

Bringing a community-based vision to the heart of Europe's research

The European Union's new research commissioner hopes that his plans to promote science will win over critics in the European Parliament.

Brussels

When Philippe Busquin was minister of the budget and energy for the Walloon Region in his native Belgium, he introduced a law requiring utility companies to provide all citizens with a minimum level of electricity, whatever their ability to pay.

"It was a relatively small measure in itself, but it showed — like the butterfly flapping its wings that can trigger to a tornado — that by changing something a little you can change the whole system," says Busquin, the European Union's new research commissioner.

Like his controversial predecessor, Edith Cresson, Busquin has deep roots in left-wing politics. He owes his appointment, confirmed last month after close questioning of his political past by the European Parliament, to having been a prominent member of Belgium's socialist party for many years.

Also like Cresson, Busquin is keen that the commission's research budget, for which he is responsible — about 3 billion euros (US\$3.2 billion) a year — should focus on projects intended to raise the quality of life in Europe as well as its economic competitiveness.

But the similarities stop there. Unlike his predecessor, Busquin has a scientific background. He took a physics degree at the Free University of Brussels (where he studied under the Nobel laureate chemist Ilya Prigogine), and spent several years as an assistant lecturer at the university and as a physics teacher at a teacher-training college before entering full-time politics in 1977.

Catalysis, not co-ordination

Whereas Cresson appeared keen to increase the commission's central control over its budget, Busquin says he sees himself as a catalyst rather than a coordinator of the activities of European researchers.

His political vision is community-based. He points, for example, to his creation of a group made up of representatives from petrochemical companies, local authorities and local people that discusses the environmental impact of the companies' activities.

The group grew out of a research project that Busquin carried out as part of his post-graduate work in the mid-1970s on the impact of industry on local communities. "Twenty years later, the group is still meeting," he says with pride.

And while Cresson treated the media



Busquin: keen to promote networks and increase the contact between European researchers.

with disdain — refusing a series of requests for interviews from this journal, for example — Busquin talks freely about his ambitions for his term of office, even if his words already echo official thinking in Brussels.

His top priority, he says, is to create a European scientific *espace*, broadly translated as a European scientific community. "The added value we can bring to Europe's research efforts, 96 per cent of which are still financed by member states, is through our ability to catalyse such an *espace*."

The main tool at his disposal is the fifth five-year Framework programme (FP5), which was adopted last year and runs until 2003. Not surprisingly, he endorses the strategic priorities already embodied in this.

For example, Busquin speaks enthusiastically of promoting European science through the use of networks. "We need to address the needs of the research community, and in particular how to increase its mobility and the intra-European contact between researchers," he says.

Another priority is to give the commission's research programmes a more human face. "I think that the FP5 is a bit too oriented to competitiveness," he says. "We should also give people a vision of how science can serve the citizen. It is very important that we give

A priority is to give the commission's research programmes a more human face.

the public a positive vision of science and what it can do for them."

Few are likely to challenge this, or his insistence that problem-oriented research must be complemented by open-ended projects. "Science must not be completely instrumentalized," he says. "There should be some research is carried out for its own sake."

More closely watched will be his determination and ability to grasp the thornier issues facing the commission, such as how to improve the effectiveness of its Joint Research Centres — a long-standing target of criticism by some member states.

Busquin speaks highly of some of the work being carried out at the centre at Ispra in Italy, which he visited last month, for example in food safety or the analysis of Earth images from space. But he acknowledges that "in some cases you will have to change the mission of institutions; some tasks need to be redefined," adding that "one must not waste public funds".

Raising awareness

Another hot topic is the extent to which the European Commission should fund infrastructure facilities through the Framework programme, particularly in the life sciences. Here Busquin says he is a believer in "a variable geometry", adding that: "Not everything should be paid for by Brussels."

Busquin has already had a baptism of fire, having had both his involvement in Belgian politics and his lack of experience in managing large-scale projects closely questioned by the European Parliament's research committee (see *Nature* 401, 104; 1999).

In the end, the committee decided to neither endorse nor oppose his appointment. Busquin admits that the encounter was "not very agreeable", although he adds that, as a politician, he is used to taking criticism.

But he talks enthusiastically about the tasks ahead, in particular raising public awareness about science and encouraging school pupils to take an active interest. "We have to give them a taste for science" he says.

"We need to find ways of bringing young scientists together, and we must also give them role models." Busquin says that as a physics student his own role model, as a scientist with a social conscience, was the US physicist Robert Oppenheimer. He is clearly keen to be seen in the same light. **David Dickson**