PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY OF SCIENCE POLICY

By Frank W. Maine

In November 1980 a Study Group on "Parliament and the Scrutiny of Science Policy" was held in Ottawa under the auspices of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. One of the persons invited to participate was Frank Maine, former member of Parliament and one of the few scientists ever elected to the Canadian House of Commons. For this article Dr. Maine reflects on his experience in Parliament and the problems Members face in trying to come to grips with the vast and complicated subject of science policy.

There is very little parliamentary scrutiny of science policy in Canada. This is a tragedy since science and science policy in the 80's are going to shape Canada's future more than any other single factor. The three major scientific areas that impact most heavily on our economy and Canada's future are energy, food and electronics. Science policy in Canada will determine how these most important scientific areas are developed to Canada's benefit. While we have some science policy, it is not highly visible and certainly not scrutinized exhaustively by Canada's Parliament.

One problem is the lack of any forum for science debate in Parliament. The Senate did have a Special Committee on Science Policy but it was disbanded after its last report in 1977. Thus the Senate no longer makes the only major contribution to parliamentary scrutiny of Canadian science policy. The House of Commons has no committee, standing or special, to deal with the whole spectrum of science and science policy. At present there at least eight standing committees that can deal with the major areas of science. These include the standing committees on Agriculture; External Affairs and National Defence; Finance, Trade, and Economic Affairs; Fisheries and Forestry; Health, Welfare and Social Affairs; Miscellaneous Estimates; National Resources and Public Works; and Transport and Communications. These committees cover some ten departments as well as the National Research Council (NRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC); the Medical Research Council (MRC); Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd (AECL); the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

In the crucial areas of energy, food, and electronics, several committees are involved. Energy is perhaps the easiest as it is concentrated in the Standing Committee of National Resources and Public Works which examines the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources; Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd; and the Atomic Energy Control Board. But science policy related to energy also affects on Transport, Agriculture, National Defence, Fisheries and the IDRC, especially when one deals with alternate fuels.

Food, which includes food produced from land as well as food produced from water, is covered by the Standing Committee on Agriculture (for land-based food); Fisheries and Forestry (for water-based food); and External Affairs and National Defence which examines the IDRC (for food research and developing countries).

Electronics also has a major impact on our economy and on our way of life. Two aspects of it, communications and computers, are rapidly and vastly affecting the way we do business in Canada. For Canada in the 80's, science policy in this area can have the most profound effect. At present the communications aspects of electronics is dealt with in the committee on Transport and Communications. Computers, if dealt with anywhere, would probably be examined by the Committee on Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs when it had the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce as witnesses.

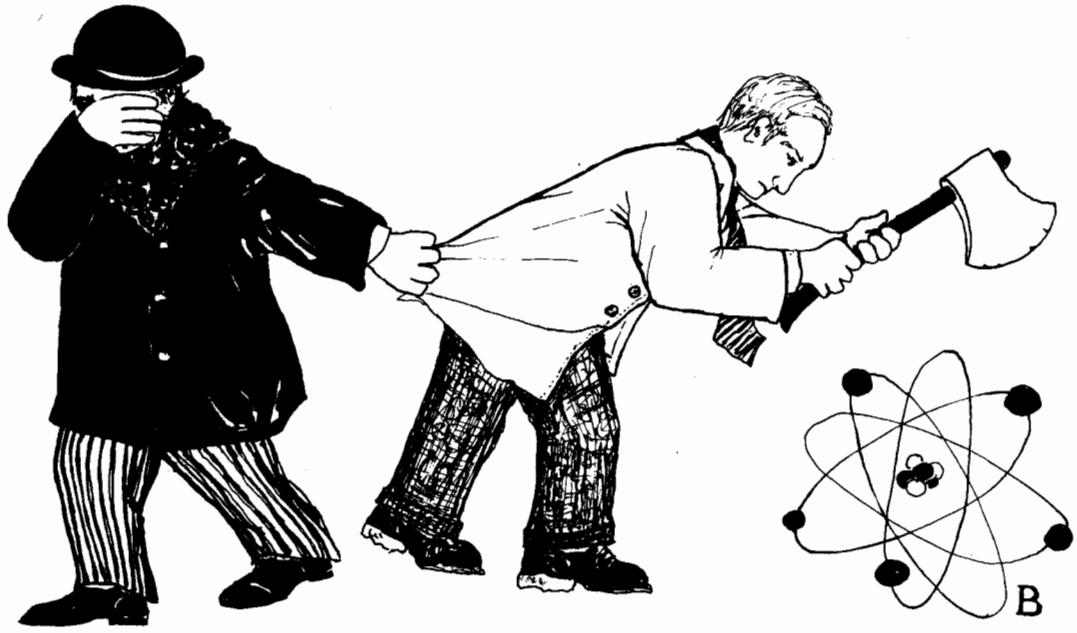
Dr. Maine was the Member of Parliament for Wellington from 1974-1979.

