

**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 flying like birds, 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 ap-

pointed 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 ac-

tion. 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.

It has also become a special interlocutor for the scientific community as a whole and maintains close links with it. The events bringing together the OPECST and high-level scientific organisations - Académies, CEA, Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, CNRS, etc.- are the true illustration of this.

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.

In the near future, the OPECST would like to continue to strengthen its various missions and, in particular, to play a role in furthering the exchange between the political and scientific worlds.

RECENT REPORTS

- **Endocrine disruptors : a time for caution**, by Mr Gilbert Barbier, senator. National Assembly report 3662 (13th legislature), Senate 765 (2010-2011).
- **Nuclear safety : Intermediate report of the special joint parliamentary committee on nuclear safety, present and future outlook of the nuclear industry**, by Messrs Christian Bataille and Claude Birraux, deputies, and Bruno Sido, senator. National Assembly report 3614 (13th legislature), Senate 701 (2010-2011).
- **The pollution in the Mediterranean sea : current situation and perspectives for 2030**, by Mr Roland Courteau, senator. National Assembly report 3589 (13th legislature), Senate 652 (2010-2011).
- **Assessment of the three-year national plan on radioactive waste management**, by Messrs Christian Bataille and Claude Birraux, deputies. National Assembly report 3108 (13th legislature), Senate 248 (2010-2011).
- **Mathematics in France and in modern sciences**, by Mr Claude Birraux, deputy. National Assembly report 3085 (13th legislature), Senate 222 (2010-2011).
- **State of research on the prevention and treatment of obesity**, by Mrs Brigitte Bout, senator. National Assembly report 3020 (13th legislature), Senate 158 (2010-2011).
- **Assessment of the application of Article 26 of the Bioethics Act**, by Messrs. Alain Claeys and Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, deputies. National Assembly report 2718 (13th legislature), Senate 652 (2009-2010).
- **Mutation of viruses and the management of pandemics: the example of the A(H1N1) virus (final report)**, by Mr Jean-Pierre Door, deputy, and Mrs Christine Blandin, senator. National Assembly report 2654 (13th legislature), Senate 581 (2009-2010).
- **Management of pandemics: HINI, what hindsight? (report of the public hearing of 14 June 2010)**, by Mr Jean-Pierre Door, deputy, and Mrs Christine Blandin, senator. National Assembly report 2717 (13th legislature), Senate 651 (2009-2010).
- **Effects on health and the environment of the electromagnetic fields produced by high and very high voltage lines**, by Mr Daniel Raoul, senator. National Assembly report 2588 (13th legislature), Senate 506 (2009-2010).
- **Pesticides and health**, by Mr Claude Gatignol, deputy, and Mr Jean-Claude Etienne, senator. National Assembly report 2463 (13th legislature), Senate 421 (2009-2010).
- **Mutation of viruses and the management of pandemics: the example of the A(H1N1) virus (interim report)**, by Mr Jean-Pierre Door, deputy, and Mrs Christine Blandin, senator. National Assembly report 2314 (13th legislature), Senate 307 (2009-2010).
- **Faced with A(H1N1) influenza and the mutation of viruses, what can researchers and the public authorities do? (Report of the public hearing of 1 December 2009)**, by Mr Jean-Pierre Door, deputy, and Mrs Christine Blandin, senator. National Assembly report 2226 (13th legislature), Senate 204 (2009-2010).
- **Assessment of the principles applying in France to animal experimentation and alternative methods to it**, by Messrs. Michel Lejeune and Jean-Louis Touraine, deputies. National Assembly report 2145 (13th legislature), Senate 155 (2009-2010).

TOPICAL PUBLIC HEARINGS

- **An assessment of French presence in sub Antarctic islands**, by Messrs. Claude Birraux, deputy, and Bruno Sido, senator.
- **Monogenic diseases : the current situation**, by Messrs. Claude Birraux and Jean-Louis Touraine, deputies.
- **The stakes of strategic metals : the case of rare earths elements**, by Messrs Claude Birraux and Christian Kert, deputies.
- **Technological breakthroughs in medicine**, by Mr Claude Birraux, deputy.
- **The Alliances : a new dynamic for research**, by Mr Claude Birraux, deputy, National Assembly report 3375 (13th legislature), Senate 453 (2010-2011).
- **The inputs of sciences and technologies to the evolution of financial markets**, by Mr Claude Birraux, deputy, National Assembly report 2987 (13th legislature), Senate 140 (2010-2011).
- **Lessons to be learnt from the eruption of the volcano Eyjafjöll**, by Mr Christian Kert, deputy.

National Assembly report 2851 (13th legislature), Senate 28 (2010-2011).

- **Is France ready for an earthquake?** by Messrs. Jean-Claude Étienne and Roland Courteau, senators. National Assembly report 2721 (13th legislature), Senate 653 (2009-2010).

ONGOING STUDIES

- **Outlook of the civil aviation for 2040.**
- **Nuclear safety, the scope of the nuclear industry and its future**, by Messrs Christian Bataille, deputy and Bruno Sido, senator.
- **Innovation put to the test of fears and risks**, by Messrs Claude Birraux and Jean-Yves Le Déaut, deputies.
- **The impact and challenges of the new diagnosis and therapeutic technologies for the brain**, by Messrs Alain Claeys and Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, deputies.
- **The stakes of synthetic biology**, by Mrs Geneviève Fioraso, deputy.

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