

The dangers of coarse politics

Keeping track of members of the US Congress is a good idea, but must be done with care. A science voting tally introduced by a group of eminent scientists does not fit the bill.

THE publication last week of a Science Scoreboard, which rates each member of the US Congress on his or her voting performance on science and science-related issues, will probably have little discernible impact on November's congressional elections. The scoreboard may succeed, however, in exasperating a number of congressmen and women whose cooperation scientists can ill afford to lose.

The scoreboard has been produced by Science Watch, a group of eminent scientists and former senior science administrators, founded expressly to collate information of this type and pitch it into the public domain (see page 288). Science Watch believes that the old Washington ways of securing support for science — based on firm but discreet lobbying by scientific societies and universities in the Congress — are beginning to fail, and that the time has come to mobilize support for science directly at the grass-roots level. What better way to get the ball rolling than publicly rating the voting record of every member of Congress on science issues?

Science Watch selected 30 key votes in the House of Representatives as its basis for measuring members' commitment to science. Half of those votes concerned science budgets, and the rest dealt with a motley assortment of issues including the prohibition of certain types of research, barring individuals with financial interests at stake from peer review, and closing down parts of the science bureaucracy.

The results of that exercise is a ratings system that puts almost all Democrats at the top and almost all Republicans at the bottom. Texan Democrats Ken Bentsen, Sheila Jackson-Lee and Eddie Bernice Johnson each score 97 per cent under this system. But are their respective contributions really so much greater than those of champions of science on the other side, such as John Edward Porter (Republican, Illinois), saviour of the National Institutes of Health, who scores 38 per cent?

Science Watch says that it did not intend that the scoreboard would divide members so deeply along party lines, and was surprised at the outcome. But the design of its survey was always going to ensure such a result. The budget roll call votes, for example, by their very nature, are challenges to the Republican budget, likely to draw support chiefly from Democrats. The other votes could almost have been hand-picked to make Republicans fare badly.

Robert Walker (Republican, Pennsylvania), chair of the House Science Committee, and now the proud owner of a 40 per cent science scorecard rating, has responded vehemently to the exercise. Walker says he is frustrated that, after two years of stressing the importance of setting priorities, the science community still prefers "to take on the role of an entitled group". Walker's frustration is justified on this occasion. The community needs to demonstrate its understanding that it is Congress's job to make choices, and sometimes to cut programmes. The fact that the Republicans are now in political retreat does not make this any less true.

Whichever party controls the Congress after November's elections, science will face an uphill battle to maintain its share of the funding pie. The community has habitually underestimated its own strength, and the time is right for it to mobilize in defence of science. But before resorting to the megaphone, it needs to consider carefully what it wants to say: a refrain of "more money now" —

which is what this exercise amounts to — will not really suffice.

Science Watch says it has left the Senate alone, for now, because it has too few recorded votes on which to base a scoreboard. Before offending half the members of that august body, the group should apply some peer review to the validity of its own work, and perhaps ask itself whether the scoreboard, as applied by them, is too blunt an instrument for the operation in hand. □

Charity begins abroad

There are few virtues in being a poor relation, as researchers on diseases of the developing world know to their cost.

POOR relations cannot expect substantial hand-outs when their richer relatives become increasingly preoccupied with domestic needs. Such is the case with the funding of research. At a time when government policies for research across the industrialized world are being explicitly moulded to two strategic objectives — increasing the wealth and quality of life of those who pay for it — the interests of others inevitably fall down the priority list. The French government is the latest to find cuts in research funding on issues relating to developing countries easier to absorb than cuts in its strategic priorities, for example nuclear and space technology.

A report published by the Wellcome Trust this week on the continued underfunding of research into what remains one of the world's most significant diseases, malaria, is therefore doubly welcome (see page 286). It provides some hard quantitative data about the relative expenditure on malaria compared to the more scientifically 'popular' diseases of the West, ranging from asthma to HIV/AIDS, demonstrating vividly the orders of magnitude that separate research efforts. And it is also a timely reminder that current trends in the science policies of Western governments are in danger of exacerbating this situation rather than reversing it.

The needs are certainly pressing. Another report, published jointly this week by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, emphasizes that the limited success of preventive measures and the spiralling rate of resistance to anti-malarial drugs both underline the urgency of an effective vaccine. But it also points out that clinical trials of candidate vaccines will be lengthy and costly until more research has been carried out on, for example, our understanding of immune responses. The disappointing results of trials of the Colombian vaccine Spf66, reported earlier this month, indicate that there seem to be few short cuts.

In an ideal world, malaria — as, indeed, other prevalent diseases in developing countries, such as leprosy and leishmaniasis — would receive as much scientific (and political) attention as HIV has done; certainly understanding the life-cycle of the parasite is as challenging as unravelling the behaviour of the AIDS virus. The former is far from neglected, witness the recent decision by the Wellcome Trust to sponsor the mapping of the *Plasmodium falciparum* genome, and other efforts to coordinate vaccine development. But, as most of those working in the field admit, much more could be done, even in the current state of knowledge. Poor relations never have an easy life. □