

## French science

## New role for academy?

THE French Académie des Sciences, which began as an informal club for such *savants* as Descartes and Pascal (and was formalized by the Sun King, Louis XIV), is stuck: stuck in ancient rules which forbid it to increase its tiny membership of 130 full fellows. Compared, for example, with the Royal Society of London, with over a thousand fellows for a similar national population, the French academy is both small and powerless. Compared with the US National Academy of Sciences, it is almost non-existent, and yet there are plenty of highly motivated French scientists who believe that the academy could and should play a larger role. And this new role may be on its way, to judge by a speech made by the academy's new president, M. André Blanc-Lapierre, earlier this month.

M. Blanc-Lapierre is the energetic president of one of France's élite engineering schools, the Ivy League of French education, which provides the cream of management, the civil service and the political parties, and must be well aware of the nature of power and influence in French society. He says there has been a "certain decline" in the influence of the few reports that the academy produces and wants a rapid increase in membership.

The Académie des Sciences is one of five academies that together form the illustrious Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, which was formed from existing institutions shortly after the French Revolution of 1789. At the top of the "Institut" comes the Académie Française, with its 40 leading French writers and intellectuals — and these and the other academies of the "Institut" are not inclined to let the wayward, new-fangled Académie des Sciences actually grow, or influence government.

Under the present constitution, the only way open to increase membership would be the "infiltration" of outside talent. This, it seems, is just what M. Blanc-Lapierre has in mind. Beside the 130 full fellows, there are 80 foreign fellows and 160 "correspondents". These have no voting power in the election of fellows, but are not subject to the same restrictions in numbers as the full fellows; so Blanc-Lapierre's intention is to increase the number of correspondents by some 90 active scientists, who though unable to vote could play their full part on committees.

Blanc-Pierre would also like to see an increase in the size of what is effectively a small academy for engineering within the Académie des Sciences, a body called CADAS (the Comité Académique des Applications de la Science) which was created in 1982. CADAS was a compromise over the establishment of a true en-

gineering academy within the Institut: The Académie des Sciences was to nurse it, inviting a membership half of outsiders (mostly engineers) and half of existing members of the Académie des Sciences. It now has nine academicians and ten outsiders but its size must be doubled, Blanc-Lapierre says, thus increasing the competence of the academy in relating science to the economy, the key political issue at present, and, incidentally, increasing the likelihood that a true engineering academy will one day be cloned from CADAS.

Whether finally the academy will really add to what is at present its principal duty, the publishing of the major French scientific journal, the *Compte Rendu* of the academy, and truly gain more influence over government through the changes foreseen may, however, be doubted. As the chairman of CODER, the Académie's Comité des Études et Rapports (reports and studies committee) said rather sadly last week, "our object has been to issue reports, but unfortunately the government hasn't asked us many questions . . . Advisory committees in France are rarely consulted". Such a situation would continue even if the academy were reformed.

Robert Walgate

## Hungarian dam

**HUNGARIAN opponents of the controversial Gabcikovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project (see *Nature* 313, 615; 1985) have condemned the recent decision of the Austrian government to lend Hungary more than US\$500 million to complete the dam. The loan will be repaid in electricity once the project is completed, thereby enabling the Austrians to cancel their own plans for a similar scheme at Hainburg. This, the Hungarian statement says, is equivalent to Austria exporting its environmental problems downstream to Hungary.**

**However, for some years, the Hungarian government has been stalling on its part of the project — the downstream installations at Nagymaros — ostensibly due to lack of funds, but almost certainly also as a result of the increasing pressure from environmentalists. They maintain that building the three dams involved (at Dunakiliti, Gabcikovo and Nagymaros) and the diversion of the flow of the Danube through a concrete channel, will put at risk the ecology of the river, destroy the wetlands of north-west Hungary, and affect the water-table of the riparian countries, making it necessary to pipe in drinking water at a cost that will largely consume the expected economic benefit of the power produced.**

Vera Rich

## Marine science

## Proposal for British overseer

THE proposal that British marine science should be safeguarded by a separately constituted research board is the nub of a report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, published this week. The committee says that such a body is needed to develop a strategy for the exploitation of the British exclusive economic zone, the 200-km offshore area that Britain has not yet formally declared. The committee says that fragmentation and the lack of funds endanger Britain's international standing.

The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), every committee's whipping-boy these days, is criticized for its management, which the select committee describes as "the way of most resistance". Specifically, the committee says that NERC's plan that a centrally located director of marine science should superintend its own research institutes, confusing relationships between the people concerned, should be replaced by a supervisory board of which the institute directors would be members.

According to the House of Lords committee, the Marine Science Board itself should not be a part of NERC but of the Science and Engineering Research Council, although it does not follow that the research institutes should similarly be transferred.

The committee is also concerned at the budget for marine research, which amounted to £70 million for civil research in 1983–84, compared with military spending on marine research of £122 million. The committee says that two research vessels were laid up during 1985 for lack of funds (and a third was in dry dock being fitted with a new engine). Invidiously, the committee compares British spending with that in the United States and France. The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution has a budget of \$52 million a year, while spending by the French marine research agency Ifremer exceeds the total of all British research spending from public funds in the civil sector.

The House of Lords committee also complains of the lack of coordination between the nine government departments and two research councils with a hand in British marine science. The committee argues that only a single board can be expected to take a broad strategic view in these circumstances, especially because the problems that arise are often literally global. It says that funds must also be provided by the government (although industry has, in fact, agreed to pay up to half the cost of British participation in the Ocean Drilling Project).

Peter Gambles