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Editorial Published: 05 May 2010

Nature **volume 465**, page 10 (06 May 2010)

A new approach to technology assessment would supplement expert opinion with input from society.

Ever since 1995, when a then-new Republican majority voted to close the US Congress Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) on the grounds that it wasn't necessary, calls have been made for its revival. Many say that the closure was short-sighted. Congress, like legislatures and executives in other nations, sorely needs a way to assess the complex scientific and technical issues involved in subjects such as climate change or genetically modified organisms.

But anything that replaces the OTA will need to confront some marked changes to the political environment that prevailed two decades ago. Then, the OTA's stock in trade was expertise, with about 150 professional staff members marshalling the best available technical information to produce authoritative reports.

Today, by contrast, the public and politicians alike are considerably less willing to accept the consensus of 'experts', even when it comes to technically grounded policy questions. The dominant strain in American domestic politics, as manifested in President Barack Obama's marshalling of grass-roots activists during his 2008 election campaign, and in the more recent 'Tea Party' movement against 'big' government, is a hunger for direct participation.

Reinventing Technology Assessment, a 2010 report from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC that lays out a new vision for US technology assessment, points to recent international experience, particularly in Europe, and calls for a broader, 'participatory technology assessment' (pTA) model that would supplement expert opinion with early input from all corners of society.

Such a model might have helped the US government to avoid spending 30 years and US\$9 billion to develop the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository in Nevada, only for Obama to abandon the project last year in deference to local opposition. As National Academy of Sciences studies of risk assessment have inferred, it would have been wiser and cheaper to interact with the public at the beginning of the project, rather than at its end.

Whatever the virtues of the pTA approach, however, it is likely to be tricky to implement. If the process is to be credible to the public, for example, it will have to be open and transparent. Yet the doors cannot be thrown open to anyone who shows up at a meeting; that would make the process vulnerable to manipulation by special-interest groups, which have become adept at

drumming up phony 'astroturf' grass-roots movements and spreading misinformation to inflame public opinion. Instead, the pTA organizers would have to do a careful job of recruiting representative samples of citizens, and motivating them to participate — presumably by paying them.

For decision-makers to listen, a pTA approach would have to be integrated with existing advisory mechanisms. One possibility would be to assign pTA responsibilities to well-established organizations such as Congress's Government Accountability Office, or the independent National Academies. Another possibility, advocated by the Wilson Center report, would be to create a non-governmental Expert and Citizen Assessment of Science and Technology network, which would include organizations with experience in public outreach such as non-partisan policy research institutions, universities and science museums.

Whatever its institutional form, however, the pTA approach needs to be attempted. It is exactly what Congress needs as it grapples with complex technical issues, and is squarely in line with the stated objective of Democrat and Republican politicians to build wider public participation in decision-making. All that's required is for Congress itself to agree, on a bipartisan basis, to set it up.
