NEWS

Climate first for Obama transition team

Appointments to key energy positions should reveal the new president's priorities.

After eight years out in the cold, Democrats in Washington DC are rushing to warm themselves by the White House fireplace. And although research advocates may have to wait to see major science-policy positions in the new administration filled, a sense of the next president's priorities and style of governance is starting to emerge.

Barack Obama, who defeated John McCain on 4 November for the presidency, swiftly set up a transition team to advise on the hundreds of jobs at senior levels in government that the administration will need filled, many of them, ideally, before the presidential inauguration on 20 January 2009. Running the team are John Podesta, the last of President Bill Clinton's four White House chiefs of staff; Valerie Jarrett, a long-time Obama confidante who is chief executive of The Habitat Company, a Chicago real-estate business; and Peter Rouse, who serves as Obama's chief of staff in the Senate. On 6 November Obama appointed congressman Rahm Emanuel (Democrat, Illinois) to be his White House chief of staff. Announcements of Cabinet positions are expected over the next couple of weeks. The secretaries of the treasury and defence are considered the highest priority, and former Harvard University president Lawrence Summers may reassume the treasury position he held under Clinton. Robert Gates, the incumbent defence secretary, may be asked to stay on, a move that would confirm the team's stated willingness to look at Republicans and independents as well as Democrats.

Podesta, who trained in psychology as

an undergraduate before going on to study law, founded the liberal think tank Center for American Progress (CAP) in 2003. The Washington-based group includes a number of leading scholars in science, technology and the environment, including Thomas Kalil — another Clinton-White-House veteran, now special assistant to the chancellor for science and technology at the University of California, Berkeley — who served as a science adviser to the Obama campaign.

The transition team declines interviews, but the CAP may provide some clues to how certain issues may fare under an Obama presidency — chief among them energy and climate. In a book published this week, *Change for America: A Progressive Blueprint for the 44th President*, the think tank outlines its case for a 'national energy council' that would coordinate energy policy among the various agencies and departments with a stake in such issues.

The creation of such a council, under an 'energy czar', would not have the same radical restructuring effect on government as that intended in the United Kingdom's recent creation of a cabinet-level Department of Energy and Climate Change, but it would provide a coordinating role not seen before. "I think it's a great idea," says Bill Becker, a climate policy expert at the University of Colorado in Denver. "A council like this can ensure that comprehensive climate action is delegated to the agencies

and that they are coordinated in carrying out a climate action plan."

In the Clinton White House, Vice-President Al Gore took on a de facto role as climate czar. Incoming Vice-President Joe Biden seems unlikely to follow him in this, although he has worked extensively on climate issues as chair of the Senate foreign-relations committee, and it would not be surprising to see

him playing a role in the climate negotiations slated for Copenhagen in December 2009, as Gore did in Kyoto. Tim Wirth, a former senator who led climate efforts in the US State Department during the first Clinton administration, says that Podesta, as chief architect of the plan, would automatically leap to the top of any list of people who might assume the suggested czarship — although whether that is what Podesta wants remains unclear.

Other advisers who might be in the frame for the job, or for a seat on the council, would be Dan Kammen, of the University of California, Berkeley, and possibly John Holdren, of Harvard University. For energy- and environment-related cabinet appointments, such as secretary of energy and head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), insiders poo-poo some of the high-profile names that have been bandied about for these jobs, including lawyer and environmental activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Republican governor of California. More likely contenders

"The top question on many researchers' minds will be the next presidential science adviser."

The congressional outcome

In last week's elections, 35 Senate seats and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives were contested. Democrats increased their majorities in both houses, although they did not attain the 60 seats in the Senate that would allow them to circumvent some opposition stalling tactics.

Bart Gordon (Democrat, Tennessee) and Ralph Hall (Republican, Texas) will continue to serve as ranking majority and minority members of the House Committee on Science and Technology. The three scientists

who serve in the House of Representatives — Democrat Rush Holt of New Jersey, Republican Vern Ehlers of Michigan, and Democrat Bill Foster of Illinois — were all re-elected. But Democrat Nick Lampson of Texas, a big supporter of NASA, lost his seat after the boundaries of his district were redrawn.

