

**THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE FOR  
SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**  
(OPECST)  
**A PRESENTATION**

*The OPECST, which was set up by Law n° 83-609 of July 8, 1983, following a unanimous vote of Parliament, aims, within the terms of the Law, "to inform Parliament of the consequences of the choice of scientific and technological options, in particular, so as to enable it to make enlightened decisions". To do this, it "collects information, launches study programmes and carries out assessments."*

Science has been spurred on by mankind's basic desire to always better understand the mechanisms governing nature and the universe. Over the centuries, it has also become a lever in transforming living conditions, helping better to control the scourges of famines and epidemics, ensuring ever greater daily comfort for the burgeoning middle class, and helping realise eternal dreams such as that of travelling into air, sailing under the sea, or transmuting matter.

The ever growing presence of science in daily life could not fail to make it a subject of political interest. The idea gradually arose of a need to assess technology so as better to master its progression by anticipating the consequences.

In the early 1980's, during a number of debates such as the orientations concerning nuclear, spatial or "cable" programmes, the French Parliament came to the conclusion that it was unable to assess Government decisions on the major directions of scientific and technological policy. It therefore decided to establish its own structure of assessment: the Parliamentary Office for Scientific and Technological Assessment (OPECST).

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### **THE STRUCTURE OF THE OPECST**

#### **An independent body**

The OPECST is an unusual structure within Parliament: its members, who are appointed

so as to ensure proportional representation of the political groups, belong both to the National Assembly and to the Senate. It is composed of eighteen M.P.s and eighteen Senators; each member may be appointed as a « rapporteur ». A « rapporteur » is an M.P. or a Senator in charge of writing a report on a given subject.

The OPECST is chaired alternately for a period of three years, by a member of either assembly. Internal rules stipulate that the First Vice-President shall belong to the other Assembly.

#### **Only M. P.s or Senators may refer matters to the OPECST**

A matter can be brought before the Office, in the first instance, by an internal parliamentary body, in other words either by the Bureau of either chamber (on its initiative, on request by the chairman of a political group, or else on request by sixty deputies or forty senators), or by a special or standing committee. Also, since 1991, some Acts have also directly entrusted a study or assessment mission to the Office. Until now, the topics dealt with have belonged to four main areas: energy, environment, new technologies and life sciences.

Some matters referred to the OPECST have been reexamined for several years, such as problems connected with the safety and security of nuclear installations. Others have required the updating of one of the OPECST's previous reports (development of the semiconductor sector, television with digital high-definition, high-activity nuclear waste, biotechnology, bioethics, etc.). The renewal of these referrals allows the Office to follow up very closely the topics concerned.

### **The Scientific Council**

The OPECST acts as an intermediary between the political world and the world of research. It must listen to researchers and requests authorized opinions. In order to carry out its task, the OPECST is assisted by a Scientific Council reflecting the diversity of scientific and technological disciplines in its very composition, as it is made up of twenty-four leading figures selected on account of their expertise.

### **THE STUDY PROGRAMMES**

#### **The appointment of the « rapporteur »**

Any matter referred to the OPECST leads to the appointment of one or more « rapporteurs », exclusively selected amongst the members of the OPECST. Several study programmes have brought together an M.P. and a Senator.

#### **The feasibility study**

Once appointed, the rapporteur first makes a feasibility study. This study aims at providing a snapshot of knowledge on the topic, determining possible research avenues, appreciating the possibilities of obtaining relevant results in the required time period and, last, determining the necessary means to start a study programme.

The « rapporteur » then submits the conclusions of his feasibility study together with methodological remarks to the members of the OPECST. At that stage, he suggests either that the study should be closed, (this happens very rarely), or he proposes to modify the extent of the study (a study first dealing with biofuels was thus extended to prospects for development of non food agricultural products), or, much more frequently a study programme is set up that leads to the drawing-up of a report.

#### **The drafting of a report**

The « rapporteur » then goes ahead with hearings enabling him to gather, without exclusion, all opinions from concerned persons and organisations. He may also travel in France or abroad in order to inspect installations and firms connected with his work.

Throughout his study, the « rapporteur » is assisted by a parliamentary civil servant and, if need be, by a study group made up of specialists from outside Parliament. He may also hire French or foreign

free-lance experts and consultants for further investigation into specific items. He may likewise gather the opinions of trade unions, professional bodies, and organizations for the protection of the environment or consumer-defence.

However, the OPECST reports are not restricted to setting out the experts' points of view. Their conclusions are the work of Parliamentarians and may go beyond merely informing, by including suggestions and recommendations.

If the « rapporteur » deems it necessary, public hearings, open to the press, are organised to gather and confront the opinions of leading figures and organisations wishing to express themselves on the subject in discussion. The minutes of these hearings may then be annexed to the report.

#### **The « rapporteurs »' powers**

The OPECST « rapporteurs » have identical powers to financial « rapporteurs »: they may therefore carry out direct investigations on any State Agency and have access to any available document, with the exception of those dealing with military matters or State security. In addition, in the event of difficulties encountered in exercising their mission, the OPECST « rapporteurs » may request to be given the prerogatives granted to parliamentary committees of inquiry.

#### **The publication of reports**

At the end of their work, the « rapporteurs » submit their draft report and their conclusions to the members of the OPECST. These conclusions are presented in such a way that they may be used directly for legislative work or budgetary discussion. Members of the OPECST must decide whether they publish these reports and all or part of the minutes of the hearings and the contributions by the experts. In this respect, the OPECST's decisions are mostly unanimous and the consensus of its decisions is one of the OPECST's main features.

The documents from the OPECST, which make up a special collection within all the parliamentary reports, are on sale at the « Boutique de l'Assemblée Nationale », at the « Espace Librairie du Sénat » and at the *Journal officiel*, and are available on each Assembly website. Since its creation, the OPECST has published more than 90 reports.

