

Science, Democracy, and Disrepute

Concerns About Actions in Washington and Newington

Normally, we avoid politics (and clichés) like the plague, except to comment on matters that either will or could impact amateur radio. This is one of those times...

Let's start on a positive note. We are quite pleased with the appointment of Ajit Pai as FCC Chairman. Mr. Pai is a very knowledgeable and experienced commissioner. Plus, he's a radio guy, with a passion for AM broadcasting. He understands the importance of radio and is highly qualified to be chairman. We wish him success. Now, on to our concerns...

Amateur radio is a science-based hobby. Science is based on provable, measurable, repeatable facts. Progress in science is based on sharing those facts, and on freely discussing and debating the analysis and interpretation of those facts. As radio amateurs, we depend on many branches of science to do what we do, and much of the scientific data on which we depend is developed by scientists working for various U.S. government agencies.

For example, DXers and contesters rely on space-weather scientists at NASA and NOAA to provide us with sunspot numbers, solar flux and related data, from which we can make predictions about propagation and plan our HF operating bands and schedules. VHFers depend on imagery from government satellites to be alerted to auroral openings and watch weather maps for signs of tropospheric scatter or ducting. Those of us involved in emergency communications rely on meteorologists at the National Weather Service and its various storm prediction centers to provide warnings about impending severe weather events so we can plan and prepare to offer communications assistance in the aftermath of major storms. Hams involved with amateur satellites depend on the work of NASA scientists, both in terms of satellite design before launch and keeping track of satellites once they're in orbit to know where and when to point our antennas to have our signals meet up with a satellite as it passes by. The list goes on and on.

As consumers of scientific data, much of it generated by government scientists, we are concerned with a growing antagonism toward science in general, and efforts by officials at the highest levels of government to limit the ways and extent to which those scientists may share their data and analyses with the general public (who pay their salaries). We are also concerned with apparent efforts to suppress scientific data that may not align with a particular political viewpoint.

Science deals in facts and is not based on what one may or may not believe (Ohm's Law applies to electronic circuits whether or not you believe in it). Debate about the meaning or significance of these facts is healthy. But informed debate requires unfettered access to scientific data, and conclusions need to be based on facts — real facts — not on preconceived political agendas (and this applies on both sides of the aisle). Science should not be subject to political pressure or censorship.

From Washington to Newington...

Speaking of censorship, we are also concerned about a new policy adopted in January by the ARRL board of

directors to restrict the actions and speech of its own members. The new "ARRL Policy on Board Governance and Conduct of Members of the Board of Directors and Vice Directors" is a lengthy document that covers the duties and responsibilities of board members, as well as their interactions with League members.

Near the top, the policy states that board members must abide by three legal responsibilities: "Good faith, care, and loyalty." It later explains that "the duty of loyalty" means that the board member must act "in the best interests of the corporation and its mission," rather than self-interest or the interest of a third party. Curiously, there is no mention of acting in the best interests of the members, should the board member feel there is a conflict between the members' interests and those of the organization.

The document pays lip service to openness and transparency, but says they must take a back seat to confidentiality in board deliberations and votes in order to allow "full and frank discussions" by the directors of matters being considered. Outside of personnel matters and other issues that are properly discussed and voted on either in executive session or as a committee of the whole, we have to wonder what discussions are taking place during the regular part of a board meeting that are so sensitive that they must be kept secret from the members who elected the directors and are paying the bills. This isn't the National Security Council. It's a big ham radio club. Secrecy breeds suspicion.

The policy goes on to state that each board member must publicly support actions taken by the board, even if he/she did not vote for them, and may not discuss or disclose individual votes on particular motions — even his or her own votes! — unless the board has specifically decided to make its votes public. Again, why the secrecy? Why don't board members want to be held accountable for their comments and their votes? (As we recall, it used to be a matter of course for the board minutes to include the votes of each director on each motion, for which a roll-call vote was requested. Again, why the secrecy?)

Several times, the policy states that no board member may make any negative comment about a board action "that might bring the organization into disrepute." We've got news for you ... It's too late. For a membership organization already being taken to task for excessive secrecy and lack of transparency in its operations, a policy that institutionalizes secret voting at board meetings and prohibits members' elected representatives from discussing board actions with them, does exactly what it claims to be trying to avoid: It brings the organization into disrepute.

In a membership organization like the ARRL, the members have the ultimate authority. There is no valid reason for the vast majority of the discussions and votes of the members' representatives to be kept secret from them. As we said last December in our editorial on the "non-election" in the Southeastern Division, League members must demand change. If their current representatives won't provide it, new people need to run for those offices and challenge the status quo. A seat on the ARRL board should not be a lifetime appointment, but all too often, that is what it becomes. Most of our readers are also ARRL members. Be active. Run for office. Become an agent of change in *your* organization.

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