



## United Kingdom Becomes Tenth Member of ESO

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On 8–9 July 2002 the ESO Council meets in London to mark the occasion of the United Kingdom becoming the tenth country to join the European Southern Observatory. Forty years ago, when ESO was created by the governments of Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden, the United Kingdom opted not to become a member, but rather to centre its astronomical observations of the southern sky on a new telescope to be built in collaboration with Australia. The recent United Kingdom's interest in joining ESO arose from ESO's success in creating large optical telescopes, high-performance instrumentation and data handling methods, as well as the prospect of participating in key future projects such as the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA) and the development of extremely large optical telescopes, where it was recognised that the scale of the projects were such that all European nations would be required to work together if these ambitious projects were to be realised in a timely fashion. The participation of such a highly developed astronomical community as the United Kingdom's will strengthen ESO by its significant contribution of intellectual, technical, and financial resources. As part of its adherence to ESO, the United Kingdom will contribute more than 20 per cent of ESO's annual operational budget, an amount based (as are the other countries' contributions) on its gross domestic product.

Given the mutual benefits of U.K. membership of ESO to both parties, it is

not surprising that the negotiations over the details of U.K. entry were brief. In late 1999, I began informal meetings with Ian Halliday, Chief Executive of PPARC, the British institution responsible for funding astronomy, to discuss the U.K. joining ESO. At first, the U.K. expressed the desire to enter ESO progressively, by "ramping up" an initially small annual contribution to that called for by the ESO Convention, but it was soon recognised that this was unacceptable to ESO. Early in March 2000, when the British Parliament took up the question of the U.K.'s entry, Lord Tansley mentioned in a debate in the House of Lords the discoveries to be expected from astronomers using the VLT, and said, "Unfortunately, none of those astronomers will be British – that is, if this country fails to subscribe with our European partners in the setting-up costs of this incredible telescope. In effect, this will mean that astronomy will hardly be worth pursuing as a career in Britain in the new millennium." An exploratory meeting between members of PPARC and U.K. astronomers with ESO Council members and executives on May 24, 2000 led to an understanding that the U.K. would seek to join ESO as soon as possible, so that British astronomers could participate as fully and swiftly as possible in VLT, VLTi, ALMA, and future large telescope development projects. In addition, the special contribution to cover past investments by ESO would be provided partly in cash and partly in kind. By December 2000, John Taylor, the U.K.'s

Director-General of Research Councils, sent me a letter formally requesting that the United Kingdom become a full member of ESO in mid-2002. A working group was then established to discuss possible in-kind contributions, and the detailed negotiations extended over most of the year 2001. On 15 November 2001, I received a letter from Lord Sainsbury of Turville, the U.K.'s Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Science, confirming that "the United Kingdom wishes to accede to ESO membership on 1 July 2002, on the mutually agreed terms." These terms include the normal annual subscription, the in-cash portion of the entrance fee, and the in-kind contribution ("which will include delivery of the VISTA [four-metre] telescope, which will be [installed at Paranal and devoted to infrared surveys], ESO access to the Wide-Field Camera on the UK Infrared Telescope [on Mauna Kea], and a programme of e-science"). At the ESO Council meeting on 3 December 2001, the Council unanimously approved a resolution in favour of U.K. accession to ESO. In the UK, this decision has now been ratified by the British Parliament; the necessary letters have been signed and exchanged; and the instrument of accession has been deposited at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, as required by the ESO Convention. We can now look forward to a new and fruitful era within ESO, significantly enlarged by the accession of the United Kingdom, and with it a new era for European astronomy.