

Q&A: BART GORDON

Leadership is also shifting in Washington DC, where the 7 November elections ushered in a complete changeover. Starting in January, Democrats will replace Republicans as the majority party in both houses of Congress. As such they will lead all committees, the working groups that regulate the details of laws in progress. *Nature's* Emma Marris spoke to one of the new power brokers in Congress: Representative Bart Gordon of Tennessee, who as ranking Democrat is in line to become chair of the House Committee on Science. She asked him how things will be different for science issues in Washington DC.

What is the main difference between you and your predecessor as chair of the science committee, Sherwood Boehlert?

Sherry's leaders in the House unfortunately limited what he could do, so Sherry couldn't be Sherry, if you know what I mean. I don't think that we are going to have that kind of heavy-handedness from the Democratic leadership.

What's going to happen with the president's American Competitiveness Initiative, to keep the country competitive in science and technology?

We will push legislation forward on that. I am very excited about it. I don't want this to be a Democratic or a Republican issue. I was asked by [incoming speaker of the House of Representatives] Nancy Pelosi to work on a competitiveness agenda, and this is a high priority for her.

One proposal that you have put forward is the creation of an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Energy, to work on technology that will reduce oil imports. Where is that going?

I don't think that the administration has an interest in it. They want to do things the way they want to do it and don't really want anybody else making recommendations. Energy independence is very important, I think it makes sense, and I am going to push very hard, in what I hope will be a bipartisan way, to get this accomplished.

There are noises from the administration that they are to release a sweeping energy plan. Are sweeping changes the way to go? I hope that what you will see from the science committee is a lot of narrow-issue, bipartisan, good-government initiatives. My thought is that we could sit around here and talk round and round about energy independence for

two, or three, or four years, and not get anything done. I don't want to hold up any good ideas we might have to put into a major bill if we can get them through on their own. Let's do smaller steps that we can get done.

Give me an example.

We are going to start with the education initiatives. There is a consensus that the United States has got to raise its capabilities in math and science. If we are going to have the jobs of the future, we need a higher-skilled workforce. The real problem is that approximately two-thirds of the math teachers in this country have neither a major nor a certification in that area. Compared with other countries, our students do worse the longer they are in school. The National Academies report lays out programmes to change this, and I'd like to see them put in place.

Does NASA have its priorities right? Do you feel that a realistic number has been put on the cost of sending humans to Mars?

I would like to see NASA do all that it is proposing and more. But we need to do a better job of oversight. I want to see if all of the numbers add up, and frankly I don't think they will. If they don't, we will have to take a hard look at priorities. I don't want to pass problems on to others. What we have seen with NASA is that prior administrators just keep on passing on problems. Someone needs to take oversight.

You've talked about censorship of scientists at agencies and politicization of science. Do you plan any hearings on that issue?

We hope that we can have some oversight hearings that are going to find out what was really going on. My goal is not to embarrass the administration but to shed some light on this problem so that people will be embarrassed to do it again. ■

See Editorial, page 243.

ON THE RECORD

“We need our scientists today to be as celebrated and famous as our sportsmen and women, our actors, our business entrepreneurs.”

UK prime minister Tony Blair, speaking in Oxford, 3 November.



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NUMBER CRUNCH

1 is the number of scientists in *Time International's* 60 years of heroes (Andrei Sakharov, right)

9 is the number of musicians (John, Paul, George and Ringo, Maria Callas, John Lydon (left), Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Bono, Bob Geldof)

SCORECARD

▲ Hope
HOPE (Help Ohio Public Education) got four pro-evolution candidates elected to Ohio's board of education. And Dick De Vos, a Republican gubernatorial candidate in Michigan who wanted 'intelligent design' taught in school, was trounced.

▲ Flares
It sounds '70s retro, but astronomers at a workshop on Cool Stars heard of what might be the biggest magnetic flare ever. An outburst in the II Pegasi system spotted by NASA's Swift satellite was 100 million times more energetic than a typical solar flare.

▲ Space-shuttle hootenannies
NASA is keeping the shuttle Discovery grounded over the New Year, because some of the shuttle's software cannot reset itself from 365 to 1. Rebooting is not a preferred option when in orbit.

Sources: The Times, New Scientist