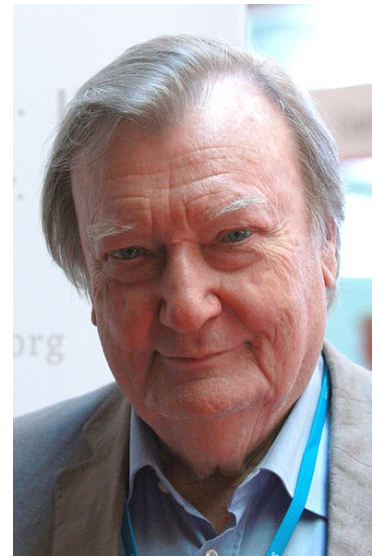


Two scientists to join Italian senate

Posted on behalf of Nicola Nosengo.

Two scientists are among the four new senators for life appointed today by Italy's president, Giorgio Napolitano. Particle physicist and Nobel Prize winner Carlo Rubbia and stem-cell specialist Elena Cattaneo will become permanent members of the Italian Senate, along with the orchestra conductor Claudio Abbado and the architect Renzo Piano, whose appointments were also announced today.

Born in 1934, Rubbia is one of Italy's most famous and respected living scientists. He spent most of his career at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, where he also served as director general between 1989 and 1993. In 1984 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics together with Simon Van der Meer for the discovery of the W and Z bosons, the particles responsible for the weak interaction, one of the four fundamental forces in nature.



Nobel-laureate physicist Carlo Rubbia was appointed to the Italian senate together with stem-cell scientist Elena Cattaneo.
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The appointment of Elena Cattaneo is possibly more surprising. Cattaneo, who heads the Laboratory for Stem Cell Biology and Pharmacology of Neurodegenerative Diseases at the University of Milan, is a leading expert in her field, and only a few weeks ago became a member of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, Italy's national academy. But outside the scientific community she is nowhere near as famous as Rubbia (let alone Piano or Abbado), and at 51 she is much younger than the average senator-for-life. In his official statement, Napolitano said that he wanted to appoint "a female scientist who is still young but has already achieved a lot" and that "choosing her is meant as an appreciation and an encouragement for many Italians of the new generations who commit themselves, amid difficulties, to scientific research".

In the last few months Cattaneo has often taken strong public positions against the "Stamina" method, a controversial stem-cell therapy which most scientists consider unproved, but for which parliament has agreed to fund a trial (see '[Italian stem-cell trial based on flawed data](#)' and '[Stem-cell ruling riles researchers](#)'). Napolitano made no reference to the controversy, but Cattaneo's role in it may have helped her cause.

The appointments are a welcome surprise for Italian scientists, who are having had a hard time trying to make their voice heard in the capital and for instance have complained about [restrictive regulation on animal research](#) that were passed recently into law. Cattaneo and Rubbia will now have the same voting rights as elected senators — but for the rest of their lives. Their votes could be significant in a country where governments often survive on thin majorities: the late neuroscientist [Rita Levi-Montalcini](#) in 2006 threatened to vote against Romano Prodi's government — kept alive by a handful of votes — unless he withdrew a plan to cut the budget for scientific research. It worked.

Italy's constitution gives the president the power to appoint up to five senators for life during his mandate, for “high merits in the social, scientific, artistic and literary fields”. Since 1948 — when Italy became a Republic — presidents have appointed mostly former politicians and civil servants, with the addition of the occasional artist, writer or entrepreneur. Only two scientists had previously received the honour: mathematician Guido Castelnuovo in 1949 and Levi-Montalcini in 2001. The recent [deaths of Montalcini](#), who passed away at the age of 103, and of three other senators for life had left four empty seats, which Napolitano has now filled.