

Curien advocates a long-term strategy for civil research

Paris

FRENCH research minister Hubert Curien last week announced the creation of a new body to monitor the nation's science and technology research activities. This "observatory", he says, has become vital given the current levels of government research funding. It is one of several initiatives being taken by the government to prepare a long-term strategy for civil research following what Curien has acknowledged is a 'once only' budget aimed to inject cash into research without a clear long-term plan (*Nature* 334, 556; 1988).

In this latest move, Curien has appointed Pierre Papon, former director of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and lecturer at the Ecole supérieure de physique et de chimie industrielle, to "find participating members for the monitoring body, define its scope and to set out a timetable for its realization". Curien expects Papon to submit his report by the end of December so that the project can start in January 1989.

The new body has already been set a number of specific tasks: to embrace the entire national system of science and technology, to monitor its evolution and to relate French efforts to European and worldwide initiatives. To do this, Curien has promised that the monitoring body will "offer all the guarantees of objectivity necessary for its credibility and will involve representatives of the national research system".

The new government, under a banner of *glasnost*, is keen to show that coherent long-term policies are being formulated contingent upon reports from expert working parties. In the meantime few ministers have been willing to say what these policies are likely to contain, and one minister was even asked to resign when he broke this tacit rule of silence. Health minister Claude Evin is, however, expected to announce shortly the government's plans to combat AIDS using the recommendations of his advisor, Claude Got.

Peter Coles

Competition for Soviet research funds

London

THE distribution of financial support for research in the Soviet Union is to be decided by open competition between laboratories, and a secret ballot by a 'competent commission', academician Gurii Marchuk, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, told the official Soviet press agency TASS recently. Under the former system, research funds were handed over to the heads of institutes, who then shared the money out between the various laboratories under

their administration. Under the new system, intended to implement Gorbachev's economic reforms, the heads of laboratories will themselves compete for funds.

In the case of applied research, each laboratory head must submit proposals for solving a particular problem, and the commission will then vote on who is to receive support. For research with no direct applications, a special fund will be established, but grants from this will also be based on competition, Marchuk said.

Marchuk stresses that more must be done in bridging the gap between basic research and industrial applications and urged a 50 per cent increase in allocations for building facilities such as pilot plants. Whether the new financial arrangements will prove workable is open to question. The funding of research on the basis of specific problems was tried in Poland during the 1970s under the auspices of the then minister of science, Dr Sylwester Kaliski, but ran into difficulties when, for example, an institute found it necessary to purchase an expensive item of equipment which would be shared by teams and laboratories working on different topics. This scheme was eventually abandoned on the grounds that it imposed too many bureaucratic constraints.

Whether the Soviet scheme can avoid such difficulties will largely depend on the efforts of the decision-making commission which, some Soviet scientists have suggested, should be empowered to call in foreign scientists as referees. Vera Rich

New Hungarian union

THE new general secretary of Hungary's trade union federation, SZOT, Mr Sandor Nagy, has stated that he "personally acknowledged" the fact of the existence of TDDSZ, the breakaway Democratic Union of Scientific Workers "as a reality". Following talks between representatives of SZOT and TDDSZ last month, Nagy told the daily *Magyar Nemzet* that the existence of TDDSZ was, however, a "sad reality" for the traditional union movement, "since those who operate independently from us imply criticism of official trade union activities". The TDDSZ members broke away from SZOT earlier this year, complaining that their interests, as scientists, could not receive proper attention in a single-union-per-workplace structure. Under the old system, scientists were spread among 18 unions, but constituted only a minority in each. Vera Rich

Mutual friends

THE United States and India have signed a three-year extension to a bilateral Science and Technology Initiative, first established in 1982 by President Reagan and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. US Science Advisor William Graham met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi earlier this month when he praised the joint research programmes, but emphasized the importance of mutual respect for each other's intellectual property rights. J.P.

Polio outbreak

FOLLOWING an outbreak of polio that has claimed ten victims in less than two months, Israeli health ministry officials have announced a nationwide immunization programme. People under 40 years of age in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza will all receive oral polio vaccine boosters as a 'preventive measure'.

Health officials say the outbreak may be linked to polio virus found in sewage samples in seven sites around the country. L. P.

Banking on commerce

THE industrial sector in Britain is losing graduates to finance and commerce according to the latest statistics. The number of students entering banking and insurance increased by 18 per cent in 1986-87, and mathematicians, engineers and technologists entering industry decreased. The number of graduates going into research increased slightly, reversing the downward trend which began in 1983-84. C.McG.

Secret weapons labs

SUSPECTED foreign agents have had access to sensitive information at US weapons laboratories, according to a new report by the General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress. GAO says the Department of Energy has not done an effective job enforcing regulations for screening foreign visitors. In addition to visits from citizens of Warsaw Pact nations and China, there are numerous visits by citizens of other countries considered capable of building nuclear weapons.

DoE officials deny that a serious problem exists and point out that for each of the weapons laboratories there are classified and non-classified areas. J.P.

British export

OXFORD University may soon be setting up a branch in Japan. St Catherine's College is discussing with the Japanese manufacturing company Kobe Steel opening a small college in Japan to provide students there with a general education on life in Britain and prepare them for undertaking studies in this country. The college would take no more than 50 students and provide courses in history, law, economics and mathematics. If all goes well the college will open in 1990. C.McG.