

French Comité National

Democracy, confusion abounds

One of the major and unique institutions of French scientific democracy, the Comité National, a king of scientific parliament with effective power over the work and careers of thousands of French researchers, is to be transformed.

That fact alone would lead to a great deal of heat, given the generally polemical French nature. But the fire has been stoked even higher by the decree, just published, which describes the transformation. It leaves so many loose ends that many French scientists remain unclear whether they can vote for candidates to the new parliament or not.

This is important, because of the potential power invested in the Comité National: if a scientist can vote for a candidate, at least he or she is assured of some kind of representation.

The Comité is the 1,200-strong board of assessment of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). CNRS is only one of the principal French research organizations, but it is the biggest and arguably the most important — at least for basic science; this year CNRS controls a budget of more than FF 6,000 million (over £500 million), and supports 9,322 scientists and 14,514 engineers, technicians and administrators. In general, the best of the university laboratories are at least "associated" with (or partly supported by) CNRS. And within this organization the Comité National plays a role by giving its advice (which is usually accepted) to the CNRS research directors on such matters as the hiring and firing of staff, opening and closing laboratories, and the awarding of grants.

The Comité National may appear to be no more than a collection of peer review committees — and it certainly does function in that way, divided into 45 sections each of 25 people according to subject or research. But the Comité is unique because it is an *elected* body, with a French electorate now totalling perhaps 20,000 people; and the key to the squabbles over the Comité is the question of what groups will be represented and to what extent?

Jean-Pierre Chevènement, minister for science and industry, was unhappy with the Comité that he inherited (the last election to the Comité National was in 1980; President Mitterrand came to power in mid-1981) for two main reasons — its subject structure was out of date, and it lacked representation from the technicians and administrators.

The new decree for the Comité sorts out these matters, and others besides. Chevènement has slightly increased the number of Comité seats that he can name himself, on advice from the CNRS directorate. He can now name eight rather

than nine of the 25 members of each Comité (the rest being elected); and four seats per section are now reserved for election by engineers, technicians and administrators. The remaining 12 seats per section (just under half) are to be determined by election by scientists. But how is a scientist to be defined in that context? It is here that the new decree is unclear, and it is here that there will be plenty of discussion and acrimony before the next elections to the Comité National, planned for early 1983.

For the new decree actually decreases the right of certain university researchers to an automatic vote. Previously any researcher could vote; now only researchers with a "link" (the word is deliberately ambiguous) to CNRS may vote. This may be quite reasonable — after all, the Comité directly affects only CNRS employees — but CNRS is so important that researchers were pleased to have their little right to "meddle" in CNRS affairs.

Now that right seems to have gone. Or has it? According to the decree, scientific institutions that are not part of the CNRS may still appoint certain of their staff to vote for the Comité. Among those institutions could be universities. So there may yet be a back door to a voting right. And certain other categories of people do not have an automatic vote, but may receive one if they themselves apply to CNRS for the right.

What this means in effect is that almost every scientist and technician in France will have some way of getting a vote for the Comité; but for some a vote will come more easily than for others. It seems the ministry hopes that this solution will reduce political argument about rights to vote, but at the same time it will be a hard winter for the CNRS elector committee which, between now and January, will have to decide exactly who can vote and why. This process alone will take fully six months, CNRS estimates.

Robert Walgate

US computer industry

Paying the price

Washington

Federal Judge Harold H. Greene has raised the price that American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) will have to pay for the privilege of entering the data processing and computer game.

Ruling on 11 August on the proposed anti-trust settlement between AT&T and the Justice Department, Judge Greene said he would accept the basic deal, under which AT&T gives up its local telephone companies in exchange for the right to enter the unregulated computer market.

But he insisted on certain modifications. The local telephone companies should be allowed to keep publishing the Yellow Pages directories, which are a big money-maker; they should also be permitted to market, but not manufacture, telephone equipment, he said. Under the original settlement, both of these options would be reserved for the parent AT&T company.

The judge also insisted that AT&T be barred from entering the "electronic publishing" field for at least seven years. This excludes AT&T for the time being from a variety of electronic information and news services; newspaper publishers have been especially worried that AT&T's grip on the country's communication system would give it an unfair advantage in this fledgling industry. Under Judge Greene's proposal, AT&T apparently could still supply transmission lines and terminal equipment for such ventures, but could not do the actual collection and compilation of information.

The anti-trust law limits the judge to making suggestions; he cannot order changes in the settlement. He can, however, reject it, and Judge Greene did not mince words: if the parties do not agree to his "suggestions", he will throw out the settlement and reopen the anti-trust case — which has already dragged on for eight years.

AT&T's vice-president and general counsel, William Keefauver, said "AT&T has a strong incentive to accept a decree and free ourselves from the business restrictions of the 1956 decree". (The 1956 settlement barred AT&T from entering the unregulated computer market. It resulted from earlier charges that AT&T was using revenues from its monopoly telephone business to subsidize its competitive ventures.) Failure to accept Judge Greene's terms means that those barriers remain. Keefauver said that the judge's suggested modifications "don't dramatically impact the thrust of the decree".

The Justice Department is less certain to go along with the changes. It had demanded that local companies should not market telephone equipment — a competitive business — while operating as regulated monopolies. The judge ruled that this was merely "theoretical consistency", when in fact allowing the companies to market equipment would increase competition — and at the same time keep rates down.

AT&T and the Justice Department have 15 days to respond to the judge. Earlier this year, Representative Timothy Wirth (Democrat, Colorado) introduced legislation to stiffen the terms of the anti-trust settlement; he later withdrew it in the face of heavy lobbying by AT&T.

The judge's suggested changes appear to incorporate a substantial portion of the Wirth plan, in particular letting the local companies keep the Yellow Pages and the right to market equipment. But, significantly, the judge did not recommend