

SCIENCE MEETS PARLIAMENT

October 14-15, 2003

Marion Burgess and Joe Wolfe

1.0 INTRODUCTION

'Science Meets Parliament' is an annual event organized by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS). For the first time, the Australian Acoustical Society (AAS) considered it was in a position where it had a number of clearly defined issues which related to government policy and therefore should participate in this event. Expressions of interest were sought from the AAS membership and Marion Burgess and Joe Wolfe were selected to represent the Society.

2.0 BRIEFING DAY

The first day, Oct 14, was described as a briefing day at the National Press Club. This is Australia's largest lobbying exercise for scientists and technologists with over 250 participants. FASTS policy material was presented and we were advised how to engage politicians successfully by experienced scientists, lobbyists, parliamentary staffers and politicians themselves. Even though we were first time participants we felt that this day provided little information beyond the distributed notes: be prepared, find out about the politician you were to meet, be yourself, be enthusiastic about science and remember that this may be the first time the politician has spoken with a real working scientist. We were advised to sell the main global message rather than special pleading. It was suggested too that we invite the politicians to ask us questions, and possibly to build a rapport so that the politician thought s/he had a scientist who could be useful in future as a point of contact.

The lunch time debate between Science Minister Peter McGauran and Shadow spokesperson Senator Kim Carr provided some interest as they justified their party policy. It was like a miniature version of a parliamentary debate, and concentrated on using the issues to score points at the expense of the other side, rather than carefully assessing the issues. This is an important reminder of political exigencies: the good of the nation is not necessarily what gets the politician elected or what gets the party into government.

In an afternoon session, Snow Barlow introduced some members of the Wentworth Group: senior experts in fields related to water and agriculture who met (first in the Wentworth Hotel, whence the name) at a time when an influential radio shock jock was promoting, with considerable public support, the idea of a very major national project to turn rivers inland to 'drought proof' Australia. Key aspects of the operation of the group were the need for an interdisciplinary approach and the right of experts to veto in their own field. The scientifically conservative but

impregnable report was distilled to 5 points for the media. While this part of the day was a little long it was satisfying to hear a story in which knowledge triumphs over ignorance (even if in part due to fortuitous circumstances) that few would have failed to enjoy it. The briefing day was completed with a talk about the newsworthiness of science and some tips on handling the media by a senior journalist.

An evening reception in Parliament House completed the day. This was attended by many politicians but they had no identification/name tags so it was only those who regularly appear in the media that were easily recognised. A photo book of politicians would have been a useful addition to our kit for the event. It also would have been valuable to have some knowledgeable FASTS people acting as hosts and facilitating chats between the politicians and the scientists. There were short speeches including one from the Minister for Education Science and Training during this reception.

3.0 MEET THE POLITICIANS DAY

Day two started with a continental breakfast in Old Parliament House and a final check on details of meetings and then it was on to Parliament House. As well as the scheduled meetings there were a number of media events; including an address by Jenny Macklin, Deputy-Leader of the Opposition, launch of Academy of Science review of Earth Sciences in Australia by Science Minister Peter McGauran, release of the ARC grants as well as some specific media conferences. In the evening was an optional extra dinner which was attended by scientists, industry representatives and politicians. During this dinner were speeches by IBM Extreme Blue team leader John Wolpert, and Graham McDonald from Merck Sharp and Dohme.

4.0 SCHEDULED MEETINGS WITH POLITICIANS

In view of the large interest in the event this year there were three scientists scheduled for each interview with a politician. All participants selected areas of interest from the list of national priorities in science. This is a short list of general areas like health, national security etc and while acoustics had a relationship with many it was not a focus of any. The 'matching' of scientists and politicians was attempted using this list. Consequently there was diverse group of three scientists meeting with each politician. The politician was not necessarily focussed on the particular area of interest of any of the scientists. The experiences of Burgess and Wolfe are summarised:

4.1 Burgess #1 with Labor Senator Steve Hutchins from NSW

My colleagues were an academic psychologist and a researcher in fire management. We were each given an opportunity to raise issues of concern to science in general, education and then our particular areas. In relation to the closing of publicly funded acoustic facilities he commented that we had little chance to reverse the wave of 'economic rationalism'. We were given a good hearing and an offer that if we sent him a submission he would consider including it in one of his senate speeches

