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New era of firmer control in French science

SUPPORT for science marks time. Universities live on budgets which in some countries, the UK included, have recently shrunk in real terms. Government interest in science is, at best, lukewarm. Students decide in large numbers that a career in science is not for them. Everywhere the scientist finds himself less loved than he used to be. Almost everywhere, that is; some interesting things are happening in France.

During the Gaullist period, French science grew at a healthy rate—in 1967, for example, research and development accounted for about 2.1% of the GNP. In subsequent years this figure declined; by 1974 it was down to 1.7%. Now President Giscard d'Estaing seems to have made a positive decision, after an eighteen-month policy review, to go for growth again. It is likely that, having seen that some other comparable industrial countries are spending rather more than 2% of their GNP on research and development, he will attempt to bring France up to that level again. A recent council at the Elysée Palace—the second in a year—wrestled with the problem of how to bring about the growth.

The President is not ordering this expansion for the sake of increasing prestige. He sees that by the year 2000 France's manpower resources will not have risen substantially, and so it will be increasingly relying on the export of technological expertise to keep its place among the rich nations. It is largely for the maintenance of France's intellectual resources to do just this that Giscard d'Estaing wishes to increase his support for science. The new policy can be seen to have two distinct aspects: reorganisation of research priorities, and the creation of more employment opportunities.

In the past, various organisations have sprung up to carry out specific tasks; they have included IRIA (for Information Processing and Automation), CNES (for space research), CNEXO (for ocean exploration) and ORSTOM (for overseas research). As time progressed the missions of these bodies changed somewhat in

response to both internal and external pressures. But they had no monopoly on research in their own field, and friction developed as questions of 'who does what' arose. Now it is proposed that consultative committees be established to act as buffers between the individual organisations and the Minister for Industry and Research, M d'Ornano. These committees will, it is expected, make it more difficult for scientists to act both as appellant and judge in deciding what projects should be undertaken. M d'Ornano has made no secret of his wish to have firmer control over the work done in the laboratories, and this new mechanism will undoubtedly help him, although it may not be well received by the research workers' unions, who have come to expect increased participation of workers in decision-making on matters of policy.

On the other hand, the unions will probably be fairly satisfied by improvements being made in terms of employment. In recent years a growing number of French scientists have found themselves having to work on short-term contracts, as tenured posts have dried up. This problem is now to be tackled; many thousand posts for researchers and technicians which at present carry little security are to be converted, in the next five years, into more stable positions. And, as an incentive to young students to work in fields which the government judges to be of priority, up to 1,500 studentships will be created, paying 2,000 francs per month for the second and third years of postgraduate thesis work.

There are risks in this, of course. Fundamental research could well suffer if the mood that research should satisfy national goals becomes too strong. It would be difficult to demonstrate that the UK had, in the post-Rothschild period, lost out on fundamental research while attempting to stimulate more applied research. But the universities of France do not have as strong a tradition as do the British ones of acting as the guardians of fundamental research.