

SCIENCE

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Send materials to *Science* Advertising, 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005.

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Internet addresses: science_editors@aaas.org (for general editorial queries); science_letters@aaas.org (for letters to the editor); science_reviews@aaas.org (for returning manuscript reviews)

LETTERS

Renovating Italian Science

We can only be sympathetic to Vittorio Sgaramella (Letters, 21 Jan., p. 305), who discusses Italy's role in Europe. We agree that Italy should be better represented within the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). We do not agree with those who hope that, by withdrawing from EMBL, things might improve ("Italy throws EMBL into turmoil," News & Comment, 21 Jan., p. 315). Not only would such a decision discredit Italy's already weakened image, but it would make futile the financial investments of two decades in support of the EMBL. It would undermine ongoing efforts of Italian institutions that are directed at improving the quality and stature of scientific research in Italy.

For this embarrassing situation there is only one responsible: Italy itself. It is unrealistic to expect that EMBL would solve Italy's problems, and the notion that a few more regional labs in Italy (supervised by EMBL) would improve the quality of our provincial research is misleading. To the contrary, it would create more dependency on the European partners.

For this new spur of provincialism, however, Italian scientists should be granted the benefits of the doubt, since more aggressive "euro-skeptical" partners are already guilty of expanding their own regional domains. Nonetheless, because we live in a fast-paced, competitive world, leading countries are reluctant to wait for less-aggressive ones, and concepts such as Europeanization and internationalization seem to be of secondary concern. The National Institutes of Health in the United States should be an illuminating example to European scientists. Through the concentration of a "critical mass" of scientists, this institution has been able to remain at the forefront of research, not through a rainy political dispersion of precious funds.

For its own good, the Italian scientific community should enforce vigorous standards of scientific research in place of short-sighted political convenience and claim its intellectual independency from a falling-apart, "partitocratic" system that has no long-term future. The real problem is that the vast majority of the Italian scientific establishment has learned through the years, for reasons of mere survival or opportunistic convenience, that tactical maneuvering and receiving timely blessings from friendly political leaders represent the only

guaranteed tickets to life-time tenured positions and well-secured funding. Peer review of grant proposals and competitive research training programs are not the tradition in Italy. Bitterly, scientific excellence and meritocracy have been slashed by political interferences which, given the current political system, would engulf any new regional initiative.

Italian scientists can perform outstanding research in molecular biology or other disciplines. It is up to them to resolve their internal struggles. The ongoing Italian political revolution should be looked on by the Italian scientific community as a historical occurrence for renovating itself and creating opportunities for new generations.

Donato Romagnolo*

Ornella Selmin

142 Winners Circle,

Cary, NC, 27511, USA

*The authors are visiting fellows of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institutes of Health, Research Triangle Park, NC, USA.

Quality of EPA Research

Richard Stone's article "Can Carol Browner reform EPA?" (News & Comment, 21 Jan., p. 312) discusses the poor state of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) science efforts in research, leadership, and science-based decision-making. Several other key factors underlie this sad condition. Environmental protection policy disagreements are not about what to conclude from the available scientific knowledge; they represent a struggle for political power among groups having vastly differing interests and visions for society. In this struggle, science is used as a means of legitimizing the various positions. Typically the uncertainties of the available evidence are exploited to bolster particular positions, and the inconvenient bits are ignored. In this way science is a pawn, cynically abused as may suit the interests of a particular protagonist despite great ignorance concerning the problems being addressed.

This process degrades both science and the contending parties. However, until a social consensus emerges regarding how environmental protection goals will be balanced against those of economic development, the situation appears unlikely to improve. It might be better for a while to focus resources less on trying to improve