European Communities

Framework programme in limbo

DESPITE arguing until 4 a.m. on Wednesday last week, Europe's science ministers have failed to agree on a budget for the European Commission's 'framework' programme of research and development, a programme that aims to lay the basis for European cooperation in key areas of research and technology up to 1991. The ministers decided only one thing; to postpone a decision on financing until 22 December, when they will meet again in the hope of completing a compromise which began to emerge in the small hours last Wednesday.

However, the new deal, which involves a three-year rather than five-year programme, has a long way to go before it can form the basis of an agreement. The Commission had tabled a 7,735-million-ECU (£5,400-million), five-year programme, but last week the British, French and West German delegations were sticking on low figures of 3,500–4,000 million ECU, the Dutch on 6,000 million and the other eight delegations on the full amount proposed by the Commission. The gap between the extremes was thus more than a factor of two, and it was difficult to see last week how it could be bridged by the Commission's compromise proposal, of 3,700 million ECU to be committed, and 3,100 million ECU to be spent. These sums would cover three years not five.

Also against the new proposal is the European Parliament, whose energy, research and technology committee has condemned any reduction in the programme, and urged the Commission to prepare to withdraw the whole proposal. Jacques Delors, the president of the Commission, in reply to an address by the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher to the parliament in Strasbourg last Tuesday, warned that he had instructed research commissioner Karl-Heinz Narjes to abandon the framework programme if ministers failed to give it a reasonable level of financing. Thatcher had just addressed the parliamentarians on the six months of British leadership of the European Communities (as president of the decision-making Council of Ministers) without making any serious mention of research. Delors gives the framework programme a high priority, and was clearly angered that Thatcher had proved an obstacle to its implementation. However, within a few hours, Narjes was proposing the new compromise. Parliamentarians have since expressed their dismay at this outcome, and are pressing for a thoroughgoing confrontation between the Commission and the Council of Ministers.

Finally, however, it may be a smaller straw that breaks the Commission's back: the matter of a 12.6-million ECU increase

in the 700-million-ECU four-year budget of the Joint Research Centre's, the group of four laboratories in Italy (Ispra), West Germany (Karlsruhe), Belgium (Geel) and the Netherlands (Petten) which are wholly funded by the Commission. Last week the research ministers received a critical report on the centres prepared by an independent group of European industrialists, and although the Commission already has plans to travel down the road the industrialists recommended (greater interaction with industry, better management of funds), most ministers were sufficiently confirmed in their negative view of the centres that they refused any increase. The exception was the Italian minister, who benefits from the considerable research employment that the largest of the laboratories, Ispra, provides.

Embryo research

UK legislation further delayed

STILL wriggling uncomfortably on the hook of human embryo research, the UK government last week issued a consultation paper on *Legislation on Human Fertility Services and Embryo Research* (Cm 46, HMSO, £2.90), asking for responses by the middle of 1987. The aim is then to introduce legislation, although it seems likely that a general election will intervene.

The paper is based on the Warnock report, published in 1984, since when the government has avoided three attempts by members of parliament (MPs) to prohibit almost all human embryo research, while promising its own legislation. From these attempts and other responses, the paper divides Warnock's recommendations into those where "a broad measure of agreement is likely" and those where it is not.

Chief among the contentious issues, according to the paper, is the use of human embryos for research purposes. One camp argues that research is both necessary and warranted. It is necessary to improve infertility treatments, contraceptive techniques and the detection of early abnormalities. And it is warranted for 14 days after fertilization. The other camp is opposed to any research that leads to the destruction of an embryo because this "is tantamount to murder", says the paper.

Pointing out that even the members of the Warnock committee were split on this issue — as are government ministers — and that various intermediate positions have been expressed, the paper says that the government intends to offer parliament alternative sets of draft clauses dealing with the issue, and to allow MPs to vote according to their consciences rather than along party political lines.

Previously fully in support of the framework programme, the Italian delegation has now linked its support to agreement on the increase for the research centres. This must make considerably less likely the unanimous agreement that is necessary for the framework programme to go forward, and it seems probable, barring a miracle, that the framework programme will limp forward, unagreed, to the next six months' Belgian presidency of the Council of Ministers. This would leave a number of programmes hanging loose, such as ESPRIT in information technology, RACE on the development of Europe-wide integrated broad-band communications, EURAM on advanced materials and the unstarted joint research programme on AIDS. There is around 1,050 million ECU in the European kitty next year to continue existing programmes, but this is not enough to increase the pace of cooperation intended.

Robert Walgate

Other issues that are considered contentious are the possibility of egg or embryo donation and whether human sperm should ever be allowed to fertilize animal eggs, even as a test for sperm quality with destruction of the embryo after one division.

Although commercial surrogacy was made illegal in 1985, the paper invited comment on whether the law should be amended to allow the surrogate mother and the commissioning parents to be prosecuted. It also seeks views on the possibility of a non-commercial surrogacy service.

Only one reaction to the consultation paper is unanimous, namely that it is a delaying tactic. Mrs Phyllis Bowman, director of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, says the paper is nothing but a rehash of the Warnock report. A spokeswoman for Progress, a lobbying group in favour of human embryo research agrees but sees the delay swinging public opinion in the group's favour.

The last attempt to prohibit human embryo research was on 13 October when Mr Ken Hargreaves MP introduced legislation in a way that stood no chance of being accepted but at least forced a vote. As on past occasions there was a substantial, if reduced, majority in favour of the proposed bill. Meanwhile, such research continues under the auspices of the Voluntary Licensing Authority set up last year by the Medical Research Council and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The authority tends to follow the recommendations of the Warnock report, which are sometimes more liberal than local ethics committees through which medical research proposals have also to pass.

Peter Newmark