U.S. SCIENCE POLICY

Former Advisers Fret Over OSTP Vacancy

Andrew Lawler

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—Although billed as a celebration, the largest gathering of U.S. presidential science advisers had more the air of a wake. Meeting here last week, the former government officials were all too aware that a new Administration is busy making critical decisions without benefit of the kind of scientific advice that has guided most presidents in the past half-century. “Nobody is celebrating the future here,” says Neal Lane, former science adviser to President Bill Clinton and now a professor at Houston's Rice University.

Lane was one of eight former science advisers who gathered on 1 May at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). (Eight of the 18 formal or informal advisers made it to the meeting; only two of the living advisers did not show.) In addition to discussing their role in shaping U.S. policies on basic research, defense, health, and the environment, the officials worried that the Bush Administration may not be interested in giving the same opportunities to their successor. “There are too many litmus tests,” complained D. Allan Bromley, who advised the current president’s father, George H. W. Bush.

Some advisers and senior scientists see the empty office in the Old Executive Office Building as an ominous sign that the White House prefers not to hear advice that may conflict with its ideological goals. “It’s clear that science policy is not one of the Administration’s priorities,” says William Golden, who advised President Harry Truman. But Administration officials insist that the delay is due to the truncated transition following the contested election and onerous paperwork requirements. “We are behind the curve, and this is only one of many positions,” says Sean O’Keefe, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget.

The former advisers ticked off several recent actions by the new president that they feel could have benefited from input from a science adviser. They include the decision to abandon the process spelled out in the Kyoto Treaty to limit greenhouse gases, reduce spending on energy R&D, reverse water-quality standards, and move ahead with a new missile defense system (see p. 1035). Decisions on the use of stem cells in research and oil drilling in the Arctic loom on the horizon, they added. “These are all issues with a strong R&D component,” says MIT President Charles Vest. “But I don’t know with whom they are consulting.”

Although he declined comment, Vest is believed to be one of several persons approached who have asked not to be considered for the science adviser’s job. And the post may become less appealing with every passing day. Any nominee is likely to face detailed questions at a Senate confirmation hearing about the candidate’s stance on global warming, stem cell research, and other controversial topics, notes Bromley. Proposed tight budgets for all research agencies except the National Institutes of Health also diminish the attractiveness of the job. Even so, Bromley says he believes that the White House may be ready to announce a candidate within a few weeks.