French research

Agenda for a new minister

THE new French Prime Minister, 37-year-old Laurent Fabius, ex-minister of industry and research, will help to protect research from the rigours of a difficult budget next year. "I'm quite sure of it", says the ex-president of the space research agency CNES, Hubert Curien, who is Fabius's man at the ministry of research and technology. But in an interview, Curien had a message for all French scientists who — he was also sure — would "understand" that in difficult times for Europe and the world, they can expect nothing exceptional.

But M. Curien was one of the architects of the "law for research", voted two years ago, which promised an average real 17.8 per cent increase per year in the civil science budget and 4.5 per cent annual increases in research posts. Those figures were exceptional. Unfortunately, says Curien, today "the economic hypotheses on which those figures were based seem not to apply". But he promises to "do his best" for science, and has set his own targets. He sees it as "very urgent" to increase the computing power of French laboratories. French scientific computing has suffered because of an unresolved conflict between industrial policy (support of home industry) and scientific needs (foreign computers, as French industry has neglected the scientific market).

Curien's efforts may be hampered by the removal of industry from his ministerial responsibilities. The first research minister in President Francois Mitterrand's term, left-winger Jean-Pierre Chevenement, built up the ministry from a small office of the Prime Minister to a "super ministry" of research and industry. When Fabius took over from Chevenement (who resigned over economic policy), he inverted the title to "industry and research" and now, as Prime Minister, he has hived off industry and given research alone to Curien — who is more scientist, or science administrator, than politician. "Fabius wanted a technical man" to look after research, Curien explains, and felt that the industry portfolio, heavy with the problems of the coal and steel industries, needed a separate ministry. However, this might be thought to mark a political downgrading of science, and a potential conflict between industrial and research interest (as in computing). Against this must be set the fact that Fabius has confirmed his belief in research and technology as the potential saviours of France. The 1982 law for science aimed to make French research and development spending reach 2.5 per cent by 1985 (it bottomed out at 1.8 per cent in the late 1970s.) It will not do so, Fabius has admitted, but he has raised the stakes by announcing a longer-term (wisely undated) target of 3 per cent.

Curien's main objective is "quite clear".

Despite the split of his ministry from industry, he seeks to improve the links between industry and research. "The volume of industrial research is not enough", he says. Curien seeks new means to stimulate it — through the banks (now nationalized) or by fiscal incentives.

Curien also plans to bring to a rapid conclusion the lengthy Gallic negotiations with trades unions and others over the "statute" or regulations defining careers in research, and is looking for help from Fabius on the matter; and he wants to stimulate the mobility of scientists, not so much geographically as among disciplines.

Agent Orange

Australian study continues

Canberra

FOLLOWING a cabinet decision not to support the full morbidity study requested by the royal commissioner, Mr Justice Evatt, the Australian Government announced on 7 August its intention to extend the Royal Commission into the effects of Agent Orange on Australian veterans of the Vietnam war. Citing an expected cost increase from \$A6 million to \$A10 million as a major reason for the abandonment of the morbidity study, the government has extended the time for the commission to report to 30 April 1985.

This is the latest in a series of investigations during the past five years arising initially from anecdotal claims by Australian Vietnam veterans that their health had been severely undermined by wartime exposure to various pesticides, in particular, the defoliant Agent Orange, a 50:50 mixture of the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, including the contaminant TCDD (2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*para*-dioxin). The veterans claim that during the 50,000-man Australian involvement in Vietnam, from 1962 to 1972, they were sprayed by their own forces and by the aircraft of Operation Ranch Hand, the US defoliant programme.

Newspaper reports of claims began to appear in 1979 with accounts of cancer, depression and anxiety states, and sudden uncontrollable rages among other complaints. In early 1980, weary of being branded malingerers and drug addicts by government doctors, unsuccessful claimants on the repatriation system organized themselves in the (Australian) Vietnam Veterans Association (VVA) and now represent approximately 10,000 of the troops who served in Vietnam. In 1982, a Senate standing committee into pesticides and the health of Vietnam veterans found that, while Australian troops were likely to have been exposed to insecticides, army records demonstrated that herbicide exposure could not have taken place: the

The new minister also gives research training a high priority. A new system for awarding doctorates, shorter and more like PhDs than before, gets his full approval. But he would like to arrange for many more doctoral students to do their research in industry, while retaining their university links, and he wishes to have a better match between the subjects of doctoral theses and the needs of industry, not so much for the results as for the training this will provide. This will be a proposal that may well find a response at the ministry of education, where the new minister is law-for-science man Jean-Pierre Chevenement. But he may be so swamped by the vexed problems of private and public schooling in France that he will have little time to spend on university affairs.

Robert Walgate

veterans' symptoms were more likely to be due to delayed combat stress, the committee claimed.

The Royal Commission began work in March 1983, but the cabinet was obliged to reconsider the feasibility of future investigations when in March this year VVA withdrew support for a pilot study of veterans' health, stressing its desire for a speedy resolution to the veterans' claims through the repatriation system, where the burden of proof for service-related injury is usually small. Meanwhile, several thousand Australian veterans and their families await the outcome of the \$180 million US settlement, although this suit refers only to Agent Orange and VVA is not directly involved.

Jeffrey Sellar

History preserved

THE zoological drawings from Captain James Cook's three voyages to the Pacific between 1768 and 1780 are being restored and conserved by the British Museum (Natural History) with the support of IBM (United Kingdom) Limited. □