

One step forward, two back?

SIR — Although the new European Science and Technology Assembly (ESTA) has been discussed in *Nature* (see 371, 190; 372, 389–390 & 395; 1994), one distinctive feature has not been mentioned. Among its 100 members there are more Nobel prizewinners (six) than female scientists (four). How is such a committee put together, and how in the 1990s can women be so poorly represented on this top level European Union (EU) committee, which has the task of “improving the quality and choice of European Union Research Programmes”, and which will have considerable influence on how EU research policy is developed and how EU research money is spent?

The 27 members of CODEST (Committee for the European Development of Science and Technology) automatically became members of ESTA. The other 73 slots were filled by asking the European organizations listed in the table to nominate individuals. Organizations were asked to nominate approximately twice the number of individuals as places, with the final selection of ESTA members being made in Brussels. This was to give the commission a chance to balance ESTA by country and by field. Not surprisingly, ESTA is dominated by the larger countries, with Germany supplying 16 members, France 14, the United Kingdom 11 and Italy 10, but even small countries such as Iceland and Luxembourg have one member each.

In this context it is instructive to look at how the four female scientists came to be included, and from which countries they come. Dervla Donnelly, a phytochemist from University College, Dublin, Ireland, is included as a member of CODEST. Consuelo de la Torre, a plant scientist from CSIC in Madrid, Spain, and Birgit

Grodal, an economist from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, were nominated as 2 of 6 members proposed by the Academia Europaea, while Margarita Salas, a geneticist from CSIC in Madrid, Spain, was nominated as one of 13 ESTA members directly chosen by the commission. In contrast, all the other organizations listed in the table — including the European Science Foundation which supplied 12 members — either did not nominate a woman or the woman was not selected. Indeed, women are not only poorly represented by number on ESTA, but once again there are no women from the major EU countries, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy.

In spite of numerous resolutions from the council, the commission and the European Parliament endorsing equal opportunities, little specific effort seems to have been made to find female scientists qualified to serve on ESTA. This can be seen from the list of organizations asked to nominate individuals, which come mostly from the physical sciences, and from industry (see table), where there are even fewer women at the top than in the life sciences. Second, given the current gender distribution in senior science jobs, unless a call for nominations is accompanied by a request to include a certain proportion of women among the nominees, women are unlikely to be nominated on sheer statistical grounds. In contrast, informal efforts last year to put together a list of female scientists from EU countries qualified to serve on top EU committees showed that there was no lack of qualified candidates. Indeed, after asking both male and female scientists to suggest names it was relatively easy to assemble a list of more than 50 women from 11 of the 12 EU countries.

Is 4 per cent a reasonable number? The commission would probably argue that it is, as national and European academies rarely have even this percentage of women members. Yet if one uses this as the only guideline it is a depressing outlook for half the human race, as such organizations perpetuate themselves and are therefore very slow to change. Instead, with ESTA an opportunity has been missed to implement the call in the 1993 EU Workshop on Women in Science, and elsewhere, for more representation of women on the top EU committees that set policy and control funds. If, for example, 10–15 per cent of ESTA members had been female (which would have meant identifying only 6–11 additional women with the necessary qualifications), a signal might have been given to other EU and national committees on the need for more gender inclusiveness. This would also have gone some way to meeting the call in the British government's committee report, *The Rising Tide*, for a 25 per cent representation of women “for all public appointments and senior positions in science, engineering and technology, including chairmanships” by the year 2000. And a little way towards the situation in the United States where, already in 1994, 6 out of 19, or 32 per cent, of the members of the recently announced President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) are female.

In summary, the ESTA composition illustrates once again the gulf that exists between words (which are cheap), and actions (which require foresight and commitment) when it comes to implementing equal opportunities.

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Members proposed by:

No. of members No. of women

CODEST	27	1
European Science Foundation (ESF)	12	0
European Industrial Research Managers' Association (EIRMA)	12	0
Academia Europaea	6	2
All European Academies (ALLEA)	6	0
European Rectors Conference (CRE)	6	0
European Council of Applied Science & Engineering (EURO-CASE)	4	0
Industrial Research & Development Advisory Committee (IRDAC)	4	0
UNICE	2	0
European Round Table (ERT)	2	0
European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	2	0
CERN	1	0
European Space Agency (ESA)	1	0
European Southern Observatory (ESO)	1	0
European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF)	1	0
Direct Appointment by European Commission	13	1
	100	4

The breakdown by country (in brackets the number of women) is Germany 16 (0), France 14 (0), UK 11 (0), Italy 10 (0), Spain 7 (2), Netherlands 7 (0), Belgium 7 (0), Ireland 5 (1), Denmark 4 (1), Sweden 4 (0), Switzerland 4 (0), Austria 3 (0), Finland 2 (0), Portugal 2 (0), Greece 1 (0), Norway 1 (0), Iceland 1 (0), Luxembourg 1 (0). ESTA members are listed by country where they are currently working rather than by nationality.

...still no silence?

SIR — Not being a native speaker of the non-phonetic language English, I appreciate the discussion of the correct pronunciation of certain scientific terms. Norby or Busser and Horowitz argue convincingly (*Nature* 372, 312; 1994) that its greek root and ‘pt’ at the beginning of a syllable determine silencing of the ‘p’ in ‘apoptosis’. However, as soon as I apply this rule to the scientific term for butterfly (as ‘feather-wings’) — ‘Lepido-ptera’ — my confusion is back; Webster suggests the pronunciation ‘lepidoptera’. Am I missing an exception to the rule?

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