

USA

Assessing the OTA

Congress's three-year-old Office Technology Assessment (OTA) has come under sharp, and potentially damaging, criticism from another Congressional committee and from the former chairman of its own advisory council. Both have argued that it has failed to live up to expectations and that there is still no clear understanding of its role and function. Colin Norman reports from Washington.

ESTABLISHED in 1972 by an Act of Congress, OTA is meant to furnish Congress with advice and analysis concerning scientific and technological issues. Its mission is frequently described as providing an early warning system on such matters. But its chief problem, which lies at the root of much of the criticism, is that on the one hand it is expected to study long-term issues, while on the other it is supposed to help Congress, which is more concerned with yearly budgets and two-yearly elections.

OTA studies and reports on matters referred to it by other committees of Congress, and it also generates some studies itself. Its operations are managed by a Director, Emilio Q. Daddario, a former Congressman who wrote the original legislation which led to OTA's establishment, and its policy is provided by a board consisting of

six Senators and six Congressmen. In addition, an advisory council, whose members are drawn from industry and academia, provides advice on OTA's operations.

The first criticism of OTA's operations surfaced in the office's recently-published annual report, which contained a letter from Harold Brown, President of Caltech, resigning as chairman of OTA's advisory council, and a response from Representative Olin Teague, chairman of the office's governing board.

Written last December, the letter begins with some words of praise for a few OTA studies, but criticises the fact that the office has taken on too many trivial tasks and asserts that "few of us on the council, I believe, would say that we are satisfied with what has been accomplished, compared with what we hoped for and still believe possible". Brown suggests in particular that OTA has been concentrating too much on immediate problems: "inevitably there are strong pressures on the Congress as well as on the Executive Branch to concentrate on immediate problems. Certainly those problems must be faced as they arise. But there needs to be a balancing effort within the Congress to foresee problems of the medium and even the long term future".

Less gentle criticism has come from

an obscure Congressional body, known as the House Commission on Information and Facilities, chaired by Representative Jack Brooks of Texas. On the basis of an 8-month study, the commission last week issued a report which concludes that "OTA remains substantially short of reaching levels of performance reasonably expected of an information resource of its size and cost and access to expertise". The report, in short, suggested that OTA has been beset by operational problems and by lack of a clear definition of its functions.

The report states that the Commission found confusion among OTA's staff, council and board, and between OTA and some Congressional committees, over the office's role and responsibilities. It suggests, therefore, that OTA's statutory authority should be reviewed, and a clear definition of technology assessment should be drawn up, presumably so that OTA's territory is staked out and so that there's no overlap of its functions with those of the Congressional Research Service or the General Accounting Office. The report goes on to state, however, that so far there has been no such overlap.

More specifically, the report expresses reservations about the fact that OTA has been performing a growing share of its studies itself, rather than having them done by outside contractors, and suggests that OTA should have a firmer policy on which kinds of studies should be performed in-house. That criticism conflicts, however, with a comment made by Brown in his letter. Listing some "substantial advances" made by OTA, Brown notes that "an initial tendency to think almost solely in terms of contracted studies has been succeeded by a more balanced procedure involving advisory panels, contracted studies, and some (as yet rather little) in-house assessment work".

But perhaps the Commission's most biting criticism concerns OTA's administrative structure. "Organisationally", it says, "OTA lacks the minimum of orderly structure", and it suggests that OTA should begin immediately, if necessary with the help of management consultants, to put itself in order.

Finally, both the Commission and Brown criticise the poor relations which have developed between OTA and its advisory council. "At one time or another", Brown states, "most Council members have expressed frustration about the relatively large amount of time, effort and persistence that they have invested in terms of the effect they feel they have had. I believe that the important task of strengthening communications between the

NSF budget goes to conference

HOPES for at least a modest increase in funds for basic research in the United States have been unexpectedly revived by the Senate. After intensive lobbying from scientific and higher education organisations, the Senate last week restored most of the money which the House of Representatives had slashed from the budget of the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the matter must now be decided in a conference committee consisting of members from each body. It's a fair bet that NSF will end up with a small increase, though not as great as the 20% boost proposed by the Ford Administration.

President Ford's budget request for NSF for the fiscal year which begins on October 1 was designed to offset the effects of inflation, which has eaten deeply into support for basic research over the past few years. But the House slashed nearly \$60 million from NSF's budget, giving

the agency less than a cost-of-living increase, largely on the grounds that basic research isn't too badly off in relation to other items in the federal budget.

The House's parsimony prompted a massive letter-writing campaign to key Senators, and a move to restore the funds, led by Senators Charles Mathias of Maryland and Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, proved successful. The senate agreed to Mr Ford's proposed 20% increase, in spite of opposition from Senator William Proxmire, Chairman of the Senate subcommittee which handles NSF's budget request. Proxmire said that he believes the increase is much too generous, but was outvoted in the committee.

The conference committee will probably settle on a figure about half way between the levels approved by the House and Senate, which would at least give basic research its first real increase in about five years.

