

Advisory Meetings: Confidentiality Dropped, Public Is Invited

On 5 June, President Nixon ordered all federal agencies to open meetings of their advisory bodies—estimated to be 2000 strong—to the public. Executive Order 11671, in one bureaucrat's words, "sent shock waves through the government."

As yet, officials of Washington science agencies agree, the scientific community at large seems unaware of this order, which will probably open most of its advisory meetings to public scrutiny. Gone are the days when scientists could enjoy the security that comes from rendering advice in relative seclusion. One White House official speculates that the days when scientists from both sides of the political fence willingly advised the government may be gone too. "There are a lot of Democratic scientists to whom we go for advice," he said. "Many of them might not want it widely known that they're consorting with a Republican administration. But we would hate to lose their expertise."

In fact, agency heads at this stage do not even know precisely how the Executive order will be implemented. Certainly, meetings of some bodies will remain closed. Study sections at the National Institutes of Health, the advisory groups that approve or reject grant applications, probably will continue to function in private. And it appears likely that those portions of any advisory meeting during which individual research proposals and their funding are being judged will remain safe from the public eye. As for the rest, nobody knows for sure.

The question of opening advisory committee meetings has been around since the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1967, but no action has been taken in this particular area until now. However, several bills on the subject have been in the hopper, both in the House and the Senate. There is some speculation about whether these bills will remain viable now. Spokesmen for the Administration are betting against it, claiming that Nixon's order does what the legislation would. However, their opinion is not universally shared.

Congressional staffers who have been working on the various pieces of legislation charge that the Executive order is full of loopholes that legislation could plug. (Some might be challenged by consumer groups, reporters, or others who believe they have been unfairly denied access to a meeting, but such challenges have yet to come.) Under the order as it stands, for example, agency heads "may establish reasonable limitations as to numbers of persons who may attend [advisory meetings] and the nature and extent of their participation, if any, in such meetings." There are, in fact, a number of specific exemptions to the requirement for open meetings, including discussions of various financial matters, trade secrets (a matter of great concern to the Food and Drug Administration), inter- or intra-agency correspondence, personnel files, and others. In addition, the issue of how the public is to be notified of advisory meetings has not been resolved, and congressional aides believe that a portion of a new bill could speak to that problem. Under the Executive order, agency heads are now required to announce their meetings either in the *Federal Register*, a document not widely read by the general public, to put it mildly, or "as appropriate, by publication in local media." At present, agency heads are likely to stick to announcements in the *Federal Register*, although pressures for more generally accessible notification could precipitate a change.

Just what the ultimate effect of this change in policy, which was by no means directed specifically at scientific advisory groups, will be is, of course, anybody's guess. Initially, officials fear that the loss of privacy may deaden scientists' willingness to speak out, but, as one man said, "They may learn to handle this more easily than we might think." The one thing that is certain is that the public will have easier access to the workings of advisory bodies than it ever has before.—B.J.C.

In fact, the changes do not affect all of the research councils. The largest of the five, the Science Research Council, which supports physical science, is not affected at all. Its budget (£55.7 million in 1971–1972) remains unchanged. The smallest, the Social Science Research Council (£4.1 million), also remains unscathed. The net result is that the total research council budget will be cut from £115 million to £95 million by progressive stages and that much of the money taken away with one hand will be given back with the other. To American scientists, accustomed to much more violent shifts in the science budget, this must seem like easy street.

Adopting another of Rothschild's recommendations, the white paper announces that the departments will be setting up scientific organizations of their own, under a new post of Chief Scientist. The first of these appointments, in the DHSS, is expected to be announced soon. The idea is to strengthen the departments' scientific expertise, which has been allowed to wither away as the research councils monopolized the research budgets. The British scientist has paid for his independence with a signal lack of influence in Whitehall. If the changes do anything to reverse this, they will have achieved something.

The government is also talking (as all governments do) about improving the flow of scientists in and out of public service, from industry into universities and vice versa. This desirable end has been frustrated in the past by difficulties such as the nontransferability of pension schemes and by a natural suspicion of the outsiders. Jellicoe announced that a high-level "task force" (which presumably differs from a committee in name only) was being assembled under the chairmanship of Herman Bondi "to make recommendations and see that they are carried out." "I personally attach great importance to this task," Jellicoe said.

Although the changes have been justified in the name of public participation in policy-making, that participation will have to be expressed through the departments, not always as responsive as they might be to public feeling. The concept of a top-level science policy committee with lay as well as scientific members has apparently been considered but rejected. The science budget will be distributed by a new council (replacing the existing Council for Scientific Policy), on which all of the in-