



NEWSMAKER INTERVIEW: MÁIRE GEOGHEGHAN-QUINN

Europe's Eager Reformer Takes on Framework Funding Goliath

An outsider to the scientific community, the E.U.'s new research commissioner promises to cut red tape, champion basic research, and fight to save ITER

For Irish teacher-turned-politician Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, landing one of Europe's top political jobs in charge of research has meant a steep learning curve. Having served her country in ministerial roles covering Gaelic culture, justice, and European affairs, she then spent 10 years overseeing European Union finances. But in her first year as E.U. commissioner for research, innovation, and science, she has had to come up with plans to reengineer the European Union's huge €54 billion research-funding program, prepare for a battle over budgets, find extra funding for the troubled ITER fusion reactor project, and has managed to raise the profile of science policy at the European Union's highest levels. She spoke with *Science* last week in her Brussels office. Her remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity. (You can read more of this interview at <http://scim.ag/MGQ>.)

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

Q: You weren't known for much involvement with science before taking this job. What's the most provocative or most interesting bit of science you've come across in your first year?

M.G.-Q.: Oh, there have been lots of things, but I suppose at the very beginning when I went to one of my first meetings at the ERC [European Research Council], there was a professor from Italy who was getting a large grant to get this driverless truck to go from Europe to Shanghai. And that was just mind-boggling. I said to myself, "It's not going to happen." And yet it did. Later, I told everybody about it: "I was there when he was telling us about this, and I had a doubt in my mind!" To me it proves that the ERC is about championing researchers with good ideas who would never get that kind of substantial money from a member state. So there are fantastic possibilities in what they do. And it has made me ever since a real strong supporter and probably the ERC's greatest fan.

Q: If that's the case, ERC leaders are hoping for a big boost in funding ...

M.G.-Q.: Aren't we all!

Q: They're hoping for as much as €24 billion between 2013 and 2020. What's your reaction?

M.G.-Q.: My reaction is that we've only just

started the budget question. No figures are on the table, and no figures will be on the table for quite some time. First of all, I have to make a pitch for my two directorates general. And depending on what we get out of that, I hope to be in a position to be able to strengthen the ERC.

Unfortunately, we're in the hands of two other institutions—the Council [of Ministers] and the [European] Parliament—who decide whether or not to give us an increased budget and what that increase might be. I think it will be one of the most difficult budgetary discussions that the E.U. has ever had, mainly because of the financial crisis. I think you'll find that a lot of those member states who have had to take deep cuts in their own budgets will try and curtail any increases in the E.U. budget. But within all of those possibilities, the ERC has a very strong supporter in myself.

Q: The green paper you issued last week on future E.U. research funding included few concrete proposals, which disappointed some observers. What do you say to them?

M.G.-Q.: The green paper is the start of the conversation. I don't think you should ever start a conversation by laying down in black and white the answers you want. So instead you pose questions, you put it out there. We are very anxious to encourage the scientific community and the other stakeholders to really get involved and engaged in this conversation, because this is an opportunity to really change the whole landscape of the way we fund research and innovation.

I want to help the people who have said to me, "Look, we're overloaded with the E.U. administrative burden. The bureaucracy has gone mad. There's so much red tape that if we could find the money elsewhere, we wouldn't come to the European Union." And to me that's a tragedy.

In looking at all of this, we looked at what does a small research center have to do when they come for the funding? If they're going to the Framework Programme, they go to one postbox. If they are going to the CIP [Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme], they go to another. If it's contributions to the EIT [European Institute of Innovation and Technology], then it's another. So let's bring it all together, under one framework so that there is one postbox: one simple, unique set of rules so that it cuts out all the extra paperwork that people have to go to—and the expense that they have to go to—to put together an application. For the moment we're calling it the Common Strategic Framework, but that's not going to be the name.

CREDIT: EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Who's paying and who's driving? The ITER fusion reactor project under construction in France (top). ERC-funded driverless solar-powered trucks (bottom) at the Shanghai Expo.

Q: Under your proposal, EIT would become part of the new, expanded program. The scientific community has viewed EIT with a healthy dose of skepticism. What value do you think it will really add to European research?

M.G.-Q.: I think it's very, very early to be judging something that has just been set up. [European Commission] President [José Manuel] Barroso, as I understand it, went to MIT [the Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and was very impressed with what he saw. Now MIT has taken quite some time to become as successful and well-known as it has become. [The EIT] needed to have security, and I think the EIT is very happy to be within the Common Strategic Framework now. I think it sees it has a home. It's like a sapling; we have to help it to grow and nourish it. I really do believe that once it is up and running, it's going to be a very, very positive element within the E.U.

Q: How is the commission intending to cover the €1.4 billion shortfall in ITER funding for 2012 and 2013, and how will further cost increases be contained in the Common Strategic Framework?

M.G.-Q.: ITER. [Laughs] Wonderful. When I came into this office almost a year ago now, one of the first files that was put on my

desk was the ITER file, and I wanted to run out the door and go home. This project was badly managed. There were issues not just in relation to the financing of it, there were also issues of governance that needed to be tackled. Those were resolved, at both the European and international level. Then we sat down to discuss with the budget commissioner and the commission as a whole how we might fill this [laughs] "hole," as it were, for 2012 and 2013. And we agreed that two-thirds of the money would come from unspent funds and one-third from the Framework Programme.

We had that package put together, and we went to the parliament and the council. And suddenly you had the commission caught in a row between the parliament and the council. That row had nothing to do with ITER. [The ITER package was cut out of the budget deal.] As a result, we now have to restart the whole thing again. We still have the two-thirds/one-third on the table. [Budget] Commissioner Lewandowski has been strongly supporting that and pushing that. And we have to live in hope and watch what happens with the parliament and the council.

It's very hard for our international partners to understand. When the U.S. government makes a decision, it's implemented.

The E.U. works in a different way. The commission makes a proposal, but then it's in the hands of the parliament and the council to decide, and they have to agree to do it.

Q: Some worry that the new funding program will focus on "innovation" and that basic science will be squeezed. What do you see as a proper balance between the two?

M.G.-Q.: You can't have innovation, as I keep saying, unless you have really excellent basic research and unless you give support to excellent basic research. My problem is that we have had this wonderful, excellent research here. We have delivered the goods, as it were, on the research side. But we have failed to bring that research all the way to the marketplace. It has been brought to the marketplace elsewhere, outside the E.U. And I want to see the excellent research that we do here brought to the market here.

But we can't have innovation of any kind unless you have basic research. So my commitment is total when it comes to basic research. It is so vital and so important.

Q: Will there be a European chief science adviser?

M.G.-Q.: It will absolutely happen. President Barroso is very committed to a chief scientific adviser. I know he is looking at a list of people that's been drawn up and trying to decide what the best solution would be.

I'm very anxious for it to happen. I think it strengthens the whole area of research and science, which is what I'm interested in doing. You know, for us to have a European Council meeting just last week that discussed energy and research and innovation was almost a miracle when you consider everything else that was going on.

And I think discussing research and innovation proved that the European heads of government realize that it's an economic policy. And it's the policy that will bring us the growth, the competitiveness, and the jobs. That shows the tremendous importance that is now attached to the whole area of research and innovation.

When [U.S.] President [Barack] Obama gave his State of the Union address, I thought it was fantastic. It happened just before the European Council, and it reinforced once again how important research and innovation is on a world scale. It shows that on both sides of the Atlantic we're competitors, but there are lots of things I believe we should cooperate on in order to compete with the rest of the world. There are lots of ways that we do cooperate, but we should even intensify our cooperation.