

“Science meets Parliament” Day Australia

Australia has just experienced its third “Science meets Parliament” Day (SmP). This event brings scientists and technologists into our national capital Canberra for one-on-one meetings with federal politicians.

The event is shamelessly modelled on the American “Congressional Visits Day” (CVD), and we gratefully acknowledge the inspiration of our American colleagues. But when I was in Washington earlier this year and met some of these people, some key differences emerged.

SmP is organised by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS). It runs over a day and a half. The first part 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 day culminates in a reception at Parliament House hosted by the Speaker of the House, the President of our Senate, and the member of cabinet responsible for science.

The second day is devoted to one-on-one meetings. We arrange individual meetings between a pair of scientists and individual members of Parliament. Normally these meetings last about 40 minutes, although some stretched out to 90 minutes (and others were shortened by pressing Parliamentary business).

Australia has 226 Parliamentarians, divided between the House of Representatives and the Senate. One hundred and forty two, or nearly two-thirds, of those politicians agreed to meetings. These included some members of cabinet (all cabinet members are also Parliamentarians in the Australian system).

This sort of access to Parliamentarians is unprecedented in Australia. This is not because science and technology are so highly regarded (they’re not!), but because the idea of lobbying in this way does not seem to have occurred to other groups in Australia. This revelation caused the Americans I met in Washington to draw their breath in sharply. THEY have to contend and compete with all sorts of other lobby groups, such as 1000 teenagers wearing blue overalls emblazoned “Future Farmers of America”. We have no competition like this, and I am happy to keep it that way.

What sort of issues were discussed in the meetings? It varied. We asked all Parliamentarians to nominate issues they would like to discuss. At the top of their list was water and salinity, and second was education and training at school, university and in industry. Third was science as it affected the local electorate.

Last of all was funding of science and technology by government and industry, which seemed to indicate a certain fatigue with an issue that is rising in prominence in an election year (Australia will go to the polls in November or December).

The scientists also took into the meetings an agenda prepared by FASTS that focussed on the level of the national investment in science and research.

The FASTS’ office arranged the meetings between scientists and Parliamentarians. First we matched them by area of residence, or by an historical or family connection to an electorate. We wanted politicians to meet scientists who lived or worked in their area. Next we matched by area of interest, seeking to find experts on the issues nominated by Parliamentarians.

This process is normally staffed by one full-time officer (me) and a part-time office manager. For this event we brought in three postgrad students for the last month. Each year it's a challenging operation which threatens to tip over into chaos in the last few days, and does so on the final morning when Parliamentarians ring to re-schedule appointments.

The event brings together a wonderful slice of Australian science, from all institutions and regions. Organisations and groups are seeing the value of arranging other meetings to coincide with SmP. This is useful because all participants have to find funding for travel and accommodation to Canberra, as well as paying a registration fee of about \$US100.

Feedback from the scientists was positive. They scored the overall event rating a score of 8.2 out of 10. A sampling of comments from their evaluation forms follows:

- *Very well organised. The impact is becoming obvious.*
- *The pollies are taking this seriously. I have no doubt that past SmPs have helped put science on the political agenda.*
- *Must do it now at the State level.*
- *A valuable experience as a young scientist.*
- *Logistical nightmare which was handled extremely well by FASTS. Well done!*

We asked for separate feedback on the meetings with politicians. There was a wider range of views on these, with most people reporting interesting and productive meetings with lots of 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.*
- *Listened but no great enthusiasm expressed.*
- *The Senator appears to have little serious interest in science. Only introductory pleasantries before Senator called to speak in Senate.*
- *The discussion was very positive and went for 90 minutes. We established a good rapport*
- *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 do we think we have achieved with SmP?

First, we have opened a conduit for communication between the two worlds of science and politics. Few Australian politicians have formal qualifications in science, and they are not completely comfortable in dealing with scientists, seeing the area as difficult and not part of "the real world". What they find in the meetings is that scientists have ideas, they have possible solutions, and they have lots of potentially-useful information.

The second is that we are steadily creating a group of scientists who have been to Parliament and talked to politicians. This helps break down preconceived notions about politicians, and enables them appreciate the pressures and constraints under which politicians operate.

Thanks, America, for the idea. Australian circumstances have enabled us to build and shape it into something quite influential. It's been really useful to us and to science generally.

Toss Gascoigne
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Toss Gascoigne is Executive Director of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS). This is a peak council for 60,000 working scientists and technologists in Australia, and the office is based in Canberra. Further details about FASTS and "Science meets Parliament" Day are available on the FASTS' website: www.fast.org