

# EC research faces another poor year

- Maastricht meeting mostly ignores science
- Pandolfi pushes for increases in Framework

## London

FOR Filippo Pandolfi, vice-president of the European Commission in charge of research, 1992 may be another frustrating year. In 1989, he had to accept a 25 per cent cut in the budget for the European Communities' (EC) third five-year Framework research-and-development programme, which was put back a year from its scheduled start date in 1990 and which is still not in full flight. Now Pandolfi faces an uphill struggle if he is to make any real progress towards his stated aim of doubling the EC's spending on research.

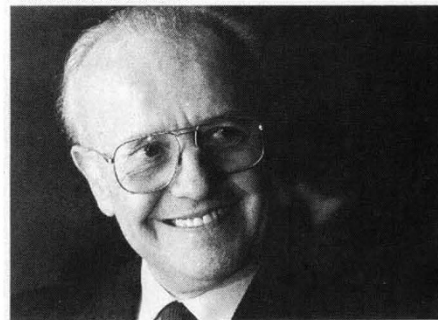
Before December's Maastricht summit, where the EC heads of government thrashed out a treaty under which their 12 separate states will move towards closer economic and political union, Pandolfi had good reason to hope that the principal block to his expansionist plans — Britain's effective veto over increases in EC research spending — would be removed. With UK prime minister John Major fighting to exclude Britain from the other 11 EC states' plans to develop new EC policies on social and employment issues, and anxious to ensure that the Westminster parliament will have the right to decide whether Britain should abandon the pound sterling in favour of a common European currency, Britain was expected to make concessions in lower-profile policy areas — such as research.

But unfortunately for Pandolfi, research and development was so low on the EC leaders' list of priorities that it was raised only in the closing minutes of the two-day Maastricht summit, almost as an afterthought. In a show of hands, Britain alone objected to a proposal that the future EC research budgets should be approved by 'qualified majority' voting (where the larger EC countries have more votes) by the 12 states' research ministers. But with Major having already achieved his two main objectives, none of the other 11 EC leaders had the stomach for another battle with the recalcitrant British. When Pandolfi produces his budget request for the fourth Framework programme (due to start in the mid-1990s) later this year, he will, as in 1989, have to win the approval of all 12 member states — including Britain.

The more money given to the EC for research, argues the Conservative UK government, the more likely it is that some will be used to support product-development work, in conflict with the UK government's policy of reducing its spending on 'near market' research. The vast

majority of the EC research budget already goes to industrial projects, but until now this has been restricted to 'precompetitive' work, where companies work together to develop underlying technologies to strengthen European industry.

The Commission is also allowed to support only those projects that are best carried out through European collaboration, rather than by scientists working in any one member state. Although Britain is not alone in claiming that large increases in EC spending could lead to this rule being broken, the extreme British stance is explained by the rigid accounting practices of the UK Treasury: to a greater extent than in the other EC countries, an increase in British spending on the EC's Framework Programme means a reduction in the amount of money available for research at home.



Pandolfi wants to double research funding.

Pandolfi has two battles on his hands in 1992. By April, he must complete a review of the third Framework programme for the member states' research ministers. Pandolfi is expected to use this opportunity to ask the ministers to restore the 2,000 million ECU (\$2,600 million) removed from the five-year budget at Britain's insistence in 1989. British officials now seem confident that Pandolfi's request will be greeted with little enthusiasm. But some EC-financed researchers, particularly those working to harness energy from nuclear fusion, claim that extra money is needed. The Joint European Torus experiment, based at Culham in Oxfordshire, followed the world's first successful first use of tritium fuel in November 1991 with the announcement that 10 per cent of its staff will lose their jobs. And in 1990, an independent panel headed by Umberto Colombo, now president of the European Science Foundation, recommended that the EC's spending on fusion research until 1994 should be 200 million ECU (\$260 million) higher than the figure allowed under the third Frame-

work budget.

Next autumn, Pandolfi faces the even more formidable task of persuading the research ministers to approve a much-increased budget for the fourth Framework programme. By 1997, he wants to increase the EC's spending on research to around 5,400 million ECU (\$7,000 million) a year — some 6 per cent of the EC's total spending, and more than twice the figure spent in 1991. Pandolfi can make a reasonable case to justify his empire building: the European Parliament backs the plan, and at a summit in Milan back in 1985, so did the EC's member governments. But enthusiasm in the member states for increased EC spending has since waned, as most of Europe wrestles with an economic recession. And with Britain still able to veto the Framework budget if its demands for financial restraint are ignored, Pandolfi will be forced to trim his plans.

The Maastricht summit has also done little to address the interminable delays that have plagued EC research. Although the overall budget for the third Framework was agreed on in a matter of months, the last of its 15 component programmes may not be under way until spring 1992, more than two years later. The problem has been a series of disagreements among the member states' ministers on one hand, and the Commission and the European Parliament on the other, over the programmes' content and management.

Under the Maastricht agreement, approval of the individual research programmes in the fourth Framework should be much quicker — proposals will require only a single cursory reading in the European Parliament, rather than two as at present. But Commission officials predict that any gains there will be wiped out under the new arrangement for agreeing on the total Framework budget. Like individual member states, the European Parliament will also be able to veto the budget proposal. With the Parliament pushing for a large spending increase and keen to flex the limited extra muscle it was given at Maastricht, Commission officials fear a long-running stalemate, with neither the Parliament nor the British government prepared to back down.

Outside the EC, 1991 was a year of belt-tightening for collaborative European projects, and 1992 promises more of the same. The continuing economic recession is one problem, and Germany's role as a leader in European collaboration is compromised by its need to invest in its new eastern states. The biggest question mark hangs over the European Space Agency: Germany is still threatening to pull out of Hermes, the French-led project to build a reusable space plane, if its huge cost cannot be reduced by the addition of new partners (most probably the Japanese) in time for a make-or-break meeting in Madrid later this year. **Peter Aldhous**