French science

Bureaucracy looks to survival

IN an extraordinary declaration of the likely directions of the new French government's education policy last week, the new minister of education, René Monory, has announced that he will make no radical alterations to the constructive policy of his socialist predecessor, Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

Monory told journalists that he "wanted to get things moving" and that he agreed with most of the things that Chevènement had been doing. He was particularly happy, he said, with Chevènement's efforts to raise the number of schoolchildren achieving the "baccalauréat" (the high school graduation certificate that guarantees entry to university). "International competition and demography demand it", he said.

Thus Monory has pinned his colours to Chevènement's typically radical efforts to reform the school system, which for Chevènement was too geared toward mathematics and to the entry of the very few into a few élite institutions.

Chevènement's intention was to create new universities of technology and more *grandes écoles* geared to tomorrow's technology. But pre-election advisers to the new Prime Minister, Jacques Chirac, sought to strengthen and return power to the existing university

system, and had been working on legislation to this end. Chevènement's grand plan will not now be torn up. Chirac and Monory may be planning to go easy; Monory is talking of not wishing to "rekindle the battles", said Monory.

The government's policy remains far from clear. Bernard Descombes, who masterminded the previous government's successful attempts to tighten up assessment and research quality in the French universities, was due to meet his new minister for higher education and research, Alain Devaquet, just before the Easter break. Whether the old ministry of research and technology will survive is apparently not yet decided.

Meanwhile, Devaquet occupies not the small office at the ministry of education appropriate to a junior minister but the grand headquarters of the old ministry of research and technology, in the old *École Polytechnique* on the Montaigne St Genevieve. The switchboard operators are selfconsciously announcing "ministry of higher education and research" to incoming callers. Some on the Montaigne hope that the ministry will not be as radically dismantled as Chirac has been threatening.

Devaquet has also filled the powerful post of cabinet director with Michèle

Legras, who is four years older than her minister and a career administrator of some eminence; she has served under ex-prime minister Raymond Barre and was *chef du cabinet* to a previous (but regrettably forgotten) research minister, Jacques Sourdille, in 1977.

Robert Walgate

Polish nuclear power

Safety fears

LOCAL opinion in the district of Lubusz in western Poland is "outraged" by plans to build a nuclear waste dump, according to Zielona Góra local radio. Members of the Sejm (parliament) are accordingly being sent to the area to confer with local officials, although no final decision on where the waste will be stored can be reached until an expert survey is completed in 1990.

At present, a new bill on the nuclear industry is being drafted. Polish media and press agency reports on the bill, during the past two weeks, have stressed that it will make all necessary provisions to protect workers in the nuclear industry and the public at large from radiation hazard. This stress on safety is clearly meant to allay fears not only in Lubusz but also in the vicinity of the planned nuclear power stations at Zarnowiec and Włocławek.

The fears go beyond the usual apprehension of residents of an area where a nuclear installation is planned. Nuclear safety in Poland is by no means well organized, but is at present governed by a regulation dating from 1961 which involves not only the Atomic Energy Commission but four other ministries as well.

In 1973, the second congress of Polish science called for a two to threefold increase in the number of nuclear safety experts, but numbers have instead fallen rapidly (by 45 per cent between 1980 and 1985), while those who remain are mostly approaching retirement age. In May 1985, the academic council of the Institute of Nuclear Chemistry and Technology at Żeran, stated that Polish radiological protection work is in so disastrous a state that its very existence is threatened.

How far the new bill can remedy this situation is unclear. The main need seems to be the training of a new generation of safety experts, which will take several years. But the rapid response of the Sejm to the disquiet in Lubusz, to say nothing of the fact that it was reported in the official media, suggests that the Polish authorities, now irrevocably committed to a programme of nuclear expansion, are anxious that fears over safety should not escalate into the kind of anti-nuclear protest now building up in Yugoslavia.

Vera Rich

Aleksandrov stays at Soviet academy

ACADEMICIAN Anatolii Aleksandrov, the 83-year-old president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, has retained his post, in spite of rumours that he was to resign at the annual general meeting on 19 March. Most rumours tipped as his successor Academician Evgenii Velikhov, a physicist who has recently entered the arena of international politics as head of "Scientists against Nuclear War". Shortly before the meeting, however, Academician Viktor Logonov, the rector of Moscow University and also a physicist, was also mentioned as a possible successor. In the event, in spite of Mr Gorbachev's current policy of retiring eminent but superannuated people, Aleksandrov was not replaced.

Aleksandrov is not in the best of health, and has not for some years attended ceremonial functions abroad. His continuation in office will mean continued diplomatic limelight for the vice-presidents, who deputize for him, which may not be entirely unwelcome to those not eligible for the presidency. Over the past few years, it has become a tradition that the president of the academy is either a mathematician or a physicist.

Apart from Aleksandrov's staying on, this year's meeting brought few surprises. Most speeches dealt with the implementation of the resolutions of the recent party congress, insofar as they affect science.

Aleksandrov himself noted that the role of the academy as a coordinator of all research work in the Soviet Union should be "appreciably enhanced" in the new five-year plan (1986-90), gave the number of researchers in the Soviet Union as around 1.5 million and noted that this year's research budget (presumably for the whole of the Soviet Union) would amount to 29,000 million rubles. Other speakers dealt with the priority areas already outlined in the guidelines for the plan, but Academician Yurii Ovchinnikov complained that although genetic engineering can produce new medicines in six months, the time needed to test and "verify" them (10-12 years) was much too long.

One innovation that seems to have been generated within the academy is the decision to create an interdisciplinary coordination council for the investigation of the "entire package of questions of the study of man".

Vera Rich