CHAPTER 8

“SCIENCE MEETS PARLIAMENT”

Australian researchers visit Parliament

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Abstract: Australia has a problem when it comes to the relationship between science and members of Parliament. Few Parliamentarians understand the possibilities of science. They do not understand the limitations of science, or the long time scales it can take to develop an idea into something that will benefit the community. Nor do our scientists understand the work of members of Parliament. They do not have a clear idea of the political processes. They do not appreciate the pressures or the time scales Parliamentarians work to. Both sides, the scientists and the Parliamentarians recognise the importance of each other. But there is no natural dialogue between the two sides, because they come from different worlds. This paper describes three ways to build a new dialogue between scientists and MPs.

Keywords: Parliament, political, Researchers, Policy, Meeting

Australia is a country of 20 million people and 226 members of Parliament; and the problem lies in the fact that only 10 MPs have formal qualifications in science.

The lack of scientific expertise can become a problem when Parliament discusses some of the big issues like water, energy, greenhouse, genetic engineering, waste disposal, or the environment. All of these issues are strongly bound up in science. Solutions and the possibility of new industries or new jobs will have a basis in science and technology.

Parliaments all over the world have to deal with these issues whether the individual MPs have any understanding of the science, or the language science uses, or the scientific method. Their lack of expertise forces Parliaments to rely on the views

1 Further details about CHASS are available at: www.chass.org.au

of the bureaucracies advising them, or a few chosen outside experts. It makes
Parliamentarians vulnerable to pressure from interest groups, or to plausible
ideas that may have little scientific validity.

This is one side of the problem. Just as Parliamentarians understand little about
science, our scientists have little appreciation of the work of a Member of
Parliament. 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, the need for information NOW, because new legisla-
tion is to be voted on today. This will happen whether the scientists have had time
to do their experiments, accumulate their results, and test through publication in
the international journals.

The gap between Parliamentarians and science applies to all areas of research.
There is an uneasy relationship generally between the world of research, and
the world of Parliament. Parliamentarians are often irritated by what they see as the
protected and privileged world of the universities and other research organisations,
and the inability of this sector to provide the advice they need when they need it.

Australia has tried to bridge this gap by opening up new channels of dialogue
between Parliamentarians and researchers. Two of the processes described below
are currently operating, and the third is an idea we hope to introduce. The three
processes are:

“Science meets Parliament”
Policy dinners for MPs
Parliamentary Science Fellows

1. ‘SCIENCE MEETS PARLIAMENT’

There have now been eight annual events which bring researchers into direct contact
with Parliamentarians. Six of these events have been for scientists, and they are
called ‘Science meets Parliament’ (SmP). The other two have been for people in
research and education in the humanities, arts and social sciences; and called
“Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences on the Hill”, or “HASS 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. These people may be nominated by their university or
research organisation, or they may be self-nominated. We seek a combination of senior
researchers and others in the early stages of their careers. All registrants pay a registra-
tion fee, and all are responsible for their own airfares and accommodation in Canberra.

SmP is organised by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological
Societies (FASTS).² It runs over a day and a half, and about 200 scientists from
across the nation will register for the event. The first day is a Briefing Day, devoted

² Further details about FASTS are available at: www.fasts.org