

Science meets the Parliament Australian case study

Toss Gascoigne

Conferência "Ciência e Decisão Política" - 22-11-2005
Associação Viver a Ciência e Instituto de Medicina Molecular

First, I want to thank the Associação Viver a Ciência for their invitation to speak at this meeting.

Lisbon is one of my favourite cities in Europe. I had some wonderful experiences when I was first here four years ago, and I love the wonderful unique qualities of the city. And the trams.

But today I am speaking about a problem we have in Australia, and the solutions we are working on. Our problem is the lack of a dialogue or relationship between scientists and Parliamentarians, or perhaps I should say more generally, between researchers and Parliamentarians.

Australia is a country of 20 million people and 226 members of Parliament; and the problem lies in the fact that very few of our Parliamentarians have any formal training in science.

They do not understand the possibilities of science. They do not understand the limitations of science. They do not appreciate the long time scales of science, the years that may lie between the first clever idea and a proven theory that can be applied in the national interest.

They are annoyed when scientists cannot give precise answers to questions on issues like greenhouse, because politicians have to make laws even though the facts may not yet be clear.

Out of Australia's 226 MPs, about 10 have formal qualifications in science, technology or engineering.

This is part of the problem, but not the only part. There is an uneasy relationship generally between the world of university research, and the world of Parliament. Many Parliamentarians, I think, still see researchers living in a protected and privileged world, the world of the universities.

Like most problems, there are two sides. And on the other side, many scientists have little appreciation of the work of Parliamentarians.

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 of politics, the need for information NOW, because new legislation is to be voted on today. The legislation is going to happen whether the scientists are ready or not, whether they have had time to do their experiments, accumulate their results, and test them through publication in the international journals.

Both sides, the scientists and the MPs, recognise the importance of each other. But there is no natural dialogue between the two sides, because they come from different worlds, worlds which do not often intersect.

We have tried to bridge this gap, to open up a new dialogue between scientists and MPs in Australia; and today I want to talk about three ideas. The first two are operating in Australia today, and the third is one that we hope to introduce.

The three ideas are:
"Science meets Parliament"
Policy dinners for MPs
Parliamentary Science Fellows

First, "Science meets Parliament"

This event happens once every year, and Australia has now run eight of them. Six of these events have been for scientists, and they are called "Science meets Parliament". Two have been for people working in research and education in the humanities, arts and social sciences; and this event is called "Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences 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.

"Science meets Parliament" is organised by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS). The event runs over a day and a half. The first part is a Briefing Day, where the participants discuss strategy, tactics and issues. Briefing Day features a range of speakers including senior Parliamentarians and bureaucrats, journalists and successful lobbyists from other groups.

We use this day to discuss ideas, and also to advise participants on the best way to approach MPs. What are some of the mistakes people make in meeting MPs? How should people prepare for the meetings? We ask staff members from the offices of politicians to attend so they can answer questions from participants.

It is also a chance for participants to practice a simple explanation of their work. We ask volunteers to stand up, and explain what their work is and why it is important, in 60 seconds. At this time a bell rings and they must sit down. 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.

For the scientists, that 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. It is a big cocktail party, and a chance for people to mix informally.

The second day is devoted to individual meetings between a pair of scientists and a member of Parliament. Normally these meetings last about 40 minutes, although some can be as long as 90 minutes.

How did we invite MPs to meet with scientists? It was by a simple letter. Australia has 226 Parliamentarians, divided between the House of Representatives and the Senate. When we first ran the event, one hundred and forty two, or nearly two-thirds, of those politicians agreed to meetings. These included some members of Cabinet.

How did we recruit scientists? Again, we wrote to all our members and invited them to participate. They had to register at our web site, and this included paying a registration fee (about Euros120).

So now we had a list of MPs who wanted to participate, and a list of scientists who had registered for the event. How did we match them up?

Initially we matched them by any connection the scientists had to a particular electorate. They may have lived or worked there, or had a family connection. We wanted politicians to meet scientists who lived or worked in their area.

But later we changed this system, and matched scientists to Parliamentarians primarily on the basis of the issues they nominated. If MPs wanted to discuss issues relating to water conservation and the quality of water, we found an expert in water to meet with them.

What sort of issues were discussed in the meetings? It varied. At first we asked all Parliamentarians to nominate issues they would like to discuss, and they had nothing

much to suggest. The next year we got smarter, and offered them a list of 15 issues, and asked them to choose by ticking items, like a menu. The most popular item, the issue they really wanted to discuss, was water and salinity, and second was education and training.

As well as these topics, the scientists talked about their own research. They also had information on the low level of the national investment in science and research. This information was prepared by FASTS.

How is the event funded? There are three sources of funding: from the participants, the sponsors and the Government. The participants pay a registration fee of about E120, and this covers most of the direct costs: hiring venues, all refreshments, printing etc.

Participants are also responsible for paying their own transport and accommodation costs.

The second source of funding is from sponsors. These include the research councils, some universities, even industry. We generally raise about E40,000 from sponsors.

The Government has also provided modest support, about E12,000 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!

We run the event with two permanent staff, and two part-time people we hire specially for this event.

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 the scientists 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 SmPs 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 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.*
- *My Mp listened but expressed no great enthusiasm for science.*

What do we think we have achieved with these events?

First, we have opened a conduit for communication between the two worlds of research 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 and they have possible solutions.

The second is that we are steadily creating a group of researchers 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.

The second matter I want to discuss is a series of dinners we have organised for MPs.

25 guests are invited, half of them MPs and half are experts in a particular field or members of my organisation.. The MPs are chosen from all political parties.

We have two guest speakers who have a conversation during 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 "Aging 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.

We are still refining the best way to present these issues, but they have been a good way of opening a dialogue between MPs and experts.

The dinners have been funded by the Vice-Chancellor of one of Australia's leading universities. They are not expensive – about £50 per guest, or £1200 per dinner. The dinners are held in Canberra during a sitting week for Parliament

The third way of establishing a dialogue between researchers and MPs is an American idea. In the US it is called the Congressional Fellows Program.

This Program enables about 30 scientists to work for a year in Congress. They either work in committee system of Congress, 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 program is funded by the professional or learned societies in the US, such as the American Chemical Society or associations for Physics or Geoscience. These organisations choose the scientists and pay their salaries and expenses during the year or so they spend in Washington.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) administers the scheme. They train 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 Congressman on how to speak and vote on a technical issue 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.

Dr Danny Wedding is one of the former Fellows. He says the two years he worked in Congress changed his life forever. He confesses to Potomac fever, the disease which

affects all people who come close to the centre of power. Perhaps in Lisbon it would be called "Rio Tejo fever".

It's because of Potomac fever that many 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. Wedding went on to head the Missouri Institute of Mental Health.

No one is unchanged by their year in Washington, and their experiences have filtered 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.

Fellows are very enthusiastic about the Program. They see a role for scientists to "poke holes in existing thinking", and considered a penetration by science of existing processes as essential.

Australia has not yet adopted this program, but Switzerland did so three years ago. Dr Margrit Leuthold is coordinator of the Swiss Parliamentary Science Fellows Program, and Secretary-General of the Swiss Academy of Medical Science

So. These are three ideas that Australia has considered. Two we have adopted, the third we are still contemplating. They all deal with that crucial question, of introducing the expertise and knowledge of the research community into the national deliberations of our respective Parliaments.

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

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