

French research

End to growth in sight?

MORE is not enough for the French national research council, CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique). Despite a real increase in its spending since 1981 of over 35 per cent, a figure only to be dreamed of on the other side of the English Channel, CNRS is pressing the ministry of research for a further increase this year. And that increase should be double last year's, at least in support for laboratory equipment and materials, and approach a real 10-12 per cent annually for the next three years, CNRS director-general Pierre Papon is claiming.

But research minister Hubert Curien, whose new three-year plan for the future of French science is now before the prime minister Laurent Fabius, has warned CNRS that it may have to be content with what it has. And with the French government facing a possible trade deficit this year as opposed to a planned surplus, and Fabius refusing to win votes in next year's parliamentary elections with a spending spree, Curien may well be right.

Papon, however, says this may mean cuts in the CNRS 5-7 year plan announced recently (see *Nature* 2 May, p.5), in which 20 research areas were selected for special effort. That plan itself required some hard choices, claims Papon, and to develop it requires the re-equipment of some laboratories, particularly in mini-computing and other "middleweight" expenditure.

But has the period of plenty at CNRS, which amounted to an average real increase of 5.5 per cent a year in total budget for the five years 1981-85, not left the organization sitting pretty, with cash to spare? Not according to some outside observers, who judge that President Mitterrand's policy of "solving the economic

crisis" by spending on science and technology has left basic science, the fields mostly supported by CNRS, protected from cuts, but not truly expanded. The 5.5 per cent "real" increase against French domestic inflation has been swallowed up by a falling French franc against harder currencies in which most scientific equipment and materials must be bought (typically dollars, marks and Swiss francs).

Nevertheless, CNRS is attempting to share equipment costs, and technicians, by creating "federated institutes" around well-instrumented laboratories, linking three to five existing groups around genuine joint research objectives. This will have the double advantage of reducing costs and of unifying an often fragmented French research effort. But still "money is the big problem" Papon says, thus shedding a disturbing

light on those research councils elsewhere whose budgets have remained fixed if not falling.

Innovations other than more money that CNRS would like to see in the new plan, which should go before parliament in July, include an increase in the number of studentships for people studying for one of the new PhD degrees, more incentives to mobility of scientists, and the establishment of more CNRS-linked laboratories in the *grandes écoles*, the elite engineering schools which tap the best talent emerging from French secondary education.

Although these schools produce some 12,000 engineers a year, only 5-7 per cent go on to do a PhD (or the previous equivalent, "third cycle" diplomas), according to CNRS figures. This lack of scientific training is a "real handicap" for French industry (of which the graduates of the *grandes écoles* often become leaders), according to Papon.

Robert Walgate

Charitable foundations

Wellcome Trust plans asset sale

THE British medical charity the Wellcome Trust, whose only substantial asset consists of 100 per cent of the shares in the Wellcome Foundation, the successful pharmaceutical manufacturer, is planning to increase its income and diversify the source from which money flows by disposing of a fifth of its holding in the company.

The immediate attraction of the proposed share sale is that the trust could expect to realize a substantial sum of money from the sale which, invested in high-yielding securities, might even double its income, which is estimated to amount to £23 million during the present year. During 1984, the Wellcome Foundation earned a profit (after tax) of £48.6 million on a turnover of £806 million.

The share prices of comparable companies, such as Glaxo, are at present not very different from 20 times the net earnings per share, which would value the Wellcome Foundation at something like £1,000 million.

A statement put out by the trust earlier this week emphasizes, however, that diversification is also a large part of the trustees' motives in disposing of part of their shareholding. The trust says that the trustees have "for some time been concerned about the wisdom of having all their eggs in one basket". But the statement also says that after the disposal of 20 per cent of the shares, the trust will not sell further shares for at least two years, and that it will not allow its shareholding to fall below 50 per cent.

The chances are that the new arrangement will also benefit the foundation, whose attempts to behave as a thoroughly commercial organization have always been cramped by the relationship with the trust.

The relationship has, among other things,

prevented the company from rewarding its senior employees by means of share options and from growing more quickly by the acquisition of other companies in return for its own stock. The second constraint will remain so long as the trust retains a controlling interest.

The relationship between the trust (which is technically a charitable foundation) and the foundation (which is a commercial company) derives from the will of Sir Henry Wellcome, who died in 1936 leaving to the trust which he created the sole ownership of the company, originally Burroughs Wellcome Ltd. The company was renamed the Wellcome Foundation in 1926.

Over the years the relationship between the trust and the foundation has been curiously ambivalent. Each has been jealous of its independence from the other, with the company repeatedly in difficulties in explaining to its dependent charity why its annual share of the commercial profit has to be substantially less than 100 per cent. (In 1984, the trust received £17 million of the total profit of £48 million, most of this by way of payments under deeds of covenant allowing the company to economize in tax payments.)

Even so, the trust is now the largest of the private foundations in the United Kingdom.

In a quite separate development, Sir John Vane, research director at the Wellcome Foundation for the past eleven years, announced last week that he is to leave the company so as to devote himself to his scientific interests. Vane, who was awarded the Nobel prize for his account of the mechanism of action of aspirin, said last week that he has no immediate plan to do something else.

CNRS spending

Over the period 1981-95 inclusive, the spending of the French CNRS (which supports 10,000 of its own scientists, 25,000 engineers and technicians, and many more scientists by means of grants at universities) is estimated to have increased (in real terms) at average annual rates of:

- 2.9 per cent in nuclear and particle physics (excluding international subscriptions).
- 5.4 per cent in other basic physics and mathematics.
- 8.4 per cent in physics for engineering.
- 5.1 per cent in chemistry.
- 4.1 per cent in Earth sciences and astronomy.
- 6.0 per cent in life sciences.
- 6.0 per cent in social science and humanities.
- 14.5 per cent in interdisciplinary programmes. □