Obituary

George Brown (1920–99)

Political champion of science in the United States

'Statesman of science' and 'Mr Science' were the honorifics often applied to George Brown, the Democrat congressman from California who died on 16 July, at the age of 79, following heart surgery. But neither of the titles, nor the official positions he held in the House of Representatives, conveyed the special role that the bear-like, cigar-chewing Brown long occupied in Washington science politics. If politicians rated battle ribbons, Brown would have earned a chestful during his 18 terms in the House. But he equally merited recognition as a homespun philosopher, unrestrained when given an opportunity to tell scientists to think less about budgets and more about social responsibility.

Several years ago, after delivering one of these homilies, Brown added, "At this point, many of you are probably rolling your eyes and wondering how someone who has spent the last 30 years enmeshed in the hardheaded world of science politics can take such utopian ramblings seriously, let alone espouse them in public". The answer is that Brown savoured both utopian ramblings and hardheaded politics. In the 1970s, as a member of what was then the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Representatives, he helped create the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment; he then served on its governing board for two decades, and vainly tried to save it from the axe when Republicans took control of congress in 1995. After a petulant President Richard Nixon abolished the White House science office in 1973, for what Nixon perceived as political disloyalty by his science advisors, Brown was in the vanguard of a successful movement to restore the office during the Ford administration.

In 1990, Brown took the chairmanship of what is now called the Science Committee of the House of Representatives, in which position he emerged as the scientific eminence of Capitol Hill. Although sometimes hinting he was acting against his better judgement, Brown saved the space station from political oblivion on several occasions. He backed the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) to the bitter end, but could not overcome the political backlash against the project's multi-billion-dollar overruns at a time of government retrenchment.

In a departure from standard congressional practice, Brown declined to exploit his guardianship over science for his own electoral benefit, although he lived a precarious political existence, retaining his seat sometimes by wafer-thin margins — 996 out of 110,000 votes in 1996. His congressional district, encompassing most of San Bernadino, east of Los Angeles, was never the destination for any significant sums of federal research money. Brown piously refrained from the pork-barrel tactics employed by many of his colleagues to deliver science money to the folks back home — competitive peer review, he insisted, was the proper means for distributing precious research money.

Brown wryly observed that scientists flocked to see him in all seasons but one — election time, when beneficiaries of other congressmen would demonstrate their fealty with campaign contributions and public endorsements. But not the scientists, said Brown, pointing to their aloofness from the grubby side of politics. An exception occurred in 1992 when, still fresh in the chairmanship of the Science Committee, Brown faced another uphill re-election battle. Some 30 mandarins of science, hurriedly organized as the Friends of George Brown, raised $40,000 for his campaign, among them Nobel prizewinner Leon Lederman, who declared: "The fact that so many of our nation's best and brightest scientists want George Brown re-elected is a testament to Chairman Brown's stature within the scientific community". At the time, the SSC, the dream-machine of Lederman and his colleagues in particle physics, was moving to its ill-fated climax on Capitol Hill.

First, and most of all, Brown was an enthusiast for science, extolling the benefits it could provide for humanity — if only scientists and politicians would shape up. Although he was a lifelong Democrat, Brown never hesitated to attack President Bill Clinton for what Brown regarded as inexcusable neglect of science. As for the Republicans, he attacked them, with or without good cause. At times, he sounded like a bellicose Luddite, warning of the "literally mindless process of technological evolution and economic expansion". But whatever he said, the science establishment, and high-tech industry, knew that George Brown was a devoted friend on Capitol Hill.

In a Congress stacked with ideologically, and sartorially, prim legislators drawn from law and business, the rumpled-looking Brown — the oldest of the 435 members of the House of Representatives when he died — was a throwback to a grittier, more individualistic time in US politics. He was born in Holtville, California, in 1920. As a Quaker, he was initially a conscientious objector during the Second World War, and served in a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Oregon. He also worked to mobilize public opposition to the wartime internment of Japanese-Americans. He later entered the army and served as junior officer for four years. After the war, he studied at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he received a bachelor's degree in 'industrial physics', and later entered politics as a city councillor in Monterey Park, California.

Although he came to be best known for his political interests in science, he was also a strong supporter of civil rights legislation, and (as he often said with pride) he voted against every defence spending bill during the Vietnam war.

Several years ago, George Brown was called to the platform at a meeting of scientists to receive yet another award for service to science. After the applause subsided, holding aloft the engraved plaque, he commented, "I can't say this award is entirely undeserved". That was typical Brown — never hesitant to speak candidly to his scientific friends.

Daniel S. Greenberg

Daniel S. Greenberg is at 3736 Kanawha Street NW, Washington DC 20015, USA. He is author of The Politics of Pure Science, *a new edition of which is published next month by the University of Chicago Press.*
e-mail: 71732.3314@compuserve.com