

U.S. SCIENCE POLICY

Clintons Push for R&D Boost

President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary took a personal interest in science last week, hosting a series of events that touted the importance of research. The events—ranging from a rare meeting between Clinton and his outside R&D advisers to a lecture by Cambridge University cosmologist Stephen Hawking televised live from the East Room of the White House—were meant to underscore the Administration's continued support for increased science spending in 1999.

The R&D budget proposals may need all the help they can get from such activities. Much of the Administration's proposed increase hinges on passage of legislation that would tap the coffers of the tobacco industry, but congressional Republicans are deeply divided over that strategy. Meanwhile, legislation that recommends doubling civilian R&D spending over the next 10 years has garnered little support in the Senate and faces opposition in the House.

The First Couple's campaign for science peaked on 6 March. In the morning, Clinton spent nearly half an hour with his Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology discussing energy R&D, environment, and education issues, according to participants. Min-

utes before that gathering, Hillary Rodham Clinton met with science reporters to emphasize the role of science and technology in the third millennium. She was followed by Vera Rubin, a Carnegie Institution astronomer and National Science Board member, and Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

That evening, Hawking spoke on the origins of the universe and the future of genetic engineering. He also chided the president for cancellation of the Superconducting Super Collider. The Clintons then hosted a reception attended by what the First Lady called "the largest gathering ever of American physicists" in the White House. For over 2 hours, the Clintons chatted about R&D issues with their guests.

So far, however, Congress does not appear to be paying much attention to the Clintons' use of the bully pulpit. Some members oppose the tobacco deal, and few see it as a vehicle to fund science. Some senators, including budget chair Pete Domenici (R-NM), have said that any tobacco windfall should go to Medicare,

while House Republicans are urging that the money be used to lower taxes. Jack Gibbons, the president's retiring science adviser, says extra R&D funding is possible without a tobacco deal, but a senior Administration official says he fears NIH would then be the only research agency to get a major boost.

Science lobbyists are pushing for passage of a measure, sponsored by Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX), that urges Congress to double civilian R&D spending by 2008. But the bill so far has only 11 co-sponsors, with 51 votes needed for passage. Gramm and other Senate supporters "are not really pessimistic—they feel they've made no effort yet," says Allan Bromley, a Yale physicist and former presidential science adviser who backs the effort, adding that he anticipates a companion measure in the House.

But a key player in the House, Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), chair of the Science Committee, thinks such a bill would be a mistake. "My advice is to cool it," he told lobbyists on 5 March. "I can't go to the Budget Committee and ask them to give scientists more without saying what we will get for it." Sensenbrenner says that "first we need to reach a consensus on priorities."

—Andrew Lawler

With reporting by Jeffrey Mervis.



GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

Tuition Fees Fight Stalls Reform Law

FRANKFURT—Legislation designed to make German universities more flexible, more autonomous, and more competitive in the international market for students has stumbled at the final hurdle before becoming law. On 6 March, members of the Bundesrat—the upper house of Germany's parliament, made up of representatives of its 16 states—rejected the federal framework law on universities, known as the Hochschulrahmengesetz (HRG), because of a disagreement on whether to allow public universities to charge tuition fees. The matter has now been passed to a parliamentary mediation committee, but university officials are concerned that the clash could delay the whole university reform process.

Increasing student numbers and deteriorating conditions at the universities have made national legislation necessary (*Science*, 2 February 1996, p. 683 and 12 July 1996, p. 172). The HRG will allow universities to adopt internationally recognized degrees, such as bachelor's and master's degrees, to make them more attractive to foreign students. The new law also puts a more effective cap on the amount of time students can take to graduate—German students are currently among the slowest to graduate in Europe—with a 5-year

maximum for a master's degree.

The bill also gives universities some freedom to select which students to admit. Students are currently allocated by a central agency called the ZVS, but the HRG will allow universities to select up to 20% of their students for popular courses, including medicine, biology, economics, and law, on the basis of high school results, other qualifications, and interviews. The flip side is that universities will be regularly assessed on their performance in research, education, and the support of young scientists, and their public funding will be adjusted according to how they score.

Although all the main political parties agreed on the draft HRG last year, the Social Democrats have since insisted that it should include a nationwide ban on tuition fees for public universities. The Social Democrat-led opposition voted against the bill in the Bundestag last month. Last week's vote was to be the final approval before the HRG became law on 1 April, but in the Social Democrat-dominated Bundesrat it became a hostage to the tuition fee dispute.

Most states are opposed to fees, but some, such as Berlin and Baden-Württemberg, want to impose them for at least some students.

Opinion in the universities is divided. "The German universities need [about \$2 billion] to improve their students' education and libraries. The states do not have that money; therefore the problem can only be solved by the introduction of tuition fees," says Peter Glotz, rector of the recently founded Erfurt University near Jena. The president of the university rectors' conference, Klaus Landfried, has suggested a moratorium on tuition fees to keep the HRG on track. Fees could be introduced later, once a nationwide scholarship and loan system is in place to ensure that students are not excluded from higher education.

With the HRG now in limbo, the federal government has declared that it does not need approval by the Bundesrat and can force the HRG through. In response, the Social Democrat state governments are threatening to appeal to the Federal Constitutional Court. However, during last week's Bundesrat debate, education and research minister Jürgen Rüttgers said he would seriously consider the proposal for a moratorium on tuition fees. With the federal government showing some willingness to compromise, university officials still hope they will not lose the HRG.

—Sabine Steghaus-Kovac

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