

OTA faces another summer of uncertainty



David Dickson discusses the continuing troubles of the Office of Technology Assessment, whose third director in six years resigned earlier this month

LAST Thursday the twelve US Congressmen who make up the board of the Congress' Office of Technology Assessment met for the second time in eighteen months to discuss how to choose a new director for the agency.

The meeting was made necessary by the surprise resignation of OTA's current director Dr Russell Peterson (above), who took on the position last January. A chemist by training, Dr Peterson spent 26 years with the Du Pont Company, heading its research and development division until he was elected governor of the State of Delaware in 1968. In 1973 he was made chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, which he left to set up a citizen's lobby group New Directions before moving to OTA.

Stating that his varied experiences in private and public life have "led me to prefer an advocacy role rather than an advisory one," Dr Peterson announced that he had accepted an invitation to become the president of the National Audubon Society, a body of 400,000 members whose main role is to protect the bird life of America.

In his 13-month occupancy at OTA, Dr Peterson has done much to put the agency on its feet, following a shaky start plagued by internal and external political wrangles. By streamlining day-to-day management, introducing clear hierarchies of responsibility, and other such moves, he has restored both OTA's reputation and its morale.

However it is no secret that Dr Peterson's strong views, both about how OTA should be run—he demanded, and got, complete authority to hire and fire staff—and on its role with respect to Congress, have themselves caused considerable friction (his resignation came not long after a particularly bitter board meeting in January).

Given that the aspects of Dr Peterson's personality which have exacerbated this friction are those that have helped place OTA on a more stable and effective footing, his departure has once again raised the

question of whether OTA—however desirable its objectives—can in fact function in the way that it was intended to do by Congress.

The Office of Technology Assessment was established by statute as an advisory arm of Congress in 1972. Its function is to help legislators anticipate and plan for the long-term consequences of technological applications, and to examine the many ways in which technology affects peoples' lives.

Few challenge the need for such analysis. And although the quality of the agency's reports have varied enormously, some—such as those on solar energy, on medical technology, and on a proposed coal slurry pipeline—have been widely praised, and played an important role in the development of legislation.

The big stumbling block has therefore not been whether, but how, such studies should be carried out. Under the first chairman, Mr Emilio Q Daddario—himself a former Congressman—OTA stayed close to the political process. This meant good contact with the political community; but the price was fierce political infighting that frequently spilled into the press, and consequently drained credibility from the agency's reports.

Under Dr Peterson's leadership the agency has, some feel, gone to the other extreme. By refusing to accept direct political pressure, he has eliminated many festering sores; but the criticism is that he has spent too much time telling Congress what it should be interested in, rather than listening to its demands.

Dr Peterson himself has strong, if controversial, views about technology assessment and its goals. "If we are to ensure change for the better, we must become skilled and successful architects of change. In today's interdependent world, that requires a holistic perspective—a comprehensive, world-wide, long-range view," he said.

The most obvious manifestation of this "holistic" approach has been an ambitious priority-setting exercise which

he set in motion last year. Over 5,000 people were asked to suggest critical technological issues facing the US and the world; to 1,530 topics suggested for study were added a further 2,875 extracted from the published literature. Synthesis and elimination by OTA staff led to a final list of 30 ranked items.

Few complained about the outcome. Of the final list, seven items were immediately selected by the board as areas for study, and three more subsequently added; these included alternative national energy futures, regulation and technological innovation, and the effects of nuclear war.

However a certain amount of resentment was caused by the fact that the exercise was initiated by Dr Peterson largely on his own initiative, and that by placing heavy emphasis on the exercise, he had shifted away from what they see as OTA's prime responsibility, namely responding to demands relating to specific legislation.

The issue of short-term versus long-term studies is endemic to discussions over the role of OTA, and is far from satisfactory resolution. And the need to maintain a balanced strategy places heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the director. The consensus in Washington seems to be that the new director needs the political skills and sensitivities of Daddario, the vision and managerial capabilities of Peterson, and a professional reputation respected in the scientific and technical community.

The task of finding a successor is therefore a daunting one. So much so that some are questioning whether OTA might not benefit from some structural change; for example, it could be more formally separated from political decisions by reducing the involvement of the 12 board members and increasing the independence of the director (a possible model might be Congress' General Accounting Office).

Many would welcome such a move, possibly with the idea of a scientific Brookings Institute in mind. Others, however, see it as a betrayal of the ideals that established OTA as a research tool forming part of, not a commentator on, the political process.

As usual in such cases, the last word may rest with those who hold the purse strings. Appropriations committees in both House and Senate are looking closely at OTA's budget request for 1980; possible cuts of \$2 to \$3 million (in a request of \$11.2 million), are being rumoured, and the final decision may well reflect Congress' reaction to the choice of a new director. It promises to be another long, hot summer for OTA. □