

FRANCE

Realpolitik and Futurism

from our Paris Correspondent

In the post-Gaullist era, the aims of scientific research are being shifted from prestige to profitability, but already the new five year plan is being criticized for lack of realism. Besides, its glittering promises do not please everyone.

THE programme presented by the Prime Minister last summer to the National Assembly was characterized by a calculated dosage of realpolitik and futurism. The question now is, what is left, one year afterwards, of these declarations of intent? The decision to modernize French industry and make it more competitive, due in particular to an R and D policy aimed more at profitability than prestige, effectively determined the direction of the Sixth Five-year Plan which comes into operation next year (for the broad outlines of the plan see *Nature*, 225, 778; 1970). Industry figures in it largely on two counts, first, because the plan recommends that a great proportion of research now being carried on in public sector laboratories should be transferred to the private sector; and second, because development has an increasing priority over research in the strict sense of the word.

Glowing Promises of the Sixth Plan

The French press published only recently some information on the Report by the Research Commission, so that public discussion of the work done by the planners has only been going on for a few weeks. First reactions indicate that it will not be easy to attain, between now and 1975, the objectives which the government has set itself. One can already foresee strong trade union opposition. And in the large government laboratories likewise, the mood is not one of optimism, particularly at the Atomic Energy Commission (where personnel licensing and the abandonment of the French graphite-gas process have for some months now created a climate of revolt and low morale) and at the National Space Research Centre (whose past policy is very severely criticized and whose future is far from certain). Then, two years after the upheaval in May 1968, the university world to which numerous research workers are attached continues to undergo a number of disruptions and there is still many an obstacle to carrying out the reforms laid down by Edgar Faure when he was Minister for National Education; dispute and argument appear to thrive on these measures. One might conclude therefore that the glowing promises of the Sixth Plan, which provides for a doubling of R and D expenditure in five years, will not be sufficient to make it popular with all scientists. The more so when we consider that the kitty, though relatively large, is shared out very unequally among the different disciplines or industrial sectors. In particular, physics is clearly sacrificed to biology and environmental sciences.

No Magic Wand for Plan Calcul

Other difficulties stem from the fact that the present government has inherited from its predecessors a certain number of established situations that no magic wand can put in order in the twinkling of an eye. Monsieur Ortoli, the Minister for Scientific and Industrial Development, found on his desk State dossiers in a thoroughly rotten state, such as the one relating to nuclear power production. A final choice must be made in September between the two competing light water processes, PWR and BWR,

represented in France by SFAC (a Westinghouse licence) and CGE (a General Electric licence). That is, unless, of course, the government decides to deal with the two competing groups together, each one only getting half of an already small market, or it may prefer to opt for a more European solution in which the Siemens-AEG Consortium would play a major part. Whatever the final decision, it would have been made under infinitely better conditions if taken a few years ago, at a period when there was still time for France not to let Germany have the privilege of establishing the only nuclear industry on the continent worthy of the name. In the field of data-processing too, the chances of building up a competitive industry have not been taken in time. They vanished just a few days ago when General Electric assigned its computer section to Honeywell and with it its majority share in the French company Bull. Strengthened thus by Honeywell's initial share capital, General Electric—failing some last minute drama—will have shattered all hopes of the national firm, the CII, carving out for itself an important share of the market. So the predictable failure of the Plan Calcul, the key element of Gaullist strategy in the field of advanced technology, seems assured.

It might be asked how quickly it is possible to limit the damaging consequences of past policies in other sectors of industry. This would imply a more severe break with the past ten years than M. Chaban-Delmas, anxious not to upset the Gaullist "old guard", appears to wish to make. The first moves on the European front made by the French Prime Minister are still circumspect, as evidenced by space matters in which, it is said, Monsieur Pompidou would have personally intervened three weeks ago: while declaring that it has no ambitions of becoming an autonomous space power, France does not seem ready to enter resolutely into multinational collaboration which would involve, purely and simply, giving up the national programme and integrating French potential into a collective project.

Need for a Circular Brain Drain

But, in the final analysis, it is on French businessmen themselves that the success of the new policy depends. If they are to be the chief beneficiaries from the Sixth Plan, they ought also to be the key people in its operation. Yet few of them, up to now, have really taken research seriously and made it take in their own laboratories the directions imposed by a rigorous analysis of market needs: the State was there to foot the bill. Their personnel recruitment policy has seldom allowed them to attract the best scientists and even more rarely to keep them. The *Grandes Ecoles* and their rigorously subservient network of institutions have until now been an obstacle to any renewal in the working climate. The mobility of scientific personnel from the public sector into industry and vice versa, is one of the key aspects of government strategy, and the success or failure of the as yet unknown measures that will be taken to organize this "circular brain drain"—still little more than a dream of top civil servants—will probably settle for several years the future of French research.