

editorial

The new public-interest science

The subject of this month's special issue—Public-Interest Science—summons up the image of a new breed of defenders of the public *à la* Ralph Nader. It is important to keep in mind that physicists already have a long tradition of defending the public interest. One outstanding figure in this role was Leo Szilard. In speaking at the recent APS session in Washington honoring Szilard, the recipient of the Leo Szilard Award, David Inglis, and the recipient of the Forum Award, Ralph Lapp, both recalled how Szilard and others such as James Franck fought the battle for civilian control of the AEC and physicists such as Edward Condon and Ernest Pollard later rallied against McCarthyism.

What *is* new about the new public-interest science is that our authors are recommending it for physicists at all levels, not just the elite. The pattern in the past has been that it was considered appropriate only for the big names in the physics community to spend their time advising and, if necessary, confronting government policy makers and Congressional leaders. Lesser known physicists were not particularly encouraged to feel they should take time off from their physics pursuits to engage in such activities.

But the thinking on this question has evolved during the 1960's and 70's to the point where many now take the view that every physicist or other scientist should feel obligated to contribute time to public-interest work. We realize now that when it comes to problems involving society no one can claim to have all the answers; the best approach is to encourage responsible efforts by problem solvers having a variety of levels and kinds of experience.

Our authors Perl, Primack and von Hippel (page 23) define public-interest science as the efforts of scientists in moving "outside industrial and government channels to help take issues to the public or the courts." They are interested in discussing the kinds of contributions the scientist can make by working primarily as an outsider confronting the system (see also Sullivan's article, page 32); we hope that many physicists will decide to become involved in this challenging and relatively new approach. At the same time we believe others will prefer a broader definition of public-interest work and will find ways to contribute that are more suited to their personal styles. For instance, we

must continue to recognize the vital importance of the scientist working as insider in the tradition of Rabi and Bethe (see the articles by Ratchford, page 38 and Chapman, page 43). An example of still another equally crucial area is the one of fostering public understanding of science *per se*. Also many of our professional societies are already involved in quite worthwhile activities in this area that deserve support, such as the Coordinating Committee for Environmental Acoustics of the Acoustical Society of America.

One unresolved problem for the ordinary physicist (in contrast to the distinguished physicist) who would like to do public-interest work is that of getting professional recognition for this kind of activity. When promotion time comes, will he find himself penalized compared to a colleague who stuck strictly to research and teaching? An important means of enhancing the prestige of public-interest contributions is the institutionalization of these kinds of activities in the form of regular university programs. A good example of this approach is the newly established Program on Science, Technology and Society at Cornell, now under the direction of Raymond Bowers; in this program faculty and graduate students work on interdisciplinary, society-oriented problems such as technology assessment.

More generally it is becoming increasingly common to hear department chairmen and directors of research pointing out the valuable things that physicists can do in the public interest. We applaud these sentiments. But the new thrust in public-interest science will succeed only if these same chairmen and directors are willing to put these sentiments into practice when they review their staff members for promotion.

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