Given the ever-increasing role of science in everyday life, it could hardly fail to become a subject of political interest. It became progressively obvious that there was a need for a parliamentary assessment of technology in order to anticipate its consequences and monitor its impact.

A number of debates in the early 1980s (e.g. regarding the future of the nation's nuclear, space and cable programmes) caused the French Parliament to realize that it was unable to formulate an impartial assessment of Government decisions regarding the broad guidelines of its scientific and technological policies.

It therefore decided to establish its own assessment authority: the Parliamentary Office for Scientific and Technological Assessment.

Following an unanimous vote in favour of its creation, the Office was established by Law n° 83-609 of July 8, 1983. Its aims, within the terms of the law, are "to inform Parliament of the consequences of scientific and technological choices, particularly to enable it to make enlightened decisions". To this end, the Office "collects information, launches study programmes and conducts assessments".

THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE FOR SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

- STRUCTURE, FUNCTION, COMPOSITION -

The Office is chaired alternately for three-year periods by a member from either chamber, with internal rules stipulating that the First Vice-Chairperson shall come from the other chamber.

Power of referral reserved for parliamentary bodies

The Office can be commissioned to conduct an assessment, primarily by an internal parliamentary body i.e. by the Bureau of either assembly (upon its own initiative, by request of the chairperson of a political group, by request of sixty deputies or forty senators) or by a special or permanent committee.

In addition, since 1991, some laws have directly commissioned the Office to conduct a study or assessment mission.

To date, the topics covered have fallen more or less equally into four main categories: energy, the environment, new technologies and the life sciences.

Some referrals have been renewed year after year, for instance regarding the safety and security of nuclear installations. Others have required an update of a previous Office report (developments in the semiconductor sector, high-definition digital television, high-activity nuclear waste, biotechnologies, bioethics, etc.). Such renewals enable the Office to continue to monitor these topics.

THE OFFICE

A unique organization

The Office is an unusual organization within Parliament: its members are appointed so as to ensure proportional representation of the various political groups and come from both the National Assembly and the Senate. It consists of eighteen deputies and eighteen senators.
The Scientific Council

The Office acts as an intermediary between the political sphere and the world of research. It has a duty to keep up to date with the latest research developments and to request official statements of opinion. To conduct its missions, the Office is therefore assisted by a Scientific Council whose composition reflects the diversity of the scientific and technological fields. The Council consists of twenty-four leading figures, all chosen for their expertise.

STUDY PROGRAMMES

Appointing a rapporteur

Each referral entails the appointment of one or more rapporteurs, chosen exclusively among the members of the Office. Several studies have brought together a deputy and a senator, or a member of parliament from the political majority and a member from the opposition.

The feasibility study

Once appointed, the rapporteur first conducts a feasibility study. The objective of this study is to assess the state of knowledge regarding the subject in question, to determine possible avenues of research, to assess the likelihood of obtaining pertinent results within the required deadlines and, finally, to determine the means required to conduct a study programme.

The rapporteur then submits the conclusions of the feasibility study to the members of the Office. At this point, the Office must choose between three options: stop the investigation, a very rare procedure; suggest a new formulation to the author of the referral; or, and this is by far the most frequent course of action, implement a study programme leading to the establishment of a report.

Drafting a report

The rapporteur conducts hearings to solicit the opinions of all concerned parties and organizations. The rapporteur can also conduct on-site visits, in France or abroad, to laboratories and companies linked to the subject in question.

Throughout the study, the rapporteur is assisted by a parliamentary official and, if necessary, by a study group consisting of competent figures from outside Parliament. The rapporteur may also engage independent experts and research agencies, in France or abroad, to conduct investigations and to study specific aspects of the subject. In addition, the rapporteur may request the views and opinions of trade unions, professional bodies and organizations for environmental or consumer protection. However, Office reports do not merely juxtapose expert opinions or establish a "state of the art" review of the subject in question. Because the reports are drafted by members of Parliament, their conclusions are more than simply informative; they also include proposals and recommendations.

