From solar system to social system

David Dickson talks to John Gibbons (right), new director of the US Office of Technology Assessment

JOHN Gibbons is fond of quotations. He starts with one from Abraham Lincoln about the inadvisability of announcing future plans when one has only just entered office; ranges from Winston Churchill to Deep Throat's advice to "follow the money"; and uses Walt Whitman to support his interest as a scientist in the unity of nature. The ability to absorb the thoughts of others, and mould a set of eclectic facts and opinions into a meaningful synthesis that represents more than mere repetition, is probably one of the most important assets that he brings to his new job as director of the US Congress' Office of Technology Assessment.

"My past experience working with interdisciplinary teams taught me to listen very hard," he says of his experience as Director of Environmental Programs at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and, subsequently, the University of Tennessee.

Dr Gibbons, an approachable 50-year-old physicist, is the first academic scientist to be appointed to head the OTA, which was set up by Congress six years ago. He is also considerably less known in Washington political circles than his two predecessors, ex-congressman Emilio Q. Daddario, and more recently Dr Russell Peterson, an industrial chemist who was previously Governor of Delaware, and resigned from OTA two months ago.

After the political wrangles that have formed the back-drop to OTA's recent history, Dr Gibbons' appointment has (to the relief of many OTA staff) been mercifully swift. The question now is whether he can produce the peculiar blend of technical, managerial and political sensitivities that the job requires.

Despite a low public profile, he is no stranger to Washington. He was a director of the Federal Energy Administration's Office of Energy Conservation between 1973 and 1974 and he sits on numerous advisory boards on energy and environment related issues where he has built a reputation for both fairness and independence.

His professional roots, however, lie in the academic community. A graduate of Duke University, Dr Gibbons joined Oak Ridge in 1954, and spent fifteen years as a nuclear geophysicist, eventually heading a team investigating how experimental nuclear physics provided clues about the formation of the solar system (as well as the surface of materials).

Professional and vocational interests

combined in 1970 when he set up and directed an environment programme at Oak Ridge, studying in particular the relationship between energy and environmental issues, and developing techniques of energy demand analysis. This led directly to considering the political process. "I recognised as I tried to wrestle with problems related to, for example, the efficient use of energy, that much depended on the confluence of good technical information into the policy process," he says.

Much of his approach is pragmatic. A report recently released by OTA on home energy conservation, for which Dr Gibbons chaired the advisory panel, concluded that home owners were more likely to adopt energy efficient practices by being convinced that they would save money than by appeals to sacrifice "which may be ineffective, if not counterproductive."

But he is also aware of the delicacy of OTA's role, suspended uneasily between the scientific and technical community on the one hand, and the political community on the other. "The problem is that OTA is expected to be objective and even-handed, but we also have to deliver information that is useful", he says. "Scientists and technologists can integrate over the technical aspects, but cannot handle the broader issues. OTA has to do a second-order integration, bringing in the economic and equity aspects. Congress then has to work out the political trade-offs."

He holds two paradigms (both from direct experience) of the way that OTA should proceed. The first was an intense, 30-day study of proposed plans for the Energy Research and Develop-

John Gibbons: listens very hard

ment Administration (now the Department of Energy), which he claims was largely responsible for getting Congress to include a conservation programme in the agency. The other is the residential conservation report, which took two years to prepare, but which shows in detail how conservation measures could generate energy savings of at least 13 billion barrels of oil by the year 2,000.

Both of these represented that type of structured interaction which he feels are essential if OTA's interdisciplinary efforts are to succeed. "Exxon designed a building in which you had to cross a library to get to your office. You need to plan and structure the process of social interaction if you are to get people to talk to each other. But this must be done through invisible organisation, rather than the heavy hand of management." His last quote is a favourite one from Adlai Stevenson: "Freedom rings when opinions clash." □

Soviet dissident charged

JUST a year to the day from the trial of Yuri Orlov, Vladimir Skvirskii, a Russian geologist and human rights activist, is due for trial this week, charged with "misappropriating state property"—library books.

This does not, it must be stressed, reflect a new Soviet tightening up on its literary holdings. Indeed, Skvirskii's defence counsel, contacted by telephone, said that he had never heard of anyone being put on trial before for failing to return a book, except for the occasional speculator who purloined and then sold books from libraries. In cases of negligence, the culprit simply had to pay a fine or offer another book in compensation.

This Skvirskii would willingly do. The books in question, he admits, were issued to him, but became damaged when he took them on a geographical expedition. The books, however, appear to have been only an excuse. During a police search of Skvirskii's home, using instruments including a mine-detector, some 69 objects were removed—nine library books and a large number of documents relating to the Soviet human rights and independent trade union movements. Witnesses questioned in the course of preliminary investigations were asked not about library books but about Skvirskii's political views, activities and contacts. **Vera Rich**