



Australian Government

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CANADIAN SCIENCE POLICY CONFERENCE

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Good morning.

Thank you for the introduction. It's an honour to be representing Australia at what is an important opportunity to share ideas and learnings about how we all go about engaging our citizens with science and the ideas and inspirations it brings.

Science has always been a part of my life. In fact, I have been immersed in science for as long as I can remember. At every stage of my career, I have, in some way, worked with scientists, scientific institutions, or the government to improve the relationship between science and society.

Based on this, I can tell you that the Australian Government's experiences and priorities when it comes to science and science engagement are similar to those of many countries around the world.

As a nation, we are working to strengthen our innovation system through development of our science base, our supply chain of future scientists and technologists, and the relationship between science and society.

Developing our science base is our highest priority. When it comes to funding, the lion's share supports institutions, infrastructure, networks, and the people who work to solve problems and create new knowledge.

But there is a wider need to ensure we also invest in good quality education. In turn, this secures the supply of scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians that will increase the potential of today's workforce and replace the ageing workforce in the future.

I'm pleased to say that the complex relationship between science and society is receiving more attention from the Australian Government and the Australian public than ever before.

Issues like climate change and nuclear safety are bringing scientific debate into homes across the world.

Against this backdrop, a new initiative is driving development of the first Australian national strategy for science engagement, and it is this initiative that I will focus on today.

Developing a national strategy for science engagement became a priority after previous government reports identified a need for better coordination of existing science awareness activities. These reports concluded that objectives needed to be refocused. And they identified a need for more strategic leadership and more targeted policy formulation.

As a fundamental part of achieving these goals, we needed to look at the way we communicate science to the public.

Effective science communication is vital for supporting science more broadly.

This is because:

- It has immense downstream effects,
- It educates and inspires future scientists,
- It builds a case for more funding and support to the researchers and their institutions, and
- It connects the public to the science that benefits their lives.

The Australian Government's *Inspiring Australia* initiative responds to the need for a national strategy for science engagement.

It aims to build a strong, open relationship between science and society that is underpinned by effective communication of science and its uses.

Inspiring Australia provides a national framework that establishes a coherent approach to science communication.

It aligns the activities of science research agencies, government departments, education providers, community organisations, businesses and industry.

Inspiring Australia has been developed following widespread consultations. It has had input from scientists, science communicators, educators, journalists, academics, government officers and community representatives from right across Australia.

The initiative also follows a strong call for national leadership in science, and for a more coherent approach

to the previous fragmented endeavours to engage people in the sciences.

This call has had a positive response from government leaders.

Australia's Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, said, *'We live in a crucial time for science in Australia and around the world. It is a time demanding strong leadership, from the grassroots to the highest levels of government. Together we must ensure that science, research and innovation can continue to play their part in shaping our future and guiding our decisions'*.

I support these words, and would like to acknowledge that a key element of the national initiative is to inspire a sense of national pride by promoting activities that recognise and reward the achievements and successes of Australians science and scientists.

The promotion of our successful scientists and acknowledgement of their excellent and dedicated work will contribute towards many of the main objectives of *Inspiring Australia*. These include attracting increasing national and international interest in Australian science,

and encouraging young people to pursue rewarding careers in science.

Launching the *Inspiring Australia* report in February 2010, Innovation Minister, Senator Kim Carr, said, “*Science communication matters because democracy matters. Science communication matters because so many of the decisions we make these days are based on science. Decisions about who gets what, when, where and how. Decisions that influence people’s chances in life. Decisions that may well determine the fate of the planet. Citizens can only have a meaningful say in those decisions – whether for or against – if they understand the science. If we are serious about giving people a real voice in how we run this high-tech world of ours, we have to be serious about science communication*”.

Inspiring Australia sets out the principles and 15 recommendations for a coherent public strategy to tackle public engagement in the sciences.

In May this year, the current Australian Government honoured an election commitment to provide 21 million dollars over three years as part of the ‘*Science for*

Australia's Future' package. This funding will drive the action that *Inspiring Australia* has called for.

Community expectations of what is Australia's first national science communication strategy are high. The initiative is being led by Questacon, Australia's national science and technology centre and a division of the Australian Government's Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.

Although Questacon's national centre is based in Canberra, it has a national reach. It operates exemplar outreach programs that promote greater understanding of science and awareness within urban, regional and remote communities across Australia. This makes it the ideal organisation to take *Inspiring Australia* to fruition.

