

The end of political gridlock, at last?

US President-elect Bill Clinton is putting pragmatism ahead of ideology in his first major appointments of people with some sympathy for a national science policy.

WITHIN the past several days, US President-elect Bill Clinton, with Vice-President and future technology czar Al Gore at his side, has named people to cabinet and other high-level positions in his administration that, taken together, give clues about how the Clinton White House will handle science and technology in its drive to improve the US economy.

First, by choosing Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen as Treasury Secretary, Clinton has eschewed the anti-business stance of liberal Democrats, perhaps taking a cue from former presidential-candidate Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts who urged the party to recognize that the government cannot distribute wealth that has not been created. Bentsen is sympathetic to giving tax advantages to business, such as tax credits for research and development. Two other senior economic appointees are on record as supporting active government intervention in ways that could affect science and technology.

Industrial policy

Political economist Robert Reich of Harvard University, a friend of Clinton's from his days as a Rhodes Scholar who has been named Secretary of Labor, favours active policies to revive US industry. And Berkeley economist Laura Tyson, who is likely to become chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisors (CEA), goes so far as to support the idea of a formal industrial policy (something the United States has previously shied away from).

The appointment of a strong environmentalist as head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also signals a change in emphasis for that agency. Carol M. Browner, who formerly worked for Gore in the Senate, and is, at present, Secretary of the Florida State Department of Environmental Regulation, has a reputation as an activist who is able to compromise with industry to get things done.

Even in his candidate for Secretary of Health and Human Services, University of Wisconsin chancellor Donna Shalala, Clinton has chosen someone sympathetic to the idea of a coordinated national policy for science and technology. Shalala, known as an educator and expert on urban problems, also has experience with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) where she is a member of the director's advisory committee.

At the top of the Clinton team (which is still incomplete) sits Gore whose knowledge of (and interest in) science and technology exceeds not only that of previous vice-presidents but also that of the president-elect himself. During the

campaign, Clinton promised to shift research and development resources from the Department of Defense (DOD) to the civilian sector. Clinton said he is interested in a civilian 'ideas' agency similar to DOD's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and pledged to provide funds to foster collaboration between academic science and industry. It is expected that the job of carrying out these promises will fall to Gore, who is eager, willing and, most important, qualified to do the job.

Picture still incomplete

Many second-tier positions within the new administration need to be filled before the picture of the Clinton team is complete but some things can be said about what the president-elect should do. It is not clear how influential the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, headed by the president's science adviser, will be in a government with so many other strong players (Gore may well overshadow the science adviser). The best way to ensure some strength in the position would be to appoint (for the first time) a science adviser whose expertise is in the biological rather than physical sciences, thereby complementing Gore's expertise in environment and technology.

Similarly, in a government intent on fostering the idea that science and technology can and should be bent to national economic and competitive needs, Clinton would do well to select as heads of the NIH and the National Science Foundation scientists who will be strong defenders of basic research, initiated at the laboratory bench and not in federal committee rooms.

It is tempting to wax enthusiastic about a new administration with obvious appreciation of the importance of science and technology in the United States' national and international life — tempting but much too soon. But it is possible to speculate that the new crew, taken together, portend a government that will try to reach compromise on complex and controversial issues, in part by providing more coordination from the top.

This is both good and potentially dangerous. A policy that places the practical uses of science ahead of the continuing need to support unfettered research is a danger the Clinton administration must avoid. But if a consensus among top government officials on general science and technology policy can lead to the end of the gridlock that has paralysed Washington for the past several years, the Clinton administration will have accomplished a great deal. □