

Why French politics and science don't mix

In mid-March, just before regional elections in France, Jacques Chirac bluntly rebuffed an appeal by the country's scientists that he intervene in their winter-long dispute with his government over drastic cuts in budgets and posts.

On 1 April (April Fools' Day), Chirac, in a U-turn, publicly disowned his government's research policies (see *Nature* 428, 105; 2004), solemnly condemning what he described as the "real problem" of the "insufficiency of resources for research". The researchers' complaints were "justified", he declared, demanding that the government "re-examine" the issue of posts, and adding that this would "be solved".

Realpolitik. Chirac's neo-Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party had meanwhile suffered a historic defeat in France's regional elections, losing all but one — Alsace — of 21 mainland regions. The scientists' protests hit a popular electoral nerve, and had contributed to the defeat (see *Nature* 428, 454; 2004). Chirac's overtures suggest an imminent climb-down on research cuts to ease tensions — although his new government does not face general election until 2007, it can ill-afford continued street protests.

The danger is that the pendulum will swing from harshly imposed 'reforms' to total inaction. For two decades, French science has indeed been a victim of successive waves of right and left politics. Successive conservative governments have repeatedly slashed research budgets, and tried — unsuccessfully — to impose reforms that too often have been superficial, smacking more of ideology than responsible stewardship of science. Ironically, an exception is Chirac's spiritual guide,

Charles de Gaulle, who imposed French science and technology on the world stage in the 1950s through a united national effort (see *Nature* 379, 9; 1996). The left has traditionally been better-placed to reform, as it is more progressive in supporting science. The Socialist, François Mitterrand, massively invested in research in the early 1980s, leading to a resurgence of French science (see *Nature* 346, 125; 1990). But since then, the left too has failed to engage in meaningful reform, too often balking at tough decisions to please their electorate.

France now has an opportunity to cross such political divides. At no time in recent history have researchers been so united on the need for profound change. They and the government are preparing a law on research to be submitted by the end of the year, in which they are laying out a multiyear funding plan for French research, budgets, and reforms of the key agencies, universities and recruitment systems.

So should we be optimistic? Unfortunately, probably not. In the cabinet reshuffle, François Fillon has been appointed minister for education, higher education and research, and François d'Aubert his junior minister for research. Both are competent political heavyweights, but their track records suggest a lack of enthusiasm and vision for research. The two held identical positions in the 1990s, but holding them was about the sum of their achievements.

The temptation will be strong to return to business as usual. Yet, ironically, a bolder vision is wanted by almost all in France. A key part will be ultimately to modernize the large national public research agencies such as CNRS and INSERM — where researchers are employed for life and are not obliged to teach — so that they play a greater role as research councils, with control of much research being devolved to the universities that are currently mainly devoted to teaching.

This is desirable in the long term, but it would be a big mistake to pick first on what works: the research agencies. A prerequisite is to first fix France's universities, which, with a few shining exceptions, are a far cry from what most would consider a research campus. Dilapidated, often hotbeds of nepotism and local politics, they cannot yet aspire to provide the quality of the existing research agencies. A host of other problems exist, from bureaucracy to inflexible tenure policies, but the future role of the universities will be key.

Whatever happens over the next few months, French scientists need to build on the current crisis and counter the central problem: that in recent times research has been an afterthought for most governments. For the sake of France's future, they should also explore how research can be spared from this right-left oscillation. Is it too much to suggest that France should engage a consensual cross-party reform of the research system?

Given Chirac's track record on science and the will of the socialists to capitalize on their recent victory, researchers would be taking a very deep leap of faith to believe that a superficial reshuffle of the same government could suddenly achieve such a goal. But if Chirac wants to be remembered for something other than his legendary political nerve, boosting France's future through science and technology should be a priority.

ELECTORAL WAVES PUSH SCIENCE REFORM OFF COURSE.

Outcome of French regional elections in 1992 and 2004

