

Science meets Parliament 2018

Kate Quinlan and Tatiana Soares da Costa report on SmP2018.

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 Nation's capital is abuzz with enthusiastic discussions between scientists and parliamentarians. On 13–14 February 2018, Dr Kate Quinlan (University of NSW) and Dr Tatiana Soares da Costa (La Trobe University) attended SmP 2018 on behalf of the ASBMB.



Dr Mel Thomson, Dr Paul McMillan, Dr Michelle Barker and Dr Tatiana Soares da Costa meeting with the Hon Anthony Byrne MP, holding his superbug gift.

The first day of this excellent event was held at the National Gallery of Australia. The program started with an opening address from the STA CEO Kylie Walker and Australia's Chief Scientist Dr Alan Finkel, and then had a focus on orientating the STEM delegates to the political landscape. As the main aim of the meeting was to enable scientists and politicians to communicate about issues that are important to Australia, we also had a number of sessions designed to help us get our research pitches ready. In a communication session after lunch on the first day, we practised, in pairs, using fun scenarios where one of us had been teleported from the 16th century and the other person had to explain how a mobile phone worked or to convince the time traveller to have an X-ray on their sore finger. That so many of us would have been burned at the stake for witchcraft by the 16th century interloper showed how much jargon we use when we communicate. The workshop really helped us to think about the messages that we present from the perspective of the person that we are communicating with. There were also a number of excellent panel discussions on Day 1, where we were advised about how to make an impact on policy making. It was great to hear the first-hand account from Dr Krystal Evans about how

she 'accidentally' organised the national rally 'Discoveries Need Dollars' campaign in support of research funding in just a few days. It was also very interesting to learn about the news cycle and that if scientists want to engage in a debate then they must be able to prepare a response within a very short time scale, often mere hours. Most of us are accustomed to having weeks or months to prepare a thoroughly researched conversation piece, research article or grant application. But if we followed that timeline in the news, the issue would be very cold by the time our input was ready and we would be too late to contribute to the debate. The messages throughout Day 1 were inspirational and helped us delegates to start thinking about our research from a big-picture view and to plan a communication strategy that avoided jargon and focussed on the needs and interests of the person with whom we are trying to communicate.

After a brief break to put on our glad rags, we ended Day 1 with a Gala Dinner at Parliament House. Here we were allowed to put our newly minted skills into practise and mingle with politicians as well as meeting and networking with fellow scientists. During the dinner there were a number of speeches, including from the Leader of the Opposition, the Hon Bill Shorten MP, and from the recently appointed Minister for Jobs and Innovation, Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash. There was a great feeling of good will and recognition of the importance of STEM to the future of Australia in the room – let's hope that translates to policies that will enable STEM to flourish in Australia into the future.



Dr Tatiana Soares da Costa at the gala dinner with Madeleine King MP.

On Day 2, we had another full program of sessions, but also were able to actually meet, in small groups with politicians and to pitch our messages about the importance of STEM or our particular research. We also attended the National Press Club Address, which was presented by Professor Emma Johnston, the President of STA. Professor Johnston gave a thoughtful speech that focussed on outlining some of the current challenges

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facing STEM researchers but also positioned scientists as the solution makers. There was a lot of love in the room for the importance of STEM to our nation's future, which could have been assisted by the fact it was Valentine's Day!

After lunch, we returned to Parliament House and were given the opportunity to attend Question Time. It was certainly lively, but perhaps didn't show our politicians in their best bipartisan light. Luckily, we were also able to participate in a parliamentary forum with the Hon Karen Andrews MP and the Hon Richard Marles MP, who have, from opposite sides of the political divide, joined to form the Parliamentary Friends of Science

group in 2012 (<https://scienceandtechnologyaustralia.org.au/what-we-do/parliamentary-friends-of-science/>). The genuine enthusiasm shown for science by these politicians and also by Adam Bandt MP and Senator the Hon Kim Carr during this session was the perfect antidote to Question Time. A final drinks session with this group was a great way to round off an excellent two days. We would like to sincerely thank the ASBMB for providing us the opportunity to attend SmpP. We are also grateful to the STA for organising such a comprehensive and informative event. For more information about STA, please refer to the article on page 45 of this issue of the *Australian Biochemist*.