *Of little use to science. He kept on commandeering the conversation! Warm, pleasant meeting, but no use for us!*
- *Very supportive - very useful and pleasant.. Photos were taken by the adviser for the local newspaper.*

What have the events achieved?

First, they have opened a conduit for communication between the two worlds of research and politics. They remind MPs that researchers have ideas, they have solutions to problems, and they have lots of potentially-useful information. It has helped counter the sometimes negative view MPs have about people from the world of research.

The second benefit is that we are steadily building up a group of researchers who have been to Parliament and talked to politicians. This helps break down preconceived notions about politicians, and enables researchers to appreciate the pressures and constraints under which politicians operate. They have a better understanding of how they can contribute positively to the Parliamentary process.

Policy dinners for MPs

A second way we are working to influence MPs is by organising a series of dinners. 25 guests are invited, half of them MPs and the other half experts in a particular field. The MPs are chosen from all political parties. This is important – we have to behave as a non-partisan organisation.

Each dinner has two guest speakers who have a public conversation in between the courses of the dinner. It is an informal conversation rather than a formal lecture, and MPs are invited to join in, to ask questions and to express their own views.

The topics are carefully chosen. They cannot be part of the current political debate, where the parties have already made up their minds and are quite often in opposition to each other. So we choose “over the horizon” topics, topics of the future where MPs are still seeking information and ideas.

The first dinner was on the topic of “Ageing Well”. One speaker was an economist, the other from a medical background. They talked about what was going to happen to Australia over the next two generations, in a time when life expectancy is increasing and the birth rates are steady or declining.

The information provided was factual, and all guests were invited to follow up matters of detail with the speakers. We do not ask the MPs to do anything specific, but simply to explore an issue with a group of experts in the field. Dinners are held in Canberra during a sitting week for Parliament, when all MPs have gathered in the national capital. They are funded by the Vice-Chancellor of Australia’s leading university, whose campus is close to the offices of Parliament.

Parliamentary Science Fellows

This idea for this Programme is again borrowed from the Americans, and in the US it enables about 35 scientists to work for a year in Congress as Congressional Fellows. They either work in committee system, providing expertise and advice on a non-partisan basis to committee inquiries; or they may be attached to individual members of Congress, working on a variety of tasks from handling correspondence to providing expert advice.

The programme is funded by the professional or learned societies in the US, such as the American Chemical Society. These organisations choose the scientists and pay their salaries and expenses during the year or so they spend in Washington, and cost about € 70 000 per scientist per year.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) administers the programme. It trains the scientists before they begin their term, and organise monthly meetings for them to share experiences and discuss issues. Many of the US Fellows are younger post-docs, while others

combine it with a sabbatical year or a final contribution to their discipline before retirement. Selection is highly competitive - the AAAS has 100 applicants for the two Fellowship places it funds.

Fellows then have to choose an office or Congressman where they can work. The choice lies between a Representative or a Senator; or a Committee attached to either House. This process may take 2 or 3 weeks, with Fellows interviewing (and being interviewed by) up to a dozen offices.

Fellows need to be highly flexible to adapt to life on the Hill. They may be asked to handle incoming correspondence, or brief Congressmen in three minutes while walking from the office to the House. They need to be able to synthesise a position in simple terms, a few words, and at short notice. Issues may range far outside their field of expertise. Positions with Congressmen can involve politically partisan activities.

Participants report that this experience can change their life forever. Many former Fellows remain in Washington at the end of their term, appointed permanently to staff of Congressmen or Committees, or finding other policy positions. About one third return to their research organisations at the end of their term. Whether they stay in Washington or return, their experiences filter through the science and technology community. That community is much more aware in its dealings with government, and the way it goes about inserting science into policy-making.

Australia has not yet adopted this programme (although Switzerland did so three years ago, where it operates under Dr Margrit Leuthold as coordinator of the Swiss Parliamentary Science Fellows Programme. She is also Secretary-General of the Swiss Academy of Medical Science.)

All three approaches detailed above deal with a crucial issue, of introducing the expertise and knowledge of the research community into the national deliberations of our respective Parliaments. This audience is too important to ignore. It is not an easy group to reach, but the approaches outlined above can be adapted to local circumstances in Europe.

These are vital issues and although they may be difficult to contemplate, we have found our efforts have been richly rewarded.