

20 Years of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

Part 2: the Past 10 Years and the Future

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of POST's services to the UK Parliament. In the last issue of Science in Parliament, Dr Michael Clark, former MP and Chair of POST, and its first Director, Prof Michael Norton, looked at the Office's origin and early experiences. In this second article, the current Chair, Dr Ashok Kumar MP, and the Director, Prof David Cope, examine the Office's experiences since 1998 and offer some thoughts on future directions.

Prof Cope became POST's Director in 1998.

Expansion and Extension

Although of course, POST is strictly a non-political organisation, the election of the Labour government in 1997 had a considerable influence on it. At one level, this came through the succession of MP Chairs appointed by the Government Whips to lead POST's Board in determining its work programme – first, Dr Ian Gibson, from 1997-2001; then Dr Phyllis Starkey, from 2001-2005 and from 2005 to the present, Dr Ashok Kumar.

More significant, however, was the emphasis placed by government on the role of science and innovation in stimulating the UK economy. This encouraged a strong sense of the positive contribution of the entire 'science enterprise' and of the urgency to develop policies to maximise the benefit. It is fair to say that there is little political disagreement on such aims, as was shown last year when the Conservative Party published its task force report on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, with the task force being chaired by POST Board member, Ian Taylor MP¹.

Coincidental, but also influential, was a whole series of national and international circumstances where science and technology issues came to the forefront of media and political attention. The first was the BSE/CJD 'crisis', followed in short order by the huge controversy over genetically-modified foods. The latter, in particular, encapsulated some of the basic principles of POST's work on technology assessment, for the Office had examined the subject as early as

1994 – and had also worked with external partners, such as the Science Museum, in organising the UK's first national 'consensus conference' – a structured public consultation process. POST was therefore very well placed to provide the type of detailed, impartial, analysis described by Dr Clark and Prof Norton in the first article, when the subject rocketed to the top of the political agenda in early 1999². Foot and Mouth Disease followed in 2001, while the entire period of the last decade has seen enduring issues, such as stem cell research, concerns over the potential impacts of information technology developments, especially in relation to privacy and, above all, the entire subject of climate change, constantly the subjects of public and political debate.

It is no accident therefore that demands for the Office's services expanded dramatically in the past ten years, nor that both Houses, in 2001, decided that POST should be established as a permanent bicameral institution, instead of being on a quinquennial renewal basis. Demand for increased services was met, early in the decade, by an expansion in staffing, so that POST now operates with three teams, each of two advisers, in the fields of Biological Sciences and Health; Physical Sciences and IT and Environment and Energy. To help to disseminate the increased output, a special Publications, Media and Events Manager position was also established.

POST Fellowships

A key contribution to the Office's increased output has also been the expansion in the number of short-term (usually three month) fellowships at POST. These enable doctoral students (and occasionally post-docs) to work alongside the permanent staff. Usually fellows produce one of POST's famous 'POSTnotes' but they may additionally or solely be based with a select committee, assisting it in a relevant inquiry. In 2008, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council became the latest research council to sponsor POST fellows, while support also comes from learned societies such as the Institute of Physics and Royal Society of Chemistry and other external organisations such as the Wellcome Trust and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts.

As Chair and Director, we would like to put on record our gratitude to all our fellowship sponsors. As a result of this support, POST now has an 'alumni network' of over 50 such former fellows, most of whom retain strong links with the Office and often continue collaboration with it in various ways.

POST's Work with Select Committees

From its earliest days, the Office had worked in various ways in assisting parliamentary committees in both Houses, but the expansion in numbers of both permanent staff and fellows has enabled this contribution to shift

up a gear over the past decade. Assistance can range from informal briefings given to committee members prior to their beginning an inquiry through to substantial pieces of research conducted at the suggestion of a committee.

The origins of POST's longest, largest, and in many ways, most influential piece of work in its 20 year history arose in this latter way. In 2002, the House of Commons Defence Committee published a report on *Defence and Security in the UK*³. In the course of its inquiry, the Committee received evidence suggesting that sabotage attacks at UK civil nuclear facilities could have very serious consequences. The committee felt it was not itself technically qualified to assess the validity of such claims and requested POST to 'pick up the ball'. So began a two year investigation that culminated in the publication of POST's longest report⁴ and a continuing relationship with the government Office of Civil Nuclear Security. POST will most likely be re-examining developments in this field in the near future.

