

# Congress Takes a Peek Into Its Crystal Balls

---

Congress has developed a future frame of mind through new groups that are taking a long-term look at the issues.

BY WILLIAM J. LANOUILLE

On Capitol Hill, the future is now.

While Congress is often thought to be living in the past or, at best, preoccupied with the present, there are some crystal balls popping up beneath the crystal chandeliers as many Members have taken to wondering and worrying about the future.

This future frame of mind has developed over the past few years, both through new groups that are taking a long-term look at developing issues and through legislation that has required Congress to do the same.

Congress formally gained its "oversight" authority with the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 (60 Stat 812), a function it is still trying to exercise effectively.

In the 1970s, it went on to create the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the Office of Technology Assessment and the Congressional Budget Office, all of which were charged with various future-oriented responsibilities. In 1974, the House added a "foresight provision" to its rules, requiring committees "on a continuing basis [to] undertake futures research and forecasting" on matters in their jurisdictions. In addition, the committees were to keep an eye out for conditions that might warrant new legislation, as well as review the impact of tax policies on subjects within their jurisdictions.

Since then, the House has required "inflation impact statements" to be included in its bills, the Senate has required "regulatory impact statements" and both chambers, "arms control impact statements." Resolutions have been introduced in the Senate that would require legislation to be analyzed for its impact on the family, the free enterprise system, the federal deficit,

consumers and federal paperwork, among other things. And last year, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger made a pitch for judicial impact statements to anticipate what burden new laws might place on the courts.

## FUTURES GROUPS

To coordinate the growing requirements for forecasting in the wake of the House's 1974 foresight provision, the Congressional Research Service set up a Futures Research Group the next year. Today, this group is the focal point for CRS and committee work on the future. With a staff of five analysts, it now finds itself flooded with requests for information- at this point from more than half the congressional offices. "We've gone from trying to sell Members and their staffs on the values of futures research to trying to keep up with the backlog of requests," said William Renfro, one of the analysts. By this fall, the group hopes to have an automated retrieval system- called "FIRST" for "Futures Information Retrieval SysTem"- that will make several thousand forecasts easily accessible.

Specialists in the group do not try to be experts in all aspects of the future themselves, but rather try to team up futurists with experts in particular fields. They also work with committee staffs to prepare witness lists, questions and background information for congressional "foresight" hearings. Such hearings have been held on the future of small business, future problems for the aging and future economic changes.

Other "foresight" hearings have explored the future of water resources, provided a preview of science and technology and predicted demographics for secondary schools to the end of this century. Future hearing topics include renewable natural resources, reuse of water and human resources.

To relate this array of future-oriented services to Members of Congress and their constituents, a group of lawmakers set up a Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future in the spring of 1976. Its staff has grown from one- Anne W. Cheatham in the office of Rep. Charles Rose, D-N.C.- to four full-time staff members and a couple of interns. Sixty-six Representatives and four Senators are members.

"We don't do any forecasting ourselves," Cheatham said, "but we put people who do the forecasting in touch with those who can use it. We exchange information, sources, speeches, articles, studies- you name it." A prime source is the monthly newsletter, *What's Next?* Another is the "Dialogues on America's Future" series, which has proven to be very popular with Members. (*For more on the dialogues, see box, p.1051.*)

"Policy making becomes complicated in a large and diverse society like our own," said Rose, "because there is little agreement about what the problems are and even less on what the alternative solutions to the supposed problems must be. That makes politicians either do nothing or guess, and we do a lot of both in Congress.

"I don't expect this group to produce many answers to our problems," Rose added, "but I hope it can teach Congressmen and Congresswomen how to communicate better with their constituents, to determine what the problems are, to examine the alternatives and to help the people decide where they want to be led."

Members of the clearinghouse don't necessarily expect that all this attention on the future will lead to more enlightened legislation, either, because, as one participant put it: "Maybe *no* legislation is the best solution to a problem. Maybe this awareness of future alternatives will

## A Fraternity on the Future

Once a month, about 30 or more Members of Congress gather for drinks, a buffet and an off-the-record discussion with invited guests. The meetings, which are called "Dialogues on America's Future," have developed into a bit of a "fraternity," according to Rep. Charles Rose, D-N the group's founder, a fraternity on the future to be specific.

"These meetings are an island of rationality and hope in a sea of often confusing disorder," said Rep. Andrew Maguire, D-N.J., as he arrived session from the House floor.

"It's stimulating to be here," said Rep. Edward W. Pattison, D-N.Y. "By definition, the issues of the future are not part of the public consciousness. Constituents, by and large, live in the present and we get a sense of the present from them. But it's our job to help our constituents think about the future, too."

