

PHYSICS COMMUNITY

With New Governments in Power, Changes in Science Policy Are Expected in France, and Hoped for in the UK

It is essential for scientists to take an interest in the administration of their own affairs or else the professional civil servant will step in—and then heaven help you!
—Ernest Rutherford

The incumbent governments in both France and the UK lost in elections this past spring. In France, where power has hopped back and forth between the socialists and conservatives in each of the five parliamentary elections held since 1981, the Socialist Party, with Lionel Jospin as prime minister, regained power in June. And in the UK, the Labour Party, with Tony Blair at the helm, is now in power for the first time since Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979. Will the party changes lead to policy changes for science?

Happy with Allègre

Happy to have a scientist in charge of science, the French scientific community has welcomed Claude Allègre as France's new minister of national education, research and technology. His appointment is seen by many, as Sebastien Balibar, a physicist with France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), puts it, "as a clear sign that education and research have become again a priority in France."

Allègre is an internationally recognized geochemist. Among many other honors, he received the Swedish Academy of Sciences' Crafoord Prize in 1986, the highest honor in his field (for which there is no Nobel Prize). He was director of the Institute of World Physics in Paris from 1976 to 1986, and he served as president of the Office of Geological and Mining Research from 1992 until this spring, when his appointment was abruptly ended by the conservative government.

Allègre is known as a man of energy and action—and as someone who speaks bluntly and can sometimes be difficult to deal with—a reputation earned during his stint in 1988–91 as special adviser to then-Minister of Education Jospin. Overall, Allègre's prominence and experience, as well as his close friendship with Jospin, have raised hopes for French science. "I am sure things will really move and change," says mathematician Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, of the Institut des Hautes

France's new science minister Claude Allègre promises action; in the UK, where John Battle is the new science minister, things look less promising.

Etudes Scientifiques near Paris.

Indeed, most French scientists welcomed the victory of the Socialist Party, which has traditionally been a stronger supporter of science than has the Right. The attempt in 1986 to dismantle CNRS, for example, still has scientists wary of the conservatives. Off to a promising start, Jospin has restored science to the ministerial level—it had been demoted by the previous government. Allègre's broad range of responsibilities includes education at all levels, industrial research and national research agencies, such as the national space and atomic energy programs. All together, Allègre's ministry accounts for more than a quarter of the French government's annual budget, and employs over half of the country's civil servants, according to Allègre's special adviser, geophysicist Vincent Courtillot.

The overriding goal of Jospin's government is to decrease unemployment from its current 12.5%, and that is also Allègre's main goal, Courtillot says. Pre-university education is his second priority.

Other ideas that are being talked about—but that haven't all been formally addressed by Allègre's ministry—include revamping the review systems within organizations such as CNRS to make them more international and less bureaucratic; Allègre is also known to favor promoting more teaching and research exchanges among universities, research centers and industry, as well as increased contact between the universities and France's elite engineering schools; and he is critical of the very strong emphasis on math in the competitive part of

France's higher education system. Allègre envisions making "many important small changes" rather than a major reform, Courtillot says.

A common concern, even among Allègre's supporters, is that he tends to act brashly. For example, it's widely believed that he plans to create several hundred new positions at CNRS. But CNRS physicist Balibar cautions against moving too quickly: "The research system is fragile, and does not like strong fluctuations, either up or down." And some worry that creating new research positions may come at the expense of equipment and facilities. Says one scientist, whose view is widely echoed, "We are hopeful, but also a little scared."

Battle: no major changes

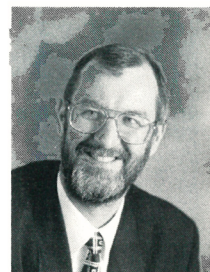
"A strong science and engineering research base is a vital part of my vision for a new Britain," wrote Tony Blair a few weeks before Labour's victory in May. But the British scientific community isn't expecting any real change in the government's policy toward science anytime soon. That's because the Labour Party promised not to raise taxes, and to follow the outgoing conservative government's spending plans for 18 months, while it reviews all public spending, says Brian Foster, a high-energy physicist at the University of Bristol and an adviser to the Labour Party when it was in opposition.

