

French science set to shift up a gear

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France's new socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, made a promising start last week to fulfilling a pledge to make research a national priority.

The creation of an independent ministry for national education, research and technology has given a prominent political status to research in Paris. Responsibility in the previous administration was relegated to a junior minister; in contrast, the new ministry ranks third in importance after the ministries of employment and of justice in the ministerial hierarchy.

The appointment of well-known geologist Claude Allègre as minister for education, research and technology has also been broadly welcomed by scientists (see below). His reputation for single-mindedness is widely judged as precisely what is needed to overcome the huge problems facing French universities and research organizations, including widespread resistance to reform.

The new government is not expected to outline its policies until next week. But during the election campaign the Socialist party promised to reverse the cutbacks in research budgets and jobs made since the conservatives came to power in 1993.

Allègre's hand should be strengthened in talks with the finance ministry by the fact that he is one of Jospin's closest friends and advisers, and by the political weight of his secretary of state for education, Ségolène Royal.

The government's promises have also pleased trade unions. They have demanded recruitment of 5 per cent annually — or 550 researchers — over five years to offset the threat to a sensible age structure in laboratories posed by the expected wave of retirement between now and 2005, when more than half of the French research workforce retires.

Indeed, the victory of the Left has been

broadly welcomed by scientists who remain deeply distrustful of the Right's commitment to research. Part of this distrust stems from the 1986 government's attempt to dismantle the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and to impose hasty reforms of the university system.

Later conservative governments recognized that imposition could lead to unpopularity. But they failed to produce workable policies, leading one critic to remark: "There has been no pilot in the plane."

Six months ago, for example, Guy Aubert, the director-general of the CNRS, was poised to introduce a broad reform of his organization. But François d'Aubert, then secretary of state for research, told him to put it in a drawer until after the general elections — at the time scheduled for next year.

Observers in Paris believe the main impact of the Left's victory may be to end this period of policy paralysis. They argue that substantial increases in support for science are unlikely given the pressure on funds. However, a reversal of the downward trend should ease tensions between the government and the research community, thus engineering a climate more conducive to reform.

Optimism is also being generated by the personal credentials of both Jospin and Allègre. Jospin has a genuine enthusiasm for education and research, and his approach as minister of education from 1988 to 1992 is widely considered as having been both energetic and progressive. "It's the best government [for science], at least on paper, that we have had for a long time," says Pierre Chambon, head of the Institute of Genetics

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Entente cordiale: President Jacques Chirac with education minister Claude Allègre (right).

and Molecular Biology near Strasbourg.

Allègre himself was special adviser to Jospin when the latter was minister of education. Together, they launched an ambitious expansion plan for the universities — and introduced measures to give universities much greater autonomy. In the recent election campaign, Allègre promised that the Left would accelerate both actions and embark on a complete rethink of the research and education system.

One of the major problems that the new government will face stems from the status of civil servant enjoyed by all public researchers. Salaries often account for more than three-quarters of the running costs of research agencies, leaving individual scientists short of the resources needed for meaningful research, and denying the agencies the means to develop strategic programmes.

But any idea of abandoning the system of universal life tenure in favour of the competitive short-term contracts common in Anglo-Saxon countries remains taboo in France. Given that there is little prospect of massive increases in the research budget, the new government will be obliged to make better use of existing resources, says Chambon, arguing that this in turn will mean tough reforms to reduce the share of research organizations' budgets taken up by salaries.

Some worry that Allègre's impatience for reform is a recipe for conflict between the government and the scientific community — he is a controversial personality, known for his autocratic tendencies and a talent for making enemies. But many seem willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, arguing also that Allègre will ultimately have to modify his approach in line with the government's commitment to negotiated reform.

Says Chambon, "I prefer someone who makes the occasional mistakes to someone who doesn't move; because we haven't moved for years now; nothing is being done and we are falling into mediocrity. Allègre is the only person who can shift the universities and research; he has original ideas and vision, and if he can't succeed then no-one can". □

Geologist takes over the ministerial helm

[PARIS] Claude Allègre, France's new minister for national education, research and technology, holds the 1986 Crafoord Prize, awarded annually by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for outstanding basic research in disciplines not covered by the Nobel prizes.

A geologist, Allègre has held the chair of life science at the University of Paris-VII,

headed the Institut de Physique de Globe in Paris from 1976 to 1986, and was president of the French geological survey — the Bureau des Recherches Géologiques et Minières — from 1992 until last month, when he was fired by the outgoing government.

Allègre is no stranger to politics. He became a member of the steering

committee of the Socialist party in 1987, and a member of its executive board in 1990, resigning in 1992 in protest at what he described as the party's lack of ideas.

Allègre himself was a member of the European Parliament from 1989 to 1994, and has been *conseiller régional* (regional councillor) of the Languedoc-Roussillon region since 1992.