Science, Information, and Power

NOW THAT THE 110TH UNITED STATES CONGRESS IS WELL SETTLED IN ITS SEATS, THINGS ARE heating up—and the decisive recent report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will help. Some of the early action is on the legislative front: The well-publicized “First Hundred Hours” of the new House Democratic majority voted up some 40 hours’ worth of the less controversial bills. The better news is that legislators made some serious-looking moves toward an emissions cap for greenhouse gases. That’s a good start, but perhaps the most significant action has come from other sources.

One of these, improbably, is American industry. Quick digression: Earlier in this space, I noted a phenomenon arising when strong views in the polity bump up against administrative inertia in the federal government. For example, national polls show strong citizen preference for action to mitigate global warming and for revising the ban on federally supported embryonic stem cell research. Years of unresponsiveness from the Bush Administration have stimulated an unexpected downward jurisdictional migration, with some states floating bond financing for stem cell research and other states—even cities—adopting their own emissions targets. Now a new downstream locus for environmental activism has surfaced, and the White House might listen to this one.

Chief executive officers from 10 major U.S. companies have gathered to form a Climate Action Partnership. When General Electric, Alcoa, DuPont, and even Duke Energy are sufficiently convinced about global warming to recommend mandatory emissions reductions with targets, they are asking to be taken seriously. This corporate congregation was mobilized in part by the World Resources Institute and leading environmental organizations, whose collective clout once again demonstrates that enlightened leadership from civic society can sometimes reach useful ends more quickly than old-fashioned intercession in electoral politics.

Back in the political domain: The U.S. Congress does more than manufacture statutes. There’s oversight of administrative agencies, and anyone who has been in charge of one knows how tough that process can be (even, as in my case, if the inquisitors are from your party). Now Henry Waxman, chair of the House Oversight Committee, is scheduling hearings—the first was on 30 January—about efforts by Administration officials to modify or rewrite the scientific findings of agency scientists. There promise to be more, and there should be. The Union of Concerned Scientists has just released a comprehensive report on such matters, and supplied witnesses to the Waxman hearing.

But there is a conveniently timed push-back from the White House. A new initiative announced late in January will affect the way in which executive agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration generate guidelines and regulations. The plan places new responsibilities on a political appointee in each agency, claiming that it will smooth the process of rule-making and make it more consistent. Critics fear that its purpose is to enforce Administration control over the development of regulations affecting the environment and public health. Significantly, the announcement was published on the very day of the Waxman hearing.

Those who believe that convergences are often not mere coincidences will see these events as a typical, garden-variety struggle between a Democratic Congress and the White House over the use of science in informing policy. But this confrontation is about more than whether politics can trump science. At its core, it is a struggle for authority between a presidency wanting control over information so that the public will accept its version of reality, and a Congress insistent on its responsibility to find facts needed to shape national policy.

This contest over the power of the presidency could not be more fundamental to the democratic values of American society. Presidential claims to exclusive power over knowledge may sometimes be justifiable in our national interest, but we should not be misled. We are not an empire—and our president is neither an emperor nor, as author and historian Garry Wills reminds us, the commander-in-chief of anyone who doesn’t happen to be in the army or the navy.

– Donald Kennedy

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