

Science, Society and Parliaments

The first European meeting of parliamentary committees and offices for scientific and technological assessment took place in Paris on 21 and 22 September 2008.

During this meeting, organized on the initiative of the OPECST as part of the French Presidency of the European Union, two topics were addressed:

- *The role of Parliaments in assessing science and technology choices;*
- *The response given by Parliaments to citizens' questions brought about by new technologies.*



Opened by Mr Claude Birraux, MP, president of the OPECST, this meeting had three goals:

↳ Emphasizing the need for the scientific and technological dimension of public policies to be better taken into account by Parliaments;

↳ Examining the manner in which Parliaments, which must remain heedful of the concerns of citizens but also give confidence back to scientists, can organize an interface between the scientific world and society;

↳ Promoting exchanges of experiences between Parliaments in the field of science and technology assessment.

Speeches were given by Messrs. Jozsef Palinkas, president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Philippe Busquin,

MEP, chair of the STOA (Science and Technology Options Assessment Office, a European Parliament body assessing science and technology choices), Silvano Moffa, an Italian MP, representative of the VAST (*Comitato per la Valutazione delle Scelte Scientifiche e Tecnologiche*, a body of the Italian Chamber of Deputies), Jyrki Kasvi, a Finnish MP, deputy-chair of the Committee of the Future at the Finnish Parliament, Mrs Ulla Burchardt, chair of the Committee on Education, Research and Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag, as well as Messrs. Henri Revol, senator, first vice-president of the OPECST, Claude Saunier, senator, Jean-Yves Le Déaut, Jean-Sébastien Vialatte and Alain Claeys, MPs, members of the OPECST.

These speeches gave rise to broad debates which showed the determination of

parliamentarians to develop regular exchanges on their respective, apparently highly diversified, practices. All the participants, and especially the representatives of the **new Member States**, such as Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, expressed their willingness to become more involved and compare their analyses more regularly.

Space policy, micro and nanoelectronics, nuclear energy, ubiquitous society, medical and plant biotechnologies, and bioethics, were the topics of the speeches by the MPs who emphasized the **opportunity afforded by the Lisbon Treaty to strengthen the role of Parliaments** within the European Union. Mention was also made of the deepening of the **European Research Area** within the framework of the Ljubljana process, the importance of scientific and technical education, as well as the assessment criteria used by international classifications regarding university research.

In her closing speech, **Mrs Valérie Pécresse, minister for higher education and research**, emphasized the importance that should be granted to society's questions on scientific and technical progress, yet without renouncing taking action, and she also underscored the essential role which Parliaments, places of neutral and pluralistic debates, accustomed to listening and choosing, can play in this field.



Mrs Valérie Pécresse, minister for higher education and research, between Mr Claude Birraux, president of the OPECST and Mr Henri Revol, its first vice-president

NEED FOR AND PLURALITY OF THE GOALS OF PARLIAMENTARY ASSESSMENT

The various speakers insisted on the interest of conducting, within Parliaments, assessment work on science-and technology-related issues.

↳ In a context marked by an incessant flow of opinions and experts reports, as well as by the lobbying by various pressure groups, Parliaments need **reliable information** based on knowledge that has been previously verified and organized ('pre-digested', 'metabolized').

↳ The **Lisbon Strategy** requires, for its implementation, not only the definition of long-term strategies guaranteeing stability, but also the mobilization of means allowing Parliaments to seize the opportunities offered by new technologies and promote the use of some of them.

↳ To meet **citizens' expectations**, Parliaments must be in a position to assess the positive and negative impacts of the technologies developed, whose consequences are not only economic and industrial but also social, cultural and ethical, so as to assess their potentialities and know about possibly envisageable alternative solutions.

↳ The preservation and deepening of the **values** on which European societies are based require an assessment of the social and human impact of technologies which could justify an adaptation of legislation.

LEGITIMACY OF PARLIAMENTARY ASSESSMENT

The legitimacy of the involvement of Parliaments in assessing science and technology choices was clearly affirmed.

↳ Parliaments form, per se, **places of pluralistic debate**, guaranteeing the diversity of opinions and freedom of speech, and open to society and the citizens they represent. These characteristics grant democratic legitimacy to their decisions and their assessment work.

↳ The **multiple effects** produced by the use of techniques justify the intervention of pluralistic



Mr Bernard Accoyer, President of the National Assembly,
welcoming the meeting participants

parliamentary bodies as arbitrators making choices.

↳ The ambivalence of citizens' expectations, wavering between the quest for progress and the fear of risks it induces, can lead the legislator to define an appropriate regulatory mechanism on the basis of the assessment work he has carried out himself.

↳ The Lisbon Treaty, by laying down the strengthening of the role of Parliaments, affords a new opportunity responding to the democratic deficit.

↳ Parliamentary assessment of science and technology choices helps politicians in their decision-making. Therefore, Mrs Valérie Pécresse, minister for higher education and research, proposed to associate Parliaments in the drafting of the European Research Area's 2020 vision to build tomorrow's Europe.

DIVERSITY OF PARLIAMENTARY ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

As specified by Mr Claude Birraux during his preliminary speech, the meeting did not set out to impose a specific model, but rather to *'examine the routes by which the legitimacy of parliamentary work can affirm itself, in a field long left to the sole appreciation of experts'*.

