

Canadian Science Meets Parliament: Building relationships between scientists and policymakers

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Abstract

The first Science Meets Parliament event in Canada was held in November 2018 in Ottawa, where twenty-eight Tier II Canada Research Chairs (a specific class of Canadian university professor acknowledged by their peers as having the potential to lead in their field) from diverse disciplines met with forty-three Members of Canadian Parliament and Senators. The main goal of this event was to facilitate communication between these two key pillars of the society, to promote mutual understanding of the nature of their respective work, roles, and responsibilities, and to build long-term relationships. Here, we, representatives of the first cohort of scientists to participate in the program, summarize our experiences and lessons learned from this event, as well as our assessment of the benefits of attending this event for scientists, policy decision-makers, and institutions. Furthermore, we provide suggestions for similar future events in Canada and elsewhere.

Key words: science policy; science communication; outreach; political engagement; Canadian Parliament; Canada Research Chair.

1. Introduction

Science has a special place in society—it provides a vision of what we can achieve through pursuing new discovery, integrating diverse understandings of our world, devising solutions to practical problems, building skills in the next generations, and bringing people together around common knowledge and goals (Boyer 1990). However, science is vulnerable in this ‘post-truth’ era, with political and commercial interests threatening to undermine its collective (societal) benefits (Editorial 2013; Groshek and Bronda 2016; Boutron and Ravaud 2018). These vulnerabilities hinder the incorporation of scientific evidence in policy decision-making and may undermine public support for science. Scientific discoveries are often the result of a concerted effort shared between the scientific community and political decision-makers. The uptake of the next medical therapies, climate change mitigations and adaptations, machine learning algorithms, educational advances, innovations in social welfare, and solutions to social inequalities by society depend on effective science policies and decisive actions on funding opportunities. Yet, the gap between state-of-the-art scientific advances and policy setting is wide, often making ongoing policy decisions blind to the latest scientific breakthroughs in many countries. Here, we describe a way to bridge these gaps.

To strengthen the role of science in society, it is no longer sufficient to allow the products of science to ‘speak for themselves’ and rely on traditional means of dissemination. Instead, scientists need to engage with the community, including political decision-makers and stakeholders, to connect scientific research with policy development. The Science Meets Parliament (SMP) model was started 20 years ago in Australia and is part of an emerging ‘movement’ that brings scientific researchers and policymakers together to promote mutual understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities, and to share their knowledge with each other. In November 2018, the Canadian Science Policy Centre, in partnership with Canada’s Chief Science Advisor, Dr Mona Nemer, adapted the Australian model and organized Canada’s first SMP.

2. SMP

Over the course of 2 days (5–6 November 2018), a selected group of twenty-eight Tier 2 Canada Research Chairs, considered world-class emerging scientists in their respective fields of research, gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to meet with forty-three Members of Parliament (MPs), Senators, and staff.¹ The event was a first step toward ensuring that the best of Canadian science strengthens strategy and policymaking at the national level. This was the first time in Canadian history that scientific delegates met directly with policy decision-makers with no immediate agenda beyond building a better understanding of how each side operates for the public good. This initial meeting functioned to start breaking down historic misunderstandings between scientists and policy decision-makers. We believe it succeeded in this regard and left participants with a view of the other side as being approachable and eager to build mutually beneficial relationships.

The ultimate goal of SMP was to bring policy decision-makers (parliamentarians) and scientists together to facilitate effective two-way communication between scientific research and public policy communities. Such communications are a critical part of long-term relationship building that will ultimately facilitate incorporating science into the development of policies that are beneficial to the

broader public (Scheufele 2014). This event was timely and critical, especially in an era when the credibility, expertise, and authority of both scientists and public institutions are regularly under attack (Carter et al. 2019). A key strength of this event was the absence of an ‘agenda’ from either group: scientists (university-based researchers in this case) were not seeking funding or advising on particular policy issues, and policy decision-makers were not asking for any specific scientific information (Jasanoff 2009). This allowed for a transparent and direct interaction that was unhindered and free from potential conflict of interest.

