

Compromise averts Framework fiasco

- Five research programmes back on track
- A continuing power struggle over policy

London

THE warring institutions of the European Communities (EC) have managed to patch together a compromise that should prevent the withdrawal, announced by the European Commission last month, of five planned research programmes (see *Nature* 350, 177; 21 March 1991).

The withdrawal of the research programmes, the only five among the 15 of the EC's third five-year Framework research budget that are nearing final approval, would have delayed any spending of the budget of about £4,000 million (5,700 million European Currency Units) until at least late 1992. The third Framework was intended originally to run from 1990 to 1994.

Although the immediate crisis has been resolved, the third Framework remains badly behind schedule, and further political upheaval is possible. Most of the arguments over EC research stem from the perennial struggle for power between the ministers from EC member states, the European Parliament and the Commission, which is the EC's civil service. With the EC's constitution due for redrafting, these battles are likely to intensify, as the member states debate plans for greater political unity.

The recent dispute over the research budget began when the Commission, backed by the European Parliament, said it was withdrawing the five programmes because the research ministers from the EC member states had altered the programmes from the Commission's original proposals, and had ignored amendments suggested by the Parliament. But the move was seen by many as a calculated act of defiance by the Commission and the Parliament, using the EC's research programme as a political battleground to press their case for increased power over EC policy — which is now dominated by the decisions taken at the occasional meetings of ministers from the EC states.

Jacques Delors and Enrique Baron Crespo, presidents of the Commission and the Parliament respectively, and Luxembourg's research minister Rene Steichen last week signed an agreement resolving the differences over the five research programme proposals, which is expected to be endorsed this week at meeting of EC research ministers.

Both sides claim to have given away little in the compromise. But some observers in Brussels believe that Delors, having made a political point, has now decided to leave the EC's research programmes alone.

The Commission and Parliament had dis-

agreed with the ministers over a number of points concerning the management of the five research programmes. The main concession made by the ministers is to weaken some of the management committees that will oversee the programmes in the third Framework (not just the five disputed programmes) — so allowing the Commission more freedom to control research programmes.

The five threatened programmes, in environmental research, marine science and technology, life sciences, technologies for developing countries, and two programmes in telecommunications, should now be finally adopted in June, and the first grants may be awarded early next year. But the delays introduced by a series of skirmishes between the member states' ministers and the Commission mean that the grant spending under the rest of the programmes within the third Framework is unlikely to begin before mid-1992. This makes a mockery of the original plan to review the progress of each of the research programmes during 1992, halfway through the third Framework.

Nevertheless, Gordon Adam, vice chairman of the Parliament's Energy, Research and Technology Committee, believes the crisis of the past month may have had one positive effect. To forge the compromise, research ministers and members of the European Parliament have been forced to communicate with one another. Adam hopes the precedent will lead to a more open dialogue between the two groups.

But a further row over EC research is likely. A Commission proposal to have future Framework budgets and the details of their component programmes approved in a single step (see *Nature* 350, 101; 14 March 1991) has been included in a draft revision of the EC's constitution, now being circulated around the EC. The draft has been produced by the intergovernmental conference that is considering plans for greater EC political unity. At present, the proposed outlines of individual research programmes are subject to scrutiny by research ministers and the Parliament after the overall Framework budget is agreed. If each Framework was approved in a single step, the Commission would have far more influence over EC research than is now the case.

Given the delays that have plagued the approval of the programmes that make up the third Framework, some EC states are expected to support the move to streamline the process. But British officials, fearing any extension of the Commission's power, will oppose the plan. **Peter Aldhous**

EUROPEAN RESEARCH

Setting up shop in Brussels

London

RESEARCH funding agencies from the European Communities (EC) member states are stepping up their presence in Brussels, anticipating an increase in the proportion of research spending by European governments coming through the EC.

The five British research councils last week merged their Brussels office with that of the British Council, which has been speaking with the EC on behalf of a number of British universities. The new UK Research and Higher Education European Office aims to ensure that UK scientists are able to compete effectively for EC research grants.

British scientists — aided by the research councils' presence in Brussels — currently earn more in EC research grants than the UK government pays into the various EC research programmes. The French and Germans have so far been less successful in winning EC funding, but now seem to be following the British example. French research funding agencies opened a Brussels office last month, and the Germans are soon to follow suit. P.A.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Nuffield takes the lead on bioethics

London

THE Nuffield Foundation, a large British research charity, will set up the first UK committee to consider the broad sweep of ethical issues thrown up by advances in biological research. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics will be chaired by Sir Patrick Nairne, formerly a senior civil servant at the UK Department of Health and Social Security, and will have a budget of some £150,000 a year.

David Shapiro, from the Nuffield Foundation's bioethics initiative, expects that the Nuffield Council will concentrate initially on the ethical questions surrounding new techniques in molecular biology, including genetic screening, and on publishing reports of its work. A majority of the council's members will be neither professional scientists nor medical doctors, Shapiro says.

The Nuffield Council breaks with the British custom of setting up separate *ad hoc* committees to tackle different ethical issues — for example, the Interim Licensing Authority for human embryo research, set up by the Medical Research Council and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

Perhaps the closest parallel for the new body is the French National Consultative Ethics Committee for the Life Sciences and Health, set up in 1983 — except that the French body is supported by public funds, rather than a charitable foundation. P.A.