

Commission bids for power

London

As the European Communities (EC) member states debate plans for greater economic and political unity, the European Commission has launched a bold plan to wrest control over the EC's research programme from the Council of Ministers — the periodic meetings of member states' research ministers.

The move would decrease the influence that individual member states have on the precise direction of EC research. This alarms many of the member states' permanent representatives in Brussels, who are embroiled in a dispute with the Commission's controversial vice-president in charge of research, Filippo Pandolfi, over the EC's future support for basic science.

The Commission, the civil service of the EC, is responsible for drawing up the EC's Framework research programmes, in consultation with the member states. But the go-ahead for individual component programmes within each Framework currently depends on the research ministers giving their approval.

The Commission's bid for increased power is put forward as a proposal to the Intergovernmental Conference that is considering plans for greater European unity. The Commission argues that each Framework should be approved in a single step, rather than individual component programmes being subject to scrutiny by the Council of Ministers after the overall budget is agreed. Under the plan, the Commission would then be able to implement the individual programme itself. This would give the Commission a large degree of control over a huge sum of money: a budget of 5,700 million ECU (about £4,000 million) was set last year for the EC's third Framework programme.

The proposal was considered by a meeting of member states' permanent representatives in Brussels late last month. Most are said to have been unenthusiastic. But the Commission has one, superficially appealing, argument to support its plan to streamline the decision-making process: the third Framework programme has become hopelessly bogged down in discussions between the Commission, the European Parliament and the member states. After almost a year, no individual programmes have yet received the research ministers' final approval.

But Pandolfi's critics say that the Commission is to blame for the delay. The problem, they argue, stems from Pandolfi's decision to present the outlines of 13 component programmes within the third Framework at one go. Previously, the European Parliament, the member states' research ministers and their permanent representatives in Brussels were able to consider programmes in smaller, more manageable batches.

To compound the administrative night-

mare, the Commission was last year forced to rewrite the 13 programme outlines, because they contained too little detail. Even now, the "human capital and mobility" programme, which will take over EC support for basic scientific research, is the subject of a bitter row between Pandolfi and the member states' representatives. Pandolfi wishes to spend most of the 518 million ECU (about £350 million) on a large postdoctoral fellowship scheme, which his opponents argue vastly exceeds the demand (see *Nature* 349, 556; 14 February 1991).

In the light of the current chaos, Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, chairman of CODEST, the committee that oversees EC support for basic research, says he cannot see the member states' research ministers agreeing to the Commission's proposal. The European Parliament is also likely to fight the plan. The parliament can influence EC research programmes through its decisions on the EC's annual budget, and is wary of any extension of the Commission's role. With this opposition, the Commission's plan is unlikely to be accepted in its present form. Nevertheless, with the EC's constitution effectively 'up for grabs' as the member states debate greater European unity, it is possible that the Commission may win some concessions and consolidate its role in directing EC research.

Peter Aldhous

UK UNIVERSITIES

New CVCP chairman

London

UK university vice-chancellors have chosen David Harrison from the University of Exeter to head the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) from 1 August. Harrison, a chemist, is the second vice-chancellor to be appointed to the post in recent months. The first, Graeme Davies from the University of



Liverpool, withdrew when he accepted the position of chief executive of the Universities Funding Council (UFC) (see *Nature* 349, 443; 7 February 1991). The two men face a difficult task improving strained relations between their respective bodies.

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ing, did officials investigate the case. NIH removed Sarin from his position earlier this year (see *Nature* 349, 95; 1991) and the case is now being investigated by the agency's Inspector General and the US Attorney's office.

"It is not the business of the subcommittee to supervise the daily workings of the NIH. But if we have to do it, we will", Dingell threatened.

The most damaging evidence in the Sarin case revolves around an NIH fund — known as the Foundation for the Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES) — that was used to support visiting scientists in Gallo's laboratory. According to the GAO investigators, Sarin set up a private bank account at a local bank with a similar name — FAES/NERIC. These initials, however, stood for the "Family Account for the Education of the Sarin Children/Neil and Eric". Sarin instructed ASTA Pharma, a German pharmaceutical company, to make out a consulting cheque for \$25,000 to FAES (an illegal payment, GAO said), which he deposited in the private account, along with other consulting payments. Sarin's lawyer, W. Neil Eggleston, says that Sarin has violated no laws, but he declines to explain the details of the questioned bank account.

NIH did not spot the violations, Raub testified, because officials had not thoroughly examined Sarin's files and were not sure that he had been given correct advice when he sought approval for the consulting. "In hindsight, the level of trust was too high", he said. "One of the things we need to develop across NIH is a greater talent for selective suspicion."

Gallo testified that, although he had been asked to question Sarin about the allegations, he could do little more than accept Sarin's denial.

"If the subcommittee and the NIH know about the allegations of misconduct, I don't know what I'm doing investigating it", Gallo argued. "I'm a scientist, not a policeman."

It is not clear exactly what NIH have done to prevent and investigate conflict of interest abuses in the future. "Do you still go by the same seat-of-the-pants review process that brought about this sorry situation?", Dingell asked Richard Adamson, Gallo's superior at the National Cancer Institute (NCI).

"No", Adamson responded. He was, however, unable to specify any significant new protection in the NIH procedures prompted by the Sarin case. Raub testified that, since the Salahuddin hearing, NIH have improved its review of applications for outside consulting and started an NIH-wide inventory of equipment. But most effort seems to have been spent in ensuring that existing procedures are being followed. NCI employees have been given seminars on existing conflict-of-interest rules, and outside companies will be sent copies of the relevant regulations, so that they can watch for violations as well, Raub said.

Christopher Anderson