Since the *Inspiring Australia* report was released in February last year, it's already given momentum to programs of real value as part of its coherent, national strategy for public engagement in the sciences.

National Science Week is an existing program that is now funded under the *Science for Australia's Future* package. It is a week-long program of science activities engaging

the community in a huge variety of ways and at a range of different levels all around Australia.

Inspiring Australia will seek to do more than National Science Week in unlocking Australia's full potential through year-round events in cities, in regional and in remote areas.

In particular it will support science communication programs that target under-served groups. These will include:

- people living in outer metropolitan, regional and remote areas;
- Indigenous Australians;
- people for whom English is a second language; and
- people who are disabled or have limited mobility.

Inspiring Australia also provides a framework for connecting with mainstream media, and new media, to communicate science issues and achievements.

Another key element of the program is engendering a sense of national pride by championing activities that recognise and reward the achievements and successes of Australian science and scientists.

The *Prime Minister's Prizes for Science* is an annual event that is now being funded through the package. This year, prizes were awarded to scientists who have contributed to industrial chemical processes, advanced research for a more sustainable future, our knowledge of the beginning of the universe, and inspiring our younger generations.

So, in addition to increasing the general profile of science, the initiative is also supporting the showcasing of Australia's capability in the sciences for scientists, science policy makers, overseas counsellors and other potential Australian science 'ambassadors' to use abroad.

This means that our framework for science engagement will also be able to provide a basis for informing future investment decisions by the government and its partners.

The success of this national strategy will depend upon building partnerships and using networks.

It will also depend upon how well existing science communication activities are aligned across Federal, State and Territory jurisdictions.

And they have shown their support already.

The *Framework of Principles for Science Communication Initiatives* has been endorsed at Ministerial level by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Advisory Council on Innovation and government departments and agencies involved in the Australian Government Coordination Committee on Innovation.

The framework sets out to define and improve standards, promote consistency of best practice, optimise appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency and increase accessibility.

It is intended to guide, rather than mandate, government involvement in science communication initiatives. And there is an important difference.

By broadly guiding communicators, we leave the detail to the communicators themselves.

This gives them the space for them to create new, innovative, and relevant ways of connecting to their target audiences, while communicating the key themes that have been developed through our research and consultations.

These themes are designed to connect with all Australians and include ‘*Telling the stories of Australian science*’ and ‘*Unlocking Australia’s full potential*’.

Other principles encourage the use of credible science, defining the target audience, and evaluating and designing programs that enable effective delivery.

The principles also serve to guide the involvement of governments in a number of other ways.

Overall, the framework addresses the importance of support for a scientifically engaged Australia as articulated in the *Inspiring Australia* report.

It clarifies the need for government involvement.

It provides consideration for the way that government collaboration is needed between all our federal government departments and agencies, as well as our states and territories.

And, the principles address the responsiveness needed to meet Australia’s evolving demands and needs.

A more coordinated approach between the Federal, State and Territory Governments can be expected to lead to better alignment of resources with increased impact.

And with all that in mind, I'd like to finish by telling you more about what's happening here and now to advance the principles and continue *Inspiring Australia*.

Two expert working groups have produced reports on *Science and the media: From ideas to action* and *Developing an Evidence Base for Science Engagement*. These reports hold practical ideas to improve practices within existing resources.

A new expert working group will consider how various science communication organisations can best work together to unlock the potential of regional communities in Australia's vast interior.

Another will consider how a mix of research agencies can best collaborate on telling a better story of marine research in Australia. It will replace the preconceived notion that we are just a dry land with a beach, with the reality that we are the world's third largest marine nation.

And we will see an ongoing stream of programs supported by *Inspiring Australia* in the coming months and across the next few years.

There is no shortage of goodwill. The first *Inspiring Australia* National Conference – *Inspiring Science, Inspiring Australia: Telling Australia’s Brilliant Stories* – attracted over 200 attendees. Many were from the science communication sector looking for ways they could best fit within the new initiative.

A recent compilation developed for a Square Kilometre Array forum showed that Australia has significant strengths in science communication¹.

However, we also have what I have already referred to as a lack of cohesiveness in its approach that results in gaps in provision or duplicated effort.

Australia aspires to be an innovative society with a scientifically engaged community and a technologically skilled workforce.

¹ http://www.ska.edu.au/educators/assets/engaging_the_world.pdf

Strong scientific engagement provided at a national level and implemented locally will mean we will become wiser, healthier, more sustainable and more competitive.

And that's a goal that we can all aspire to.