

Science Meets Parliament 2025



Praveena
Thirunavukkarasu
at Parliament House,
Canberra.

Science Meets Parliament (SMP) is the flagship event hosted each year by Science & Technology Australia (STA), bringing together professionals from the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors with the nation's policy-makers. This year marked a remarkable milestone for SMP, as it celebrated its 25th anniversary, reinforcing its role in fostering meaningful connections between researchers and policy-makers. SMP has provided scientists with invaluable opportunities to engage with parliamentarians, enhancing their ability to communicate research effectively and contribute to science-informed policy-making.

A week prior to the SMP event, we received instructional videos on *Practice Your Pitch* by Dr Lila Landowski (Vice President, STA, and Lecturer, University of Tasmania) and Tanya Ha (Director of Engagement, Science in Public). They highlighted the importance of delivering a compelling pitch, incorporating an analogy to effectively engage parliamentarians and communicate our science. Additionally, we had a video on *Preparing to Meet a Parliamentarian*, led by ATSE CEO Kylie Walker and Associate Professor Jeremy Brownlie. This session provided insights into what to expect during the meetings, strategies for a successful interaction and best practices for follow-up.

I had the privilege of attending the two-day event in Canberra on 12–13 February. It was an eye-opening experience. The program provided deep insights into how the government and policy-makers work towards the advancement of science in Australia. Through keynote sessions, panel discussions and interactive workshops, I gained a better understanding of the policy-making process, the role of advocacy in science and how researchers can effectively contribute to national decision-making.

Day 1 kicked off with a welcome to the country from Ngunnawal Traditional Custodian and Elder, Aunty Serena Williams, followed by an opening address from STA President Professor Sharath Sriram and STA CEO

Ryan Winn, marking the opening of SMP2025. The first session, *Navigating Democracy: A Beginner's Guide to Civics*, featured a conversation with Anna-Maria Arabia (Chief Executive of the Australian Academy of Science) and the Hon Bill Shorten (Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra). They discussed how to effectively communicate research while aligning with policy-makers' interests. They encouraged us to be ambitious in what we ask for and to articulate our claims with clarity.

The second session on *Leading with Science: Elevating STEM for Economic Growth* encompassed a panel discussion with Professor Sriram, Jas Chambers (President-Elect, STA), Dr Raj Aseervatham (National President and Chair, Engineers Australia) and Professor Reuben Bolt (Deputy Vice-Chancellor First Nations Leadership, Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory). The discussion highlighted the lack of awareness and education about STEM careers, and how discovery science requires decades to yield results.

This was followed by a session where current and former policy advisors shared their insights into their roles in supporting Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators in the policy-making process. The sessions, titled *From Research to Reality: The Role of Policy Advisors in Decision-Making* and *Turning Passion into Action*, explored how advisors help translate research into practical policies and guide evidence-based decision making. Afterward, we watched a National Press Club Address by the Hon Ed Husic MP, Minister for Industry and Science, who underscored the significance of quantum computing, its potential for early bushfire detection to the next generation of robotics.

Pitch Perfect: How to Talk About Your Science to the Media featured distinguished speakers including Dr Lila Landowski, Tanya Ha, Dr Nicholas Coatsworth (former Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Australian Government) and Dr Vanessa Pirotta (Chief Scientist, Wild Sydney



From left: Dr Praveena Thirunavukkarasu, Dr Simone Li and Dr Claudia Del Campo (all Monash University).

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Harbour). Two key messages were that “science is not finished until it is communicated” and “be yourself – because everyone else is already taken.” The session reinforced the need to make an impact, capture people’s attention and tailor communication to the audience while speaking clearly, confidently and passionately.

We concluded the day with a Welcome Reception and Gala Dinner, with the theme *A Night at the Museum*, a spectacular black-tie event with a record 500 attendees. We enjoyed a vibrant dance performance by Aunty Serena and her children, and had the chance to network with scientists from various backgrounds. A highlight of the evening was the presence of Her Excellency, the Hon Sam Mostyn AC, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, who delivered a speech reflecting on the significant achievements of SMP over the past 25 years. She left us with two key thoughts: the critical role of collaboration and trust in science, as well as their broader impact on civic life. She emphasised that these principles are essential to the nation’s progress and success.

The Day 2 sessions highlighted the parliamentarians’ perspectives on policy development and the research that happens behind the curtain to support policy-making. I was intrigued to learn that hundreds of dedicated researchers work at the Parliamentary Library, providing confidential insights to parliamentarians and supporting the policy-making process. A key session focused on *Using STEM for the greater good*, where Professor Brett Sutton (Director of Health and Biosecurity, CSIRO) and Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi (Deputy Leader, Australian Greens) shared their experiences of transitioning from the lab into the realms of politics and industry to drive national progress. They discussed the importance of perseverance, encouraging us to embrace challenges and leverage our expertise to influence policy-making and create a meaningful impact on the nation’s future.

I had the opportunity to meet the ALP Member for Adelaide, Steve Georganas MP, in his office, alongside two fellow scientists. We began by introducing ourselves and presented our research, with each of us delivering a brief pitch. I spoke about my T cell research, explaining their critical role in combating infections and their significance in the immune system. I also discussed how we use the Australian Synchrotron to study the molecular structure of various protein–protein complexes. I was pleasantly surprised by Mr Georganas’ genuine curiosity and engagement with our work. He asked thoughtful questions, demonstrating a keen interest in understanding the details of our research. This meeting was a unique and valuable experience, allowing me to communicate complex scientific concepts to a policy-maker. Additionally, I took the opportunity to advocate for increased and recurring funding for early-career researchers, and the importance of sustained investment

in scientific research to drive innovation and progress.

Since it was a Parliament sitting week, I was fortunate to attend a one-hour tour of Senate Question Time. It was fascinating to observe how Members of Parliament debated pressing national issues. The discussions covered topics such as tax changes affecting Medicare and bulk billing, as well as the approval of certain medications for various diseases.

SMP2025 was an inspiring and transformative experience that allowed me to see science beyond the laboratory and understand its crucial role in shaping policy decisions. The event highlighted how scientific expertise is valued in policy-making and reinforced the importance of effective science communication in influencing national strategies. I highly recommend that scientists participate in SMP in the future, as it provides a unique opportunity to see science through the lens of politicians, engage in meaningful discussions with policy-makers, and advocate for evidence-based decision-making. The experience not only broadened my perspective, but also strengthened my ability to communicate the impact of my research in a way that resonates with stakeholders beyond the scientific community.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the ASBMB for supporting my participation in this event. SMP was an unparalleled opportunity to appreciate the significance of my research and explore ways to contribute more effectively to Australia’s scientific and policy landscape. This experience has further motivated me to actively engage in science advocacy and work towards the betterment of Australian science and innovation.

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From left: Dr Kristina Konstas (CSIRO), Dr Amy Wilson (Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation), Steve Georganas MP and Dr Praveena Thirunavukkarasu.