On the first day, the scientists met with Dr Mona Nemer, Canada’s Chief Science Advisor, who shared her personal experience of facilitating interactions among scientists, politicians, and policymakers. She also discussed the roles of scientists in advancing evidence-informed policy and provided tips for communicating with legislative representatives. Following this meeting, the delegate scientists attended a policy workshop to learn about the structure of government and legislative processes in Canada and methods for effective political communication. In particular, experienced legislators from across the political spectrum advised scientists on how to adjust their communication methods from source-oriented to audience-oriented. Scientists then received the guidance of communication experts, including current and former MPs and senators, in an interactive session where they practiced research dissemination speeches aimed for a lay audience.

On the second day, each scientist was paired with a number of MPs and Senators (‘policymakers’). Some had several-hour long conversations with policymakers or shadowed MPs for the morning/afternoon sessions. Others attended committee meetings such as the Standing Committee on Health and Finance or the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development. In several instances, the paired scientists and policymakers embraced different political ideologies. Despite these ideological differences, many pairs were able to find forward-thinking common ground through their discussions. The Standing Committee meetings were relevant to a wide range of scientific disciplines, and policy themes, including climate change, fisheries protection, energy access in Indigenous communities, small rural businesses, big data, the new relationship between Canada and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, advancing gender and health equity, and healthcare funding. Some discussions focused on how science can be most useful to policymakers, the types of evidence that policymakers need for effective decision-making and procedural details on how policymakers seek out scientific evidence. In some cases, both sides also agreed to host events focused on teaching scientists about working with the media to influence policy. Later in the day, the scientists attended Question Period in the House of Commons and the day concluded with a networking reception, where delegates, the Honourable Dr Kirsty Duncan—Minister of Science and Sport, Chief Science Advisor Dr Mona Nemer, MPs and Senators from all four political parties and invited guests came together to celebrate the inaugural event.

3. Benefits to scientists

This event offered scientists new ways to consider Parliamentarians and to connect with policymakers on Parliament Hill or in their home constituencies. More importantly, the event initiated the long process of relationship-building between scientists and Parliamentarians that will help the scientific community better

was organized by a volunteer-based committee where professors, students, postdoctoral fellows, and administrative staff spent their valuable time. This volunteer model is not sustainable if we were to continue such a program. In addition, home institutions should encourage scientists to apply for such programs and provide funding support.

8. Concluding remarks

SMP was designed to build long-lasting, stable, and non-partisan science–policy relationships. If continued, we envision that this program can truly help strengthen the alliance between science and policymakers for a positive change in society. Scientists and policymakers often misunderstand each other's roles, responsibilities, motivations, and the nature of their work. An effective way to deal with such misconceptions is to initiate a direct, active platform where both groups can meet and discuss their work. SMP was the first such national event that engaged scientists and policymakers, which can be beneficial to other nations as well. Introducing scientists as approachable, committed people who are willing to contribute their expertise for the greater good can engender a political culture in which all actors distinguish between scientific evidence and partisan opinions and recognize science as an apolitical public benefit.

We anticipate that this and future events will encourage the routine translation of science for policy. By training researchers and providing them with opportunities to communicate with a policy audience, the translation of scientific data into politically useful information may become a routine part of research planning. At the core of a program like this is fostering respect for the role of science in society and the recognition that the use of evidence in policy-making is something to be strived for and is in the interest of the broader public. Indeed, providing research findings to political leaders can lead to policy change (Hjort et al. 2019).

Notes

1. Demographics of the Canada Research Chairs, the MPs, Senators, and staff are listed here: <https://www.sciencepolicy.ca/science-meets-parliament-2018-statistics>
2. Only Tier 2 Canada Research Chairs were selected for the inaugural event because having the tier as a selection criterion saved a lot of time for screening and reading candidates' profiles. In addition, Tier 2 is emerging scientists and Tier 1 is more established and may be less available. Pending funding, the event can include any scientists (e.g. professors, scholars, or post-docs).

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