

Summary

How POST builds bridges between science research and Parliament

The role of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and the use of research evidence in Parliament was the subject for Dr Chris Tyler's PolicyNet Talk, the first public seminar on developments in POST since he became POST Director a year ago.

The session, which took place on 23 May, was chaired by Dr Hayaatun Sillem, Director of Programmes and Fellowship at the Academy and attended by members of engineering institutions, scientific societies and research councils.

As a permanent office of Parliament, POST works with both the House of Commons and the House of Lords and with their respective libraries and committee offices.

POST is highly regarded within Parliament and acts as a non-party political body. Dr Tyler said, "POST focuses on presenting the research evidence and its relevance to policy options, not the politics." Its well-known POSTnotes are used by 90% of members when preparing for debates and 80% of members use these briefings multiple times a year.

The audience raised a variety of questions including how POST addresses controversial issues such as genetically modified organisms and shale gas. "Often it's the research evidence that bridges the gap on very politically opposed views," said Dr Tyler. He stressed that POST seeks to provide honest advice. "If the science consensus says one thing, we will be open. On the other hand, if the science does not reach a consensus we will be open about that too," he said.

The audience was keen to learn how to boost engagement with Parliament. "There have been numerous improvements in the engagement between research and Parliament over the last five to 10 years, but there are always ways to improve," said Dr Tyler. He recommended talking to committee staff, "because they work extremely closely with Members."

The issue of scientific uncertainty was also raised as a barrier. POST tackles this problem by being very clear on the level of uncertainty. "Using descriptions of likelihood can be more instructive than lists of numerical probabilities," said Dr Tyler.

In September, POST is launching its social science unit. Funded by the ESRC and partnered by UCL, it will provide much needed in-house expertise in social sciences. The new unit will embed social science across all of POST's work as well as working on its own stream of social science content. Partnering with the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP), University of Cambridge, POST is also beginning to focus on horizon scanning projects.

Dr Tyler revealed future plans for POST, which will provide science induction schemes for incoming members. "It's important to work with parliamentarians straight away when they arrive, and not just rely on them coming to us," he said. An upcoming report from the House of Lords will help identify specific needs of new members.

Dr Tyler described POST's goal as supporting the use of research evidence in Parliament. "By supporting parliamentarians in their use of evidence, POST will build capacity within Parliament so members are more comfortable using research evidence," he said.