

## **Director General for Research and Innovation Robert-Jan Smits**

### **Closing speech, the ERC's 5th anniversary event**

**Brussels, 1 March 2012**

I have had the honour to participate in part of this journey. I participated in the Copenhagen conference in 2002, was in Dublin Castle in 2004 and attended the launch event in Berlin in 2007. And I must say, it was one of the most interesting experiences I had in my career. Not only because of the persons I got to know, but also because of the process itself. It has taught me a lot and I would like to share some of these lessons with you.

First of all, when an initiative or idea is strong and powerful enough, it cannot be stopped. This was the case with the idea to create at European level a scheme for frontier research carried out by individual research teams whereby proposals would be selected on basis of one sole criteria...excellence. This was indeed the missing component of the European Research Area. Second, in carrying forward a new idea, it's not the quantity of the people that are involved that makes the difference, but the quality. Amongst those early impressive pioneers certainly Fotis Kafatos and Frank Gannon should be mentioned. And the third lesson I learnt is about my own organisation, the Commission. I learned that we can really make a difference if we are willing to stick out our neck and show leadership. And this is what we did when in 2004 the Commission was asked by the science community to support the initiative of creating the ERC by putting it on the political agenda. Here it was Commissioner Potočník who showed the required political courage, but also the names of Achilleas Mitsos and Peter Kind should be mentioned. And let's also not forget the important role the European Parliament, in the person of Angelika Niebler, played.

And then now to the current situation. The ERC has turned into a successful programme and has become the benchmark not only in Europe but also at global level for investigator-driven research. Yesterday, Commissioner Geoghegan Quinn summed up some of the impressive achievements of the ERC in terms of number of applicants, the peer review process and time to contract. This has a fantastic effect on the visibility of European excellence across the continent and on the attractiveness of Europe as a location for research. We can say that the ERC has become a robust organisation with a first class Scientific Council, responsible for defining the science strategy led by a super dynamic President. Yes, Helga, I single you out because you keep on impressing all of us with your strong leadership. It was not for nothing that the Commissioner said yesterday that she is your biggest fan. I think we all are. But we should also not forget the other part of the ERC organisation, the Executive Agency, this impressive Commission body which takes care of the science administration. Here I must mention the names of William Cannell, Jack Metthey and Pablo Amor who have really worked day and night to make the agency fit for purpose. And of course the staff of the Agency, those 350 impressive persons, all fully committed to the cause of the ERC.

Now what about the future, since this is actually what I was asked to speak on. Last year a Task Force was set up to look at the future of the ERC. I had the pleasure of chairing this. Amongst its members were Helga Nowotny, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker and Mrs Vike Friberga. The main recommendation of the Task Force was to continue with the current set up of the ERC. This was for me a clear motion of confidence for the partnership between the Scientific Council and the Commission. And as such a motion of confidence for the Commissioner and myself. We also agreed to streamline the organisation and to nominate after 2014 a full time President of the Scientific Council, who should be the face of the ERC at European and international level. And then there is of course the Commission proposal HORIZON 2020 for the next programming period in which the Commission has proposed to almost double the budget for the ERC. A better sign of our commitment to the ERC is not possible. I

am very happy that both the European Parliament as well as the Council of the EU have in a first reaction welcomed our proposal.

So what should the ERC be and look like in 2020. This was one of the questions Helga got at the press conference yesterday. Also Morten Østergaard, the Danish Minister, addressed this point in his speech yesterday and said that he hoped that in future, there would be more female grant holders, the grants would be more evenly spread over Europe, without of course compromising on excellence, and that at the global level, the ERC would be fully acknowledged as the promotor of frontier research. Would this then complete the mission of the ERC? Can we then be complacent? I don't think so, since in my opinion the search for excellence is never over. And perhaps this is the secret of the success of the ERC!

Thank you for your attention and HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, ERC!

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