If the rapporteur deems it necessary, public hearings open to the press can be organized to gather or even confront the opinions of leading figures and organizations wishing to express their views on the subject. The minutes of these public hearings can then be annexed to the report.

The powers of the rapporteur

French law provides Office rapporteurs with the same powers as budget rapporteurs: they may therefore conduct investigations of any state agency and request any departmental documents, with the exception of those dealing with national defence or security. Moreover, if the rapporteurs encounter any difficulties in the execution of their mission, they may request to be granted, for a period of no more than six months, the same prerogatives as those granted to parliamentary committees.

Publication of reports

At the end of their study, the rapporteurs submit their draft report and conclusions to the other members of the Office. Their conclusions are presented in such a way that they may be used directly for legislative work or budgetary discussions. The members of the Office then decide whether to publish the report and all or part of the minutes of hearings and contributions made by experts. It should be pointed out in this regard that most Office decisions are reached unanimously, the Office being characterized by the consensual nature of its positions.

Over the past few years, the practice has developed of questioning the relevant ministers concerning the appropriate follow-up to rapporteurs' conclusions.
The parliamentary office for scientific and technological assessment

The documents produced by the Office form a specific collection within the general body of parliamentary reports and may be purchased at the Boutique de l’Assemblée Nationale, at the Sénat and from the Journal Officiel. They are also available on the websites of the assemblies.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Each year, the Office organizes several public hearings on topical scientific or technological issues.

GENERAL 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 parliamentary representatives to various bodies, or for it to be represented, by its chairperson or one of its members, on the board of directors of various organizations.

It has also built up a special relationship with the scientific community as a whole and maintains close links with it. This is illustrated by the various events associating the Parliamentary Office for Scientific and Technological Assessment with such prestigious bodies as the different Académies, CEA, INSERM, INRA, UniversSciences, CNRS, etc.

Finally, the Office also contributes to the development of international parliamentary relations and participates, particularly at a European level, in various conferences and events. This has particularly contributed to the development of a network for sharing and exchanging information: the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA), consisting of the European organizations responsible for conducting scientific and technological assessments for both national parliaments and the European Parliament.

RECENT REPORTS

- Scientific, technological, social and ethical stakes in the personalized medicine, by Mr Alain Claeyts and Mr Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, Deputies. National Assembly report 1724 (14th legislature), Senate report 306 (2013-2014).
- Technological developments bound to the ecological car, by Mr Denis Baupin, Deputy, and Ms Fabienne Keller, Senator. National Assembly report 1713 (14th legislature), Senate report 293 (2013-2014).
- Stakes and perspectives of the hydrogenate sector, by Mr Laurent Kalinowski, Deputy, and Mr Jean-Marc Pastor, Senator. National Assembly report 1672 (14th legislature), Senate report 253 (2013-2014).

PUBLIC HEARINGS

- Organ transplants: withdrawals from deceased donors after cardiac arrest PUB HEA, by Mr Jean-Louis Touraine and Mr Jean-Sebastien Vialatte, Deputies. National Assembly report 1246 (14th legislature), Senate report 747 (2012-2013).
- National consultation on research and higher education, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut, Deputy, and Mr Bruno Sido, Senator. National Assembly report 776 (14th legislature), Senate report 420 (2012-2013).
- Which lessons about the study of the transgenic corn NK 603?, by Mr Jean-Yves Le Déaut, Deputy, and Mr Bruno Sido, Senator. National Assembly report 759 (14th legislature), Senate report 409 (2012-2013).
ONGOING STUDIES

- The economic and environmental issues of biotechnology, by Mr. Jean-Yves Le Déaut, deputy and Ms Catherine Procaccia, Senator
- Stakes and perspectives of epigenetics, by Mr Alain Claeyss and Mr Jean-Sébastien Vialatte, Deputies.
- Strategic issues of the rare earths, by Mr Patrick Hetzel, Deputy, and Ms Delphine Bataille, Senator.