

An Epidemic of Politics

Americans have come to accept the role of politics in the appointment of certain kinds of public officials. Few of us are surprised, though some may be disappointed, when a federal judgeship is awarded because the candidate passes a litmus test of loyalty to some principle important to the president's party. Scientific appointments, however, should rest on more objective criteria of training, ability, and performance—at least, that's what this community has always believed. Thus we can view with relative calm the interrogation of a future secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) about his views on abortion. But it seems out of place when appointees to scientific advisory committees are subjected to tests of political loyalty. And study section membership, which involves peer review of scientific proposals, surely ought to be free of such barriers to entry.

During the past fall, *Science* published several news stories related to this practice. One involved the wholesale replacement of members of the advisory committee to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Center for Environmental Health, without consultation with the center's director. Another involved CDC's Advisory Committee on Lead Poisoning and Prevention. Still another covered the National Human Research Protections Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing. Perhaps most telling was the revamping of the membership of the study section that evaluates grants for the study of workplace injuries for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. Advisory committees might have been vulnerable to occasional stacking of this kind in the past, though it is a bad idea. But study sections?

The present epidemic, in which advisory committees are shut down and reassembled with new members, and candidates are subjected to loyalty tests, seems old hat to some observers. "After all, that's fairly standard practice," we have been told by officials in HHS. Well, it isn't—or at least it wasn't. What's unusual about the current epidemic is not that the Bush administration examines candidates for compatibility with its "values." It's how deep the practice cuts; in particular, the way it now invades areas once immune to this kind of manipulation.

In this space in the 25 October 2002 issue, *Science* published an editorial by David Michaels and a group of colleagues. Several were distinguished former public servants who had been involved with some of the committees in question, and they brought a useful personal-experience perspective to the matter. Their piece was a story in itself, but what followed was even more interesting. It loosed a volley of letters to us in which scientists told of similar experiences. Here are two examples:

A nominee for the National Institutes of Health Muscular Dystrophy Research Coordinating Committee is vetted by a staffer from the Office of White House Liaison, Health and Human Services. After being asked about her views on various Bush administration policies, none of them related to the work of the committee, she is asked whether she supports the president's embryonic stem cell policy.

A distinguished professor of psychiatry and psychology receives a call from the White House about his nomination to serve on the National Council on Drug Abuse. His interviewer declares that he must vet him to "determine whether he held any views that might be embarrassing to the president." A series of questions follows, into which the interviewer interpolates a running score, viz.: "You're two for three; the president opposes needle exchange on moral grounds regardless of the outcome." He then asks whether the candidate had voted for Bush, and on being informed that he had not, asked: "Why didn't you support the president?"

This stuff would be prime material for a Robin Williams comedy shtick, but it really isn't funny. The purpose of advisory committees is to provide balanced, thoughtful advice to the policy process; it is better not to put the policy up front. As for study sections, deciding which research projects to support has always been a matter for objective peer review. Political preferences are for the pork barrel, and the Congress is already doing too much of that. Indeed, the applicable statute for all this—the Federal Advisory Committee Act—specifically requires that committees be balanced and "not inappropriately influenced by the appointing authority." It would be a good idea for HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson and the White House Personnel Office to read the law, and then follow it.

Donald Kennedy

Scientific appointments should rest on more objective criteria.