Bryson Confirmed as Commerce Secretary

On October 20, the Senate confirmed President Obama’s nomination of John Bryson to serve as U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Bryson replaces Gary Locke, who is still part of the Administration as the American Ambassador to China.

Bryson now takes charge at a key department for geographers. The Commerce Department is the parent agency of the U.S. Census Bureau and of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). His budgeting decisions and recommendations will be critical in a time of federal austerity – all agencies may face cuts of five percent or more through ongoing appropriations debates and future proposals.

The Senate tally was 74-26, with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and 25 other Republicans voting against the nominee. The strength of that opposition is unusual for a Cabinet nominee and can be attributed primarily to the fact that Bryson was a co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and supports energy reform based on a cap-and-trade system. Despite the fact that Senate conservatives did ultimately lose the battle, they were able to significantly delay confirmation for Bryson, who was nominated back in May.

Not all conservatives and like-minded groups, however, opposed Bryson. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers, and four former Commerce Secretaries from Republican Administrations (Carlos Gutierrez, Barbara Franklin, Don Evans, and Pete Peterson) endorsed the nominee. And Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) decided to support Bryson, asserting, “If I were president of the United States, I would probably not have nominated Mr. Bryson… but I don’t think you can really question his credentials and background, and that should be the criteria in my view.”

Bryson served previously as the corporate head of power giant Edison International, chair of the California State Water Resources Control Board, and president of the California Public Utilities Commission. He has also been a board member at Stanford, Caltech, and the Keck Foundation—a prominent funder of research projects and endeavors. Bryson holds a BA from Stanford and a JD from Yale.

NSF Releases SBE 2020 Report

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has released Rebuilding the Mosaic: Fostering Research in the Social, Behavioral, and Economic (SBE) Sciences at the National Science Foundation in the Next Decade. The release came in conjunction with the SBE Directorate’s recent advisory committee meeting and the annual meeting of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA). The COSSA meeting included presentations by NSF Director Subra Suresh and SBE head Myron Gutmann. Both officials indicated that the report has been well received by the Foundation’s leadership and that the document will play a key role in shaping SBE funding priorities in the coming years.

Readers of this column may recall that Gutmann gave a featured presentation about the production of the report at the 2011 AAG Annual Meeting in Seattle. The SBE Directorate solicited the submission of white papers on topics related to transformative questions affecting SBE sciences on a decadal scale – and a total of 252 papers were submitted.

Among the notable conclusions of the report:

- Future research will be interdisciplinary, data-intensive, and collaborative. That vision rests on thorough grounding in the core SBE sciences that continue to present important, discipline-based research and methodological challenges.
- The research community looks to NSF/SBE to provide leadership and direction in building capacity and infrastructure, most notably in interdisciplinary training, data and facilities to support analysis, simulation, tools, and training in new research methods, including integration and synthesis across data, methods, and disciplines.
- Four major topic areas have been identified within the wealth of ideas received: population change; sources of disparities; communication, language, and literacy; and technology, new media, and social networks.

Rebuilding the Mosaic notes that the SBE Advisory Committee will be issuing a complementary report in the coming months “that will reflect their expertise and ideas about the SBE sciences.” The Advisory Committee had full access to the white papers that were submitted to the Directorate.

The Geography and Spatial Sciences program at NSF is part of the SBE Directorate and there were multiple mentions of geography and geospatial research throughout the report. Rebuilding the Mosaic can be accessed at: www.nsf.gov/pubs/2011/nsf11086/nsf11086.pdf.

Wirth, Prewitt Endorse AAG Resolution

Former federal officials Tim Wirth and Ken Pruitt have signed on as supporters of the AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education. The endorsements came after an exciting month, during which three former U.S. Secretaries of State (George Shultz, James Baker, and Madeleine Albright) and several other individuals and groups signed onto the document. The Honorable Timothy E. Wirth represented the people of Colorado in Congress for 18 years, serving six House terms and one Senate term. He was also Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs during the Clinton Administration. Wirth has been President of the United Nations Foundation and Better World Fund since 1998. The Honorable Kenneth Prewitt served as Director of the Census Bureau from 1998-2001 and led the agency during the 2000 decennial census. He is now Carnegie Professor of Public Affairs and Vice President for Global Centers at Columbia University and serves concurrently as President of COSSA. Prewitt was previously President of the Social Science Research Council.

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