Rearrangements, rather than comings and goings, may have the most effect on the Hill. In the House, liberal Representative Henry Waxman of California is trying to wrest control of the

energy and commerce committee from John Dingell of Michigan, the longest-serving member in the House, whose district includes a lot of America's troubled, subsidy-seeking auto industry. Waxman might push climate policy more fervently; Dingell, though, would be better placed to get industry on board. In the Senate, 90-year-old Robert Byrd of West Virginia has relinquished control of the appropriations committee, which allocates funding

John Dingell.

to science and other agencies. He will be replaced by Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, 84, also a Democrat, and Inouye's position as chair of the Commerce, Science and Transportation

Committee goes to Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia. Inouye, who wanted to be a surgeon before losing an arm in military service, has a demonstrated and geographically unsurprising interest in ocean research.

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Barack Obama could make key decisions sooner rather than later.

Executive orders

John Podesta (right), co-chair of the transition team, is already talking about how President-elect Obama might overturn executive

orders previously signed by President George W. Bush. Talking to Fox News on 9 November, Podesta called Bush's restrictions on stem-cell research and his opening of public lands to oil and gas drilling "not in the best interest of the country". Bush's stem-cell order, signed on 9 August 2001, prohibits federal funding from being used for research on human embryonic stem-cell lines derived after that date. Obama aides have reportedly already drafted wording to lift the order.

In other good news for stem-cell research, Michigan's Proposal 2 ballot initiative (see *Nature* **455**, 1154–1155; 2008) was approved by voters; Michigan researchers will now be able to legally derive human embryonic stem-cell lines.

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for EPA chief include New Jersey environmental chief Lisa Jackson and Massachusetts energy secretary Ian Bowles. Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell (Democrat) has been mentioned as a potential secretary of energy.

Whoever gets the EPA job could have a strong influence on how climate policy is implemented; last year, the Supreme Court ordered the agency to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. Obama campaigned on a promise to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050 using a cap-and-trade system that would generate US\$150 billion for clean-energy technologies; Robert Sussman — a former EPA deputy administrator who is now serving on the transition team — told *Nature* earlier this year that this would be a priority if Obama were elected. (Sussman declined interview requests last week.) In a recent interview with *New York* magazine, Emanuel pointed out that of the four areas an Obama administration would seek to reform — financial regulation, tax, health care and energy — energy was one where "you can do some things immediately".

Beyond the potential energy appointees, the top question on many researchers' minds will be the next presidential science adviser and head of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Obama has said his presidential science adviser will have the official status of an assistant to the president — something the current science adviser, John Marburger, has not been

granted. In the past, presidents have made this appointment anywhere from six weeks before the inauguration — Richard Nixon appointing Lee DuBridge — to five months after it — Bush appointing Marburger. Many researchers will want Obama to emulate Nixon in this (although not to go on to abolish the post completely, as Nixon did in a fit of pique in 1973), and on the campaign trail he said he would fill the position quickly.

There is no shortage of people offering advice on the subject. Last week, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), an advocacy group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, released a five-point checklist for science appointments. Francesca Grifo, director of the scientific integrity programme at the UCS, says that incoming appointees can do a few simple things to assure their staff members that science will have a place at the policy table; as an example she cites William Ruckelshaus, who on taking charge of the EPA in 1983 wrote a 'fishbowl' memo stating that all work would be done in complete transparency. Whether that is sufficient remains to be seen. "The big event is when the first scientist at an agency has research results that are controversial and tries to speak out," says Grifo. "What's going to happen to that first scientist?"

Other open positions in the Obama administration include directorship of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), from which Elias Zerhouni stepped down on 31 October, leaving

former deputy Raynard Kington in charge as acting director. The NIH is under the umbrella of the Department of Health and Human Services. Various names have been floated for the Cabinet-level position of chief of this department, including former presidential candidate Howard Dean, a physician and former Democratic governor of Vermont, where he greatly improved access to health care, and former South Dakota senator Tom Daschle.

One major position is not just open but new. Obama has promised to appoint the first-ever government chief technology officer to look after digital infrastructure, electronic delivery of government services and other high-tech issues. Names rumoured to be under discussion include more or less everyone in the Internet business that people outside it have ever heard of, including Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google; Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com; Bill Joy, formerly of Sun Microsystems; Vint Cerf, one of the Internet's original architects; and Steve Ballmer of Microsoft. Technology advisers have played a prominent role in the early days after Obama's election — Schmidt was standing by his side during his first press conference as president-elect, and is also part of the economics transition team.

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Have your say on who should assume the top science positions at <http://tinyurl.com/5sjd4e>.