

# Secrecy and elitism in science and government

**“... Science is surely the activity of a particular elite. I no more understand ‘Science for the People’ than I know what is meant by ‘Age of Aquarius.’”**

—Dr. Philip Handler, President of the National Academy of Sciences, in several speeches this year.

by Richard H. Gilluly

Everything secret, Lord Acton warned, degenerates.

The recent publication of the secret Pentagon papers revived that warning; and other recent disclosures indicate that secrecy in Government to some degree characterizes most Federal departments.

A recent book by Sen. Fred Harris (D-Okla.) calls for a revival of the philosophy that the people, given the facts, are capable of ruling themselves. Harris criticizes the belief that certain individuals and classes of individuals possess special expertise that enables them to know better than the people what the people need.

**There are two** specific problems. One is the assumption that experts possess special keys to truth; the other is the experts' frequent insistence that they cannot function well if their activities are subjected to public and news media surveillance.

According to the new Populists, a group including many leading environmentalists, such as Ralph Nader, scientists and industrialists with special interest biases often have been responsible for intimidating the citizenry into accepting these two assumptions, particularly in environmental, scientific and technological areas.

June and July hearings of the inter-governmental relations subcommittee of the Senate Government Operations Committee revealed the degree to which the assumptions have permeated Government—including the agencies that deal with environmental problems. Sen. Lee Metcalf (D-Mont.), chairman at the hearings, concerned himself with the whole range of business advisory committees to Federal agencies. But a large portion of the hearings was devoted to the Commerce Department's Industrial Pollution Control Council (SN: 6/26/71, p. 434). The IPCC—made up of industrial executives—advises the President and his executive agencies on pollution questions. The IPCC's meetings are closed to the

public and even to observers from outside groups. Metcalf termed the meetings “secret.” Commerce officials said they preferred the word “private.”

Although the IPCC is mandated to provide special expertise on pollution to the executive agencies, it became clear at the hearings that the group has more than one purpose. Introduced into the record was a letter, on Commerce Department stationery, from Tom Cuning, director of communications and public affairs for the IPCC. Dated Oct. 29, 1970, the letter says, in part:

“As you know, the P.R. aspects of industry and pollution and what industry is doing is a tough nut to crack. It's not that industry generally isn't doing something and making progress, it's how do we get the story told considering the attitude of the public. . . .”

The letter went on to ask the company public relations men to whom it was directed to extract articles on pollution abatement from house organs, employe magazines, annual reports, newspapers and magazines, and for-

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ward them to the IPCC. The purpose: To compile a “case history” series to help convince the public that industry is doing something about pollution.

Some of the colloquy that resulted from introduction of the letter:

Sen. Metcalf: “. . . [the letter] is a very revealing document [showing] that the purpose of the IPCC is largely a public relations activity.”

Bert S. Cross, chairman of the IPCC (and of the finance committee of the

Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co.): “Let me try to answer that, Sen. Metcalf, because I do not think that it is true that this is a gimmick that takes the place of getting a job done by any stretch of the imagination. If there is anybody responsible for [the letter] it is me. I wanted to know what these people are telling their people. . . . I don't think there is a thing wrong in letting people know when you do a good job. . . .”

Metcalf suggested that articles from house organs are scarcely of the objective technical quality that should be required of a committee of “experts” advising the President.

The letter and the exchange regarding it become particularly significant in the light of the role of advisory councils, as seen by Larry A. Jobe, assistant secretary of Commerce for public administration. In arguing against public representation, Jobe said, “looking at our committees in terms of whether or not they have members who may be said to represent the interests of the public in contradistinction to the interests represented by other members, we believe that for many committees that kind of distinction in the membership is not relevant or appropriate.” The public interest, he explained, is automatically represented by virtue of the expertise of the members.

**Jobe then** went on to say that some of Commerce's committees do have members “distinguishable” as being representative of the public. But in a letter to SCIENCE NEWS, written after the quotation about the public-spiritedness of experts had appeared in an earlier issue, he said that IPCC was never intended to represent the broad public interest (SN: 7/24/71, p. 52). This comment appears to imply three general types of committees: Those that have “distinguishable” public representation; those that do not, but are nonetheless representative because experts naturally take the public interest into account; and finally, committees of experts, such as the IPCC, that are not intended to represent the public.

There are numerous examples of this kind of official or quasi-official obfuscation in pollution matters. Last year the National Research Council came out with a report on sulfur-oxide abatement (SN: 8/29/70, p. 187). Its main finding was that technology for abatement does not yet exist. The major sulfur-oxide polluters, electric utility companies, cannot afford research and development for abatement, the report said, because regulatory commissions will not let them “[include the R&D] in their capital structure.” The statement is vague because there is no explanation of what including such costs in capital structure really means. In fact, not long before the NRC report was

issued, the Federal Power Commission had ruled that utilities could put R&D expenses into operating expenses and thus recoup these costs. FPC had under consideration, at the time of the NRC report's issuance, a proposal to allow utilities to include R&D capital expenditures in their permanent rate bases (or "capital structure") and since has ruled this can be done. As for the state and local commissions, which have a far larger role in utility regulation than the FPC, it is generally recognized that they are almost always considerably more permissive toward the utilities than the Federal regulatory agency.

