Lobbying for Science

THE recent action in the House of Representatives, cutting 98 per cent from the funds requested by the Administration for the National Science Foundation, reveals a problem and points a moral. Announcement of the action late in August precipitated a spate of activity on the part of scientific societies, college presidents, professors, and others. At this time it is not known what the Senate will do about the appropriation, nor how the matter will be decided by a conference committee of both the Senate and the House. But it is safe to say that the National Science Foundation will receive less money than it would have, had the House Appropriations Committee been convinced of the need for the full amount. Apparently, no one made the least effort to convince these legislators.

The foundation itself can perhaps be excused. Officers presented the original request last April, but Alan T. Waterman took office only in late March. As director, he had to know in detail just why he was asking for $14,000,000, and this kind of knowledge takes time to accumulate. The organizations and individuals who make up the scientific and engineering fraternity in this country cannot be excused, however. They can be said to have failed to exercise their fundamental right of petition. This is even more inexcusable when the competent battle led by scientific societies for passage of the bill authorizing a National Science Foundation is remembered. Congress was forgotten once the authorizing legislation was passed. Even the greenest newcomer to Washington knows that the big battle takes place when the appropriation comes up for a vote.

"Lobby" is a word with nasty connotations. It must be remembered, however, that a lobbyist is a man who is exercising the fundamental right of petition. There are good lobbyists and bad lobbyists, lobbyists working on large salaries and larger expense accounts to "buy" Congressmen, and lobbyists working with next to no money for a cause in which they believe.

A lobbyist for the scientists might have saved the day for the National Science Foundation. What does a competent, honest lobbyist do? First, he informs the people he represents about what is happening of interest to them on Capitol Hill; in the case of the NSF, he would have informed scientists that the appropriation was in trouble long before the House Appropriations Committee voted on it. Second, he is a technician who knows best how to direct the action of a group of citizens with a common interest in petitioning Congress. In this case, members of the House Appropriations Committee would have been made aware last spring of the interest of voters in their districts, and of the scientific fraternity as a whole, in this appropriation. Third, he is a liaison man between the people he represents and Congressmen. He gives the Congressmen an understanding of the problems and aspirations of his people insofar as they relate to legislative action. He educates the Congressmen. In this case, he would have made members of the House Appropriations Committee see the vital importance of fundamental research and of the need to train new scientists.

When this note appears, the fight on the NSF appropriation will be over. Science will have won or lost. But science will still need a lobbyist. Every scientist is aware of the increasing interlocking of science and everyday events, of science and politics. An ever-increasing proportion of scientists work for the government, or on contract with the government. What scientists do has a direct bearing on the immediate political and economic future of all people, and their legislative representatives are therefore directly concerned. Bills to hamper scientific freedom, bills that may misdirect natural scientific trends—these and possibly some good bills will be coming up spasmodically. Congress needs to act intelligently and with a background of knowledge. Whether we like it or not, only a lobbyist can provide that knowledge and intelligence.

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