

OTA Moves Ahead, Science Policy Act Bogs Down

Congress is expected to complete action this week on a bill establishing an Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), a proposal that languished in congressional backrooms for the better part of a decade, until its remarkable resuscitation earlier this year. In sharp contrast, however, congressional sources see virtually no prospect for further action this year on S.32, a billion dollar measure sponsored by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) that would shift the emphasis of federal research funding from military toward civilian problems, greatly expand the National Science Foundation, and make some sweeping declarations of federal science policy. In both houses, backers of the latter bill now seem resigned to letting it lie dormant during the winter, until the new Congress convenes.

The OTA, a far less expensive and controversial proposal to institutionalize science advice for Congress, won a thumping victory in the House in February (256 to 118), then passed the Senate by a voice vote, without debate, on 14 September. A House-Senate conference committee quickly ironed out differences that the bill's supporters considered relatively minor, and on 22 September produced a conference report. The Senate approved the report the same day and sent it to the House, where final approval this week is reportedly assured.

The OTA would serve as a think tank for Congress, advising legislators on the economic and social impact of technological programs supported by the federal government and suggesting areas of R & D that deserve to be strengthened or de-emphasized. In this sense, the OTA would constitute a congressional analog to the President's Office of Science and Technology, although the structural differences between the two are great. Under the House-Senate agreement, the OTA staff would be supervised by a 13-member "Technology Assessment Board" composed of six senators and six congressmen, with equal representation from Republicans and Democrats. The 13th member would be the nonvoting staff director, who would be appointed by the board for a 6-year term.

Backers of the OTA expect no opposition from the Nixon Administration, either to the office itself or to its \$5 million, 2-year budget. Indeed, a presidential veto of an internal congressional office would be an affront virtually without precedent. (On the other hand, the OTA itself is almost unprecedented. The last time Congress set up an entirely new information service for itself was in 1914, when it established the Legislative Reference Service in the Library of Congress.)

One substantial question about the OTA remains, however, concerning the extent to which the OTA's staff may be expected to reflect the interests and attitudes of the senators and representatives seated on the governing board.

It is possible that the latitude of the staff's judgment may be broadened by the existence of a 12-member public advisory council to the OTA, which the House-Senate conference committee agreed should be established. But one could argue that the advisory group's

independence could well be compromised by the fact that it would be appointed by the congressional board.

In the end, the OTA's usefulness will turn on its credibility; its credibility will depend in part on the professional staff's autonomy; and that in turn will be determined by the membership of the Technology Assessment Board. What with preelection distractions rapidly multiplying, there are, as yet, no signs that anyone has gained an inside track to membership in this newest of congressional clubs—and thus there is no hint of its philosophy.

Declining Fortunes of S.32

Preelection paralysis has also afflicted Kennedy's bill, S.32. Although the measure passed the Senate handily in August (by a vote of 70 to 8), its supporters give it almost no chance of leaving the House Committee on Science and Astronautics in this session. One reason is that Representative John W. Davis (D-Ga.), the subcommittee chairman in charge of the bill's House version (HR.34), has of late spent most of his time stumping his home district around Rome, Georgia, in preparation for an unexpectedly hard fight for reelection. For another thing, the Nixon Administration—or at least the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—is firmly opposed to the bill and its \$1.025 billion price tag.

Congressional backers do see a few hopeful signs on the horizon, but not many. During 2 days of hearings on the bill last week before Davis's subcommittee the National Science Board—the NSF's governing body—went on record favoring S.32, although it has reservations about some of the bill's specific provisions. This position contrasts with opposition by H. Guyford Stever, who, as NSF director, functions as the Nixon Administration's spokesman on the bill.

Another sign of grass-roots support popped up in congressional circles last week in the form of a letter to President Nixon from one of his Los Angeles County campaign chairmen, John J. Perez. In a letter dated 7 September, Perez is said to have noted that S.32 and its House companion measure enjoyed wide support among scientists and aerospace workers in Southern California. Expressing concern that the President had not supported the bill, Perez reportedly concluded that a few friendly words from the White House about it would "make the job to reelect the President much easier in California."

Whether Mr. Nixon was swayed is not recorded, but the OMB's recommendation for a veto would seem as firm as ever. In any case, the bill's bipartisan backers are content to lie low until the new Congress convenes next year. At that time the strategy will be to reintroduce the bill in both houses, hold more extensive hearings, and push for an early victory in an atmosphere presumably expunged of campaign antagonism. In the meantime, staff aides to Senator Kennedy have made it plain that the current bill isn't necessarily the only acceptable version. Said one Kennedy staffer, "We're open to constructive changes."—ROBERT GILLETTE