

# Conference Report

## Communicating climate change: advice from Science meets Parliament 2010

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If you had the attention of a politician for five minutes, what would you say? How would you summarise the work that you do, or the importance of acting on climate change in less than 45 seconds – the time it takes for a sparkler to burn itself out?

This is exactly the dilemma 120 early to mid-career scientists faced during the 11<sup>th</sup> Science Meets Parliament (SmP) held in Canberra on 9–10 March 2010. Australia's leading science advocacy organisation, the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS), runs SmP every year to provide an opportunity for Australian scientists to be exposed to the political process and how science can influence decision makers. This year AMOS generously supported Dr Ailie Gallant and Dr Joëlle Gergis, research fellows from the School of Earth Sciences at the University of Melbourne, to attend.

Day 1 was a series of professional development seminars designed to provide us with a glimpse of how the media, policy development and effective communication actually work. We heard from Kevin Rudd's speechwriter Tim Dixon, Alison Carabine from ABC's Radio National and Richard Dennis, executive director of the Australia Institute. We discussed the different cultures that journalists and politicians inhabit and some of the barriers to having our science understood. We learned the importance of 'knowing your audience' and targeting your message with the right language and within the right context. We were told that when it comes to communicating complexity, it's always best to try and humanise the scale of what you are trying to say. People need to know how your information affects their daily lives (or the prosperity of the nation); before you can compel someone to take action, they need to very clearly understand the risk of inaction.

It was in this context that we discussed climate change, the unofficial theme of this year's SmP. Following the journalists' admission that conflict makes a good story, we discussed the ethics of providing a voice to global warming contrarians in the name of journalistic 'balance'. They explained that the public is still trying to assimilate the complexity of climate science and very often do not possess

the critical thinking to distinguish the weight of opinion filtered through the peer-reviewed literature and opinions espoused through non-specialists in the blogosphere. When a controversial view on climate change crops up, the journalists admit that the media seize it as a 'fresh angle' on a now long running story that is starting to sound like more of the same to the general public. As Herald Sun columnist Andrew Bolt understands, controversy will always draw a crowd.

Lively discussions buzzed into the evening as we made our way into the Gala dinner in the Great Hall at Parliament House. After a welcome by Kim Carr, the Federal Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, SmP guests wined and dined on tables sprinkled with the likes of Minister Lindsay Tanner, Senator Steve Fielding and the deputy leader of the opposition, Julie Bishop. ABC broadcaster Robyn Williams hosted us through an entertaining and thought provoking evening of special guests. The keynote speaker, Chair of the Australian Science Media Centre, Mr Peter Yates, made the perceptive comment that the planet's epitaph might read: 'We got the science right but we stuffed up the communication'. He cautioned the climate community's recent trend of avoiding addressing the arguments of extremely vocal, well-orchestrated global warming contrarians.

He even went as far as to suggest that climate science needs a key spokesperson to do what Carl Sagan did to lift the profile and popular understanding of the complex field of



**This year's AMOS SmP attendees, Joëlle Gergis (L) and Ailie Gallant (R) (Photo: A. Gallant).**

astronomy. Discussion suggested that the recent development of Climate Scientists Australia, an independent group of our senior scientists willing to provide evidence-based information to climate related policy decisions, could fill the vacuum created by the collapse of discussions surrounding the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) and international negotiations at Copenhagen last year.

It was reassuring to meet with parliamentarians who had an appreciation of climate science and to hear examples of infiltration of science into policy making. A specific example of this came from a meeting between Ailie Gallant and ALP backbencher, Mike Symon, which highlighted that societies such as AMOS can influence government policy. In his capacity on the committee for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Mr. Symon demonstrated that he had a good grasp of an inquiry into long-term meteorological forecasting in Australia and specifically mentioned the difficulties faced in forecasting on time scales from years to decades. This was an inquiry to which AMOS had made a submission and several points made by AMOS were included in the final report.

A second meeting between Ailie and an MP from Queensland, Yvette D'Ath from the marginal seat of Petrie (north of Brisbane) highlighted the community responses to the recent media attention on mistakes in the IPCC report and the "Climategate" email debacle. Ms. D'Ath expressed concern that many in her electorate who had only recently come to accept that humans have had a discernable influence on the climate system now seriously doubted these claims. Ms. D'Ath was very interested to learn ways in which she could respond to those in her electorate claiming the science was incorrect and asked for websites and other sources that she could pass on to people in her electorate.

Joëlle Gergis met with Mr Petro Georgiou, a liberal holding the seat of Kooyong in Melbourne's affluent eastern suburbs. As a man who crossed the floor in support of the CPRS Bill in November 2009, he needed no convincing about the dangers climate change poses to our economy and lifestyle. He believed that one of the key mistakes made by the Rudd government was trying to rush through the complexity of decarbonising the Australian economy in step with the Copenhagen deadline. He felt that the public and parliamentarians did not really understand the CPRS so were not prepared to compromise the status quo.

On day 2 we were treated to a fantastic guest speaker, American science writer Chris Mooney, at the National Press Club. He gave an incisive overview of the nature of the 'guerrilla war' being waged on climate science in the untamed jungles of the online world. He said it was naïve for scientist to feel that the 'truth will prevail' in the global warming debate as the mountain of peer-reviewed evidence grows. Instead he suggested that as a community we need to equip ourselves with the professional communication skills needed to combat the very targeted tactics of our opponents. In a recent interview Professor Michael Mann (co-creator of the 'hockey stick' temperature reconstruction) referred to the 'asymmetric warfare' between trained global warming contrarians and climate scientists as 'literally like a battle between a Marine and a Cub Scout'. In the 11 March 2010 issue of Nature, the editor warned that 'scientists must acknowledge that they are in a street fight, and that their relationship with the media really matters'.

Chris Mooney suggested that climate scientists simply have not received the core communication training they need to fight the war. He proposed that we must begin to train a small army of ambassadors who can translate the science and make it relevant to the media, politicians and the public. It was inspiring to hear that short science communication courses are now being offered to students at the University of California's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, with further plans to extend this to Princeton University later this year. No doubt these courses aimed at training 'bridge builders' of the future will help 21<sup>st</sup> century scientist harness the enormous influence of the online world in a constructive – rather than destructive – way.

At the end of our time in Canberra, we left with the clear message that scientists are welcome in the political process, but we must equip ourselves with the tools of effective communication our knowledge is to be heard. We need to be prepared to defend our science in the face of intense public scrutiny with conviction and in plain English. We learnt that, if possible, we need to tell a human story and to say something new, while remembering to talk with the audience, and not at them. Once we restore community confidence in climate science, one conversation at a time, our politicians will have no choice but to follow.

Here's that sparkler; your time starts now.

Further Information:

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