It was also in collaboration with select committees that POST, in the last decade, pioneered the use of online consultations by the UK Parliament. The first consultation was on the career experiences of female scientists, for the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. This was followed by a general public consultation organised for the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, while POST, on its own initiative, conducted another, which had over 600 participants, on inland flooding, after the disastrous occurrences of 2000-01. Such online consultations are now quite regularly used in committee inquiries, where appropriate.

POST looks forward to strengthening and extending its work with parliamentary committees in the future. The timescales of committee work, with inquiries usually originating at quite short notice, does not always mesh well with the longer term work planning horizon of POST. However, the Office always tries to reschedule its programme to accommodate interesting committee requests, as it did most recently, when POST's Environment and Energy team leader was seconded for a period to assist the work of the Draft Marine Bill Committee.

POST and the Wider World of Technology Assessment

Two significant features of the past decade have set the work of POST in a wider context. The first has been the remarkable expansion of parliamentary technology assessment units across Europe, with the latest being established in July 2007 at the Swedish Parliament. There are now 18 such offices, from Finland to Greece, and movements afoot in some of the newer member countries of the EU. Many of these Parliaments have sent delegations to investigate POST's working methods before establishing their own offices. All have been welcome, although eyebrows were raised when the Norwegian Parliament requested that we receive a delegation of 18 members – the Office had to make a special request to increase its entertainment budget to be able to offer them dinner. All 18 offices collaborate in various ways, including joint projects, through the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment network. Next year, to mesh with POST's 20th anniversary, it will also hold the presidency of the network.

Delegations also came to POST from wider afield than Europe – especially through approaches to POST by organisations such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. This coincided with a growing interest in 'science for development'. In 2001, POST's Board agreed that a continuing theme of its work should be examination of UK interests in development matters. The resultant output served only to increase the interest in POST's work from parliaments and research institutes in developing countries, especially Africa. In response, last year, with support from organisations such as the Gatsby Charitable Trust and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, POST began a special project to assist such parliaments to enhance their science and technology assessment capacities. One POST staff member has been on a part-time secondment to initiate the project, which will run for the next two years.

Closer to home, awareness of, and interest in, the work of POST from within the UK has considerably expanded in the past decade. Dr Clark and Prof Norton, in their first article,

noted that one of Parliament's original objectives was that POST should, through its work, help to raise the credibility of the parliamentary process as a whole. It is very gratifying that so many higher education institutions systematically refer their students to POST publications, while POST always welcomes the requests that the Office regularly receives from Members for multiple copies of POSTnotes to distribute to constituents.

20 More Years

There is no indication that the growing role of science and technology that POST has covered over the past twenty years will slacken in its pace in the future. POST regularly conducts internal 'horizon-scanning' exercises to identify emerging issues – something that the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee last year suggested that it should explore more formally⁵ – a message received with alacrity by POST's Board. Immediately after every general election, POST publishes a special briefing on the science and technology issues that it anticipates might receive parliamentary attention during the forthcoming Parliament. Soon after the return of Parliament from the 2008 summer recess, POST will collaborate with the Government Office of Science to look at that Office's Foresight and Horizon-Scanning Programmes and ways in which they can reinforce their parliamentary relevance. POST looks forward to ensuring that on the issues of the future – be they 'human enhancement', the problems of securing energy needs while protecting the environment, or the seemingly limitless applications of information technology – the UK Parliament can draw on analysis that is – timely, independent, comprehensive and comprehensible.

Notes

- 1 Ian Taylor, Conservative Party Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Task-force, *Science in Parliament*, 64, 1, Spring, 2007, p1.
- 2 POST report, *Genetically Modified Foods - Benefits and Risks, Regulation and Public Acceptance*, 1998
- 3 House of Commons Defence Committee, Sixth Report, Session 2001-2, *Defence and Security in the UK*, HC 518-1, 24 July 2002
- 4 POST report 222, *Assessing the Risk of Terrorist Attacks on Nuclear Facilities*, July 2004
- 5 House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, Second Report, Session 2006-7, *Governing the Future*, HC 123-1, 6 March 2007