

‘Oblivious’

Rush Holt on Science, Technology, and Congress

On July 25, 2006, the Committee on Science in the U.S. House of Representatives held a hearing on the scientific and technical advice available to Congress. Much of the hearing focused on the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), an agency that provided such advice to Congress from the 1970s

to the 1990s, until it was shut down. Representative Rush Holt, a Democrat from New Jersey and a patent-holding research physicist, spoke about the need to replace or reinstate OTA. The following excerpt is taken from his prepared text.

Congress decided in 1995 that we didn't need an in-house body dedicated to technological assessment. The technical assessment could come, we told ourselves (before my time here), through committee hearings, Congressional Research Service reports, experts in our district, think tanks, and the National Academy of Sciences. Now, you and I each know that members of Congress have a low comfort level with technology and are generally unable to probe beyond our personal understanding or the briefing books crafted by our staffers. In the ten years since we said these various groups would provide the technical advice we need, we have not gotten what we need in order to do the people's work...

We do not suffer from a lack of information here on Capitol Hill, but from a lack of ability to glean the knowledge and to gauge the validity, credibility, and usefulness of the large amounts of information and advice received on a daily basis. Although we would like to believe that the scientific and technical advice and assessment provided from outside remains politically neutral, this is not necessarily the case. In general, groups tend to be slow in responding to real-time needs of members of Congress or their staffers in terms of science and technology assessment or advice, they often do not know what

is happening in the halls of Congress, and have their own agendas.

There are real gaps in what Congress gets. We are not getting what we need. We need unbiased technical and scientific assessments in a congressional timeframe by those who are familiar with the functions, the language, and the workings of Congress...

Why is this of such importance to Congress? Why do we need specialized, in-house scientific and technical assessments and advice? I can think of three compelling reasons: science and technology pervade almost all issues before us, including many that are not recognized explicitly as technology issues; the language and technologies are specialized and complex, and require translation for members and their staffers; and members think science and technology are for scientists and technologists, thus avoiding science and technology themselves.

Every member is aware of the social, economic, moral, and political aspects of each of the issues before us. Not so with scientific and technological aspects of the issues before us. Members duck those aspects of the issues, flee them, ignore them, and, perhaps most often, march off oblivious to them...

We, each day when we cast our vote, are deciding the future of our nation; we are deciding the future for our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren. We are creating a legacy for which history will hold us accountable... In our technologically advanced, short-focused society, we have lost long-term vision.