

## High-cost of democracy . . .

### Washington

YEAR-END figures released this month by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) show that science interest groups are no strangers to the time-honoured tradition of trying to win political influence with hard cash.

The National Education Association (NEA), an organization that supports both secondary and higher education, spent more than \$336,000 on politicians last year, spread out over nearly half the members of Congress. Based on a grading system that ranks each politician's voting record and political platform, the association targets legislators who are likely to support new facilities, funding for research or other potential benefits for university and pre-college education.

Other major science-related organizations that spent from tens to hundreds of thousand dollars on congressional campaigns include big biomedical companies such as Smith Kline Beecham and Monsanto, membership organizations such as the American Medical Association, and even government-funded laboratories such as General Atomics, a fusion research contractor.

And, to no surprise, the top dozen aerospace contractors outspent nearly everyone else. They distributed over \$2 million last year to support a core group of some 150 influential legislators — more than a quarter of Congress.

The FEC figures show that the heads of six of the most important congressional committees that determine federal science funding were given an average of about \$470,000 each, more than twice the congressional average. The source of such largesse is not the companies and associations themselves, but the Political Action Committees (PACs) they create for the express purpose of contributing to congressional campaigns. No single PAC is permitted to give more than \$5,000 per year, so the large totals represent the growing number of special-interest blocs eager to influence legislation.

PACs are one of the most visible creations of the 1970s' campaign finance reforms. Although companies and associations cannot directly give money to candidates, they can set up — and pay the overhead for — PACs to which their employees or members contribute. By allowing individuals to pool their resources, PACs have emerged as the favourite way for corporations and associations to influence politics. Such PACs accounted for nearly \$400 million in campaign contributions last year — up to half the total contributions in some races.

Senators who chair committees receive an average of nearly \$40,000 each from science-related PACs, while their col-

leagues in the House of Representatives averaged almost \$30,000. Total spending on congressional races last year by science and technology-related PACs came to over \$10 million.

For their money, the PACs can legally expect little more than a promise that their views will be considered — and sometimes solicited — about legislation that could affect them. Of course, the voters who make up the constituency of every member of Congress are entitled to the same assurance. But when the time comes to get outside reaction on legislative issues, the names with cheques attached often get the first call. "It can determine whether a call gets returned, a letter gets written, a witness asked to testify. It buys access", says John Deeken, an aide to Senator David Boren (Democrat, Oklahoma).

"You can't buy a politician, but [a contribution] does get your foot in the door", agrees Ivette Torres of the NEA. Critics worry that the increase in PAC spending (since 1979 the number of registered PACs has more than doubled) threatens to shift the balance of US politics away from the voters at large.

"The biggest risk of PACs is that they have evolved into a second set of constituents. There is now a split between the traditional constituents — the voters — and the cash constituents", says Larry Makinson, an analyst with the Center for Responsive Politics, a bipartisan research group. Rather than the democracy envisaged in the constitution, where legislators answer first to the voters in their home state, legislators are now best known — and supported — for the committees they serve on. For example, Senator Bennett Johnston, the powerful head of the energy and water appropriations subcommittee that funds the Department of Energy, received nearly \$1.3 million in PAC contributions last year, almost ten times the congressional average.

But some legislators are beginning to rebel. Senator Boren and Senate majority leader George Mitchell (Democrat, Maine) have introduced a bill that would limit PAC contributions to \$100,000 in the House and to between \$190,950 and \$825,000 in the Senate depending on state size. The aim is to limit the impact of PACs on the political process. Because PACs favour incumbents and legislators on important committees, in 1988 four times as much PAC money went to incumbents as challengers. With more than a quarter of the Senate already co-sponsoring the Boren-Mitchell bill, many analysts believe that the PAC system of campaign finance could be challenged seriously this year and that limits on PAC contributions are likely.

G. Christopher Anderson

## Dublin victory for aboriginal protest

IMAGE  
UNAVAILABLE  
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REASONS

### London

MICHAEL Mansell (left) and Bob Weatherall of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre protesting on Wednesday last week outside London's Natural History Museum, which holds bones and mummified heads of some of the last members of the Tasmanian aboriginal race, which died out at the end of the last century. Echoing complaints made in the United States about the treatment of the remains of American Indians, Weatherall and his supporters object to the public display of aboriginal bones, saying that they should be returned to Australia for traditional burial.

The museum, however, is not allowed to disperse material from the collections, under the British Museums Act of 1963. Furthermore, a museum spokesman said that it "would be a tragedy" to devalue the collection by dispersal. The Tasmanian aboriginal race has died out, so these remains are the only source left for studying their origins.

Before visiting Britain, Weatherall had been to Ireland to demonstrate outside the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin. He claims that his grandfather's mummified head was held there, and on Thursday last week the college agreed to a request from the Australian Ambassador to return the head to the Australian authorities. It has been handed over to the Australian Embassy in Ireland on the understanding that it is to be sent to the National Museum of Australia.

C.W.