

**Speech at Plenary Session “Dialogue between Political Leaders and Scientists”  
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Good morning.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank Mr Omi for inviting me to speak this morning. I have known him for eight years and would like to praise his vision, effort and determination for this forum to grow and to discuss effectively the challenging issues of science and technology that we face.

He has always advanced the cause of science and technology for the greater good and the evidence of his success is in front of us.

As you mentioned, I am the Chair of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology at the British Houses of Parliament, called POST. It was created in 1989 and has expanded its activities ever since.

I should emphasise here that POST is totally non-political and is NOT a *government* agency – it is an internal office of the British *Parliament*.

POST is one of a growing number of S&T offices at Parliaments across Europe – and they all cooperate through a Europe-wide association. It now has 15 members, from Norway to Greece.

I think that the activities of these special parliamentary units provide a key to the subject that we are addressing this morning – and I will return to that theme.

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But, to start, let me look at the proposition that this session is considering – that ‘*political leaders typically tend to avoid difficult science and technology questions and to leave them to experts*’. I do not think that is correct – and for three reasons.

**First** – and most important – is that, , political leaders, CAN’T do this even if they wanted to.

And, that’s because scientific and technological issues arise in virtually EVERY matter that politicians have to consider.

It’s not just the ‘BIG’ issues, such as stem cell research, or how we provide for future energy supplies.

S&T affects *virtually all* aspects of the lives of the people who elect us to office – and who expect us to listen to their concerns – but also to provide leadership and inspiration related to their hopes for the future.

Whether, for example, it is new housing, crime and security or the very important area of health and well-being, all have aspects that derive from the application S&T.

The **second** reason relates to the first. Because this key role of S&T has become so important, political leaders are keen to encourage more investment in research and development and to encourage universities and companies to pursue this research.

Individual politicians, like myself, are obviously keen to see this investment developed in their own constituencies, but there are also national and international dimensions to this drive for innovation and dissemination of its results.

The British Labour government has recognised this. Although, like most governments, it faces strong pressures to reduce public spending, it developed a ten-year plan to increase public *and* private funds flowing to R&D. I should also note that the British Conservative party has decided to fundamentally review its S&T strategy – its working group is chaired by a Conservative member of POST's Board.

The **third** reason why political leaders cannot avoid considering S&T matters is that, particularly for basic scientific research, the majority of the funds come from the taxpayers' purse.

S&T research must, rightly, compete in this respect with all the other calls for public spending – on improved social welfare, on health provision, on the quality of our cities and rural areas, and so on.

Political leaders have to take difficult decisions on the balance of this spending. S&T cannot have an open cheque.

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It may be true that most political leaders do not have a formal S&T educational background. At the British Parliament, I am one of a very small number of engineering graduates. Across **all** S&T subjects, at the British Parliament, only about 12% of the members have a university S&T qualification.

And, of course, an expert in metallurgy, such as myself, will have just the same level of knowledge as a non-scientist in areas such as medical research, or the impacts of information technology.

But, we cannot avoid making recommendations and decisions. These may be to *encourage* the application of S&T – but they may also be to *regulate* its impacts. That's because the application of S&T inevitably leads to changes in current ways of doing things – and, we must recognise, often to winners and losers.

To make these decisions, we must draw on analysis and information – that is, on competent assessment.

Every day, we are bombarded with press releases and reports, with letter-writing campaigns organised by pressure groups, and so on. And we have to admit that the S&T community is one of these.

The key, as I said at the beginning is the quality of the information – we need

- confidence in its source
- confidence that it is based on the widest possible analysis
- confidence that it has explored the fullest range of potential outcomes of different policy decisions

And – we need all this in a hurry, and in a succinct and readily digestible form.

We do NOT need recommendations – as I said, we get bombarded by those anyway, but we welcome scenarios of potential outcomes.

This is the role that the parliamentary science offices can fulfil – and uniquely. Among the challenges they face are:

- maintaining their political independence
- having a dialogue with, but not being influenced by, all the special interests that I have mentioned
- being farsighted – but not so farsighted that what they say is irrelevant to political dialogue
- assisting political leaders in engaging with the public, but not in any way replacing them – and
- doing all this in a short space of time and in a way that is immediately accessible.

How effective is this parliamentary S&T assessment process? I can speak only for the British Parliament. There, members of both Houses CHOOSE whether to receive POST's output.

And about 50% of the roughly 1000 members have done so, for **ALL** S&T subjects. Others, naturally, choose to concern themselves with just one area, such as environment, or information technology.

I think that this is a pretty good indicator, although of course, we are always trying to improve it.

Although at the moment, only parliaments in Europe have such special offices, there is nothing specifically European about the role they play. I know that there has been interest in the model here in Japan – and in Korea from where I have just come.

But it is possibly in the developing world – an area of particular interest to me – that we have the dilemma of the greatest need – with the fewest resources. Parliaments in such countries are limited in their effectiveness by chronic resource shortage.

For that reason, collaborating with UNESCO and other partners, this autumn, POST is launching a special project working with such parliaments, especially in Africa. I know that the STS Forum also recognises this particular need – and, Mr Chairman, I hope that at a future session, myself or one of my colleagues, can report on the success of this effort.

Thank you.