Pork and Punishment

THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES DOES SOME FUNNY THINGS WITH RESPECT TO some scientific projects. It either likes them enough to scoop them out of some priority line and give them special status, or it finds them, well, either dumb or disgusting and declines to give them money that their executive agency has asked for. In the first instance, it finds various ways of funneling federal support to them, often going outside various established procedures for competitive review. In the second case, it amends authorization or appropriation bills to require the removal of particular projects that members dislike for some reason or another.

We have long experience with both habits. The first has become so familiar that it has a pet name: pork, short for “pork-barrel funding,” a term that first received public notice in the late 19th century, when individual members would compete for river and harbor projects. The process by which pork is actually distributed is “earmarking,” after the practice of notching the ears of livestock to claim ownership. In the development of a research agency’s budget, a member will specify a support line for a building, project, or research facility at an institution in the member’s district; because the budget is limited, this means that funds will be diverted from projects that had been competitively approved.

At one time this was just a cottage industry, perfected by a lone few. In the Northwest, for example, Senators Warren Magnuson and Mark Hatfield worked wonders for their medical schools. But the game changed when Gerald Cassidy and Kenneth Schlossberg put together a tiny organization that made pork-barrel strategizing a lobbyist’s game. Their breakthrough was a special appropriation for Tufts University; once that happened, Columbia, Catholic University, and others found pork. The subsequent history of this malady was chronicled by Bob Kaiser in an excellent series in the Washington Post earlier this year.

While I was at the Association of American Universities, we made express objections to pork-barrel funding of academic science facilities and urged member presidents to resist temptation. Some did; Cornell was a heroic example. Others, alas, didn’t, and the system continues to be broken. Indeed, despite recent efforts to control lobbying and other sins, set-asides are still in and growing, and bragged about by successful members.

Just as some members of Congress are working to support projects that probably wouldn’t have survived the competition of peer review, their colleagues are busily trying to de-fund others that already have! This, too, is an ancient practice. One thing members don’t like is studying sex; another is anything that sounds too “social-sciency.” One year, a member objected strenuously to a National Science Foundation project with the word “ATM” in the title, wondering why we would spend tax money studying automated tellers; it turned out the grant was for asynchronous transfer modes used in communications technologies. Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire used to be fond of going after projects he thought silly and even created an award for proposals he found especially ridiculous called the Golden Fleece Award.

The most recent attempts attacked several projects that were identified as the National Science Foundation Authorization Act of 2007 was being considered. Representatives John Campbell (R-CA) and Scott Garrett (R-NJ) cited a total of nine grants between them for elimination, offering amendments that would have barred funding for them. What were the subjects that so troubled them? Well, one study was to analyze comparative features of menopause among six cross-cultural groups of women. A member defending the process asked Garrett how he would explain to the women in his constituency that he opposed studying menopause. His response is unrecorded, but both amendments failed and—at least for the moment—peer review and the competitive processes survived.

In both of these modes, Congress is acting to substitute its own judgments for priorities derived through competition in which expert judgments are taken into account. There is a case to be made for legislative authority to redress distributional or other issues in managing the federal science budget. But Congress should state clearly what it is doing and why, not take ad hoc bites out of a process that works fairly and well.

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