

Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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Whither Democracy?

After many years of one-party rule, the tiny republic of Arcania finally held its first contested election for president in 1991. However, it continued the unusual practice of including appointed judges as voting members of its legislative body; some defeated candidates were even appointed to these judgeships. Recently, the president's appointed cabinet began to press to have themselves added to the legislature as voting members.

What country would make such a mockery of democracy? Why, none other than our own AMS. The October 1995 *Notices* (pp. 1148-1152) contains a proposal to add the appointed policy committee chairs to the AMS Council as full voting members. Although this was tabled at its August meeting (December 1995 *Notices*, pp. 1548-1552), the Council did vote to invite "...chairs of the policy committees to attend meetings of the Council with *full privileges of the floor* and request[s] that the Trustees subvent their travel in a manner similar to *ordinary Council members*." While this would appear to be a well-intentioned compromise, the addition of "nonordinary" nonvoting members to the Council seems to violate Article IV, Section 4 of the AMS bylaws, which states, "All members of the Council shall be voting members" (November 1995 *Notices*, pp. 1317-1321).

Whether or not this violates the letter of the bylaws, it certainly violates their spirit. The right to determine the makeup of its Council belongs to the membership of the AMS, which must ratify changes to the bylaws.

Communication between the Council and AMS committees is important, and there may be times when a policy chair's presence at a Council meeting is desirable. But this hardly justifies giving them "full privileges of the floor" on unrelated matters, much less the right to vote. Moreover, a much stronger case can be made for inviting chairs of other (i.e., non-policy) AMS committees to speak to the Council on relevant matters. The Council resolution which authorized the five policy committees also provided that each committee should include three elected members of the Council (May/June 1993 *Notices*, p. 526). If this communication mechanism is not working effectively, there is a serious problem with the policy committees, and it is that committee structure, not the makeup of Council, which should be changed.

The creation of policy committees has given rise to other communication problems. Council meetings (except for executive sessions) are open to *all* AMS members, and any member may obtain copies of the agenda and minutes. In recent years the Council has permitted representatives from interested committees and groups to speak on matters before it. By contrast, committee meetings are normally closed; only a committee chair can invite a nonmember to attend or even see the agenda or minutes. When there is overlap of charges, the chair of one committee need not even inform, much less invite, other chairs. Even policy committees have sometimes found that their recommendations have been significantly altered or rejected by the AMS Executive Committee and/or Board of Trustees so that the original recommendation was not placed on the Council agenda. Some matters do require careful study and review by small groups; AMS governance requires a careful balance between this need, openness, and communication.

One can also question the long-standing practice of including appointed editors on the Council as full voting members. It is hard to see why the editor of a mathematics journal should have more entitlement than any other member to vote on such matters as redirection of the Centennial fellowship, ethical employment practices, or the establishment of an Institutional Members Advisory Committee. At present, these editors are appointed by the Council upon the recommendation of the *elected* Editorial Boards Committee (EBC). Although not reported in the *Notices*, the agenda for the August Council meeting also included a proposal (which would not require an amendment to the bylaws) to replace this elected EBC group by one appointed by the president.

Why is democracy under such threat in the *American* Mathematical Society? Democracy, whether in federal government, local government, or professional societies, is hardly a perfect system. A benevolent dictatorship (especially one with *me* at the helm) can be much more efficient. In a democracy candidates are sometimes elected on the basis of name recognition, while highly capable opponents are defeated. Within democracy, there is also an important role for appointed officials, but balance of power makes it advisable to separate their functions from those of elected bodies.

Most of us find that, despite its faults, democratic government is preferable to any other system. Why, then, do we not extend that judgment to the society that provides our professional representation as well?

—Mary Beth Ruskai