French science budget

Forecast 1983 expansion jeopardized by inflation

Sophia-Antipolis, France

THE swelling French science budget, voted at the end of 1982 to be 17.8 per cent greater in real terms this year than last, is in peril of being punctured by "rigueur" — the word French politicians use these days for "tightening the belt" or, more bluntly, for telling a minister that he will not get the funds he was promised.

There was rigueur last year too, but the Ministry of Research and Technology came out of it rather well, with an overall cut of around 10 per cent in current francs, according to latest estimates, leaving a substantial net real increase of 10 per cent. (The Ministry of Research and Technology's principal basic research council, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), was even better protected, seeing only a cut of FF50 million in a research budget, excluding salaries, of FF1,800 million.)

This year, however, the rigueur threatens to be harder. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, who must himself distribute the cuts to his ministers, is arguing strongly that if scientists are to be considered part of French society (they had complained of being forgotten), then they must also accept society's responsibilities. If rigueur turns into cuts of 25 per cent in current francs, the figure now being discussed, then science must take its share. Under such rigueur, the 17.8 per cent real increase in research budgets (plus 10 per cent inflation) would be nearly wiped out.

Thus Pierre Papon, director general of CNRS, has sent a letter to his laboratory directors forbidding them to spend more than 60 per cent of their promised and approved budget for 1983 — until they hear otherwise from him. Last year the cuts were restricted to large capital projects (dealt with by introducing slight delays) and "extra" money for certain research themes that CNRS hoped to promote; the ordinary running costs of laboratories were not affected. This year, as Papon's letters suggest and as Mauroy's argument implies, the money for materials and equipment may be affected also.

All this emerges as the achievements of the government in science and technology over the past year are put to the test in this little town in the south of France: Sophia-Antipolis, the ten-year-old science city on the Côte d'Azur. Four hundred scientists, administrators, technicians and industrialists have this week been asking whether the promises of the 3,000-strong national colloquium on science and technology in Paris last January have been

borne out. The answer so far is yes — with certain reservations. According to the organizer of this week's conference, biotechnologist Daniel Thomas of the University of Compiègne, the Paris meeting created a "psychological arena" among French scientists and industrialists:

Tasmanian dam

What price will buy off Hobart?

Canberra

THE tussle between the federal and state governments over the Tasmanian dam has been made more urgent by its general election, due on 5 March.

The Tasmanian government is considering a state cabinet submission valuing the resources of the south-west wilderness area at A\$2,500 million, a sum five times that offered by the Prime Minister, Mr Malcolm Fraser, on 20 January, by way of compensation for not building the Gordon-below-Franklin dam. Half of the A\$500 million package would cover the capital costs for building a coal-fired thermal power station of similar capacity to the proposed dam and the rest would subsidize the cost of the electricity generated to keep it on a par with hydro-electricity costs. By comparison, the dam will take 10 years to complete at a cost of A\$470 million and supply its output of 180 MW two to three times more cheaply.

Summarily dismissing the offer as being insufficient, Mr Robin Gray, the state premier, invited the federal government to make a higher bid. It appears that the state is planning not only more dams, but mines and timber logging on the world heritage site and the A\$2,500 million is allegedly the value of the total unexploited resources of the region.

Tasmania has been harder hit than the other states by the present recession and has the highest unemployment level. Industries are reluctant to move to Tasmania owing to the costs and delays of sea transport, emigration of skilled labour and the small domestic market of 400,000 people. One of the state's few attractions is its hydro-electricity, but cheap electricity alone cannot draw industries except those which have a large electricity bill, such as aluminium smelting.

Nevertheless the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) justifies the dam on the grounds that the present capacity will be exceeded not only by increased industrial development but also by increased domestic consumption.

they discovered for the first time since 1968 that they could talk to one another. At a pre-Sophia meeting in Lyons, last Friday, industry was pronouncing itself delighted at the number of doors that were opening to them on university research.

There are, however, still some complaints. The promised regional consultative committees on research have not been established, and certain regions such as the Rhône-Alpes would like much more autonomy. Also there is no sign, so far, of a common contract and career structure for all scientists, which would allow greater mobility among research organizations, universities and industry.

Robert Walgate

Another study by McLachlan Consultants, the group contracted by the Senate Select Committee on South-West Tasmania, using a different set of assumptions, disputes HEC's forecasts on demand, arguing that they are too high and that the dam or other alternatives need not be contemplated for another 3 years.

What appears certain, however, is that the dam will be a crucial issue in the general election. A recent poll shows 48 per cent of Australians are against the dam, 25 per cent are in favour of it and the rest are undecided. Its importance in turning the tide against the government is appreciated by some Liberal-National Party candidates in the seats at risk, who have declared themselves "anti-dammers". This is against the policy of their party, which decided against federal intervention to save the wilderness in December last year before it was placed on the world heritage list, and has since reiterated its position. The Australian Labor Party (ALP), on the other hand, which requires an additional 11 seats to take office, will, by a wide interpretation of the federal government's powers, legislate to stop the dam — a move which Tasmania may challenge in the High Court, the ultimate arbiter of constitutional power.

A coalition of conservation groups, including the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, decided last week to campaign for ALP House of Representatives candidates in 13 mainland seats, presently held by the government, which are vulnerable to swing less than 2 per cent.

These considerations in a snap election have increased the pressure for a negotiated settlement over the dam issue. Such a solution would neither compromise state rights, nor lose the anti-dam vote on the mainland seats but would placate the pro-dammers in the five Tasmanian seats. But the precedent would be set for other states to demand compensation for not exploiting the resources in their world heritage sites.

Vimala Sarma