

Science Meets Parliament Summary – Britta Denise Hardesty, CES Atherton

The 2011 Science Meets Parliament (SmP) started on Monday morning with an overview by Cathy Foley (FASTS president) and Anna-Maria Arabia (FASTS CEO). After introductions, groups identified who they think the players are in the way decisions are made in government and how they interact (ranging from members of parliament and the PM to volunteer, special interest groups, people of Australia and the media). It was an interesting exercise to identify various viewpoints on directionality of influence in Australian society. This is helpful for us to help identify where science (and scientists) fit in. Day 1 was mainly about understanding how to communicate effectively. Topics focused on included how to deliver your message, how to engage with the media and how to convey your message to politicians (DO NOT ASK FOR MONEY). Day 1 wrapped up with a cocktail reception and dinner at the Great Hall with John Brumby, the former Premier of Victoria as our speaker, and Annabel Crabb as a very lively MC. Unfortunately, no MP made it to our dinner table, which may not be surprising given there were call-outs throughout the evening. One other bit of information that came out of the evening is that FASTS has renamed itself to STA – Science and Technology Australia and is embarking on a cool campaign called ‘respect the science’ to promote respecting the scientific knowledge (including the rigorous testing and peer review process).

Tuesday started bright and early with a breakfast briefing presentation from Margaret Sheil, the CEO of the Australian Research Council. It was informative to learn more about the process that has gone into making decisions and ratings for Universities within the country, as well as some of the challenges therein. I met with Labour MP Graham Perrett, who is switched on and interested in science topics across the country as a whole, as well as interested in those areas that may be particularly relevant to his constituent. The topic of climate change came up – as it did throughout the two days – since it is such a ‘hot topic’ in the media and elsewhere, particularly in light of recent discussions around the proposed carbon tax. Minister Kim Carr gave an address to the SmP delegates, and we also heard from Professor Ian Chubb the new Chief Scientist over lunch at the National Press Club. Those interested (and with schedules allowing) also had the opportunity to sit in the Public gallery to listen to and watch the child-like antics of parliament. The display was interesting (and a tad embarrassing) – as many would have seen on the Tuesday evening news.

Key Learnings:

- Effective science communication approaches
- Ins and outs of Australian government
- Science interest at federal level
- Perceptions of science and role of scientists