### **THE OPECST'S INFLUENCE AND INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

The Office has progressively become an

acknowledged instrument of parliamentary action. Several laws make provision either for it to be informed of, or to participate in the appointment of representatives of Parliament to various bodies, or for its representation, by its President or one of its members, on the board of directors of various organisations.

As part of the control activity of Parliament, OPECST has been more and more involved in French science policy, being asked for advice about national research strategy plan and encouraging a new policy organization based on five large “thematic alliances”.

Once the “Investments for the future” program was launched, OPECST first succeeded in connecting it to the “thematic alliances” organization, then managed to assess the first outcomes of this program.

Every year, several conferences and seminars are organised by the OPECST, either in relation to one of its reports or on a scientific or technological subject.

Finally, the OPECST also contributes to the development of international parliamentary relations and takes part in various congresses and events, in particular at a European level. Thus, over the last few years, we have seen the setting-up of an information and exchange network, the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA), bringing together the European organisations responsible for conducting scientific and technological assessments for national Parliaments and the European Parliament.

## RECENT REPORTS

- **Numerical safety and risks: issues and chances for firms**, by Mrs Anne-Yvonne Le Dain, MP, and Mr Bruno Sido, senator. National Assembly report 2541 (14th legislature), Senate 271 (2014-2015)
- **The vaccine adjuvants: a disputed issue (report of the public hearing of May 22nd 2014 and conclusions of January 28th 2015)**, by Mr Jean-Louis Touraine, MP, and Mrs Corinne Bouchoux, senator. National Assembly report 2534 (14th legislature), Senat 266 (2014-2015)
- **Drones and safety of the nuclear plants (restricted report of the hearing of November 24th 2014 at 2 pm, report of the public hearing same day at 4 pm and conclusions of November 26th 2014)**, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Mr Bruno Sido, senator. National Assembly report 2533 (14th legislature), Senate 267 (2014-2015)
- **The German energetic turning point: which learnings for the French energetic transition? (report of the public hearing of September 25th 2014 and conclusions of December 9th 2014) - two volumes**; by Mr Bruno Sido, MP. National Assembly report 2440 (14th legislature), Senate 176 (2014-2015)
- **The innovation principle**, by Messrs Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Bruno Sido, senator. National Assembly report 2409 (14th legislature), Senate report 133 (2014-2015)
- **The Assessment of the national plan on radioactive waste management, PNGMDR 2013-2015**, by Messrs Christian Bataille, MP, and Christian Namy, senator. National Assembly report 2226 (14th legislature), Senate report 805 (2013-2014)
- **Regulatory barriers to innovation for energy savings in buildings: the need for a shake-up**, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Mr Marcel Deneux, senator, National Assembly report 2113 (14th legislature), Senate report 709 (2013-2014)
- **Maritime fishing : how to reconcile exploitation and preservation of halieutic resources ?** by Mr Pierre-Marcel Cléach, senator. National Assembly report 1920 (14th legislature), Senate report 495 (2013-2014)
- **The genetics advances, towards a precision medicine ? Scientific, technological, social and ethical challenges of the personalized medicine**, by Messrs Alain Claeys and Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, MPs. National Assembly report 1724 (14th legislature), Senate report 306 (2013-2014)
- **The new dispassionate and lasting mobilities : designing and using ecological vehicles**, by Mr Denis Baupin, MP, and Mrs Fabienne Keller, senator. National Assembly report 1713 (14th legislature), Senate report 293 (2013-2014)
- **Raising awareness and knowledge of and sharing scientific, technical and industrial cultures : an imperative**, by Mrs Maud Olivier, MP, and Mr Jean-Pierre Leleux, senator. National Assembly report 1690 (14th legislature), Senate report 274 (2013-2014)
- **Hydrogen, an energy carrier for the energy transition ?** by Mr Laurent Kalinowski, MP, and Mr Jean-Marc Pastor, senator. National Assembly report 1672 (14th legislature), Senate report 253 (2013-2014)
- **Alternative techniques to hydraulic fracturing for the exploration and exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbons**, by Mr Christian Bataille, MP, and Mr Jean-Claude Lenoir, senator. National Assembly report 1581 (14th legislature), Senate report 174 (2013-2014)

**TOPICAL PUBLIC HEARINGS**

- **Biosimilar medicines**, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut and Mrs Catherine Lemorton, MPs, and Mr Bruno Sido, senator
- **The French seeds industry: inventory of fixtures and prospects**, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut and Mrs Anne-Yvonne Le Dain, MPs and Mr Bruno Sido, senator
- **Assessment of how pain is presently taken into account and medical prospects of its improvement**, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut, Mrs Anne-Yvonne Le Dain, MP, and Mr Bruno Sido, senator
- **Drones and safety of the nuclear plants**, by Messrs Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Bruno Sido, senator
- **The German energetic turning point: which lessons for the French energetic transition?**, by Messrs Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Bruno Sido, senator
- **To build a new society and improve**

**competitiveness thanks to the environmental research**, by Messrs Jean-Yves Le Déaut and Mrs Anne-Yvonne Le Dain, MPs, and Bruno Sido, senator

- **The innovation principle**, by Messrs Jean-Yves Le Déaut, MP, and Bruno Sido, senator

**ONGOING STUDIES**

- **The issues and perspectives of epigenetics**, by Messrs Alain Claeys and Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, MPs
- **The question of the various uses of biomass**, by Mr Roland Courteau, senator
- **The strategical issues of rare earths**, by Mr Patrick Hetzel, MP, and Mrs Delphine Bataille, senator
- **The digital technology in the service of health**, by Mr Gérard Bapt, MP, and Mrs Corinne Bouchoux, senator.

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