FEDERAL LOBBYING

Societies Drop Opposition to Station

Scientific societies have long been among the most vocal opponents of the space station. Fourteen societies signed a statement opposing the station in 1991; another 10 signed on in 1992. But last month, when members of Congress geared up for another assault on the international space laboratory, their scientist allies deserted them. Most scientific groups were silent, and two—the American Astronomical Society and the Planetary Society—had even changed their position and supported the station.

The station survived: A vote in the House of Representatives to eliminate $2.1 billion for the station in the upcoming fiscal year was defeated by the surprisingly comfortable margin of 278 to 155 (*Science*, 8 July, p. 180). The lead-up to the vote represents a case study of how the politics of science are played in Washington.

Why did the societies change their tune? For one thing, few groups have felt entirely comfortable weighing in against the station. A few years ago, when National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officials cited the opportunity to do science in a low-gravity environment as a major reason to build the station, many societies felt compelled to point out that as a scientific project, the station was a poor value for the money. But this year, NASA didn't package the station as a scientific venture, emphasizing instead jobs, the chance to tap into Russian technology, and the potential to inspire young people.

Another reason many societies sat out the debate this year is that opposing the space station has always been fraught with risk. For one thing, some societies in past years have been criticized by members who support the station or who felt the issue was tangential to their professional concerns. After the American Society for Cell Biology came out against the project in 1992, for example, some life scientists complained because they believed the station would be valuable for biological research, and others questioned why the society should be commenting at all about a project on which its members had little knowledge. "It has really been a contentious issue," says one official.

Opposing the station also put the societies at odds with powerful political forces, including the President, key congressional leaders, and the aerospace industry. Several society heads report veiled threats from Congress that opposing the station could hurt the chances of other space-science missions. And NASA administrator Daniel Goldin's "reputation for vindictiveness is well established," says one.

Robert Park, head of the Washington office of the American Physical Society (APS), has traditionally been the driving force behind the scientific opposition to the station. But the station's political durability finally did him in. "It's hard to mobilize people year after year," he says. "You can get them to sign up one year, but then they hear the complaints. They take a little heat, and then they don't want to take it any more." This year, APS and a few of its sister societies within the American Institute of Physics were the only scientific groups to publicly oppose the station.

Free sailing. The space station is no longer a target for most U.S. scientific societies.

They were not the only societies to take a stance, however. Space-science groups also spoke up—but in favor of the project. The Planetary Society, whose membership includes non-scientists, had opposed the station in congressional testimony prior to last autumn. But in June it wrote a letter to a leading congressional opponent saying that "the space station is not only vital to the continued development of the American space industry, but it has also become a crucial part of our foreign policy." The society also reasoned that the demise of the station could undermine NASA's other activities, turning it into "a huge agency without much of a mission."

For the American Astronomical Society, the shift has been more gradual. In 1991, the society organized a letter-writing campaign against the station, but this year it wrote a letter to Vice President Al Gore describing the station as one of several "noble and worthy investments for the future." Executive director Peter Boyce explains that the society simply decided it was no longer politic to oppose the station. "When [NASA] stopped pitching it as a science project, it kind of cut the ground out from under us," he says. At that point, he adds, scientific opposition "wasn't politically realistic. I think [the opposition of other societies] really hurt the scientific community."

Boyce denies a rumor that the society had traded its support for the station in 1992 for a promise of $10 million in construction funds for the Keck II telescope. But he acknowledges that it is susceptible to political arm-twisting. "The Administration really wants to do the space station, and over the years they did get to us," Boyce says. "I learned that you just don't get anywhere by trying to cut somebody else's program to help your own." He says he learned one other lesson: "It just didn't make sense to wage a battle that didn't look winnable."

–Christopher Anderson

INTERNATIONAL FUSION PROJECT

Departing ITER Head Predicts Trouble

When they launched a joint effort 4 years ago to build an experimental fusion reactor, the world's leading industrial powers were well aware that they faced an immense challenge: It was the most technologically ambitious fusion project ever attempted, and it demanded an unprecedented degree of international cooperation and coordination. Last week, the outgoing director of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) warned, however, that the project's four participants—the United States, Russia, Japan, and the European Union—haven't yet faced up to the magnitude of the task. The project, he warned, will be delayed "indefinitely" unless it is restructured and given nearly double its current staff.

On 30 June, Paul-Henri Rebut said he would step down as director of the $10-billion project after mounting criticism by the ITER Council of his management practices (*Science*, 17 June, p. 1655). But last week, in an interview with *Science*, Rebut made it clear that he has no intention of going quietly. He said the project's organizational structure has created "endless difficulties."

ITER is a creature of its four partners, operating through a joint council. Its lack of independence—ITER does not legally exist on its own and has no control over its finances—undermines the authority of the director, he says, and leads to an inefficient "design by committee. To get things done is always a fight. It's impossible to work under these conditions."

Staffing has been a major bone of contention between Rebut and the ITER council. Rebut believes the project will need three or four times its current level of 50 computer-aided design (CAD) workstation operators.