French science

No big deal

Eighteen months after the arrival of the Mitterrand government in France, with its promise of a great new deal for French scientists, reform of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) is complete, or almost complete.

Last week the new statute for CNRS was finally agreed at the Council of Ministers, and published along with the appointments to seven top jobs — some of them new — and the budget details for 1983, showing continued growth of about 13 per cent in real terms (outside salaries). What remains are the elections to the Comité National, the CNRS "parliament" which makes detailed decisions on grant allocations, appointments and promotions in CNRS laboratories. The elections on new (reformed) principles are planned for March.

M. Maurice Godelier, the anthropologist whose appointment as director of social sciences was vehemently opposed little more than a year ago, has now slipped into the role without much protest. His far-ranging report on social sciences to the minister of research and industry (see *Nature* 28 October, p.771) appears to have had a calming effect, and he has been appointed jointly with the previous acting director, M. Armand Frémont, to a combined directorate of social sciences and humanities. Frémont is expected to concern himself with regional issues, while Godelier will be concerned with the higher issues of policy.

Two new directorates have been created: one for information and publications, and another for the application of research ("valorization"), which should strengthen the role of the CNRS in innovation, a principal objective of the government.

The director of valorization will be M.

Jean-Jacques Duby, a 42-year-old mathematician who has had a distinguished career in IBM research and management. M. Duby will consider offering incentives to research groups in the form of additional grants for basic research in return for time spent on applications, a scheme which works well at the Institut Pasteur. CNRS will also seek an increasing role in the research training of third world scientists.

As for the 1983 budget, the net real increase of 7.3 per cent (including salaries), the 320 new research posts (3.4 per cent) and 220 new technicians (1.5 per cent) will be divided unevenly according to the particular needs of each sector. Thus the social sciences receive a large sum for new buildings, to house the home workers; biotechnology sees a start on a new FF20 million (£1.7 million) laboratory for the molecular biology of plants in Strasbourg (which will take three years to complete); and physics sees an allocation for the construction of a new synchrotron radiation source for Orsay, "Super-ACO".

Dividing the budget differently, however, one of the most substantial increases planned for next year comes in medium-sized equipment — instruments costing roughly between FF 1 million and FF 3 million. Here the budget will rise 60 per cent. There is some question, however, whether this sum will survive "regulation" — the mechanism whereby the minister of finance holds back some monies previously promised, subject to good performance of the French economy. This year CNRS did well — losing only FF 50 million in the last analysis, in a budget of FF 6,000 million, but there are fears of worse controls to come — even up to 30 per cent. M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the minister for research and industry, is fighting this battle with his ministerial colleagues, in the hope of protecting research from the ravages of the government deficit.

Robert Walgate

Professional liability

Biologists at risk

Washington

As biology comes to have commercial implications, biologists need to insure themselves against lawsuits: their professional lives are getting risky. This seems to be the unwritten message of a brochure now being mailed to members of four US scientific societies concerned with biology and biomedicine.

A "professional liability insurance policy" is being offered for \$62 per year to members of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, the American Institute for Biological Sciences, the Society for Neuroscience and the Society for Medical Research. The policy is organized by Maginnis and Associates of Chicago and underwritten by the National Union Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh.

The policy covers up to \$1 million in costs, in addition to repayment of legal defence costs, for each "occurrence" or incident in which an insured scientist stands accused. It will also pay these costs if the lawsuit arises years after the policy has expired, so long as the events in question took place while the policy was active.

Maginnis officials say the policy covers scientists in situations where they do not normally have insurance cover. An employer such as a university, they note, might be sued for something a faculty member did and then decide the faculty member was negligent and sue him. Or the university might decide that the action in question was outside the faculty member's "scope of employment" and leave him to fight on his own.

The policy would also cover a scientist when consulting outside his regular employment, with a company or individually, whereas his regular employer's insurance would not.

Scientists are covered for advice they give to doctors or nurses about how to treat patients in case the patient later sues the scientist as part of a malpractice suit against his doctors. But the proposed insurance policy does not cover the scientist if he talks to the patient directly, so cancer gene specialists are advised not to hand out free advice to potential patients at cocktail parties.

Arthur C. Gentile, executive director of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, says the policy "covers just about every kind of professional activity". He cites a case where there was an explosion in a laboratory and people who were injured sued. Although the institution that owns the laboratory would probably be liable, the scientist running the laboratory might be named too. "The liability may not be clear and in the meantime you have legal costs" says Gentile.

The policy covers someone charged with libel or slander — such as harming another

Budget trends in Britain and France

For Britain, the graph shows the evolution of the budget of the Science and Engineering Research Council, excepting salaries and corrected for inflation by the retail price index. The figures are given as percentages of the 1973 budget. This indicator of "true money for science" is almost exactly constant over the decade. By contrast, the roughly equivalent Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France shows a strong decline in the same

quantity over the 1970s, followed by a small rise in 1981 (the last year of the previous government). The strong increase in the past two years indicates the impact of the Mitterrand era. But the 1983 budget will only just pass that of a decade earlier. The continuation of the slope to 1985 is broadly guaranteed by the "law for research" of July this year but may be affected by the uncertain state of the teetering French economy.

