

editorial

New way of life in Washington

The demise of the President's Science Advisory Committee and the Office of Science and Technology forces us into a major re-examination of the channels through which scientific expertise and advice are made available to the government and public. Some would argue that this re-examination is long overdue—that the recent announcements about PSAC and OST have merely formalized what had, in effect, already befallen these two groups: They had for sometime ceased to be effective influences in the formulation of government policy. Limited as they were to rendering purely technical advice, their recommendations had been too often ignored by administrations faced with pressing economic and political considerations. Further, since the deliberations of these groups were not made public, there was no opportunity for open discussion of both their recommendations and the reactions of the government policy makers.

But with the new reorganization of science in Washington, the science community now has a unique opportunity to rethink its own approaches to this problem and establish a more effective system of input—one which is realistically attuned to the way things are done in Washington. Clearly we should look to the scientific societies to assume major responsibilities in any new system. In particular there is the opportunity now for the societies to work together to create a much improved approach to what had been one of the major functions of PSAC and OST—investigating questions of national importance that involve scientific judgments.

Under the old system these evaluations were carried out by a relatively small group of scientists, although admittedly quite prestigious in their fields. The rest of the scientific community had no way to become involved in the deliberations and could only react after the fact to the final recommendations.

Now the societies have a chance to revamp this mechanism by opening it up at the very beginning to the scientific community at large, calling for public discussion from the broadest possible spectrum of scientists from widely ranging disciplines, experience and age and political persuasions. In effect we would be creating a new level of discourse—a “town meeting” format in the scientific community to consider questions of national importance.

Moreover, the much greater number of scientists encouraged through this approach to participate in national issues could be called upon to help with the job of educating the public on these issues, thus providing some realistic hope for at last attaining the long sought goal of an informed public.

Also this approach would encourage the scientific societies to get actively involved in seeing that their respective disciplines each contribute as much as possible to the national interest. The multidisciplinary problems of our time require multidisciplinary task forces to work on them. On their own initiative, the societies could set up multidisciplinary groups that could draw upon the entire nationwide reservoir of expert scientific talent. Groups of this kind could be sponsored to investigate topics such as energy, instrumentation, pollution, transportation and so on and they would be quite useful generally in exploring how the work of research scientists can be coupled to the interests of the mission-oriented government agencies and of industrial groups. This approach by the societies will, in the long run, prove more fruitful for the self-interest of scientists than movements focusing on trade-union professionalism.

In adjusting to the new way of life in Washington, the priority goal of the scientific community should not be to take the me-tooism approach of demanding jobs from the government. We will do much better to work together through the scientific societies to show the government how more jobs can be created for everybody.

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