Speakers at the sessions have included Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock* (Random House, 1970); the late E.F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful* (Harper & Row, 1973); Herman Kahn, head of the Hudson Institute; anthropologist Margaret Mead; and economist John Kenneth Galbraith. And at a dinner meeting in June, for example, Alice M. Rivlin, director of the Congressional Budget Office, summarized the vision: the future of 16 previous speakers.

Several trends have emerged from the dialogues, one participant said. "We don't want to be too far ahead of our constituents, but just being a year ahead of them on some issues helps us a lot." Water policy is about to become a popular issue, he predicted, with land reform, children's rights and privacy amid global communications systems next on the horizon.

Another Member said, "The value [of the dialogues] to me is to look at these strange and weird ideas, [rather than] the day-to-day things."

But day-to-day cares intrude even on these gatherings. As Rivlin finished her summary and asked rhetorically, "What do we do?" the House bells rang, calling Members to the floor for an appropriations vote. "Spend! Spend!" some responded jestfully, as they paraded off to cast their votes.

convince us that there is no legislative solution. That in itself would be a great achievement, because it would break us from the mind-set that we can legislate and spend our way out of our troubles."

Awareness of the future is creeping into some laws, however. The first "impact forecast" was prepared last year by the Futures Research Group as part of the committee report on a bill (S 1363) to encourage the co-generation of electricity with industrial steam.

An even more ambitious approach to legislative forecasting would be provided by the "sunrise" bill (HR 10421) sponsored by Rep. Butler Derrick, D-S.C. It would require committees to incorporate impact forecasts in all legislation sent to the floor, not merely in their reports.

### FEDERAL FORECASTING

While other parts of the Federal government are dabbling in the future, Congress seems to be leading the way.

"Congress is definitely out ahead of the rest of government in its futures activities," said Edward Cornish, president of the World Future Society. "The Federal Aviation Administration has an active futurist section, which prepared a study of air travel out to the year 2000. But that's an isolated example, whereas in Congress, interest in the future seems to be a very steady movement.

"Congress seems most aware of the American people's frustration with government's inability to respond

creatively to new challenges.

Congressmen and their staffs are searching for ways to make government more anticipatory. They're beginning to realize that legislation will remain on the books for 25 or 50 years before it's reviewed and they want to be sure that what they do now won't have an adverse impact years from today."

Indeed, a project now nearing completion at the Council on Environmental Quality, the Global 2000 Study, "reviewed the forecasting abilities of various federal departments and agencies and reached some disturbing conclusions. The study revealed that while most bureaucracies have future-oriented forecasters within their ranks, it is rare that their findings are used in policy formation and even rarer that they are coordinated with other parts of the government. Said one futurist who reviewed a draft of the study:

"Government forecasting is reliable if the issue is domestic, falls within one department's purview and has a short-term solution. If it's international, interdepartmental, or long-term, then reliability goes way down. There are conflicts between different departments' data banks, conflicts in basic assumptions."

Cheatham of the clearinghouse also sees a surprising disarray among the federal futurists. "We're holding a futures forum in October," she said. "We'll have booths with crepe paper decorations, beer and pretzels, and just let everybody get to know what everybody else is doing.

The last time we had one it was amazing how futurists in one department didn't know about their counterparts in other places- even though they were working on many of the same things."

If the federal futurists have trouble communicating with one another, those in Congress anticipate a different problem- that by being so well coordinated through the CRS facilities, they may become overburdened with non-legislative requests.

"We're afraid of a deluge," said one member of the Futures Research Group. "We have a fantastic capability here, probably the best in the country. If we're not careful, we'll end up doing the work for everybody else. I'll bet every lobbyist and consulting firm in town would love to be able to plug into our system. Limiting access could become a problem."

Another problem is that not everyone in Congress is convinced that the use of futures research is in their best interests. A few committee chairmen want the CRS to prepare "emerging issues" reports only on topics they consider important, or they keep the reports from colleagues.

There is also resistance to futures study by some federal officials. "When they come before Congress, they're afraid to say honestly what the future holds...for fear that they'll be told to fix it, or else," said Cheatham.

One area where Congress and the executive branch do seem to be

---

coordinating, however, is on the federal budget. "The budget is something we both have in common," said Alice M. Rivlin, director of the Congressional Budget Office. "The Administration, in its fiscal year 1980 budget, is taking a three-year look at alternatives, from 1980 to 1982. We have five-year alternatives. I know they have long-range, internal planning papers. I'd love to see them. I hope they share them with us. It would help us all."