

## French science

# No big deal

Eighteen months after the arrival of the Mitterrand government in France, with its promise of a great new deal for French scientists, reform of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) is complete, or almost complete.

Last week the new statute for CNRS was finally agreed at the Council of Ministers, and published along with the appointments to seven top jobs — some of them new — and the budget details for 1983, showing continued growth of about 13 per cent in real terms (outside salaries). What remains are the elections to the Comité National, the CNRS "parliament" which makes detailed decisions on grant allocations, appointments and promotions in CNRS laboratories. The elections on new (reformed) principles are planned for March.

M. Maurice Godelier, the anthropologist whose appointment as director of social sciences was vehemently opposed little more than a year ago, has now slipped into the role without much protest. His far-ranging report on social sciences to the minister of research and industry (see *Nature* 28 October, p.771) appears to have had a calming effect, and he has been appointed jointly with the previous acting director, M. Armand Frémont, to a combined directorate of social sciences and humanities. Frémont is expected to concern himself with regional issues, while Godelier will be concerned with the higher issues of policy.

Two new directorates have been created: one for information and publications, and another for the application of research ("valorization"), which should strengthen the role of the CNRS in innovation, a principal objective of the government.

The director of valorization will be M.

Jean-Jacques Duby, a 42-year-old mathematician who has had a distinguished career in IBM research and management. M. Duby will consider offering incentives to research groups in the form of additional grants for basic research in return for time spent on applications, a scheme which works well at the Institut Pasteur. CNRS will also seek an increasing role in the research training of third world scientists.

As for the 1983 budget, the net real increase of 7.3 per cent (including salaries), the 320 new research posts (3.4 per cent) and 220 new technicians (1.5 per cent) will be divided unevenly according to the particular needs of each sector. Thus the social sciences receive a large sum for new buildings, to house the home workers; biotechnology sees a start on a new FF20 million (£1.7 million) laboratory for the molecular biology of plants in Strasbourg (which will take three years to complete); and physics sees an allocation for the construction of a new synchrotron radiation source for Orsay, "Super-ACO".

Dividing the budget differently, however, one of the most substantial increases planned for next year comes in medium-sized equipment — instruments costing roughly between FF 1 million and FF 3 million. Here the budget will rise 60 per cent. There is some question, however, whether this sum will survive "regulation" — the mechanism whereby the minister of finance holds back some monies previously promised, subject to good performance of the French economy. This year CNRS did well — losing only FF 50 million in the last analysis, in a budget of FF 6,000 million, but there are fears of worse controls to come — even up to 30 per cent. M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the minister for research and industry, is fighting this battle with his ministerial colleagues, in the hope of protecting research from the ravages of the government deficit.

Robert Walgate

## Professional liability

# Biologists at risk

Washington

As biology comes to have commercial implications, biologists need to insure themselves against lawsuits: their professional lives are getting risky. This seems to be the unwritten message of a brochure now being mailed to members of four US scientific societies concerned with biology and biomedicine.

A "professional liability insurance policy" is being offered for \$62 per year to members of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, the American Institute for Biological Sciences, the Society for Neuroscience and the Society for Medical Research. The policy is organized by Maginnis and Associates of Chicago and underwritten by the National Union Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh.

The policy covers up to \$1 million in costs, in addition to repayment of legal defence costs, for each "occurrence" or incident in which an insured scientist stands accused. It will also pay these costs if the lawsuit arises years after the policy has expired, so long as the events in question took place while the policy was active.

Maginnis officials say the policy covers scientists in situations where they do not normally have insurance cover. An employer such as a university, they note, might be sued for something a faculty member did and then decide the faculty member was negligent and sue him. Or the university might decide that the action in question was outside the faculty member's "scope of employment" and leave him to fight on his own.

The policy would also cover a scientist when consulting outside his regular employment, with a company or individually, whereas his regular employer's insurance would not.

Scientists are covered for advice they give to doctors or nurses about how to treat patients in case the patient later sues the scientist as part of a malpractice suit against his doctors. But the proposed insurance policy does not cover the scientist if he talks to the patient directly, so cancer gene specialists are advised not to hand out free advice to potential patients at cocktail parties.

Arthur C. Gentile, executive director of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, says the policy "covers just about every kind of professional activity". He cites a case where there was an explosion in a laboratory and people who were injured sued. Although the institution that owns the laboratory would probably be liable, the scientist running the laboratory might be named too. "The liability may not be clear and in the meantime you have legal costs" says Gentile.

The policy covers someone charged with libel or slander — such as harming another

## Budget trends in Britain and France

For Britain, the graph shows the evolution of the budget of the Science and Engineering Research Council, excepting salaries and corrected for inflation by the retail price index. The figures are given as percentages of the 1973 budget. This indicator of "true money for science" is almost exactly constant over the decade. By contrast, the roughly equivalent Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France shows a strong decline in the same

quantity over the 1970s, followed by a small rise in 1981 (the last year of the previous government). The strong increase in the past two years indicates the impact of the Mitterrand era. But the 1983 budget will only just pass that of a decade earlier. The continuation of the slope to 1985 is broadly guaranteed by the "law for research" of July this year but may be affected by the uncertain state of the teetering French economy.

Robert Walgate

