French research

Pragmatism back in fashion

Paris

DURING the past year of economic crisis, the smile on the official portrait of President Francois Mitterrand has cast a rather baleful air over government offices. But now that smile is visibly brightening. Mitterrand's new boy, 38-year-old Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, is turning France from socialism to social democracy. Mitterrand looks happier with the new tag, and science may benefit as well.

Fabius's minister of research, M. Hubert Curien, is a technocrat, not a politician, and will not let ideology get in his way. Asked by a newspaper last week to choose his *leitmotif*, he replied "to choose and to act". This may sound banal, but Curien means it. And there is no time to hesitate. General elections are due in 1986, and the electorate has lost its taste for the *Partie Socialiste*. The President needs results.

While the French plan — to base economic growth on research — has life in it yet, the rose-tinted spectacles are gone. There is a new sense of realism, for example, on the French policies on the new technologies, in the past always suspect because they were so centralist (despite efforts to the contrary).

French centralism works beautifully in projects which require the mobilization of France like an army, as Napoleon knew. Thus the French have built the TGV (high speed train), conquered space (with Ariane) and introduced nuclear power (half French electricity is nuclear, and the proportion is rising). The recipe has not worked as well for the multifarious worlds of biotechnology and the microchip. Central projects in biotechnology and electronics launched two years ago have run into the sand.

The big surprise is that technocratic centralist France now admits this. The Prime Minister is now being told influentially that these projects must now be decentralized, made more responsive and various. One lesson learned is that while it may be logical for the Institut Pasteur to have just one company — Institut Pasteur Production — effectively controlling applications of Pasteur research, and for the medical research council INSERM to have a similar body controlling applications of monoclonals (Immunotech), commercial and practical realities make such unique relationships inefficient. So change may be expected there, and in many other places where centralism and "logic" have prevailed.

It helps that Curien has room in which to move. His ministry (research and technology) is rid of the short-term problems of heavy industry, which had begun to dominate the old ministry of industry and research in Fabius's time. But useful links between the industry and research administrations have been retained. Curien's

budget has also sensibly increased, and there is a prospect of his having more direct power over the budget of a number of organizations (such as the council of agricultural research, INRA), previously only influenced by the ministry.

One immediate task for Curien's ministry is to prepare the budget for 1986, the first year beyond the 1982-85 "law for research" defined by the first socialist science minister, M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement. That could be important. The law as it stands ties political hands. Curien may wish to try something new, such as abandoning the *programmes*

mobilisateurs which centralized policy in, for example, biotechnology and electronics.

Another hopeful sign is that French science has loosened up over the past two years. People are more aware of the outside world and more willing to change where change is needed. Even links between research and industry have improved — from a very low base. According to Philippe Lazar, director-general of the medical research council INSERM, "there's been a real shift in the ideology" both in industry and research.

So Mitterrand's new government has brought a sense of hope. But the Fabius honeymoon will soon be over. Then the marriage must begin.

Robert Walgate

UK biotechnology

Advertisement sails near wind

AN advertisement by the biotechnology group Porton International that appeared in *Nature* on 30 August (and in the US journals *Science* and *Bio/Technology*) appears to have caused a flurry of confusion, even discontent, about the relationship between the company and the Centre for Applied Microbiological Research (CAMR) at Porton, the British government laboratory converted from defence to civil purposes five years ago.

Other commercial companies are offended that the advertisement may have been taken to imply that CAMR is either a subsidiary of Porton International or that it may have an exclusive commercial relationship with Porton International. The Public Health Laboratory Service, whose chief function is to provide pathology services and research for British health services, says it wishes to "make it quite clear" that CAMR is "in no sense a subsidiary company of the advertiser".

Even before the transfer of CAMR from the British Ministry of Defence to the Public Health Service Laboratories, CAMR had been keenly interested in the commercial exploitation of some of its projects, notably that for the production of asparaginase used in cancer chemotherapy. Part of the case for not closing the laboratory five years ago was the argument that the British public investment in biotechnology required a laboratory with Porton's experience in microbiology.

The advertisement has given offence because CAMR is described as a component of several of the company's "ten divisions", in which connection it is listed together with operating subsidiaries of Porton International, and because of the use of an aerial photograph of the CAMR laboratory block and another of a new building as "the new production centre at CAMR, Porton". Complainants say that the achievement gives casual readers the impression that the facilities at Porton are the property of Porton International and

not the British Government. The advertisement does, however, say (on the same page) that Porton International "has the largest commitment of any company to research and development at CAMR", implying that the relationship between the two organizations is not exclusive.

Porton International, described in the advertisement as an "independent private group whose shareholders include world leading pension funds and institutional investors", is a company recently created by Wesley Haydon-Baillie with funds from UK and overseas financial institutions. Its British subsidiaries include the well-established company LH Fermentation. Porton International also has a licensing agreement on the herpes vaccine developed jointly at the University of Birmingham and CAMR, now in clinical trials, while other collaborative ventures are in the process of being negotiated.

The laboratory staff's views of the advertisement are mixed. Some point out that Porton International is the largest single customer for CAMR's research services, in which role it supports several members of the laboratory's staff and also has a lien on a proportion of the potential output of the production plant. Others, however, still resent the company's use of the name "Porton", first registered for commercial use in 1982.

By some accounts, the appearance of the advertisement may have complicated a series of negotiations which have been under way for some time between the Department of Health and a number of British companies with interests in biotechnology, the chief effect of which would be to convert part of CAMR into a research facility for a commercial consortium. This is not inconsistent with the insistence of the Public Health Laboratory Service that CAMR is independent and "that there is every intention that this independence should continue".

John Maddox