



Inside the tent: science and higher education under Obama

With a presidential order reversing the ban on stem cell research already drafted, there are high expectations that the 44th President of the United States of America is going to give science and R&D a massive shot of adrenaline.

Bloggers are feverishly confident the anti-intellectual, anti-science stance of the Bush administration is about to be turned on its head and scientists, academics and intellectuals will once again be invited inside the tent.

However, Professor David Brady, deputy director of the Hoover Institution, a public policy research centre at Stanford University, is not one of them.

"I'm not sure we will see significant changes in approach to higher education, science and R&D under Obama," said Brady, who was in Australia as a guest of the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.

"But academics and intellectuals will certainly have more of a say in the Obama presidency in the beginning, then the question is, how effective can they be.

"This is the problem that scientists have that is not going to get solved because Obama is the president. The one thing scientists have

is objectivity, but in these areas where you want to make huge structural changes in the economy, such as climate change and alternate energy, these are areas with a lot of risk associated with them. You are promising a benefit you are not sure of, and that benefit is not measurable.

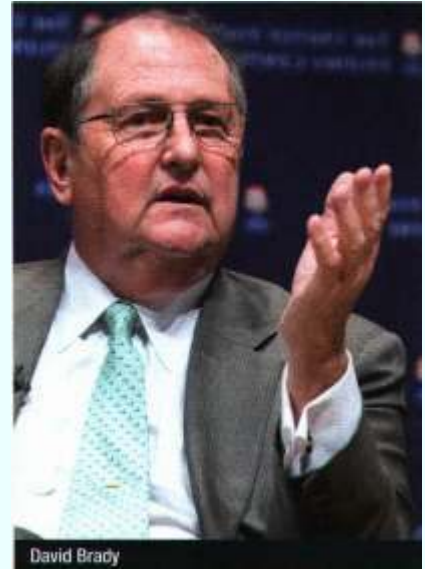
"When that happens, if you want to stay in the game, you have to give up your objectivity and become a player in the policy process. That is something academics have not been good at, with a few exceptions."

And then, of course, there is the issue of the economy. Brady expects the current account deficit to reach 6.2 per cent of GDP in the coming months – the highest it has been since World War II. Getting the economy back on its feet is going to be the number one priority and until then, what happens in innovation, technology, R&D and higher education will be a wait and see.

The one thing he is sure of is that Colin Powell won't be the next secretary of education – a theory that did the rounds of UK and US papers last week.

"Why would you go for a for a secretary of defence and five-star general to be secretary for education? What a joke." ■ JH

See Toby Miller's Letter from America, page 8



David Brady