

A New Chairman for Senate Science Panel

Lawyer Slade Gorton, replacing Schmitt, gears up for big role in science policy, especially at NSF

Until recently, when officials from universities and federal agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) argued for more research dollars before the Senate subcommittee on science, technology, and space, they had a strong ally in its chairman, Harrison H. Schmitt, a former astronaut. He was a politician who spoke their language and supported their goals. But Schmitt was defeated in a reelection race in New Mexico last fall. Now when science officials go before the subcommittee, they will face a new chairman, freshman Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), a lawyer who is virtually unknown to the scientific community.

Nonetheless, Gorton is making his presence felt among congressional science policy-makers. He has already made a bid for equal authority over the budget of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Jurisdiction over NSF is now in the hands of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, headed by Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and ranking minority member Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.).

In a recent interview with *Science*, Gorton explained his interest in the chairmanship and stated that he plans to play an important role in shaping science policy.

The 55-year-old senator acknowledges that he has a tough act to follow. "Senator Schmitt had an obvious advantage of having a professional career in science," Gorton said in his office in the new Hart building. "He could delve into the smallest and most technical detail. I'm not going to pretend that I can do that. We are going to be generalists."

Gorton has no special training in science but has a solid background in law. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa in international relations from Dartmouth and went on to receive his law degree from Columbia, again graduating with honors. The Chicago native then moved to Washington, the home state of his wife. He became a leader in state politics, eventually becoming state attorney general from 1969 to 1981. His biggest political coup was his 1980 victory over incumbent Democratic Senator Warren G. Magnuson, who had served in the Senate for 36 years.

Despite his lack of experience in science matters, Gorton says he took the chairmanship as a fresh challenge. He

chose, for example, not to go to the Judiciary Committee because "I knew everything there was to know." Gorton said that science "is the future. It's dealing with frontiers in industry and technology and to me, that's an interesting challenge." The science subcommittee also deals with aerospace matters, a mainstay of Washington's economy.

Gorton has not been active in scientific issues either in state or national politics, except for legislation on radioactive waste disposal. In 1981, he successfully blocked a federal bill that would allow low-level waste generated anywhere in the nation to be dumped at Hanford, Washington. Gorton substituted a measure that would allow only Western states to bury radwaste in Washington.

Although he states that he is "firmly pro-nuclear," Gorton has distanced himself from the financially troubled nuclear power industry in the state of Washington, which has been pressing for a federal bailout. Gorton has labeled the problem a state, not a federal, matter, a move that makes his Senate colleagues happy.

The senator already has some firm ideas on broad scientific issues. Researchers no doubt will find it reassuring that Gorton believes basic research should be strongly supported. He reiterated several times that the pursuit of knowledge "is important, even when there's no predictable payout."

Gorton, whose constituency includes the Boeing Company, remarked that NASA also "is very, very important. I want to enhance and preserve its lead in the world. We need to retain that leadership." According to a subcommittee aide, Gorton has not yet raised the subject of aerospace with the staff.

Several actions by Gorton already seem to underscore his pledge to take an active role in science policy. He has kept on a key staff aide, Dennis Barnes, who advised Schmitt during the past 2 years. Barnes is a former associate provost for research at the University of Virginia. Gorton has also introduced a science education bill that would provide training for high school mathematics and science teachers and support new university faculty, especially in engineering, and more cost sharing of academic research and education with industry.

His most significant action took place

on 3 and 9 March. On those 2 days, the subcommittee held hearings, ostensibly to discuss the "plans and programs" of the NSF for fiscal year 1984. Gorton, in effect, signaled the Labor and Human Resources Committee that he wanted shared authority over the foundation, which has been under the sole jurisdiction of Labor and Human Resources since 1977.

Gorton is continuing a fight initiated by Schmitt, who saw NSF as part of the subcommittee's natural province. Indeed, the subcommittee and its parent, the Commerce Committee, have broad responsibilities in science and technology. The subcommittee already oversees NASA, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the National Bureau of Standards. The full committee reviews the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and, under Senate rules, "shall study and review, on a comprehensive basis, all matters relating to science and technology. . . ."

For the past 2 years, Schmitt held reauthorization hearings on NSF and introduced his own budget bills in spite of the fact that he lacked jurisdiction under the Senate rules. Although the bills did not differ substantially from those of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, the turf battle bottled up the legislation. No reauthorization bills reached the Senate floor for 2 years, although the House passed legislation annually. The net effect is that the appropriations committees, which have limited staff resources to devote to NSF affairs, have set policy for the foundation. One House science subcommittee aide remarked, "I wish those guys would get their act together."

Last year, Schmitt offered to trade part of his subcommittee's authority over the Toxics Substances Control Act for partial jurisdiction over NSF, but Kennedy and Hatch said no. "It was given as a token," said a Gorton subcommittee aide. "We found out that Kennedy wanted more than just a symbolic trade."

Gorton said he simply wants to share authority, not gain total control over, NSF. Asked how much he would fight for shared control, Gorton said, "I don't really know." He added, "If we do our job right, we'll have significant influence" over NSF.—MARJORIE SUN