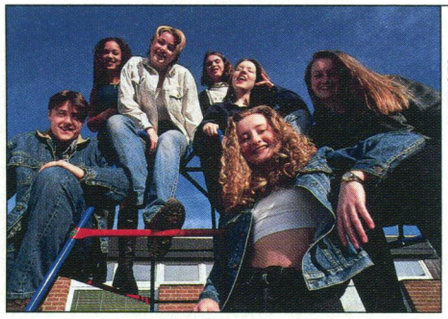
SCIENCESCOPE

edited by JOCELYN KAISER



UNIPHOTO

Teen scene. Bill could hinder studies of kids.

Hope for Milder Bill on Student Surveys

Social scientists, who have been campaigning to blunt the effects of a House bill which they say would jeopardize surveys on adolescent behavior, are encouraged by signs that the Senate may entertain a more moderate proposal early next year.

In February, according to staffers, the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee will take up the Family Privacy Preservation Act (H.R. 1271), a bill that originated in the Republican "Contract with America" and passed the House by a wide margin in April (*Science*, 19 May, p. 967). The House version would require written consent from parents before minors could participate in any federally funded survey, potentially interfering with surveys administered at school. The Research and Privacy Coalition, a group of 35 organizations of scientists, doctors, teachers, and parents that formed in October to oppose the bill, has been lobbying the Senate committee to tone down some of the bill's restrictive language. And now, according to coalition leader Susan Persons of the American Psychological Society, committee members Carl Levin (D–MI) and John Glenn (D–OH) are planning to introduce amendments that would do just that.

Most federal surveys currently cannot be given without parental notification, but if a child's parent doesn't explicitly refuse, consent is implied. Under the House bill, a failure to respond is a denial. Supporters of H.R. 1271 say such surveys deal with subjects—like sex, drugs, and suicide—that parents don't want their children exposed to. But social psychologist Lloyd Johnston of the University of Michigan testified at a Senate hearing last month that if prior written consent for such surveys were required, response rates would drop from 95% to 50%.

Clinton Science Plan: Don't Ask for Details

The White House is trumpeting its new 7-year balanced budget plan as good news for federal research, but it will be months before anyone knows just how upbeat the news will be. The plan, released 7 December, "makes more funding available for investing in science and technology than the Republican budget" vetoed by President Bill Clinton, according to a White House statement. But there's a catch: The numbers are secret.

Compared to the Republican plan, Clinton's proposal is kinder to basic research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, including its Mission to Planet Earth, the White House says. There's also more money for global-change research and environmental technology at the Environmental Protection Agency and for technology efforts at the Commerce Department. The latter programs are targeted by Republicans, while NSF and NIH budgets would change little under their plan.

But Clinton's proposed budget doesn't mean that agencies should expect a rosy future. A White House official says funding for the favored programs would lie between a freeze and an increase matching inflation—only slightly more than Republican projections for the agencies. Details, he adds, won't be available until Clinton's 1997 budget request reaches Capitol Hill in February.

MIT, NRC Faulted in Radiation Incident

Universities tend to bristle when the government tells them what to do, and that feeling was evident last week at a public meeting where the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) released its final report on the August poisoning of a biology postdoc at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). While the NRC concluded that lax compliance with its rules may have contributed to the incident and to MIT's 8-week delay in reporting it, NRC officials conceded that ambiguities in those rules were to blame as well.

Alhough the NRC found that Yuqing Li's ingestion of some 570 microcuries of the radioisotope phosphorus-32 likely resulted from "a deliberate act," the report also faults safety at MIT. Li's lab—run by Nobelist Susumu Tonegawa—lacked proper controls on radioactive tracers, such as locks on freezers, said the NRC's John Glenn. Glenn criticized MIT's Radiation Protection Office for failing to catch these flaws, and he charged that the MIT panel overseeing the office had not met at required intervals in 1993 and 1994.

MIT radiation chief Frank Massé, however, countered that the panel, which includes "very experienced people," skipped only one meeting. "If calendar timing is the primary issue here, we could go to less senior members of the faculty, who obviously have less busy schedules," Massé said. He also challenged Glenn's claim that dosimetry data suggested Li's exposure could exceed the 5 rem NRC limit for radiation workers, requiring that MIT notify NRC within 30 days.

Glenn admitted that the period for measuring such exposures is unclear in NRC rules. Nor do the rules support an October NRC notice requiring institutions to report within 2 days suspected misuse of radioisotopes, he said. Fixes for such problems may be discussed at a meeting of NRC commissioners next week.

Union Laments the State of Russian Science

Leaders of Russia's scientific trade union, who this week blasted President Boris Yeltsin's government for deep cuts in state spending on basic research, are planning to appeal for a large boost in science funding—from 1.5% of Russia's gross domestic spending in 1995 to between 2% and 2.5% in 1996.

The Trade Union for Workers of the Russian Academy of Sciences (PRRAN), meeting in Moscow earlier this week, has drawn up a resolution to be submitted to the Yeltsin government later this month. The resolution is meant to influence both Yeltsin and the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, which is up for election on 17 December. The Ministry of Finance has already pledged to raise basic science spending by 50% in 1996—in line with PRRAN's appeal—but many scientists are skeptical.

Speaking on behalf of PRRAN, which represents 96% of the academy's 160,000 scientists, chemist Granit Syomin of the Institute of Elemental-Organic Compounds in Moscow told *Science* that he views the present government as biased against basic research. This is, he says, "a tragic mistake." Russia has spent just $73 million on basic science this year, most of which has been eaten up by utility bills for academy institutes and small salaries for researchers.

Syomin adds that the academy must be better funded to preserve Russia's scientific community, which has lost a third of its members since the Soviet Union's breakup. But many Western experts—as well as younger Russian scientists—disagree: They argue that the country's sprawling scientific establishment needs to shrink further. All eyes will be on the new Duma to see whether it chooses retrenchment or restoration for Russian science.