Thomas H. Chilton, chairman of the NRC committee and retired Du Pont executive, suggested in a recent telephone interview that the statement regarding utilities and regulatory agencies may not be true now, "but it was supportable at that time [in late 1969, when the study was completed]." He conceded that the committee's repre-

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sentation was heavily weighted on the side of industrialists, but he insisted this was necessary in order to get the "most knowledgeable" men.

"There were no ecologists," he said. Nor, he added, was there anyone on the committee who could be regarded as having a strongly environmentalist orientation. Chilton says he still feels such committees ought to be restricted to the experts in the specific field under study. But experts in the technology of air-pollution abatement are one thing; experts in utility financing are another.

The NRC is not a Federal agency; but it is the advisory arm of the National Academy of Sciences, which is Congressionally chartered as an official adviser to the Federal Government. And apparently the errors regarding utility companies have not been rectified, at least not among all of NAS's representatives. At a press briefing on energy problems held in connection with this year's NAS annual meeting, Dr. Manson Benedict of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology nuclear engineering staff told science writers that utilities could not pay for R&D for generation of electric power from breeder and fusion reactors—because the regulatory bodies wouldn't let them.

(In connection with the generally private nature of NAS activities, a group of 32 science reporters petitioned the

Academy in April for press access to its business meetings. NAS President Philip Handler responded on June 22 that the Council of the Academy was "not yet ready to accede to this petition in the form in which it is presented" but that an effort would be made to arrange the annual meetings so that discussions and reports concerned with public matters would be presented as part of the open program.)

**The oil industry** has been criticized by environmental interests almost as much as the electric utility industries. The Metcalf subcommittee spent a day on the National Petroleum Council, a group of high-level oil company executives and Interior Department officials that advises Interior on energy policies. Numerous environmental problems are associated with energy industries. For instance, there is a desperate need for finding nonpolluting ways to use coal in power plants; many of these techniques have been proved at bench- or pilot-plant scale, but neither Federal nor industry funds have been forthcoming in amounts necessary for getting plants into commercial operation. According to some studies, the problem may be that increasing monopolistic control of all energy sources, including coal, by the oil industry is at the root of the drying up of funds, both from industry and from Interior's Office of Coal Research (SN: 6/12/71, p. 394).

"The existence of the NPC is a prime opportunity," said Sen. Metcalf, "for [oil companies] to have special access to the Secretary of the Interior or the President they could not have if the council had not been created."

**The question** of accessibility of council meetings to the press and public is one that was never wholly resolved at the hearings. A July 15 NPC meeting was opened to the press, but motion after motion, many of them dealing only with housekeeping matters, were passed without discussion. A lawyer from Interior's solicitor's branch said at the hearings, "I think the transcripts [of NPC's meetings] are available" for whomever would wish to examine them. But a Metcalf staffer said examination of an NPC transcript earlier made available showed such entries as a member of the council saying, "Let's go off the record here," whereupon as many as two full days of ensuing conversations were not included in the transcript. A spokesman for the American Public Gas Association told Metcalf that data on oil company gas leases on Federal lands, needed for an FPC hearing, were not available from NPC or the Interior Department.

Prof. Robert Engler, political scientist from the City University of New York, recommended doing away with the NPC entirely. "Oilmen have a right to be heard," he said. "But why pri-

vately and in an administrative rather than a legislative setting? There are conflicts within the oil industry but the sum of their positions or the resolutions of their differences does not ensure a wise or a just public policy. Many points of view are left out—consumers, workers, conservationists, laymen, critics."

The Government witnesses at the hearings kept saying that the advisory committees are just that, advisory, and not policy-making groups. Prof. Engler, Metcalf and others, however, insisted that the committees often are *de facto* policy-making bodies. Metcalf said, for instance, that the IPCC clearly has the ear of President Nixon, who established it with considerable fanfare as part of his environmental program. Metcalf suggested that a serious question exists about whether the public at large or—to narrow the field to what might be termed special interests on the other side—the conservationists have any-

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where near this kind of influence on the President.

In the view of Dr. Henry J. Steck, political scientist with the State University of New York at Cortland, expressed at the hearings, such advisory committees are probably not guilty of downright lying or even of having less than honorable intentions. Rather, the problem is that the value systems of industrialists—and of the scientists and technologists who in one way or another represent the industrial point of view—are such that a distorted and incomplete picture is presented to the President and his pollution-control agencies.

For instance, it is an article of faith with most businessmen that an ever-expanding Gross National Product—as measured by galloping increases in energy consumption, more automobiles and all the other things that go to make up the nation's "high standard of living"—is, if not sacred, certainly necessary if the economy is to survive.

Many environmentalists, as well as economists, land-use planners, architects, transportation specialists, and, most important, members of the public, increasingly question this premise. It seems doubtful that the businessmen advisers to the President tell him the question is being asked and bears looking into. □