

TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

OTA Taking Shape

by our Washington Correspondent

DURING the Congressional close season, Senator Edward M. Kennedy and his staff have been quietly moving behind the scenes mapping out a path for the Office of Technology Assessment—Congress's new think tank and crystal ball on technological matters. If Kennedy gets his way, and he probably will because he will be chairman of the OTA's policy board, the office seems destined to become a powerful force in American science policy, not to mention a base from which Kennedy can launch assaults on the Administration's policies.

Although the legislation which set up the office would seem to prescribe a fairly passive role for the OTA—chiefly that of letting contracts to universities and other organizations for assessments of problems referred to it—Kennedy's plans would make the office highly active. First, the OTA board, which consists of six senators and six members of the House of Representatives, is given the power under the legislation to initiate studies off its own bat, and Kennedy hopes to use that authority to good advantage. He has already asked the National Science Foundation to draw up a list of likely topics for study and has informally asked the National Academy of Sciences for advice on priorities.

Another possibility which would give the OTA considerably more public attention is that the board may hold public hearings from time to time. Moreover, Kennedy and his staff have been considering the possibility of having *ad hoc* panels appointed by the OTA board to study specific issues. One advantage of such an arrangement is that panels could be appointed to draw up reports on issues where timeliness is necessary, for example to affect the passage of a particular item of legislation. Much of the OTA's work will necessarily be in the form of long-term studies, and the ability to appoint such panels for quick, qualitative studies would greatly increase its flexibility.

As for personnel in the office, there are at present two vacancies on the OTA board because neither Senator Gordon Allott nor Representative Earle Cabell were reelected to Congress. At present, Olin Teague of Texas seems to be the most likely candidate for the position vacated by Cabell, but a successor for Allott has not yet emerged from the Republicans. (Teague is expected to become the chairman of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, unless he gets caught up in the manoeuvring for the House leadership.)

Another important appointment, which will be made when the OTA board has its first meeting in January, is that of director of the office. Kennedy has already had a meeting with Emilio Q. Daddario, former chairman of the House subcommittee on Science, Research and Development, and chief architect of the legislation which set up the office. The indications are that the board will offer the directorship to Daddario and that he will take it.

All Kennedy's plans are, of course, subject to debate and approval by the rest of the OTA board, and the office is, in any case, unlikely to be funded until next spring. If Kennedy does get his way, however, the office will clearly be a powerful body which will make its presence felt in science policy circles. It could also become a thorn in the Administration's flesh as it brings United States science policy under its microscope.

POPULATION

A Hint of ZPG

by our Washington Correspondent

THE US government last week released a set of figures which should bring joy to the hearts of members of Zero Population Growth and others concerned about the so-called population explosion. During the first nine months of this year, the birth rate in the United States fell to 75.3 births per thousand women of childbearing age (between the ages of 15 and 44). If maintained, this birth rate would result in an average of 2.08 children per family, or just below the 2.1 level needed for zero population growth. Even in absolute terms, the number of births dropped during the first nine months of this year, to 2,437,000, compared with 2,673,000 during the corresponding period last year.

Even if the birth rate is maintained at the ZPG rate indefinitely however, the population of the United States would still grow to about 320 million from its present size of about 210 million because the age distribution of the present population is heavily weighted towards younger people. Dr Paul Ehrlich, founder of ZPG, said last week that the decline in fertility is "cheering", but added that "it is extremely important that we get a rate lower than this so that population growth will end sooner".

One way to help push the fertility rate down even further is through an expanded population research programme, and it was announced last week, hard on the heels of the new population figures, that a new Biomedical Center for Population Research is to be established at the University of Chicago, and the Ford Foundation has also announced that it

has awarded twenty-six grants, totalling \$647,702, for studies of population policies. The Chicago centre, which is being set up with a \$436,658 grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, will support biomedical research into reproduction. The director of the centre is Dr Elwood V. Jensen. The research supported by the Ford Foundation will be sociological studies ranging from the effect of US income tax laws on fertility patterns to the motivations for delayed marriage among the women of Hong Kong.

Short Notes

Medical Ethics

THE National Institute of General Medical Sciences has awarded a grant worth nearly \$220,000 to the Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, for a three-year study of the ethical implications of genetic counselling and of screening for carriers of heritable diseases. The institute, which is based at Hasting-on-Hudson, New York, will look into the general issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and freedom from coercion in genetic counselling and screening. Such issues have recently been brought into the spotlight by the increased attention directed towards screening and counselling for sickle cell anaemia.

Baldeschweiler to Caltech

DR JOHN D. BALDESCHWEILER, Deputy Director of the Office of Science and Technology and Deputy Science Adviser to President Nixon, will leave Washington next July to become chairman of Caltech's Division of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. Baldeschweiler has been a member of the Office of Science and Technology for almost two years, and before that he was Professor of chemistry at Stanford University. He succeeds Dr George Hammond at Caltech, who resigned last July to become Vice-chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Pioneer 10

A RECENT course adjustment to Pioneer 10 should take the spacecraft behind Io, the orange satellite of Jupiter, which will allow measurements to be made of the satellite's atmosphere. Io may have an atmosphere of nitrogen or methane, and as the spacecraft passes behind the satellite, changes in the radio signals cutting through the atmosphere should shed light on its composition. For about ten minutes after Io emerges from Jupiter's shadow, it is much brighter than normal, a phenomenon which may indicate that a temporary deposit of ice forms on its surface when it is cut off from sunlight.