

Science meets Parliament is an annual event organised by Science & Technology Australia (STA) that was created to connect those working in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector with our country's decision makers. For two days each year, the hallways of Parliament House are abuzz with enthusiastic discussions between scientists and parliamentarians. On 21–22 March 2017, Associate Professor Marc Kvensakul (La Trobe University) and Dr Erinna Lee (La Trobe University/Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute) attended SmP 2017 on behalf of the ASBMB.



*Marc Kvensakul
and Erinna Lee
at Science meets
Parliament 2017.*

Day 1

It is not often that one gets to attend a professional development workshop in beautiful historical surrounds. The first day of SmP 2017 was held in the Members' Dining Room of Old Parliament House with a sweeping view across to Parliament House. The day started with a Welcome Address from Professor Jim Piper AM (President, STA) and Kylie Walker (CEO, STA). This was followed by the inspiring Opening Address by Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel, who emphasised the importance of science engagement and for us to recognise that scientists and parliamentarians do in fact share a common goal of wanting to make a difference.

Following the official opening proceedings, the day comprised a series of panel discussions covering subject areas such as 'Meet the media - turning science into news', 'Getting into policy: how science is used to shape public policy', and 'How to convince parliamentarians: hear from the experts'. Much discussion was had on the

importance of scientists communicating with the public at a time when 'fake news' and suspicion of experts abound, and the importance of discussing our science in a non-partisan way. The final session of the day conducted by Dr Merryn McKinnon and Dr Will Grant, from the Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at ANU, required us to get into groups and undertake communication exercises which included sharing our science stories, under a series of challenging and fun constraints (including a fire alarm!). This served the purpose of preparing us for the next day to come and for improving our communication skills in general.

The day concluded with a formal dinner at Parliament House. Each table was a mix of scientists and politicians, enabling more personal conversations to occur over dinner. To emphasise the genuine opportunities for influencing our politicians available at this event, at one of our dinner tables, an exchange between a mathematician and a Member of Parliament led to an immediate text sent from the MP's phone to a Minister requesting a meeting to discuss what had just been exchanged and the possibilities of making it happen. The MC for the dinner was Bernie Hobbs (ABC science broadcaster) who provided much laughter and entertainment throughout the night. She chaired the enthralling debate between the Hon Arthur Sinodinos (Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science) and the Hon Bill Shorten (MP, Leader of the Opposition) about their vision for STEM.



*Australia's Chief Scientist Dr Alan Finkel and Leader of the
Opposition Hon Bill Shorten MP share a moment at the gala
dinner. Photo credit: Science meets Parliament, Mark Graham.*

Day 2

Whilst Day 1 was all about professional development classes, Day 2 was the 'make it happen' day. Each delegate was assigned into groups to meet with parliamentarians at scheduled times. Here, we got to put into practice

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what we had learnt the previous day. When our meeting times came around, we were escorted past the security doors through the inner corridors of either the Senate or the House of Representatives chambers to meet with our assigned politician. Any fly on the wall on this day would likely have witnessed enthusiastic and fervent exchanges between both parties. Whilst these meetings were ongoing, those waiting for their meeting times were able to listen to the current Australian of the Year Professor Alan Mackay-Sim and the Shadow Minister Senator the Hon Kim Carr share their vision for Australian science. At midday, those not in meetings had the opportunity to attend the National Press Club address presented by the Hon Arthur Sinodinos, who discussed why Australians should care about science and innovation, discussed our economic challenges and presented the National Science Statement. We got to witness the grilling from journalists that ensues after the address that makes an NHMRC interview look like a walk in the park.

Towards the end of the day, all delegates were able to witness Question Time. To put it diplomatically, the lively proceedings were a real eye-opener, and allowed us to experience first-hand what partisan politics looks like in real life. The penultimate session was a panel discussion on how science and politics mix. The meeting concluded with a relaxing cocktail finale.

Politics may not always be at the forefront of one's mind as we sit at the laboratory bench or in front of our computers looking for the next cure for cancer or heart disease. However, the professional development opportunities offered over the two days opened our eyes to the importance of effective communication of our science in exerting a positive influence on the legislative and policy-making process – which in turn can have a

significant impact on our funding climate, on investment in the STEM sector and on the future of Australian science and technology. The parliamentarians displayed a genuine interest in learning about our work and what was needed. Whilst 'funding' was a taboo word, the main purpose was to excite our country's leaders with our science, demonstrate how what we do in our laboratories every day is relevant, and in so doing spark their enthusiasm to make the changes we need.

If you ever have the opportunity to attend Science meets Parliament – put your hand up. It really was a fantastic learning experience and we would like to thank the ASBMB for this brilliant opportunity that made us realise that politics should indeed be for all scientists.



*Day 2 presented us the opportunities to discuss our science and excite our country's decision makers to help make a difference to the future of science in Australia.
Photo credit: Science meets Parliament, Mark Graham.*