Reviving Congress's Old Think Tank

September 01, 2007

When the Democrats regained power this year on Capitol Hill, hopes rose for the resurrection of Congress's own think tank, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), a largely Democratic creation that was vengefully terminated in 1995 when the Republicans took back the House and Senate. Now there's progress toward fulfilling those hopes, but just a bit.

The House bill for financing Congressional operations next year allots $2.5 million to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a Congressional support agency, to explore technology assessments. The Senate was far less generous, providing only $750,000. The outcome will be determined by a House-Senate conference, but any amount represents a step forward for the revival effort.

GAO, formerly the Government Accounting Office, customarily investigates the performance of federal agencies, at the request of Congressional committees and runs on over $500 million a year. For proponents of reviving OTA in its original form as a separate Congressional service agency, the good news is shaded by disappointment at being consigned to a big, busy parent agency with its own practices and traditions. But it's a start, and perhaps all that could be hoped for, given the troubles that wracked OTA during its 22-year-long history.

With a full-time staff of some 200 at its peak, including many advanced degree holders in the physical, social, and behavioral sciences, OTA was a rare professorial-style enclave in the hurly-burly of Congress. For academics dreaming of influencing legislation, OTA was an inviting base for service as staff members, visiting fellows, or short-term panelists, of which there were thousands during OTA's lifetime, drawn mainly from universities. Together, they collaborated on studies spanning national security, health, transportation, law enforcement, agriculture, and much more. Hundreds of massive reports, quick studies, memos, and other documents ensued, of which the major output is available online at www.wws.princeton.edu/ota/ns20/pubs_f.html.

In the years since OTA's demise, its revival has persisted as a holy cause, though a minor one on the Washington scale, driven by alumni nostalgia and deep faith in the agency's value for wise legislating. Its leading Congressional advocates are Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), chairman of the powerful Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ), a physicist who is one of a handful of science PhDs in Congress. The revivalists hopefully pointed out that Congress never rescinded the 1972 legislation that created OTA. Rather, it demolished the organization by withholding money for its operations, leaving intact the enabling legislation. Money could bring OTA back to life in its original form, but cautious legislators chose instead to assign OTA's old role to the GAO.

OTA was grounded in the hopeful notion that the scientific and technical essentials of legislative issues could be identified by bringing together recognized experts of various persuasions to present their data and conclusions. Guided by OTA staff, the discussions were intended to sift out the basics. Published reports, some years in the works and running to hundreds of pages, were written by OTA staff and were

subjected to outside peer review before distribution to members of Congress. Though politics permeate Capitol Hill, OTA was designed to be apolitical and non-partisan, under the authority of a board evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans of the House and Senate. In its reports, recommendations were verboten, though “options” for legislative action could be stated. Even with these safeguards against political contamination, OTA was roiled by accusations of Democratic bias and underhanded interference in the legislative process. Resentments accumulated, first as proposals for OTA’s creation were debated over six years, and then after it came into existence. Republicans saw good reason to be suspicious, because it was mainly Democrats who pushed for creating OTA, and in their vanguard was the leading Senate liberal, Edward Kennedy; closely allied with him was a Democratic Congressman, Emilio Daddario, of Connecticut, who, following departure from Congress, returned as the first director of OTA. Kennedy chaired the board.

OTA failed to prosper under Daddario, a savvy politician but an inept administrator, or under his successor, Russell Peterson, a former Delaware Governor unfamiliar with Capitol Hill. Technology assessment, originally defined as foretelling the impact of new technology, drew fire as Luddite quackery. Five years after its founding, OTA was in the political ICU, deemed frail and ineffective and of scant value for the legislative process. In 1979, a “last chance” director, John H. Gibbons, was appointed. Gibbons was a physicist-environmentalist closely allied with a fellow Tennessean, then-Rep. Al Gore. He chucked the futurist role and, finding that OTA was engulfed by big and little assignments from myriad members of Congress, ruled that only committee chairs and ranking members could assign tasks to OTA. OTA flourished, undertaking and eventually producing hundreds of reports aimed at illuminating the scientific and technical aspects of current or oncoming legislative issues. Parliaments around the world sent delegations to study OTA, and a score or so emulated the agency in one way or another.

Success brought new troubles. A 1983 report that cast doubt on the efficacy of polygraph testing drew the ire of law-enforcement agencies that relied on the device. Reports that noted skepticism about the feasibility of President Reagan’s cherished Star Wars missile defense program nourished anew suspicions of Democratic influence over OTA. But even on the Democratic side, problems festered for OTA. Its big assessments were thorough, but often so long in process that the underlying legislative issues had come and gone when the reports arrived. Unable to order studies, many rank-and-file members tended to ignore the agency. In 1992, Director Gibbons left OTA to become science adviser to newly elected President Bill Clinton, taking several staff members with him, thus reinforcing the Republican suspicions of Democratic infestation at the supposedly non-partisan OTA.

In 1995, Newt Gingrich and the newly successful Republican Revolution sought to demonstrate that anti-spending fervor began on Capitol Hill. In the patron-laden precincts of Congress, unprotected victims were rare. But there was OTA, with a budget of $22 million — admired by a few, reviled by many Republicans, and little known to many in both parties. A last-minute rescue effort came close to saving OTA with a pared-down budget, but a final vote in conference ended in a tie, which meant the end for OTA.

The restoration movement began at once. Twelve years later, it may be on the brink of success — but a small success, for starters.
