

SPEECH

by the acting President of the Council (“Competitiveness”)
Lord Sainsbury, Minister for Science and Innovation, speech to the
Industry, Research and Energy committee of the European
Parliament on UK Presidency Work Plans – 13.07.02

COMPETITIVENESS /RESEARCH AND TECNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Key messages/issues

Research and innovation continue to be at the heart of the Lisbon strategy. Building on the progress made under the Luxembourg Presidency, work will focus on moving forward discussions on the seventh framework programme, in close collaboration with the European Parliament, with a view to reaching agreement during the course of 2006.

Opening remarks

Mr Chairman, honourable Members of Parliament, it is an honour to be here to speak with you today.

The UK Presidency comes at a time when the European Union is facing several important challenges. At a time when Europe is working hard to define its position in the global knowledge economy and when the challenges and competition from other parts of that global economy have never been greater.

At this time there can be no doubt as to the importance of the EU to the UK. As outlined by the UK Prime Minister, Mr Blair, in his opening address to the European Parliament at the beginning of our Presidency, we hope to make progress on far reaching strands of work over the next 6 months. The UK will make as much progress as possible on Future Financing. In full cooperation with the Commission and EP, we shall undertake a period of consultation with partners to find a way forward on this dossier. We will also seek a consensus on a general review of the EU budget structure and priorities. We need to make progress in the area of economic reform. We will aim to work in collaboration with all 25 Member States to establish a Europe better able to create jobs and with higher living standards. This can be achieved by promoting the knowledge society, strengthening the internal market, improving the business climate and driving through the Lisbon agenda.

Research, innovation and education are cornerstones to the success of the re-launched Lisbon Strategy. Key priorities for the next 6 months are therefore the Seventh Research Framework Programme and the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme.

An excellent relationship between you, in the European Parliament, and ourselves in the Council is absolutely crucial if we are to take forward the Lisbon agenda successfully. This is why we look forward to continuing the tradition of close cooperation between the European Parliament and Council that has significantly enhanced the efficiency of the co-decision procedure.

In this context we look forward to the next six months. I will now give more detail on the issues concerning my responsibilities in the research sector.

I feel that the European dimension of research has been one of the less heralded aspects of European development. Nevertheless, it has in many ways been a notable success story, and one which deserves to be highlighted more than it generally is.

Over the past two decades and more, through a series of Framework Programmes, the EU has steadily reinforced its efforts to promote and support research activity. As a result, Europe has made serious steps towards the establishment of a genuine internal market for science and technology. So today the European Research Area is now a great deal more than just a high-sounding slogan.

However, more action is still required to make the EU an attractive place for business to invest in research and we will aim to put in place the right Framework Programme to stimulate such investment, in order to create the right climate for innovation in Europe. I can reassure members that every means at the UK Presidency's disposal will be directed towards building on the progress made under the Luxembourg Presidency on key areas of the Commission's proposal on FP7 so that this crucial instrument of Community research policy is ready by 2007. Assuming that the envisaged timetable is maintained by the Commission, the UK Presidency intends to open discussions also on the specific programmes and the Rules for Participation. The UK Presidency is committed to a constructive dialogue with the EP with a view to facilitating as speedy an adoption of the seventh Framework Programme as possible.

To launch the UK Presidency in the area of 'research', fruitful informal discussions have already been held on certain key topics on European R&D, which will undoubtedly feed into the formal Council deliberations. On Monday this week I met with Research Ministers

from across the EU at our Informal Council in Cardiff. Discussions centred on four key issues relating to the Framework Programme: the independence and scientific integrity of the envisaged European Research Council; how to improve business involvement in collaborative research and knowledge transfer; developing the potential of less research-intensive countries; and the best way to encourage participation of SMEs in the seventh Framework Programme. We also addressed as a horizontal theme simplification of the Framework Programme, something the research community tell us is one of their key priorities. Our aim in these discussions was to make the Framework 7 programme as useful and valuable to scientists and industrialists as possible. As we take forward the negotiations on the Financial Perspectives, it is important that Framework 7 is seen as essential to the future success of European industry and the quality of our lives and not as an optional add-on.

Alun Michael will talk to you later about how we plan to take forward work on the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme. All I want to emphasise here is that clearly we will seek to make sure that it complements FP7 and provides effective support to high growth innovative SMEs.

We look forward to the forthcoming Commission Communication on the 3% Action Plan for investing in research with a view to stepping up efforts in this area. Actions at the national level are clearly important and we will in October be hosting a Conference on the coordination of national research and development programmes to consider how Member States can better integrate the planning of their national research programmes toward achieving common objectives.

We are also looking forward to the upcoming work over the next six months on the Framework Agreement between the European Community and the European Space Agency.

Finally we would like to welcome the agreement between the six parties for siting the ITER experimental reactor in Cadarache, negotiated by Commission for the Community. This is not just a good outcome for the EU but for the whole world. It is, we believe, a significant step towards a world of safe, clean, abundant energy. We are now waiting for the Commission to finalise the draft international agreement on ITER and submit proposals for Council decisions approving this agreement as well on the setting up of a European Legal

Entity to manage European participation in the project. This is an extremely important project and it is essential that it is now managed on the basis of a tight timetable and with the clear aim of producing commercial electricity as soon as possible.

Concluding remarks:

Europe is facing major global challenges, with long-term implications, in the policy areas covered by this Committee and the “Competitiveness” Council, but the Presidency look forward to continuing the excellent co-operation that has prevailed so far between this Committee and the Council, for the benefit of European citizens and for researchers, investors and entrepreneurs.

Mr Chairman, honourable members of Parliament

I have presented to you the main priorities and the activities envisaged by the UK Presidency in the field of Research for the coming six months.

I thank you for your attention and I would now welcome any questions or comments from the committee on this area.