

US mid-term elections

Power jockeys in new race

Washington

LAST week's elections put the Democratic Party front and centre on the Capitol Hill stage. With control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the Democrats will carve up the spoils of their victory in the next few weeks, chiefly the chairmanships of the committees that determine the legislative agenda for the next session of Congress. But a new majority party will hardly be a panacea for budget troubles, and the Republicans will now have the luxury of watching the Democrats make the difficult choices.

The Democrats gained control of the Senate, and now enjoy a 55-45 majority. Several extremely close races delayed final calculations, but the Democrats will add at least 5 seats to their 253-182 majority in the House of Representatives. Ironically, several of the Republicans being replaced as Senate committee chairmen are reckoned more liberal than their Democrat successors. An example is John Stennis, a conservative southern Democrat, who takes control of the powerful Appropriations Committee from Mark Hatfield, a liberal Republican from Oregon.

The chairmanships of the key appropriations subcommittees controlling the purse strings for the National Science Foundation (NSF) the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other government science agencies are still uncertain, but present chairmen have treated science agencies generously. Lowell Weicker (Republican, Connecticut) has been a strong ally of NIH as chairman of the health subcommittee, and Utah Republican Jake Garn has been favourably disposed toward NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) as chairman of NASA's subcommittee. Garn was a passenger aboard the space shuttle in 1985.

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), already under attack in Congress, will probably face greater resistance from the Democrats taking over military and energy committees. Both Sam Nunn of Georgia and Louisiana Democrat J. Bennett Johnston have criticized SDI.

A dramatic philosophy shift will occur on the Labor and Human Resources Committee when Orrin Hatch of Utah steps down in favour of Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. Hatch, a conservative, has been an outspoken opponent of abortion, favouring a constitutional amendment making it illegal. Kennedy is a liberal and a strong proponent of government-supported health-care programmes.

In the House of Representatives, membership of science committees is unlikely to change substantially. The most signifi-

cant difference will be the departure of Don Fuqua from the House Science and Technology Committee. Fuqua, who retired this year and will take a job as a lobbyist for the space industry, will be replaced by Robert Roe of New Jersey.

Although science agencies fared relatively well in the most recent budget cycle, next year will probably be a different story. The Gramm-Rudman deficit reduction act will force still larger cuts to reduce the budget deficit.

William Wells of George Washington University, who follows congressional science policy for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says a harbinger of next year's problems was seen in the House of Representatives appropriation for the NSF research budget. Although NSF has received favourable treatment from the Democrat-controlled House, this year the appropriation for NSF-sponsored research was \$146 million less than the administration request.

With only a fixed amount of money to dispense, the House subcommittee chose to protect certain housing and environmental programmes at the expense of NSF. In the final budget compromise with the Senate some of that money was restored, and overall NSF received about an 8 per cent increase in funds. According to Wells, in the next Congress just holding steady will be a "a remarkable achievement".

Joseph Palca

British SDI cash

THE value of SDI contracts in Britain has not so far approached the reported \$1,500 million target sought by British politicians at the outset, but their total value now exceeds \$14 million. Contracts and sub-contracts include, according to the Federation of American Scientists and the Council on Economic Priorities, Barr and Stroud \$250,000; Cap Scientific \$250,000; British Aerospace \$1.25 million; Ferranti \$508,000; General Electric (UK), \$1.75 million; Hunting Engineering \$1 million; Logica \$700,000; PA Defence Services \$750,000; Plessey \$1.45 million; Racal \$250,000; Scicon \$250,000; Short Brothers \$250,000; Thorn EMI \$500,000; UK Atomic Energy Authority \$4.3 million; UK Ministry of Defence \$1.4 million.

The Science and Engineering Research Council's Rutherford Appleton Laboratory is also now negotiating a \$15 million research contract for the Super-Sprite Laser Facility. In the British Isles those doing SDI work include University College, Cork, Heriot-Watt University and the University of London. Tim Beardsley

Strategic defence

SDI should change course

Washington

RESEARCH for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) continues to be an obstacle to superpower arms negotiations, but a compromise on defensive research that meets the legitimate interests of both sides should be possible, according to the Aspen Strategy Group, an independent think-tank.

The group's study, *The Strategic Defense Initiative and American Security*, published on 22 October, is critical of the current SDI programme, saying its large-scale mockups are inadvisable for technical reasons and erode confidence in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. But the Aspen group says "progress towards a new [strategic arms] agreement should be possible" if the United States modifies its position that all development and testing of space-based defensive systems is allowed, in return for the Soviet Union dropping its demand that only laboratory research is possible.

The co-chairmen of the Aspen study were William J. Perry, a former under-secretary of defence under President Carter, and Lt-Gen. Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to President Ford. The group includes senior politicians, academics and representatives of industry.

The group sees valuable opportunities to trade arms cuts for a commitment not to give notice of withdrawing from the ABM treaty for 10 years — this would mean forfeiting "very little in technical terms". The study finds "virtually no prospect" of a significant and effective population shield against a responsive enemy this century. And it says the SDI programme's large field experiments "appear to be driven by political considerations" and risk "freezing in" technologies prematurely in what should be a long-term programme.

The Aspen group also says the United States has conducted SDI experiments "whose consistency with [the ABM treaty] is measured by criteria that we would probably reject if the Soviets used them to justify their programmes". The US administration has proposed a new interpretation of the treaty that would allow testing of SDI components as long as they were not actual weapons.

The group recommends that SDI research should be refocused on more long-term "high-leverage" goals, including the problem of mid-course discrimination of warheads from decoys and that defensive research should have a near-term goal of preventing or responding to a Soviet break-out of the ABM treaty and preserving options for selective defences.

Tim Beardsley