

## EUROPEAN UNION

# Scientists' Champion Leaves Europe's Top Research Job

**BRUSSELS**—When Antonio Ruberti took over as the European Union's (EU's) commissioner in charge of research in January 1993, he came with high hopes from Europe's scientists. Unlike his predecessor and fellow Italian, Filippo Pandolfi, Ruberti had broad experience in science, having been a professor of systems engineering, rector of Rome's La Sapienza University, and Italy's science minister from 1987 to 1992. He also had bold plans for reshaping the EU's research program to make it more scientist-friendly, and to better coordinate EU research with national research priorities. But Ruberti steps down on 25 January with only a fraction of his ambitious agenda accomplished. His term was cut short because the Socialist Party of Italy, of which he is a member, was ousted from power last year. He will be replaced by Edith Cresson, France's former prime minister (see box).

Ruberti will be missed. Says Cambridge University pharmacologist Sir Arnold Burgen, "Ruberti brought a scientific outlook to DG XII [the EU's department of research] which wasn't there before. He is a scientist himself and understands how scientists

think." Before Ruberti arrived at the European Commission—the EU's executive arm—its science program was not exactly popular with scientists. He promised to make DG XII more responsive to scientists' needs and to curb its bureaucratic ways. Ruberti also called for better coordination between EU strategies and those of member countries.

To have completed such reforms after just 2 years in office would have been tough, given the glacial pace of much of European politics. But Ruberti did make a considerable impact, particularly in opening up the murky world of Brussels bureaucracy. According to astronomer Jan Borgman, president of the new European Science and Technology Assembly (ESTA), an EU advisory panel set up by Ruberti, "he has steered several projects onto the right tracks. For example, he designed manuals and procedures for achieving higher standards in peer review and for making the procedures for peer review clearly understand-

able to the politicians."

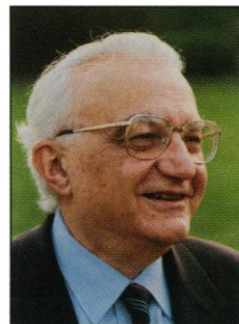
Many scientists credit the creation of ESTA as a major contributor to this new perestroika in DG XII. "Through this assembly the voice of the scientist might be heard better," says Ilya Prigogine of the Free University of Brussels. Its 100 members are nominated by non-EU bodies such as the European Science Foundation and the Association of All European Academies. Since its first meeting in September last year, ESTA has mostly been grappling with the latest EU science budget, but it has also cast a critical eye over the commission's methods of peer review for proposed projects. According to Prigogine, the next wave of EU research money, which will be shaped over the next few years, "will be the test. We will see what the influence of ESTA on that program will be."

The EU's science budget comes in 4-year chunks called "Framework" programs; the fourth Framework, running from 1994 to 1998, was significantly shaped by Ruberti's influence. At \$15.2 billion it is 50% larger than Framework three. And while the EU's traditional enthusiasms, such as information technology, energy, and biotechnology, still dominate the program, Ruberti cites significant changes under his stewardship, such as a new program of socioeconomic research. "We have added research in education and how we can improve it. We also have a research program in technology forecasting ... comparable to the American Office of Technology Assessment," says Ruberti. "I think the fourth Framework is Ruberti's personal achievement," says European Parliament member Umberto Scapagnini of the University of Catania, Italy, who is president of the Parliamentary Commission for Energy, Research, and Technology.

One aim that eluded Ruberti during his time in Brussels was overcoming the fragmented nature of European research. Ruberti is nonetheless determined that the process of research integration should go on: He is leaving behind detailed plans in a document drafted a few months ago, entitled "Achieving Coordination Through Cooperation," which is now being scrutinized by members of ESTA. Borgman views it as Ruberti's legacy and, despite the inevitable national tensions it will arouse, Ruberti is optimistic it will be carried through. "Yesterday, before the [European] Parliament, Mrs. Cresson said clearly that she aims to continue this policy," he says. She will leave a tough job in carrying on where Ruberti left off.

—Alexander Hellemans

Alexander Hellemans is a writer in Amsterdam.



**Farewell.** Departing commissioner Ruberti.

## France's Firebrand Takes the Reins

When Antonio Ruberti steps down as Europe's custodian of science next week, Edith Cresson, who was France's outspoken prime minister from May 1991 to April 1992, will be poised to take over. First, however, all 20 newly nominated commissioners must be approved by the European Parliament, and some of the candidates had a rough ride before a parliamentary session in Brussels last week. The parliament can only veto



Edith Cresson

the whole cabinet, not individuals, but it seems Cresson will not be the stumbling block. "Mrs. Cresson gave a better than average performance. She certainly wasn't one of those commissioners that were picked out for criticism," says British MEP Glynn Ford.

Before the MEPs, Cresson defended her plans for supporting industrial research, viewed by some as counter to the principles of free trade, and for a "task force" linking industry and research. "I am all for competition because it enhances competitiveness. But when others have industrial policies, why shouldn't we have them?" Cresson also said that fundamental research should continue to be encouraged.

Despite such assurances, scientists view Cresson's appointment with mixed feelings because of her lack of knowledge about research. "The things I hear from France are very positive, but Ruberti is a genuine scientist and Cresson is not," says Cambridge University pharmacologist Sir Arnold Burgen. She has her supporters, however, such as Dutch astronomer Jan Borgman, president of the EU's new European Science and Technology Assembly (ESTA). "I can go along with the idea that the interests of science can be defended by someone who puts first the primary objectives of the Union, that is, employment, social equilibrium, and prosperity."

—A. H.