

How not to reform an independent academy

Openness is a virtue, but its imposition from without threatens the independence of the US National Academy of Sciences complex.

Over many years, the US academy complex — comprising the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council (NRC) — has developed an enviable record in providing independent and penetrating advice to the federal government.

The complex, which employs some 1,100 staff, produces about 200 reports a year on a wide range of scientific and technical issues. This week's assessment of the US government's clean car programme (see page 528) is a typical example: it makes several pointed criticisms of the programme, and provides a commendably comprehensive update on all aspects of clean car technology.

The thoroughness of the academy complex's output stands in stark contrast to the voluminous material that special interest groups and government agencies themselves produce to feed the Washington policy-making machine. However, recent legal action by animal rights and environmental groups has sought to subject the work of the complex to the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), one of the so-called 'sunshine laws', which requires advisory panels set up by the government to conduct all meetings in public and to adhere to stringent rules in appointing panels and conducting business (see *Nature* 385, 755; 1997 & 386, 309; 1997).

Who could object to such a requirement? The Supreme Court believed that it could not, when it cited the National Academy of Sciences as an example of a "quasi-public" body, and therefore subject to FACA, in a footnote to a 1989 ruling. But the problem with this judgement is that, in treating the academy complex as though it were part of the federal government, it ignores the very need for independence that led to that body's establishment in the first place.

The National Academy of Sciences is an élite body of 1,800 of the United States' most distinguished scientists. The foundation of the NRC in 1918, and its expansion after the Second World War, brought the academy a strong professional staff — now shared by the National

Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine — and equipped its panels to draw membership from outside the élite membership. This structure allows the NRC to ensure the impartiality of the process, even when the government pays for the studies. The panels are necessarily shielded from outside pressure, particularly pressure from the federal government itself: this means that much of their discussion takes place in closed session.

The track record of the academy suggests that this arrangement succeeds in producing studies that the nation can trust. This year, for example, the Department of Energy (DoE) will ask one of its own advisory committees, operating under FACA, to assess the current design for the proposed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER). It will also ask the academy for its assessment. Ultimately, the Congress will place greater reliance on the independent judgement of the academy than it will on the DoE's advisory panel. On politically charged issues, such as pollution control or nuclear waste disposal, this credibility gap between the government's FACA panels and the academy's work is even more pronounced.

FACA has certainly succeeded in shining some valuable light on the workings of US government agencies. The sometimes cumbersome operation of its committees is doubtless an improvement on what went on before, behind closed doors. But its insistence on long and unproductive open sessions, and more importantly the degree of civil service supervision that it imposes, would undermine the academy complex.

The complex has recently been making efforts to keep interested parties better appraised of its work, and to open more of its meetings. Because of the autonomy of the NRC's different boards, this process has been uneven, and efforts must continue to broaden it. Such incremental reform is the best way of opening up the complex without compromising the quality of its work. If continuing court action fails to re-establish the academy's independence from the government and exempt it from FACA, the Congress must change the law to do so. □

Small symbols of peace

The Middle East provides a setting for science policy as a lever for hope amid strife.

Political events surrounding Israel give little room for any response other than despair. As the prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, confronts international reaction to his expansionist policy towards settlements, and as Palestinians and Israelis confront each other in spiralling violence, one looks for signs of hope that rigidly opposed viewpoints can be softened and mutual understanding enhanced.

All avenues need to be pursued, and science provides one. Cooperation in research between Israel and its neighbours has been developing in recent years. Israel's Arab neighbours have not always been able or willing to rush to participate in joint research, while Israel itself is not a development agency. A reluctance to engage, and the disparity in scientific resources and achievement, is

especially marked with the Palestinians.

In such circumstances, a third party with money to spend can play a useful role. One such is Germany's funding agency, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). It is funding German applicants in collaborative programmes with Israel on condition that Palestinians are also involved. Four projects are under way — in cancer genetics, developmental biology, agriculture and geographic information systems, with more to come. Similar trilateral schemes are funded by Germany's research ministry and by the United States.

One must hope that such projects will quietly prosper despite the circumstances. Agencies elsewhere with scope to tailor foreign collaborative schemes to boost reconciliation, in the Middle East or elsewhere, should consider following the DFG's example. □