4.2 Burgess #2 with Liberal Member Ross Cameron from NSW

My colleagues were an astronomer and physics academic. After a discussion on astronomy the interview focussed on education and the need to foster science right from primary school. We discussed and agreed on the need for a 'cultural change' and the lack of skilled science and maths teachers in schools. But when we began to talk of the problem with higher tertiary fees for science and engineering not encouraging students he began to diverge. The discussion ended with his strong endorsement of the current government proposals for tertiary education reform coupled with examples of a similar nature to those used by the Minister.

4.3 Burgess #3 with Advisor for Liberal Minister for Child and Youth Affairs Larry Anthony from NSW

My colleagues were a PhD student in entomology and a pharmacist. The advisor apologised for the inability of the member to meet with us and outlined the role of the Minister. As he has a rural electorate, he was very interested in development of education opportunities for rural youth.

4.4 Wolfe #1 with Dr Carmen Lawrence (Lab, WA)

My colleagues were a specialist in blue-green algae and a family psychologist. Dr Lawrence is rare in our parliament in having a PhD and being familiar with research. She is also very intelligent and needed little convincing of the importance of science. She was perturbed by the privatisation of scientific facilities, of which the NAL story is an example. She was also interested in the potential problems of hearing in an aging Australian population. Her interests in algal blooms and family psychology were greater than those in acoustics and proportionately more time was spent on those. I left wishing that there were more politicians like this one.

4.5 Wolfe #2 with Michael Johnson (Lib, Qld)

My colleagues were a limnologist and a nuclear engineer. Mr Johnson is a young backbencher whose electorate includes Queensland University. His sister is a scientist. His reply to our general points was that it all costs money and where would we like to cut. He was however aware of the surveys showing that Australians would prefer greater expenditure on education and health to tax cuts. He had little interest in acoustics, approved of privatisation, and no interest in limnology. He was however interested in space craft and nuclear reactors, so the engineer and I spoke to him about those topics.

5.0 COMMENTS ON EVENT

As this was the first time the Society has been involved in this event we perhaps had hopes of seeing some short term, albeit tiny, outcome. What we realise now is that that this was just the first step and the efforts must continue. The main benefit of participation is longer term. A couple of disappointments were the chance of the interview being useful was based on the luck of the 'matching' by FASTS and that there were limited opportunities to bring up specific issues. However looking at the broad picture it is important to support the increasing group of scientists and technologists that received political and media attention over the day. This is just one way to ensure that the politicians do not become complacent about the status of science and technology in Australia.

The many parts of the event proceeded well even though there was a very high number of participants. The briefing day could quite easily be reduced to less than half a day as most of the points were also in the printed information. While we were told it was important to prepare it was only after the first interview that we realised what this preparation involved. As each interview takes its own course it is essential to have a broad understanding of the majority of the issues – these include general support for education and research funding as proposed by FASTS plus general issues particular to acoustics. The briefing day could have been better spent giving us more background on the FASTS issues. The science and industry dinner was well attended but there was only limited opportunity to circulate. The seating plan ensured there was at least one politician per table but again there was limited opportunity to pursue particular topics and it was a matter of luck which politician was at the table.

We hope that the Society will continue to support at least one person to attend the main event of the FASTS Science Meets Parliament Day. The invitation to provide a submission was offered by two politicians and has been followed up. However there is only so much that the Council of the AAS and its representatives can do. It is clear there are a number of serious concerns among the membership of the Society. Talking about it amongst ourselves does have a role in that it helps to identify the issues and perhaps indicate solutions. But it should not stop there – every member of the Society can talk with or write a letter to their local member or the member for their place of work. Participation in the event has reminded us that all votes are important to our local members so they are interested in our concerns. The great response to 'Science Meets Parliament Day' shows that the politicians do realise the importance of the scientific community and that most are willing to spend time to discuss the problems and we should all try to capitalise on that.



Any comments or suggestions for actions related to political issues that the AAS can follow up should be forwarded to:
GeneralSecretary@acoustics.asn.au