Board and the Council needs to be faced during the coming year". And the House Commission on Information and Facilities, noting that there has been considerable confusion over the role of the council, suggests that "substantial revision of the Council's statu-

tory function, or its abolition, be proposed on grounds that unless Council contributions are integrated more effectively in the policymaking process, its existence can only be a source of frustration and disharmony within the agency".

There is clearly going to be more debate before OTA is able to establish a comfortable role in which it acts as a long-term analyst and at the same time provides advice geared to Congress's short-term outlook. □

EEC

European science policy sought

The European Commission recently unveiled proposals for a Community science policy. Progress towards the aim of a common approach, reports Chris Sherwell, may prove to be more pedestrian than the enthusiasts are prepared to admit.

If the expressions of satisfaction emanating from the vicinity of the Berlaymont Building in Brussels are anything to go by, Europe is now well on its way towards forging a science and technology policy for itself. The Commission of the EEC, which has its headquarters there, recently unveiled the results of a closed symposium which took place under its auspices in Milan towards the end of May.

The aim of the symposium was to gather suitable suggestions for guidelines regarding research and development which the Commission might present to the relevant Council of Ministers later this year. This it reckons to have achieved. Among the 100-odd participants were members of the European and the various national parliaments; members of the Commission and of the Economic and Social Committee (a consultative body serving the EEC and Euratom), and government officials; and the customary host of scientists, engineers, industrialists and trade unionists who help to make meetings like this more models of organisation than of representativeness.

The three-day symposium, at Milan's International Institute for Management of Technology, was organised by Directorate General XII (Research, Science and Education) of the Commission with the aid of CERD (the European Research and Development Committee), which is an independent 21-member body of scientists and engineers established by the Community in 1973 to advise the Commission on the formulation of a common science policy. It took place in the context of an effort finally launched two years ago to sow the first seeds of a revamped Community science and technology policy to replace the old sectoral approach of the previous sixteen years.

That effort in fact had its real beginnings many years ago, but it was

only in January 1974 that the Council of Ministers found itself able to give expression to sentiments voiced at the Paris Heads of Government meeting in October 1972; the Council passed four resolutions which would provide a basis for a broad Community science and technology policy. The resolutions covered matters like coordination, participation in the European Science Foundation and programmes of action. The Commission was landed with the task of looking at the science policies of the nine member states with a view to producing Community-wide projects and a common approach externally.

The hope was that the terms of a full-blooded European science policy could be finalised by the end of 1976. The Council, when it met again in June 1975, urged that discussions on the objectives of such a policy be held "without delay", and the Milan symposium, being the major part of those discussions, heralded the end of this first phase in the new Community approach. The next phase begins if and when the Council approves the recommendations of the symposium's five working parties, each of which aimed to tackle separate areas of interest.

Recommendations

The Commission document summarising the working parties' recommendations, taken as a whole, does not make exciting reading, being littered throughout with empty phrases characteristic of all ostensibly agonising searches for lowest-common-denominator agreements. Hidden in the interstices of the Commission's denatured language, however, is some sort of basis for the optimism now being expressed so expansively by the Director General at DGXII, Herr Gunter Schuster. Here, in essence, is the gist of the recommendations.

Working Party I: Long term objectives and priorities. The group recommends that a suitable instrument "such as proposed in 'Europe+30'" be established "at the earliest possible time", and that in the meantime a "small unit of specialists" be set up in or be linked to DGXII "without delay". Lord Kennet from Britain dissented on the latter point, arguing that such a staff

should be actually in DGXII to avoid the danger of it becoming a substitute for Europe+30.

Among the many areas of high priority for research in the long term, the working party includes Europe's ecological system, climatic changes, water management and food shortages.

Working Party II: Medium term objectives and priorities. The main theme informing this group's recommendations emphasises the need to do more to bring innovations to potential customers. The group wants to "make operational, within the Communities (the EEC, the European Coal and Steel Community and Euratom), structures for securing and examining research and development proposals coming from any public or private European organisation". It also wants "to re-launch the Community development contract procedure" reserved for *European* [group's italics] groups of enterprises and multinationals, and "to establish structures for conveying the Commission's intentions". A consultative committee for industry is suggested.

More specifically, the group hopes that certain subjects now neglected or insufficiently developed will receive "special consideration"—among them, hydrographical problems arising out of the existence of multinational basins, European epidemiological research, recycling and reclamation, basic biological research, and ethical problems in genetic matters.

Interestingly, there is a frank acknowledgment of the constraints within which such a policy can work. The human and financial resources the EEC has at its disposal, the group says, "are not considerable", and are so concentrated as to prevent the needs of a real European policy being met over a wider field—and in certain fields, the group declares, the EEC could not be satisfied with the role of a mere catalyst. The scientific and technical activity of the EEC, it stresses, is "an essential part of a true European economic community", and it expresses its hope for a separate budget that would allow further progress.

Working Party III: Coordination of national policies. After recognising that a common policy can only be built up "slowly and step by step out of the coordination of national policies