

European Community

Davignon quits as commissioner

Brussels

VISCOUNT Etienne Davignon, the Belgian who has masterminded the European Community's expanding science and research programme, will leave the European Commission at the end of the year. A pragmatist at heart, Davignon has let few opportunities slip to forge a solid base of international cooperation in research. It is not yet known who will be the new science commissioner.

The most recent example of Davignon's persistent efforts to mesh Europe's scientific talent to its industrial and economic needs is the £1,000 million Esprit information technology research programme.

Davignon has been forced to leave for two main reasons. First, the agreement of the ten member governments to support Mr Jacques Delors put an end to Davignon's hopes of becoming the new president of the Commission. Second, the Belgian Government made clear on 1 August that it would be putting forward the name of Finance Minister Willy De Clercq as Belgian member of the Commission. French-speaking Walloons claim that all Belgium's important foreign posts will be in the hands of Flemish speakers like De Clercq.

For the French-speaking south of the country, Davignon's portfolio, which includes the steel industry, is of vital concern. When Davignon joined the Commission in 1977, industry was his only responsibility. Since then, Davignon's workaholic drive gained him research and development sectors in both energy and science in the Commission of Gaston Thorn.

As part of his research responsibilities, he inherited the Commission's own Joint Research Centre (JRC) with some 2,200 personnel. Set up under the Euratom Treaty as a nuclear research centre, JRC had begun to diversify its activities after several years of crisis and indecision by the Council of Ministers. Crisis again struck in 1983, when the JRC Super-Sara project, a nuclear accident simulation experiment, was cancelled. According to Davignon, ministers had been shillyshallying for three years and were far too deeply involved in technical matters. The new JRC now boasts a board of governors and a scientific council to delegate decision-making.

Davignon applied the same philosophy — that ministers should be involved in policy, not in technical details — to the broader canvas of the Community's scientific research activity. His answer was the framework programme which sets out seven major goals for the Community's research, such as improving industrial efficiency, encouraging the quality of scientific collaboration and improving the environment. Research ministers would then have to assess and review resources to decide how programmes such as Esprit

would fit into this overall scheme of things.

The idea of the framework programme has been accepted in principle by the research ministers. But the necessary doubling of resources has fallen victim to the continuing squeeze on the Community's finances. Key elements of the framework programme — such as the European fusion programme, environmental research and the biomolecular programme — are already in place. Others, such as BRITE, designed to encourage

Romanian technology

Neglected by West and East

THE United States Administration has been reconsidering the proposed sale of satellite monitoring equipment to Romania. The equipment, which would give the Romanians access to data from the "Landsat" satellite system, would constitute some of the most sophisticated equipment ever sold by the United States to an East European country. The sale was first proposed in 1977, but ran into opposition from some members of the administration who felt that the equipment could be adapted for military purposes.

According to US Government sources, the latest round of discussions has been little more than a routine review of the situation. In fact, the Romanian deal has taken on a new significance in view of the forthcoming sale of Landsat equipment to China. The technology package which it is expected the Chinese will purchase will give them access to data from both Landsat cameras, one capable of detecting objects some 100 m in diameter and one which will distinguish objects of about 30 m diameter. The proposed Romanian deal would include a ground station and computer bloc which would give access to the low-resolution camera only. There are fears that the Romanians might have the capability of converting such equipment to military use.

During the past two weeks there have been strong rumours of a disagreement between the Secretary of Commerce, Mr Malcolm Baldrige, and the Secretary of Defense, Mr Caspar Weinberger, over the export of the technology. Baldrige was one of the chief exponents of relaxing export control guidelines to allow the export of "dual-use technology" to China. Weinberger, however, is known to be uneasy and would like to have more control over the vetting of individual deals.

There is no doubt that the Romanians could derive considerable benefit from access to Landsat data. Although Romania participates in the Comecon *Interkosmos* programme, it is a far less active partner than, say, Czechoslovakia or East Germany, and there is no doubt that the

basic research and applications of new technologies to aid traditional industries, the biotechnology programme, telecommunications and the "stimulation" activity (aimed at raising the quality of multidisciplinary and multinational research), will follow in the coming months.

Where Davignon has made his mark has been in identifying Europe's weaknesses and energetically working at priorities to achieve closer scientific collaboration in the Community. If the quality of research is the key to industrial prosperity, the next generation will have reason to be thankful for his spell as commissioner.

David Price

Romanians were piqued when, after being given to understand that they were sixth in the running order, they were relegated to ninth place, either as a gesture of disapproval of President Nicolae Ceaucescu's independent foreign policy line or else due to an administrative decision that, after the first batch of cosmonauts (Czech, Polish, East German), the remaining six would go in (Cyrillic) alphabetical order.

Landsat data, with their applications to land-use and geological surveying, would be particularly useful for the Romanians, who, during the past decade, have seen their oil reserves dwindle to such an extent that the country is now a net energy importer. And with a failing agriculture, Romania has now embarked upon a "scientific nutrition" programme that will need every bit of technological help it can get. Even if the Romanian military did want to try to adapt Landsat technology for military use, they might well run into considerable opposition from the economic planners who have their own plans for it.

Vera Rich

Martin Goldman

MARTIN Goldman, one of the physical science editors of *Nature* in the 1970s, was killed in last week's train crash in Scotland.

Goldman joined *Nature* in 1975 after an outstanding academic career at Oxford, Princeton and Sussex, where he completed a DPhil in theoretical physics. He was attracted to science journalism by the opportunities that it provides for getting to grips with research on a broad front. He particularly enjoyed the opportunities that arose for writing popular pieces, and this experience, together with his occasional broadcasts for the British Broadcasting Corporation, led him eventually to the career in radio journalism on which he was well embarked. Based at BBC Radio Scotland, he had already established a national reputation as a science producer. He was 34, and leaves a widow and two young children.

David Davies