

French elections

Research loses its ministry

THE French general elections last week, which led to the appointment of a new right-wing French government, have also produced a slap in the face for the research establishment. For M. Jacques Chirac, the new prime minister, has failed to appoint a minister to head the Ministère de la Recherche et de la Technologie (MRT), the nerve centre of the previous government's strategy on research. Last week, staff at the ministry were in limbo, as ministerial appointments were announced which ignored the existence of MRT.

Even worse, the new prime minister, the mayor of Paris and leader of the minority Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) party, has not mentioned research or technology in a list of five priority issues for the future, although the outgoing socialist government would almost certainly have done so. For Chirac, precedence goes to issues such as denationalization, law and order and a return to transferable voting (a system which President Francois Mitterrand threw out in favour of proportional representation in a successful bid to complicate the right's hold on the present parliament).

According to the plans of Chirac's science advisers, responsibility for technology policy and the overall distribution of the French government research budget will be given to a prime-ministerial office one-tenth the size of the present MRT, which would be faster acting and more flexible than the socialists' ministry. But by late last week, no announcement had been made about the setting-up of such a body.

This turn of events presents one big question-mark for Eureka, the programme for European cooperation in high-technology innovation which was created with a great flourish by President Mitterrand last year. Anomalously, Mitterrand remains president until the next presidential elections (which must take place by 1988). Constitutionally, he will retain major powers over foreign and defence policy, and already he has vetoed one of Chirac's nominees for the job of foreign minister — ostensibly because the candidate was too much in favour of the US Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Eureka will fall slap into the centre of this turmoil, as the programme was born as a response to the US call for European participation in SDI, and involves foreign, defence and research policy in high degree. Yet the ministry which has been overseeing the programme (MRT) is no longer to exist: conflict between Chirac and Mitterrand on foreign policy seems inevitable.



THE "Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie", France's giant leap into modern interactive exhibition methods for science and technology, is now open to the public. Originally commissioned by the previous French president, M. Giscard d'Estaing, the Cité has grown out of a gigantic and failed abattoir built to serve the whole of the Paris region.

The redesigned building includes two "domes" on the roof which will follow the

Sun and channel light to the building through a system of mirrors. The 36-metre-diameter "Geode" in front of the building houses a 180-degree projection system and can seat 370 people. The whole complex cost FF4,450 million (around £445 million) and, with 800 staff, will cost FF158 million (\$16 million) a year to run. Parts of the exhibition have yet to be completed, but all should be in operation by September this year. Robert Walgate

As for research, M. Chirac's actions so far are entirely consistent with statements made by his science advisers before the election. The only mention of research in Chirac's new, slimmed-down administration is at the ministry of education, where one of three junior ministers assisting the principal education minister will be responsible for "the universities and research". If the previously advertised programme is carried through, this new "delegate minister", theoretical chemist M. Alain Devaquet, will now take control of the major French research council, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and begin to dismantle parts of it in order to decentralize policymaking and to give university researchers more direct power over their laboratories.

Devaquet himself, however, is less

feared by some of the architects of the previous government's science policy than others Chirac might have chosen. A 43-year-old professor at the University of Paris (South), he studied chemistry at the École Normale Supérieure de St Cloud from 1962 to 1966, and has worked in North America at Cornell University and the University of Western Ontario. He is a member of a respected CNRS "laboratoire associé", one of the many CNRS laboratories jointly supported by the universities and by CNRS. Many such laboratories, however, have a sense of having suffered from CNRS policies of concentration, which are claimed to have favoured the CNRS's fully-owned "laboratoires propres", and this factor may shape some of Devaquet's own thinking.

Robert Walgate

Nuclear energy

Weizsäcker changes his mind

Hamburg

CARL FRIEDRICH VON Weizsäcker, the physicist and philosopher whose brother, Richard von Weizsäcker, is West German president, has changed his mind about the place of nuclear energy in the fuel economy of West Germany. As director of the Max-Planck Institute of Future Research until his retirement in 1980, von Weizsäcker judiciously balanced his opposition to nuclear weapons with the opinion that peaceful nuclear energy is a necessity. But now, in a foreword to a book to be published shortly, he announces that he has changed his mind.

Although now 74, von Weizsäcker's opinion is still influential in West Germany. His revised opinion accompanies a book *Die Grenzen der Atomwirtschaft* (The limitations of the nuclear economy) by Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, a Hamburg state senator, and Bertram Schefold, a Frankfurt economist.

Von Weizsäcker has been influential in

the West German debate on nuclear energy since at least 1957, when he organized the "declaration of the Göttingen eighteen" in which a number of distinguished West German physicists declared their opposition to nuclear weapons. In 1983, he was the adviser on national security policy to the social democratic candidate for federal chancellor, Hans-Jochen Vogel.

According to the unpublished foreword, von Weizsäcker has changed his mind because of the "sleepless nights" he endured worrying about the problem of the protection of civil nuclear power plants from attack, either by terrorists or in time of war. He says that he has come to prefer that the development of solar energy should now take precedence because of his fear of "outrages", and that he does not dispute the possibility that, in a peaceful world, nuclear energy could again "render mankind an important service".

Jürgen Neffe