

U.S. NATIONAL ACADEMIES

Advice on Science Advising Leaves Plenty of Questions

A panel of the U.S. National Academies has taken a political hot potato, slathered rhetoric over it, and produced a report that satisfies those on all sides. Unfortunately, the report's Rorschach-like quality may also lessen its impact.

The hot potato is the Bush Administration's practice of asking some appointees to scientific advisory panels about their political affiliations, voting records, and stance on issues within the panel's purview, leading to criticism in the media and from several watchdog groups. The response from White House and various agency officials has ranged from attacks on the critics' credibility to a vigorous defense of the need for balance.

Last week the academy's Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (COSEPUP) appeared to condemn political vetting in a report covering

both president-appointed science jobs and appointments to federal advisory panels (nationalacademies.org). Its key recommendation, with respect to advisory boards, declares that "persons nominated to provide [scientific or technical] expertise should be selected on the basis of their scientific knowledge and credentials. ... It is inappropriate to ask them to provide nonrelevant information,



Tough job. Richard Meserve, John Porter, and Frank Press discuss National Academies' new report on government service.

such as [their] voting record, party affiliation, or position on particular policies." Such information, says panel chair John Porter, a former Republican congressman turned Washington lobbyist, is no more appropriate than asking scientists about "their height or hair color."

Porter emphasized that the committee did not investigate specific allegations, nor was its advice focused on the current Administration. But that didn't prevent Kurt Gottfried, chair of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), the most visible of the Administration's critics on the subject, from claiming victory. "The report echoes the concerns of 60,000 scientists," he said in a UCS press statement shortly after its release.

On closer inspection, however, the report's seemingly clear language starts to blur. The report only deals with scientists on advisory panels, notes committee member Richard Meserve, president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. He said it might be appropriate to ask questions eliciting political views of other members of an advisory panel, such as those selected to represent patients, companies, or other special interests. It would also be reasonable, he notes, for an agency dealing with sensitive topics such as testing drugs on children, or disposing of low-level nuclear waste, to make sure that all views were represented.

Exactly right, says UCS's bête noire, presidential science adviser John Marburger, ►

PALEOANTHROPOLOGY

Skeptic to Take Possession of Flores Hominid Bones

A leading Indonesian paleoanthropologist who questions whether a tiny 18,000-year-old hominid found on the island of Flores is really a new species plans to take at least temporary possession of the skeleton and similar hominid remains by the end of November. Earlier this month, Teuku Jacob of Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta had the skull of the hominid—dubbed *Homo floresiensis* by the Indonesian-Australian team that discovered it—transferred to his own laboratory from its official depository at the Center for Archaeology in Jakarta (*Science*, 12 November, p. 1116). Center officials have agreed to Jacob's request to have the skeleton's remaining bones, as well as the fragmentary remains of several other tiny hominids unearthed during this year's season, transported to Gadjah Mada as well, according to Radien Soejono, the center's

senior archaeologist and co-leader of the discovery team.

Jacob, who was not a member of the team, says he has already concluded that the tiny Flores hominids belong to a population of microcephalic, pygmylike modern humans rather than to a new species.

Some researchers are worried that Jacob will prevent others from studying the bones; he is well known for jealously guarding access to fossils (*Science*, 6 March 1998, p. 1482). "This development seems to threaten all future studies of *Homo floresiensis*," says Chris Stringer, a paleoanthropologist at the Natural History Museum in London. "One wonders how Professor Jacob is able to take over discoveries made, studied, and published by other workers." Stringer's concerns are echoed by a number of other researchers, including one Indonesian archaeologist who

asked not to be identified. "We are very unhappy," the archaeologist said. "The hominid is important to the whole world." Peter Brown of the University of New England in Armidale, Australia, who originally analyzed the hominid bone, says, "I doubt that the material will ever be studied again."

Soejono expects Jacob to return all of the bones to Jakarta eventually, although he's not sure when. "I am not going to push" for their return, Soejono says, adding that Jacob is a "very experienced" scientist.

Jacob told *Science* he will probably need until the end of this year to complete his study. He says that it is up to the center to decide the bones' ultimate fate but adds that the remains would be "much safer" in his own vaults in Yogyakarta, where many of Indonesia's famous hominid fossils are also stored.

—MICHAEL BALTER

CREDIT: MARTY KATZ