

26 Mar 2024

RE: Science Meets Parliament

Dear committee -

First to thank you very much for nominating me to attend this event. It is certainly a unique experience, taking place in the Great Hall at Australia Parliament House and meeting with other academics from across the country, parliamentarians, and their advisors.

The meeting with NSW Greens Senator David Shoebridge and his Chief of Staff was, of course, the central element. It was clear (as I believe is often the case with SMP parliamentary meetings) that the Senator had picked out the academics he wanted to meet with, as we all discovered prior to the meeting that we had a shared interest in different aspects of Artificial Intelligence. My interest being in AI in education, and the other academics in our group included a data scientist interested in visualisation, the executive director of a high performance computing facility, and an AI researcher. The Senator requested that some parts of the conversation be confidential, so I will be a little light on the details in this report — however, it is clear the senator has a deep interest in what the appropriate laws and policy settings for Artificial Intelligence in Australia should be. This was a broad conversation covering aspects from data sovereignty, to use of AI for deceptive purposes, to the environmental impact of data centres and how they are designed. It was also a very pragmatic conversation, considering what aspects it is tractable for government to design practical and enforceable regulations for, and which areas are harder.

Although the Senator is, of course, a cross-bencher and therefore does not directly set government or opposition policy, this also seemed to have a freeing effect whereby the conversation could be more grounded in the issues. Given the influence that cross-benchers wield through parliamentary inquiries and through the work of the Senate, it was a tremendously encouraging conversation.

Many of the other sessions in SMP were informative, especially those around better understanding the roles of political advisors and civil service advisors, and how to engage with them effectively. Naturally, there were also some sessions that were more about pressing the needs of science to politicians and the public, rather than informing scientists about the workings of politics and government (e.g. the Press Club address by the STA president, making the case for more foundational funding for research in Australia).

There is also always a networking element to these events — for instance on the second day of the conference it was very good to (briefly) be in a round-table discussion on whether Australia could gain traction in AI research chaired by Prof Brian Schmidt — albeit I had double-booked myself with one of the other tours so had to leave that session early.

On that note, I can also recommend the bee-keeping tour. While this may seem an odd choice for a computer scientist (and I only registered for it late), Australia Parliament House's beekeeper is a scientist volunteering in that role. For a computing academic in a regional university, at the time that varroa mite has just come into Australia affecting one of our main agricultural pollinators, it is the fastest and most impressive crash-course in pollinator management and environmental impact considerations that you're ever likely to come across.

Yours sincerely

Will Billingsley