

Science meets Parliament 2019

Matthew Johnson and Vanessa Vongsouthi report on Smp2019

'You could be the best violinist in the world, but if you're in a soundproof room, it is a waste.' Winthrop Professor Fiona Wood's opening address resonated with a room full of STEM experts from across the nation, kicking off Science meets Parliament 2019. The annual Science and Technology event celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, gathering STEM professionals for a two-day event with the Australian Parliament. The event is designed to educate STEM researchers about policy and governance, and connect researchers with parliamentarians to talk about science and its role in Australia's health, environment, wealth and wellbeing. The ASBMB, an affiliate of Science Technology Australia, sponsored us (Vanessa Vongsouthi, ANU PhD candidate and ASBMB member, and Dr Matthew Johnson, ASBMB's ACT State Representative) to attend the event and communicate our experience.



From left: Trent Zimmerman MP, Alexandra Thomson, Kristine McGrath and Matthew Johnson.

As per previous Science meets Parliament events, day one was aimed to educate attendees about the inner workings of Parliament, and prepare everyone for their meetings with parliamentarians using a range of eminent speakers and workshops. Science meets Parliament is all about communicating and networking and while sitting at round tables with delegates from across STEM, we had to concisely introduce ourselves and say what we do, all within one minute. The diversity of attendees was immediately apparent – museum curators, representatives from public policy think tanks, science commentators and biotech researchers, to name a few. For many researchers, who are accustomed to networking at subject specific conferences, this environment was already a welcome step outside our comfort zones. In her opening address, Professor

Wood gave an inspirational speech of her experience of translational research and how it can be used to improve the treatment of burns victims. Professor Wood's story exemplified how basic research can be translated into real health outcomes with determination and perseverance. Australia's Chief Scientist, Professor Alan Finkel, and New Zealand's former Chief Science Advisor, Professor Gary Evans, spoke about their experience advocating for science and technology in Parliament. Professor Finkel talked specifically about the role that Australia might play in the production of clean hydrogen fuel for industry both in Australia and abroad, as opposed to the fossil fuel exports that the Australian government currently supports. Discussion was centred on the role of science in advising public policy, in the face of a growing presence of an anti-science culture in Australian politics.

Science meets Parliament offers two tracks, one geared for first time attendees, another for returning veterans. As this was our first time, we attended track one, which started with the 'New to Canberra' panel discussion featuring Paul Osborne (Bureau Chief and Journalist), Dr Sarah Pearson (Chief Scientist for Department of Foreign Affairs) and Sarah Cullens (Principle Consultant for Nexus Public Affairs). The session detailed how the media, lobby groups, public service, and advocacy groups influence government. Each panellist gave a detailed account of how their profession impacts government policy, and advice on how representatives from STEM can do the same. How a message is portrayed is as important as the message itself; scientists are often guilty of communicating with too much jargon, for too long and being too abstract. For members of Parliament, who primarily deal in votes, making your ideas real and relevant to them and their electorate is important to getting your message across. Fortunately, we had ample help and time to prepare our pitches. In the session 'Practicing your Pitch', Dr Will Grant and Dr Rod Lamberts gave us the tools to ditch the jargon and simplify our science. In one exercise, we iteratively distilled our pitch down from several minutes to as little as ten seconds. It was amazing to see how creative people in STEM can be with their pitches when time was restricted. The session was a fantastic experience for communication that geared us up for the networking events that followed.

Our first chance to meet Senators and Parliamentarians was at the ANSTO sponsored Gala Dinner held in the Great Hall. Our evening, hosted by SCOPE TV presenter, Lee Constable, provided a great opportunity to practice our networking skills. Unfortunately, the parliamentarians expected to sit at our particular tables were unable to attend. However, it was fascinating to meet people who work in different STEM-related jobs, many of which we

Science meets Parliament 2019

didn't realise existed. During dinner, we heard from The Hon Karen Andrews MP (Minister for Industry, Science and Technology) and The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP (Shadow Minister for Employment and Industry, Science, Small and Family Business) about their visions for STEM in Australia.

Day two of Science meets Parliament was largely about the personal meetings with an assigned parliamentarian. We were assigned to meet Trent Zimmerman MP and Graham Perrett MP (Shadow Assistant Minister for Education and Training). Mr Zimmerman is a Liberal MP



From left: Tim Rawling, Vanessa Vongsouthi, Erika Duan, Leanne Cameron, Timothy van der Laan and Graham Perrett MP.

for North Sydney who supports same-sex marriage and recently the full legalisation of e-cigarettes. Despite a busy schedule, Mr Zimmerman met with myself and two other STEM representatives. Mr Zimmerman was very engaging and interested in our various areas of research, and we had a short discussion regarding my research on resistance to antibiotics and the development of novel treatments. Unfortunately, the bells rang and parliamentary business cut our meeting short. Mr Perrett is a Labor MP for Moreton, teacher, lawyer and author. He met with Vanessa and four other delegates, taking the time out of his day to have an exciting discussion about STEM teaching in Australia, graphene water-filtering technology, and Vanessa's research on plastic-degrading enzymes. Science meets Parliament concluded with a panel discussion with Ministers from both sides of politics answering questions from the STEM community. The lack of science in policy making was a prominent topic. The blame was placed on the STEM community for not communicating to politicians and the wider community clearly enough. On the topic of climate change, we were reassured that climate change denial is not prevalent in Australian politics and that the discussion has moved on to what we need to do about it. However, considering this panel discussion and the recent push by parliamentarians for a science watchdog, it seems that communication between STEM, the public and Parliament is more important than ever.

**matthew.johnson@anu.edu.au
vanessa.vongsouthi@anu.edu.au**