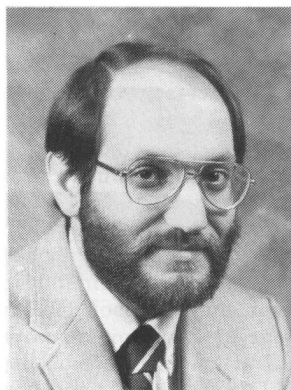


Social Responsibility vs. Political Advocacy

Elton N. Kaufmann, MRS President

Few here would deny that the individual citizen should bear a burden of social responsibility and enjoy the right of political advocacy. But what about the institution? In particular, what about the institution which is a nonprofit learned scientific society. Most would agree that the burden of social responsibility not only remains but is multiplied by the greater than individual impact such an organization may have on society. The right of political advocacy however, if anything, is diminished and restricted. Again, because of the greater potential impact of an institution on the political process. In what arena is it appropriate for MRS to espouse a cause on behalf of its collective membership and the greater materials research community and where must it (or should it) remain either scrupulously neutral or totally silent?

There are many gray areas here, but there are also some reasonably definitive and sensible guidelines. First, MRS is made up of individuals each of whom may, and does, express an opinion on any issue. If a sizable proportion of the materials community tends to hold a given view and



express it, then the Society will likely be viewed as holding that view in spite of the absence of an explicit and official endorsement.

This is natural and not necessarily bad. But, in general, the Society must neither promote nor endorse a viewpoint simply because it represents that of the majority of its members. In some cases it would clearly jeopardize the privileged nonprofit status we enjoy as a scientific and educational organization. But more significantly,

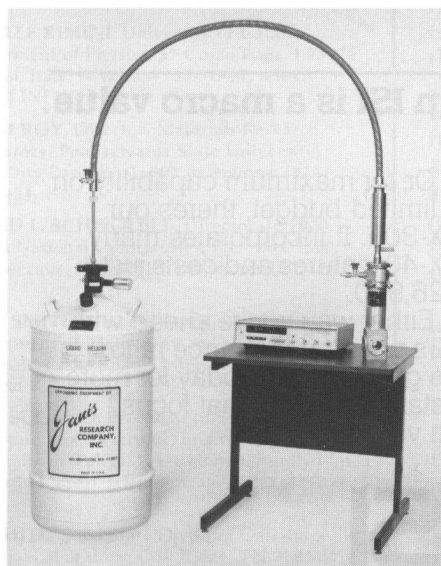
it would deter the materials researcher who holds the minority view from joining us. That is, it would add a criterion for selection of MRS, as the scientist's choice for a professional organization, which is not germane to the practice of materials research or the purpose of the Society.

When we consider many controversial issues of the day which are either completely unrelated or highly tangential to our professional pursuits, it is easy to conclude that MRS must abstain from position-taking, whether or not a consensus sentiment of the membership is perceived. When the issues strongly influence our professional lives, what is the proper role of the Society? In this arena, the Society has two choices. It may again eschew association with a controversial subject so as not to chance offending one side or the other (or both). Or it may step forward and insert itself as a neutral arbiter, as ombudsman, or discussion facilitator so as to advance the controversy toward resolution for the benefit of all involved. It may also, through its forums, help distill from contentious issues the technical aspects about which the MRS constituency may be expert. This, I submit, is the more socially responsible path to follow.

These thoughts are not presented here in the abstract. They are prompted by the increasing contact MRS has been experiencing with controversial issues and with policy and funding organs of government. The issues of large facilities versus small science, of international competition and technological leadership, of technology export versus free exchange of information have all surfaced in our meetings or committees. As recognition of MRS and its members, as the single most broad-based and knowledgeable group of materials researchers in existence, has increased, we have been approached by many university, government, and private sector organizations with requests for help and advice. As a responsible member of the scientific community and the larger world community, our Society should offer its expertise to those who require it and its forums for the open discussion of technically relevant subjects, whether controversial or not.

There is a risk attendant to embracing responsible involvement while trying to walk the fine line of neutrality. The leaders of MRS should accept this challenge and the membership should encourage the bolder course through their participation.

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