CNRS

Union power may not erode

THE 20,000 staff, £600-million budget French national research council, CNRS, is to be given a lighter management structure and put back in the hands of the 'best' scientists after years of technocratic rule from the top and foot-dragging by trades unions.

That at least is the theory now being put out by the new CNRS administration, encouraged by the French prime minister, Jacques Chirac. Last week Chirac and his ministers gave approval for a new de-unionized structure for the research council's elected evaluation committee, the 1,000-strong Comité National. This gives back to CNRS power lost earlier in the year when the previous Comité National was declared illegal on a technicality, and clarifies at least part of the new government's policy towards science.

According to Serge Feneuille, director-general of CNRS, one of the new slogans will be that "science cannot be unionized", and the restructuring of the Comité National confirms it. In the elections, which will probably be complete by April 1987, at least half the candidates, especially the most senior, will no longer have to declare a union affiliation but may stand under their own name. Places on the committee for the engineers, technicians and administrators who are most unionized are to fall.

But although these developments are meant to loosen the hold of the unions over the system of promotions and grants, the new structure, according to its opponents, will shift power from the unions to another sector that could be equally conservative, university lecturers who do no research, but who will now be free to vote and stand for election. This move is a concession to university opinion that would have preferred CNRS to be dismantled. The resulting compromise, say critics, will merely hamstring the scientists in a new way. In the life sciences, many non-researching physicians from teaching hospitals will be joining the evaluation committees to make their opinions of French biology, and biologists, felt.

Whatever the politics of the Comité, there is some relief among 'les admissibles', the 512 young hopefuls who were appointed to full-time life-long CNRS research positions earlier this year by the previous Comité National, only to have the Comité declared illegal. At least now there is a legal Comite to look into their case, but, according to CNRS, they will have to take their examinations again. The same number of posts, 512, will be made available, and the resulting appointments will be counted as 1986 appointments with no bearing on the level of further recruitment in 1987. The proper 1987 appointments round (some 400–450 posts) will then take place in September and October, with a return to a normal spring timetable in 1988.

Meanwhile, Feneuille is known to have considerable interest in the introduction of short-term postdoctoral positions into the French research system which now locks itself into the appointment of a scientist for life at the age of 26. Feneuille believes that French industry, in which science is severely under-represented is in need of 'irrigation' with scientists. He argues that a system of postdoctoral appointments to CNRS in excess of the long-term need would allow the scientific irrigation of industry, as happens regularly in the United States and Britain. Such a change, however, could be political dynamite in France. **Robert Walgate**

Soviet academy

Marchuk in ministerial mode

THE Soviet Academy of Sciences, already regarded by Soviet planners as the chief coordinator of all pure and applied research in the Soviet Union, is to acquire a new role. Addressing the Supreme Soviet (the Soviet Union's bicameral parliament) last week, Gurii Marchuk, the new president of the academy, said that it is to start producing forecasts for the major areas of science so as to identify the parts of the national economy ripe for development.

The new role of forecasting is part of a major reorganization of the structure and management system in line with the restructuring of the whole Soviet economy launched by Mr Mikhail Gorbachev last year. Under the new scheme, Marchuk said, the "specialized departments" of the academy will play a larger part, so as to direct scientific institutions towards the most important problems of fundamental and applied science.

How these changes will work is not yet clear. The major innovation so far of the Gorbachev era in science and technology, the "interbranch scientific–technical complexes" (MNTKs) are, in Marchuk's words "producing stress and difficulties". These organizations were supposed to "accelerate scientific and technical progress" by cutting across the interdepartmental bureaucracy and the barriers between science and industry. (At present the gap between initial breakthrough and large-scale production is said to be as much as 11 years.)

But as yet, the only MNTK to have received official commendation is the Paton Institute of Electric Welding of the Ukranian Academy of Sciences, which has existed for many years and which served as the model for the MNTK concept.

Marchuk also repeated in his speech the targets outlined in the draft plan for 1987 (computers — both main-frame and personal; plasma, radiation and laser treatment of specialized materials; powder metallurgy; and biotechnology) and the Comecon Comprehensive Programme for Scientific and Technical Progress up to the year 2000. But, he warned, if the Soviet Union's "fine scientific and technical foundation for attaining the highest world standards" is to be properly employed, the planners, and in particular those involved in the capital construction of new enterprises, must play their part.

This is a new line. Hitherto, scientists have blamed industrialists for not using their results; more recently industrialists have begun to retaliate, saying that the results they were offered were unsuitable in practice. Marchuk now seems to be arguing that scientists can produce what industry needs only if the planners properly specify what is required.

But the real novelty of Marchuk's speech was not so much what he said but the fact that he addressed the Supreme Soviet in a virtually ministerial manner. As former head of the State Commission for Science, of course, he is no stranger to the Supreme Soviet. But the fact that he would have addressed it in this way at this early stage suggests that his presidency of the academy will be more vigorous than that of his predecessor. **Vera Rich**

Networking the begging-bowl

Strasbourg

THE general assembly of the European Science Foundation (ESP), the most penniless and self-effacing of European science institutions, came to no particularly decisive conclusions last week. But the foundation did agree that it would ask its members (emphatically not governments but the research councils that governments support) for extra funds to keep its network programme alive.

That programme springs from an inquiry by ESF two years ago, at the behest of the European Commission, which showed that European researchers were too often isolated from each other. Largely because of a donation of a million French francs, the network programme last year brought 400 people together at 35 international meetings. The flavour, this year, is polar research, on which everybody is keen. But there are no funds, whence the begging bowl. Robert Walgate