

and knows first-hand what science is about. He says (see *Nature* 361, 286; 1993) that he hopes to mould the evolution of the European Communities (EC) research programme by taking fuller account of the needs of working scientists. That makes sense. Too much of what the EC has previously attempted, often at the whim of individual commissioners, has naively been more concerned with industrial than research policy. Ruberti will be more, not less, effective now that some of those projects have been transferred elsewhere in the commission.

But how is the EC to get closer to research? And what part does the EC have to play in the development of research in Europe as a whole? It will not have escaped attention in Brussels that, on 18 and 19 January, the administrative (not the political) heads of Europe's research councils held an informal meeting at Bonn to brood about these questions among others. Although the only tangible decision was that there should be another meeting later in the year, more generally the sense of the meeting seems to have been that the pan-European research enterprise is too important to be left exclusively to the EC.

The research council heads are powerful fellows, who collectively spend on research nearly a hundred times as much as the EC. Already, through their support of the European Science Foundation (ESF) in Strasbourg, they have a European research agency of their own which, significantly, embraces parts of Europe where the EC's writ does not yet run. (The next secretary-general of ESF, from July, will be Dr Peter Fricker, for many years the director of the Swiss national research foundation.) In ESF and from their collective experience, they also have a vivid appreciation of how, in science, the aspirations of individual researchers help to determine the pattern of research — just the link Ruberti says he wants to establish in the EC's research programme.

The research councils can plainly help Ruberti a great deal, not least with advice. He is, after all, the first research commissioner to include education in his brief; one of his tasks should be to use a substantial part of the EC's research money to stiffen research support for higher education, especially in parts of the community where science is comparatively neglected. But the research council heads, at Bonn, had by all accounts set their vision on a wider Europe. In particular, they were talking of the possibility that ESF might become "a common instrument" for the improvement of European science. That is an exciting prospect, which Ruberti could do much to encourage. □

Watching watchdogs

The Chemical Weapons Convention will work only if verification procedures are sensitive to public scrutiny.

THE Chemical Weapons Convention, signed in Paris last month by more than 130 countries after 25 years of negotiation in the United Nations, is due to come into full operation within two to three years, but already there is alarm over

arrangements for policing it. In Britain, the responsibility will fall to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), one of whose tasks is to promote the welfare of British industry. The treaty will require that governments should restrict the export of equipment that has both military and civil applications. But only last year, DTI was one of several government departments caught up in the Matrix-Churchill affair, when an ex-government minister admitted that officials had been encouraged to be less than scrupulous in applying that same 'dual use' test to exports for Iraq. The record suggests that the nominated custodians of British responsibilities under the treaty are not above suspicion.

Overall responsibility for ensuring compliance with the convention will rest with a new body, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, to be established at The Hague. A preparatory commission is meeting in the Netherlands next week to decide how that, and in particular its intended technical secretariat, will function. But the convention also imputes a significant role to national authorities, which will be responsible for reporting on national compliance, for example by collecting information on the activities of the chemical industry.

In Britain, the national authority is being set up by DTI. In one sense, the choice is logical; much of the information to be collected will be of a nature that the industry would ordinarily prefer to keep to itself. That is particularly so of production and marketing data on 'dual use' chemicals which, although widely used for civilian purposes, can also be the precursors of chemical weapons. Who better, industrial officials argue, to protect it against foreign predators than DTI?

But, as with any weapons control treaty, the effectiveness of the convention will hang on signatories' confidence and trust in the verification procedures. There is a clear conflict between the industry's need to protect confidential information and the public interest that such information is subjected to independent critical scrutiny. Not to put too fine a point upon it, can DTI alone be trusted to do the job required?

The solution is — or should be — relatively straightforward. The national authority should consist not only of government and industry officials but also of independent members, perhaps drawn from the scientific and academic communities. Short of full public transparency — agreed to be impractical — the presence of individuals able to raise awkward questions and voice suspicions about potentially illicit activities may be the best guarantee that the integrity of the review process is observed, and that self-interest is not allowed to overcome due caution.

Such procedures have already worked well for genetic engineering. But so far the president of the Board of Trade, Michael Heseltine, the minister responsible, has not been receptive. Answering a parliamentary question last week, he merely stated that the composition of the national authority was still under discussion. But with the credibility of an international treaty at stake, this is one area in which John Major's commitment to open government should mean that the financial interests of the few are not allowed excessive influence over the security interests of the many. □