

Royal Colleges' Working Parties, TAKE NOTE.

1. Science: vol.275: 17 January 1997, page 297

The US National Accademy of Sciences (NAS) has always worked behind closed doors; it forms expert panels which advise the government on scientific and medical matters, very similar to the UK Royal Colleges' Working Parties.

In January 1997 a US court ruled that the work of an NAS panel should be accessible to the public if its advice was utilized by a federal agency. The court rejected the NAS' contention that that, as a private body, it is exempt from laws requiring government bodies to open their meetings to the public. (In 1972, the Federal Advisory Committee Act mandated public access to meetings and materials used by a government advisory panel).

2. Science: vol. 276: 9 May 1997, pages 900-904

As adviser to the US government, the NAS is being criticised for taking too long to deliver its reports and for operating too secretively; the NAS, however, fears that recent court rulings could force it to open up its deliberations and to alter its **process of selecting experts and reaching conclusions**. It claims it must operate largely in secret to prevent government, industry or influence groups from influencing results, but has been forced to concede its stance is under legal attack by those who say **secrecy can mask bias and conflict of interest among panel members**.

Physicist Tom Cochrane believes the way the National Research Council (NRC, which is the operating arm of the NAS) selects scientists for its study panels smacks of old-boy networks and back room deals and that an important issue is that panel members are either paid consultants to, or paid advisers to, or received benefits from, or co-authored papers with those against whom they were called to deliberate, which, says Cochrane, means that their reports can only be biased: in one panel, Cochrane found that seven of the sixteen panel members were in this category, and he maintains "I don't see how these guys conclude this was balanced".

Objectors to the secretive old-boy selection of panel members say the members of such panels are so close, each knows when the other is breathing and what the other is thinking, and are not persuaded by the NRC's argument that anyone with the expert knowledge and expertise in specialist fields will be bound to have connections and collaborations with each other.

Analyst Steven Aftergood observes that "committee members tend to....have some common set of prejudices".

In a recent lawsuit, an environmental group argued that the NAS' claim of independence and balance is a fig-leaf masking this impenetrable old-boy network, and that this is unacceptable, given that the reports of these panels, or working parties, are considered to be the definitive word on an issue, and that a few experts exert such a profound influence on the way the government and the public then view an issue.

Changes have now been forced upon the NAS / NRC, and panel members are henceforth required to detail financial conflicts of interest and to discuss their biases at the first committee meeting: new commissions now review the make-up of panels and the results of their work.

These changes have dramatically improved the overall quality and credibility of the reports, but have not led to greater public access, which has given rise to a lawsuit which argued that the study panel in question included too many scientists

on the panel who were funded by the panel's sponsor; a federal district judge in Washington, DC ruled against the NAS.

Managing the NRC is no easy task due in part to so many "consultants with lots of large egos", according to one NAS member. Observers agree, and say that even taking into account the recent advances, the status quo puts the council at risk of becoming an increasingly irrelevant think tank attached to a prestigious society made up primarily of white male scientists.

3. Science: vol. 276: 30 May 1997, page 1328

The new policy at the NRC says that the council's work "can benefit from increased public access and increased opportunities for public input" at those meetings at which panel members are gathering information; this openness, however, must be balanced by assurances that committees and panels are shielded from undue pressures. Panel members will now be expected to discuss their potential biases during an open session at the start of their work, and the NRC has set up a World Wide Web site to provide up to two months' notice of open meetings.

Royal Colleges, take note.....

Margaret Williams

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