The focus of science policy and science research in Canada is the Ministry of State for Science and Technology, along with the NRC, NSERC and MRC. In the House of Commons the first three appear before the Miscellaneous Estimates Committee while the last, the Medical Research Council, comes under the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs. Miscellaneous Estimates, as the name indicates, is the committee that deals with all estimates that do not fit somewhere else, such as those of the Privy Council and the Governor-General. The committee has no scientific expertise nor any staff to help it scrutinize science matters that come before it.

The point of this explanation is to illustrate that science policy is spread over one-third of the standing committees of the House of Commons — certainly not focussed in any one committee. The Senate did much better by setting up a Special Committee on Science Policy but because it was a Special Committee rather than a Standing Committee it could not address itself to the problem of an *ongoing* examination of science policy. What the Senate did accomplish, by its long examination of science policy, was to produce several senators who are now very knowledgeable about science policy in Canada. This asset should not be wasted but harnessed. This is the reason I would propose a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons rather than a Standing Committee in each. The expertise and continuity of the Senators would help overcome the lack of expertise and lack of continuity of Members of the House of Commons — especially in an area as detailed and complex as science policy.

A permanent science committee is necessary because there have been no other effective ways of bringing detailed attention to this area. Opportunities in Question Period are too short and infrequent as are questions and answers in the Adjournment Debate. Opposition days offer a day long focus on science policy but they have been far too infrequent. I recall only two opposition days devoted to science policy during my years in Ottawa. One was introduced by Harvie Andre in June 1975, the other by Bill Kempling in May 1976. Bills related to science policy were also very infrequent.

Bill C-26 dealing with the restructuring of the National Research Council, and Science Council was one of the few bills concerned with science or science policy during the 30th Parliament. Private Members Bills are far more numerous than the time allotted to deal with them. Even so, those that are dealt with, picked by lottery, are almost never acted on and as such, are a poor vehicle to use for debating science policy. The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, an unofficial committee made up of parliamentarians and scientists, could serve a useful purpose in bringing parliamentarians and scientists together, but it does not have any power. Attendance by parliamentarians, who have so many demands on their time, is usually poor.



The standing committee approach, I feel, is the only way to ensure attendance and focus attention on science policy. One example that did work fairly well was the Hare Report (which dealt with the question of disposal of post nuclear reactor radioactive waste) which was referred to the Standing Committee of National Resources and Public Works. At the Committee, witnesses were called and the question was examined and debated in detail. This was one of the rare examples of parliamentary debate and in-depth questionning of science policy in my time in the House.

This model could and should be used more, although as I have already argued a joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons on Science would be an even better forum. How can such a joint committee be established? There are two ways to bring about the change. One is by working through the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization. Parliament recognizes the need for reform and has charged that committee with investigating the problems and making recommendations for changes. In the 30th Parliament, I joined this committee and worked on it with one goal in mind; to have science dealt with more effectively. Sub-committees were struck and I became a member of the Sub-Committee on Committee Structure which was assigned the task of reviewing the entire committee system. Our report was presented to the full committee on September 20, 1976. It recommended, among other things, that committees be grouped into more functional areas of related interests e.g. economic affairs, legal affairs, external affairs, social affairs, and science affairs. We recommended fewer committees, each with fewer members, thereby attempting to resolve the problem of committee attendance and conflicts of meeting schedules.

Although some recommendations from the Procedure Committee are accepted by the Government and subsequently adopted by the House of Commons there seemed to be neither the time nor the inclination to accept our proposals for changes in the committee structure. The second way a committee on science policy could be established, is by a government motion introduced into the House of Commons and the Senate. The Special (later standing) Committee on the Northern Pipeline and other special committees have been struck in such a manner. In this instance, the government responds to a foreseen need.

To pursue this avenue, a proposal should be made to the Minister of State for Science and Technology and the Leaders of the Government in the House of Commons and the Senate. With sufficient lobbying and with support from the scientific community and others concerned with science policy and its effects on our economy, the government could be convinced that it was worthwhile to form a special or even a joint standing committee on science policy.

I pass the baton on to the science community and to present Members of Parliament to muster the support and action needed to convince the government of the necessity to take action on this recommendation.