The debates highlighted the great diversity of the existing institutional mechanisms depending on the traditions and organization of each Parliament.

↳ Not all Parliaments have an assessment body devoted to science and technology issues. Nevertheless, in several Parliaments, debates are taking place to study the manner in which a body assessing science and technology choices can be created.

↳ The ways in which such assessment bodies are integrated in parliamentary institutions vary, both concerning the degree of involvement of parliamentarians in choosing and elaborating assessment studies, and also regarding the funding conditions when studies are carried out by bodies outside Parliaments.

In France, for example, parliamentarians carry out studies themselves and become directly involved. Within the VAST at the Italian Chamber of Deputies, parliamentarians exercise an active role, refusing to become the passive recipients of scientific opinions. In the Bundestag, study briefs are issued to an independent body.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONS OF CONFIDENCE WITH THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

The various speakers emphasized the interest of developing cooperation with the scientific community, especially with academies, but also with universities, the private sector and research institutes.

This cooperation takes extremely varied forms: institutional relations with the Academy of

Sciences, as in Hungary, hearings, thematic seminars, workshops, interviews with experts to whom studies have been entrusted, visits of laboratories.

Following the example of the United Kingdom and of France where the Parliaments have set up a **partnership**, respectively with the Royal Society and the Academy of Sciences, the STOA has developed a 'pairing' scheme allowing a special relationship between European parliamentarians and scientists.

The OPECST has the specific characteristic of having a **Scientific Council** within itself. In addition, its "rapporteurs", appointed among the parliamentarians who are members of it, set up a **Steering Committee** helping them in their assessment work.

While the exclusively parliamentary nature of the VAST means that it can play a *'role as a link between Parliament and the world of researchers, scientists, companies and institutions'*, and while the OPECST has endeavoured to become an **'interface'** between the French Parliament and the scientific community, by being *'the representative of scientists to citizens and of citizens to scientists'*, the organization of special relations with the world of research is not a specific characteristic of parliamentary bodies assessing science and technology choices in other countries.

HOW ARE EXCHANGES BETWEEN PARLIAMENTS TO BE ORGANIZED?

The need to organize regular exchanges between Parliaments was affirmed so as, on the

one hand, take advantage of the experiences gained by other Parliaments on topics like nuclear energy or the methods of regulating new technologies and, on the other hand, endeavour to give more consistency to national public policies dealing with scientific or technological issues.

Several ways were mentioned:

- ↳ The organization of **missions to Member States** as systematically as possible,
- ↳ The establishment of **bilateral or multilateral relations** with other bodies,
- ↳ The setting up of a **network**.

The latter solution gave rise to lively exchanges between the various speakers on:

- ↳ The role played by **EPTA** (*European Parliamentary Technology Assessment network*) which groups highly varied bodies but whose parliamentary character is insufficiently affirmed, owing in particular to its operating method and the chosen topics;
- ↳ The setting up of an **interparliamentary network**, allowing the organization of discussions between parliamentarians and information exchanges on parliamentary work;
- ↳ The establishment, within the European Research Area, of a **transnational network** favouring cooperation between the professionals of assessment, in order to succeed in establishing a European science and technology assessment area.



Final Declaration

AT THEIR MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2008, IN PARIS AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, THE PRESIDENTS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES AND OFFICES FOR SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AGREED TO:

1. EXPRESS THEIR CONFIDENCE IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY TO CONTRIBUTE TO PROGRESS IN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES. UNDER APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENTAL DIRECTION AND ASSESSMENT, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY GUARANTEE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS IN EUROPE AND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

2. CONFIRM THE MAJOR ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN DIRECTING AND ASSESSING PUBLIC POLICIES IN THE FIELDS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY. AS EXPRESSIONS OF POLITICAL SOVEREIGNTY AND PLACES OF EXPERTISE AND DEBATE, PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS ARE NATURALLY QUALIFIED TO PLAY AN EMINENT ROLE IN THESE MATTERS.

3. UNDERLINE THE NEED FOR PARLIAMENTS TO ACTIVELY REINFORCE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION AS WELL AS LEAD CIVIC DEBATES ON THE PLACE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIETY. THESE DISCUSSIONS SHOULD TAKE THE FORM DEEMED MOST APPROPRIATE WITHIN EACH COUNTRY, BUT SHOULD FOSTER AN ENLIGHTENED AND HARMONIOUS DEBATE BETWEEN EXPERTS, CITIZENS AND ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES.

4. ENCOURAGE NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT TO COMPARE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES REGULARLY, WORK AS A NETWORK TO EXCHANGE EXPERTISE MORE EFFICIENTLY, SUPPORT INITIATIVES TO STRENGTHEN TECHNOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS AND CONSOLIDATE THE PARLIAMENTARY DIMENSION OF THE EPTA NETWORK (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT).

5. CALL UPON THE EUROPEAN UNION, EUROPEAN RESEARCH MINISTERS AND PARLIAMENTS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA TO STRENGTHEN EUROPEAN DYNAMISM IN SCIENCE AND INNOVATION BY REINFORCING SYNERGIES, REDUCING PROCEDURAL COMPLEXITY, AND CREATING FINANCIAL CONTEXTS TO SUPPORT NEW, INNOVATIVE COMPANIES AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER.

Novembre 2008