

French ministry in climbdown over reform

[PARIS] The French ministry of national education, research and technology has quietly abandoned plans for a decree to reform the statutes of the country's main research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

The ministry, while officially continuing to refuse researchers' demands for a national debate, has in parallel now requested a parliamentary inquiry into the mobility of researchers and into ways of improving links between the public research agencies and the universities.

The decree to reform the CNRS has been a major focus for strong opposition in the research community to plans by Claude Allègre, the science minister, for a profound reform of the country's research system (see *Nature* 396, 607 1998). Scientists complain that it would transfer excessive responsibility for the work of CNRS laboratories to the universities, while failing to address fundamental problems, such as the weakness of university research.

Vincent Courtillot, a former principal adviser to Allègre who was recently appointed director general of the ministry, discreet-

ly announced the abandonment of the CNRS decree last week in an interview with the newspaper *Le Monde*. The format of a decree was too rigid, he said, adding that reform of the CNRS would await proposals from the organization itself "within three to four months".

The conciliatory tone of Courtillot's policy outline, in sharp contrast to the previous hardline stance of the ministry, has been interpreted by observers as indicating that the ministry is keen to seek a way out of the current deadlock over reforms. "It marks a substantial change on the ministry's part," says one member of the CNRS board of directors.

The deadlock culminated in an unprecedented meeting in Paris just before Christmas of the 800-member National Committee for Scientific Research, the 'parliament' of the country's scientists, which plays a major role in evaluating laboratories and administering recruitment. The meeting attacked the reforms as "ill conceived" and overwhelmingly rejected the way the ministry has tried to impose them on the scientific community with minimum consultation.

This month, the presidents of the 40 sections of the national committee issued a statement arguing that a national debate was essential. Courtillot maintains that such a debate is not on the cards, arguing that, had the government wanted one, it would have organized it on coming into power 18 months ago.

But one member of the CNRS board of directors says this amounts to "saving face". Indeed, the ministry has asked for a parliamentary inquiry into research issues that is expected to lead to concrete proposals. The ministry has recently come under fire from its own ranks, with the research committee of the ruling Socialist party supporting calls for wider consultation between the ministry and the scientific community.

Depending on the inquiry's remit, it might well satisfy researchers' demands, says Henri Edouard Audier, a member of the national board of SNES, the main trade union representing researchers.

At the same time, Audier laments that a procedure of consultation could have already been completed had it been under way from the outset.

Declan Butler

British universities face review to increase accountability

[LONDON] A review of research spending in British universities to make them more accountable is to start this year in a series of pilot institutions. The so-called 'transparency review' will be extended to the top research universities by the end of next year.

The move was announced last week by John Taylor, the new director-general of the research councils. Taylor was speaking before the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee in his first major policy statement since taking office six weeks ago.

He also indicated that he questioned the need at this time for a new government white paper (policy document) on science — an idea floated at a recent meeting of politicians and scientists in Downing Street (see *Nature* 396, 714; 1998). "There are no immediate issues staring us in the face," he said.

The transparency review was a condition attached to increases in research spending allocated to universities following the government's recent comprehensive spending review (see *Nature* 394, 209; 1998). The review will be overseen by the Science and Engineering Base Co-ordinating Committee, chaired by the government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Robert May.

The main aim of the exercise is to make



Taylor: focusing on identifying costs.

universities more accountable for research spending and to oblige them to better identify research costs — this is 'activity based costing'.

At the moment, the universities receive core funding from the higher-education funding councils and project funding from the research councils, under what is known as the dual-

support system.

But in a surprise move, Taylor also said that the review will include an assessment of whether current funding arrangements are "sufficiently selective", with the distribution of funding resulting in the "identification and maintenance of centres of excellence". The review will also consider whether these two streams of government research funding are "complementary and coherent".

The transparency review will initially focus on the complex administrative issue of introducing an activity-costing methodology to universities. Taylor told the committee that final specifications for this should be available by June. It would then be

implemented in volunteer universities as early as the start of the next academic year and extended to all the top research universities towards the end of 2000.

Taylor explained to members of parliament that he had "pushed hard" to move the transparency review this far forward in the six weeks he had been director-general. He warned the committee that it would not be possible to bring it any further forward, saying: "You have to keep the aeroplane running while you change the engine." The review, he said, would bring "information that will help us better run dual support, and triple support if we have a third leg of funding. We are going to get a better understanding of whether there really is a funding gap." Under the present arrangements, universities do not receive the full costs for the research they undertake.

Taylor spelt out as a priority for his term in office the interface between the research councils and how well they coordinate their activities on key topics and interdisciplinary issues. He warned the committee that the excitement over genome research should not be allowed to lead to neglect of other areas of research, such as information technology and communications, which he predicted would dwarf other fields in terms of economic returns over the coming decade.

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