John Battle is the new minister of a new portfolio—science, energy and industry—that raises science to a higher ministerial level. But, as might be expected, the elevated post comes with more responsibilities: manufacturing and services; science and technology, including telecommunications; energy and the environment. So while Battle will have more clout than did his predecessor, many worry that his big brief may spread him too thin. In addition, because science remains in

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CLAUDE ALLÈGRE



JOHN BATTLE

the Department of Trade and Industry, where it was moved from the cabinet office in 1995, adds John Mulvey, a retired University of Oxford physicist and director of the independent lobby group Save British Science, "We are also concerned that the government will see science too much as an adjunct of industry."

Although Battle isn't a scientist—he trained for the Catholic priesthood but then took his degree in English—he's said to be energetic, enthusiastic and receptive to ideas from the scientific community. He's been a member of Parliament since 1987, and while Labour was in opposition he served as shadow minister of energy and of science and technology. Battle reports to Margaret Beckett, a metallurgist by training, who is secretary of state for trade and industry and cabinet minister for science and technology; Anne Campbell, a statistician who is trusted by the scientific community, will help with the science part of Battle's brief.

"The hope is that Beckett will prove more active in science policy than her predecessor," says Mulvey. "But we know nothing yet." Battle hadn't yet set specific priorities for science when

PHYSICS TODAY went to press. But many in the British scientific community expect more discussion upon release of the Dearing report, a nationwide review of funding and organization of higher education inherited from the previous government. Also of keen interest to the community will be the government's choice of new chief executives for the UK's leading funders for the physical sciences—the research councils for particle physics and astronomy, and for the engineering and physical sciences.

"If the country wants to maintain its excellent standards across a wide range of scientific disciplines, then government will have to put money into it," says Mulvey. And, despite the 18-month freeze on government spending, Save British Science is lobbying the new government to at least reverse cuts in research and higher education that were planned by the old government—cuts of about £52 million (about \$88 million) for 1997 and £93 million for 1998 (both values are adjusted for inflation). Says Mulvey, "This sort of start would be a timely signal of intent, and have an enormously encouraging impact on morale."

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ruary, page 58). And since December, CERN management has sought other ways to reduce spending over the next few years. Now CERN has come up with a plan that cuts costs and also helps allay staff worries of further sweeping salary cuts.

The plan is for individual staff members to sign up for various optional programs that would cut personnel costs. Their options include taking early retirement, accepting less pay now for more time off later, or working reduced hours for a proportionate decrease in pay. The details have yet to be worked out, but management and staff both hope that enough money will be saved by these voluntary measures; otherwise, CERN may again impose levies or take other unilateral actions. "We are in favor of the voluntary measures, providing there is a guarantee of stable employment conditions," says Derek Ball, vice president of CERN's staff association. "We'll try to convince staff to take these measures."

Stability is indeed a key issue at CERN, and one that has stirred up tensions in the past months. Some CERN council delegates, who represent the organization's 19 member states, have talked about restructuring the salary and promotion systems, and of reconsidering other benefits such as pension plans and health insurance. The staff association has actively fought such actions, arguing that CERN cannot legally change its contract with its employees before 2001, when the current five-year review period is up.

Although the recent proposal may allay staff fears, many council delegates feel that management is being too soft on the staff, "in view of the financial burdens on the people in the member states," says Dutch delegate Bernard de Wit. And the council, management and staff are discussing "ways to make savings beyond voluntary measures—though this topic is not yet on the council's agenda," he adds. But Maurice Robin, CERN's director of administration, defends management's proposal: "Surely from the point of view of the workload at CERN, it's best to use a consensus approach," he says. And, referring to the nearly 1400 appeals made by staff members to protest the 2.5% crisis levy, Robin adds, "You can't have this kind of phenomenon every year." Decisions on the appeals, lodged with the Administrative Tribunal of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, Switzerland, are expected in about a year.

Meanwhile, says Ball, "What we'd like to do is get on with building the LHC."

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CERN Plans to Reduce Costs through Voluntary Pay Cuts

When CERN decided last December to build the Large Hadron Collider, or LHC, sooner than originally planned, it was clear that the organization's budget would be tight. It was also clear that personnel spending

would be a prime target for cutting corners. This year, about 9 million Swiss francs (about \$6.3 million), or 2% of CERN's personnel budget, is being saved by docking all CERN salaries by 2.5% (see PHYSICS TODAY, Feb-



"THE CERN STAFF ASSOCIATION will not stand by idly while the announced financial and intellectual erosion continues," said Michel Vitasse, the association's president. Vitasse (fourth from right) is flanked by vice presidents Derek Ball (left) and Jean-Pol Matheys at a press conference in April held to publicize the association's concerns about the future of CERN.