Robert Walgate

scientist's reputation by overheated statements in the classroom or in published articles.

In the court fight between Hoffman LaRoche and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) over how Hoffman LaRoche obtained a KG1 cell line belonging to the university, the company also named individually two UCLA scientists, David W. Golde and H. Philip Koeffler. It also named Golde separately and accused him of slandering the company. The university is conducting the entire case, including the parts in which the individuals are named, and carrying the costs.

Golde's view is that he therefore does not need the insurance policy now being offered. (Moreover, the university has a malpractice policy that covers him because he is also a physician.) But he warns that "there is not always a 100 per cent

congruence of interests between a faculty member and his university in this kind of situation".

As for the likelihood that a university, after defending one of its faculty, would turn round and sue him, Harvard's general counsel Daniel Steiner says it is "far-fetched".

The brochure does not mention the problem of liability for new organisms created through gene-splicing: would the policy cover, for example, a scientist who invents a bug that eats Manhattan, as one observer phrased it? But the policy would in any case be of only marginal use in that situation. For one thing, the likely damages would exceed the \$1 million liability limit. Moreover it does not cover any "punitive" damages — the extra penalties a judge can impose to deter the scientist from, say, turning his bug loose on Chicago.

Deborah Shapley

Soviet technology

Red tape blamed for delay

Soviet bureaucrats — not scientists — should be blamed for persistent delays in the introduction of new technology, Academician Anatolii P. Aleksandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, said last week. He was commenting on the recent plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which, in his words, had put "new pressure" on the drive for the more rapid implementation of new technology. This drive was a major issue in the policy of the late President Leonid Brezhnev, and the stress that the plenum put on it seems an intensification rather than a change in policy. Dr Aleksandrov, however, may find his own position under the new administration more vulnerable. It is widely believed that, although he was elected by the academy in a secret ballot in the regular way, his candidacy was known to enjoy the support of Mr Brezhnev, and there has been considerable speculation that with Mr Brezhnev gone, Dr Aleksandrov may now be replaced as president of the academy.

In any case, as president of the academy, Dr Aleksandrov holds considerable responsibility for the technological modernization programme, since, during the last five-year plan, the academy was given a major coordinating role and charged with establishing and strengthening links between researchers and industrial customers. This move followed a wave of criticism of scientists for not pulling their weight with those science centres which had been specially created to serve the needs of local industry singled out for special blame — starting with the relatively small Far Eastern Science Centre, and working up to the prestigious Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences. The scientists retaliated vocally, blaming the administrators and managers who failed to

implement their recommendations.

Scientists were again blamed earlier this autumn. On 20 October, *Pravda* carried an article by two senior officials alleging that research potential was being wasted and misapplied in the various institutes of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Three days later, in an interview on Moscow radio, Dr Vladimir Shumnyy, deputy director of the Cytology and Genetics Institute of the Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences, tacitly denied the accusation, citing an impressive list of joint achievements of the Siberian branches of the two academies, from the development

of the hardy Novosibirskaya-607 winter wheat and a strain of sheep with a 50 per cent increased wool yield to the hormonal control of plant growth and pig fertility and the protection of grain by irradiation.

Such a media dialogue is a well-known ploy in Soviet journalism; a new drive is launched and backsliders rebuked, and then a selected representative of those under attack states his case. The matter may then be dropped (on the assumption that those who deserved criticism will have profited by the warning), or else may go on to become a full-scale press campaign of criticism, culminating in a new party and government decree.

What was not routine in this case was, of course, the death of Mr Brezhnev, which necessitated the convening of the Central Committee plenum, and the latter's announcements of, effectively, new party directives. For Dr Aleksandrov, who, only a few days before, had on behalf of Soviet science, made one of the five valedictory speeches at Brezhnev's funeral, it was time to make his position clear. The scientists had produced the designs, he said, and in some cases they were implemented "quite rapidly and effectively". In many ministries, however, the need for updating technology had been discussed for years, but scientists had not yet been able to establish "proper working contacts". The result was waste, inefficiency and delays. The firm reiteration of the problem by the plenum, he hoped, would get things moving again. He stressed, however, that if the scientists' work is not to be wasted, economic managers should be more accountable for their work in implementing new technology.

Vera Rich

EEC dependence on Soviet national gas

The figure shows the dependence of the European Economic Community (EEC) on imports of natural gas with particular reference to the Soviet Union. Natural gas now accounts for 18 per cent of the total energy consumption of the EEC, compared with just 7 per cent in 1970. But fears that demands for imported gas may lead to an increased dependence on Soviet supplies appear to be unfounded, as shown by the situation envisaged for 1990 which is illustrated here. Gas imported from non-EEC countries will account for 44 per cent of the total amount of gas required. Of this, 19 per cent will come from the Soviet Union, accounting for only 4 per cent of the total energy consumption. Other non-EEC suppliers will be Norway (12 per cent of natural gas imports), Algeria (10 per cent) and Libya (1 per cent), and 2 per cent will come from unspecified sources.