Italy frees research council from 'baroni'

[MUNICH] The Italian council of ministers has approved sweeping reforms of the national research council, the CNR, that will reduce its influence over government science policy but may increase the efficiency of its research environment.

The ministers approved a decree introducing major changes to the law governing the CNR, which operates a network of 300 government research institutes in most disciplines of science. The changes are designed to curtail the pervasive influence over the CNR of an élite group of powerful university professors in Italy, known as *baroni*.

Scientists have cautiously welcomed the reforms, operational details of which have yet to be hammered out, but say that budget increases will be needed to allow the organization to fully exploit its new potential.

The power of the CNR president has been reduced and CNR's 14 discipline-based committees, which were heavily dominated by university professors, have been abolished. The committees had distributed research funds, appointed institute directors and served a pivotal role in the Italian government's formal scientific advisory system.

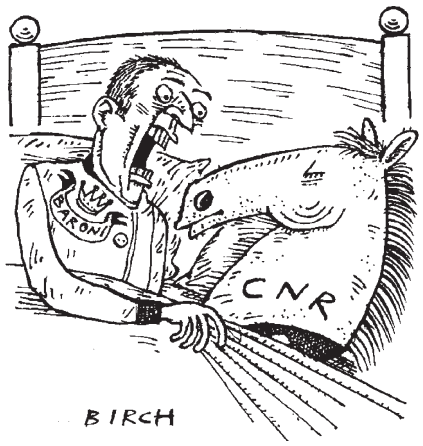
An executive board will be established consisting of the president of the CNR and six members, only two of which will be selected by the CNR. The board will make final decisions about institute directorships, which will have to be advertised openly.

A scientific committee, comprising half CNR and half external scientists, will advise the executive board. It will authorize subcommittees to deal with research in specific disciplines, but the structure is designed to limit the influence of entrenched members of these subcommittees.

Administration will be decentralized, such that staff at the CNR headquarters in Rome could drop from more than 1,000 to under 300. The number of institutes and university-based CNR research centres will be reduced from 320 to under 100 by consolidating smaller centres into larger ones, but no loss of researchers is foreseen.

CNR will lose its grant agency role. Its small-grant fund, criticized for its 'raindrop' distribution (see *Nature* **367,** 398; 1994), will disappear, and its strategic research fund will be transferred to a new ministry-based committee and opened up to scientists at universities and other research organizations.

Arturo Falaschi, a geneticist on leave from the CNR and currently director of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Trieste, says the new CNR framework law "abolishes many of the faults of the past", particularly the way the CNR was used as a bargaining tool in academic politics by the powerful committees.



Falaschi says the autonomy given to institutes by the decentralization of administration will make the life of researchers simpler and more efficient. But true benefits will be reaped, he says, only if the new scientific committees are populated by good scientists committed to modern research and research management methods, including appropriate peer review.

Details of issues such as the recruitment of research staff and allocation of funds by peer review are to be drawn up by the CNR. How these details are defined is fundamental to the future of the CNR, says Falaschi.

Glauco Tocchini Valentini, director of the CNR Institute for Cell Biology in Rome, says that if the details are not defined optimally, and if the government is not willing to raise the budget, which has stagnated for years through lack of political support, the CNR will be left very vulnerable. "We urgently need new blood, because only 14 per cent of our researchers are under 40," he says.

"If the government wants the CNR to build itself into the sort of internationally competitive organization it wants, it must provide adequate resources," Tocchini Valentini adds. Budget decisions for 1999 will be announced in the autumn.

The changes are intended to be instituted within 180 days, but Luigi Donato, director of the CNR Institute for Clinical Physiology in Pisa, thinks they are so extensive that two or three years could be required and that transition rules will therefore be needed.

The decree was made possible through the so-called Bassanini law, which allows existing laws to be modified without formal parliamentary approval to reduce the stalling powers of Italy's bureaucracy. It has taken more than a year to win government support for the reforms (see *Nature* **388,** 609; 1997) because of strong opposition from the large cross-party lobby of politicians who are also university professors. **Alison Abbott**

Boost to Canadian science infrastructure

[OTTAWA] **Twenty-six Canadian universities have won infrastructure grants worth Can$36 million (US$24 million) under the first competition held by the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI). The CFI is an independent non-profit organization set up by the Canadian federal government last year to support research infrastructure.**

More than 400 new faculty members will have their careers launched with buildings and equipment funded by the first CFI programme, called New Opportunities.

The CFI has Can$800 million over five years to invest in infrastructure for research and development in Canadian universities, colleges, hospitals and other non-profit institutions (*Nature* 385, 759; 1997). It will typically provide 40 per cent of project costs, with the rest coming from local government, industry or the voluntary sector.

The response to its first competition, launched in December, has been overwhelming. Proposals worth almost Can$3 billion were submitted, of which the CFI's share would have been Can$1.2 billion. "All of us were quite flabbergasted," said David Strangway, the CFI president.

The contributions of other partners mean the CFI's Can$36 million investment represents a total of Can$90 million for equipment and buildings. Strangway says the money will help young researchers recognized for tackling problems in priority areas for Canadians. These include understanding molecular processes in herbicide resistance, developing robotic systems for dynamic or dangerous situations, and building safer roads.

Robert Giroux, president of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), said the CFI was set up to end 10–15 years of serious underfunding of infrastructure that prevented Canada from capitalizing on emerging fields of research.

AUCC surveys show that better facilities, salaries and research funding abroad meant that many of the best researchers left the country, Giroux said.

CFI vice-president Carmen Charette said the criteria used to assess projects were research quality, infrastructure suitability, innovation capacity and potential benefit to Canada. She said New Opportunities would allow access to the best facilities.

Further competitions will be announced in autumn 1999 and the year 2000, and conferences in the next three to four years will consider future programmes. About half of the Can$800 million will be available in the next two years. **David Spurgeon**