

## Chirac's newly won winning ways

*In the aftermath of the French election the consequences for science of the demise of the ministry for research may be overestimated.*

THE new Prime Minister of France, M. Jacques Chirac, is inevitably less demonstrative a supporter of the French research and development establishment than was his predecessor, M. Laurent Fabius, who had succeeded to that post from his earlier appointment as minister of research. So much was widely predicted in the weeks preceding the election, when M. Chirac's advisers were forever saying that the research bureaucracy had become a natural target for their cost-cutting decentralizing zeal (*Nature* 319, 729; 1986). Even so, it will have come as a shock to many people that these widely flagged intentions could have implied anything so radical as the abolition of the ministry of research (see page 295). Henceforth, unless M. Chirac changes tack, research will be no better distinguished from the other routine matters with which governments are concerned than it is, for example, in Britain. Is this not a sign that the new government intends for science the policies of malign neglect on which previous governments in Paris have habitually relied? And will not the result be that the resurgence of the past five years will be more rapidly put into reverse?

Fears such as these will be widely expressed in the next few weeks, but it is too soon to take them seriously. M. Chirac may intend to keep his election promise to let the French ministry of research go into limbo. It remains to be seen whether he will have the courage (some would say gall) also to reorganize along the lines of his manifesto the agencies by which French research has been supported over the past five or even fifty years, the research councils of which the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) is the chief. Before the election, M. Chirac's advisers were promising that the agricultural and medical research councils would be transferred to the corresponding ministries and that CNRS, by far the largest, would be broken into smaller pieces. To some extent, the motivation of these policies is doctrinal, born of the conviction more common on the right than the left that governments may create the framework for industrial innovation but can have no substantial (or useful) part to play in the execution of industrial strategy. Yet there is no suggestion that the French agricultural and health research councils will be much transformed by what M. Chirac plans for them. The crucial issues are not administrative but financial.

### Tradition

The future of CNRS is bound to be more difficult to decide. Traditionally, even before the Second World War, CNRS had several distinct but parallel functions. In recent decades, CNRS has become best known as the agency by which major efforts in basic science are undertaken, in fields as different as high-energy physics and geochemistry. Innovations of this kind have spawned the distinctive French efforts in space research and oceanography, now administratively independent. But CNRS is also the traditional partner, with the universities, in the conduct of academically based research, but in a manner that is interestingly distinct from that practised almost everywhere else. Most of its work in support of university research is channelled through the full-time CNRS employees who work alongside academics in university laboratories, exciting both the admiration of colleagues and their envy. On the face of things, it would

not be a disaster if some of this activity were transformed into that more familiar elsewhere in Western Europe and North America, the provision of research funds to university researchers by means of the familiar competition for research grants. Siting the administration of CNRS within the ministry of education in Paris will make it easier for M. Chirac and his colleagues to contemplate a change along these lines. Provided that the contemplation is serious, not a token prelude to predetermined and prejudiced reorganization, there may even be benefits to be won from change in this direction. Robbing CNRS of its role as the chief sponsor of major projects in basic research would be a more dangerous step to contemplate at this early stage.

### Change

The other obvious consequences of the post-election reorganization of the French government are inevitably harder to assess, if only because of the novelty (and ambiguity) of the arrangement that has harnessed a socialist president to a right-wing executive in the constitution of the government. President Mitterrand will be anxious to ensure that the executive and the French Assembly do not chip away at his constitutional authority over French foreign policy, which will make the whole area of French collaboration with other countries a potential no-man's land in the months ahead. The chances are that the President will be able to sustain those French policies stemming from his personal enthusiasm for European collaboration in high technology. It would not be surprising if the Prime Minister, as a *quid pro quo*, were to succeed in aligning France with Britain in scepticism about the need for continued investment in collaborative high-energy physics through the agency of CERN, the high-energy physics laboratory at Geneva. Provided that both partners in this uneasy government alliance acknowledge that the immense benefits that have accrued to France in the past five years are a prize that cannot be lightly thrown away, even developments such as these need not spell doom.

Newly elected governments tend to brim over with enthusiasm better suited to routine matters of public administration than to the proper care for sensitive parts of public life, among which research may be the most delicate. It is one thing to nationalize (or denationalize) a string of banks or other businesses, replacing one bunch of shareholders by another, and quite another to pretend to know what decisions should be made, and how, in a field in which even the practitioners are at a loss to tell just what needs doing. So what M. Chirac must keep clearly in mind, during the first few heady weeks when enthusiasm may get the better of his colleagues' judgement, is that France has done extremely well in basic research during the past decade for reasons which are not sufficiently explained by the way in which money has been thrown at some researchers during the past five years. During the same period, for reasons which are probably quite separate, the French telecommunications network has ceased to be a joke and become something of a marvel instead. Nobody's interest would be served if the new government, by pretending that it knows not merely the questions but the answers, were to make a mess of this beneficent development. □