

Silly Season on the Hill

What in the world is going on with the U.S. Congress? Back in the “old days” of the 1970s, members of the House and Senate didn’t have much personal interest in science. Occasionally, an expert in some field was elected and played a useful role in science policy, like astronaut-geologist and former Senator Harrison Schmitt, who kept an eye on space exploration issues. But most have shown their interest by giving the National Institutes of Health more money than requested by the administration annually, even tacking on a few special science facilities for their state’s medical school. It may have been pork, but at least it was kosher.

But now, in the silly season of August, it seems that nearly everybody on Capitol Hill is knee-deep in science! Members suddenly know how to evaluate individual grants, even defunding those that deal with touchy subjects. One banned grant dealt with the psychology of romance—apparently too hot to handle these days. A number of current legislators have also become amateur neurobiologists, developing an unexpected command of difficult topics like “persistent vegetative state.” The Senate’s chief surgeon, Dr. Bill Frist (R-TN) established a record for definitive long-range TV diagnosis on that subject. Then, thankfully, he staged a dramatic turnaround on stem cell research. We never know exactly what to expect from these guys.

It’s reassuring that genuinely well-qualified scientists persist in a few refuges on the Hill. One physicist in Congress, Rush Holt (D-NJ), is an example. His work on education and the support of science funding has been exemplary, and it’s good to have an expert with his credentials on the Intelligence Committee. And there are able Republicans in the serious science game as well. The chairman of the House Science Committee, Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), is one; his colleague Vern Ehlers (R-MI) holds a doctorate in physics. That committee has stuck thoughtfully to its jurisdiction and mission, and the science community should be grateful for its upgraded substantive leadership.

But one congressional committee has become so enthusiastic about science that it has strayed off the reservation into unclaimed territory. Chairman Joseph Barton (R-TX) of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce has sent demand letters to a number of people: Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); Dr. Arden Bement Jr., director of the National Science Foundation (NSF); and research professors Drs. Michael E. Mann, Malcolm K. Hughes, and Raymond S. Bradley, who collaborated on recent analyses of global temperature proxy data. The text of each letter begins with a brief summary of the conclusions of the IPCC regarding human influence on recent global warming. Then, after reciting some reasons for skepticism about those conclusions and Dr. Mann’s role in them, it lists an extraordinarily burdensome set of demands.

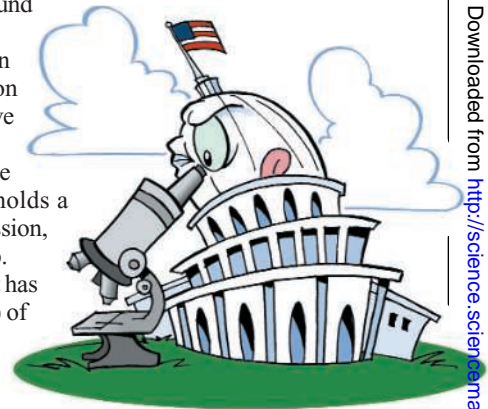
These include disclosure of all funding sources, agreements regarding that support, exact computer codes, locations of data archives used, responses to referenced criticisms of the work, and the results of all temperature reconstructions. That’s only the beginning. The letter to Dr. Mann contains highly specific requests spanning 8 paragraphs and 19 subparagraphs. Dr. Bement’s letter demands exhaustive lists of all agency policies, all grants related to climate research, policies relating to IPCC review, information regarding requests for access to research records, and more. It’s clear that what’s going on here is harassment: an attempt at intimidation, carried out under a jurisdiction so elastic that any future committee chair might try to play this game if coached by the right group of unschooled skeptics.

There are ways of avoiding both the harassment and the precedent. Chairman Boehlert could take charge of matters, because this debate belongs with the real science committee. If hearings are necessary, they can be held. If independent and objective information is needed, the Congressional Research Service could help. Better still is the time-tested way of reaching scientifically sound conclusions: scientific experiment, analysis, debate, and review. A letter* to Chairman Barton from *Science*’s publisher, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, points that out in prose more tactful and elegant than I can presently manage. As for me, I’m just the editor—and I’m outraged at this episode, in which science becomes politics by other means.

Donald Kennedy
Editor-in-Chief

*www.aaas.org/news/releases/2005/0714letter.pdf

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