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Congressional Seminars

Some members of Congress have become increasingly concerned over the disparity between the meagerness of their knowledge of science and the size of the research and development budgets they must consider and the number of scientific issues involved in legislation upon which they must take action. Indeed, the wish for better communication has persuaded some congressmen that we should have a Department of Science and Technology headed by a cabinet officer who could serve as a major source of information about many of the government's scientific activities. The fact that the head of the new Office of Science and Technology will be available for testimony before congressional committees was one of the features that commended the establishment of this office to Congress.

But there are other, less formal, ways of finding out what is going on in science. Several committees have invited a scientist or a panel of scientists to come and talk with them, not about pending appropriations or specific legislation, and not in the formal and sometimes forbidding atmosphere of a "hearing," but informally, about the speaker's area of research, where it is heading, what has been accomplished, and what problems are being encountered.

Notable among these seminars was one arranged last spring by the National Science Foundation at the request of the Subcommittee on Independent Offices of the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations. For several days, a series of speakers talked with the subcommittee about research in physics, astrophysics, biochemistry, genetics, and psychology, and about science education, the economics of research and education, and the problems of planning future scientific resources.

Even less formal, and carried out around a dinner table instead of in a Capitol Hill committee room, have been two series of seminars arranged by the Brookings Institution and the AAAS for a group of 25 to 30 members of the House of Representatives. At each session a speaker has described and answered questions about his own research area: astronomy, genetics, meteorology, operations research, virology, learning, cryogenics, or something else. A third series of these informal meetings will be given next winter.

Sitting in on these discussions—for there is always lively discussion—gives an impression of greater and better informed interest in scientific topics than one could have expected a decade ago. Members of the congressional audience may not know the details of a research area, but they ask searching questions, questions that usually center on the applications and the public policy implications of whatever topic the speaker has chosen. Thus the congressmen increase their knowledge of science and of how scientists think and work, and the scientists gain a greater appreciation of congressional concern with the work in which they are engaged. Both benefit, and the seminar is proving to be a useful channel of communication between the scientist and the legislator.—D.W.