

New CNRS Chief Gets Marching Orders

PARIS—Geochemist Claude Allègre, France's new minister for education and research, is hoping this week to kick off his promised campaign to re-energize French science by appointing physicist Catherine Bréchnignac as the first woman director-general of France's giant research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). As *Science* went to press, the Council of Ministers of the new Socialist government was expected to approve the appointment at its 16 July meeting. Bréchnignac, highly respected as both a researcher and an administrator, will be charged by Allègre with slimming down the CNRS's weighty bureaucracy and attracting more young scientists into its ranks, in what many see as the first step in a far-reaching shake-up of French scientific institutions.

The CNRS, with 11,600 researchers and a \$2.45 billion annual budget, is France's largest public research agency and the backbone of its fundamental research effort. Bréchnignac will replace Guy Aubert, whose term as CNRS director-general expires on 18 July. Aubert was appointed by the previous conservative government and was closely associated with its budget-pruning policies. Bréchnignac's appointment was warmly welcomed by colleagues who spoke to *Science*. "Her scientific qualifications are incontestable," says Michel Broyer, director of the CNRS's Ionic and Molecular Spectrometry unit at the University of Lyons. Mathemati-

cian Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, director of the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques near Paris, adds that Bréchnignac "is an extremely direct woman, who presents her point of view but is capable of listening to others and changing her mind if she is convinced."

Bréchnignac, who has an international scientific reputation in the field of atomic clusters, is no stranger to the CNRS administration. In 1995, after 6 years as director of the Aimé Cotton physics laboratory at the University of Paris's Orsay campus, she was named scientific director of the CNRS's physics and mathematics department. Bourguignon says that during her tenure as department chief, Bréchnignac "always gave priority to research. ... She is passionately engaged in science."

Bréchnignac will need to muster all her administrative skills to fulfill what the government expects her to do as the new CNRS head. Geophysicist

Vincent Courtillot, Allègre's chief adviser, says that she will soon be receiving a detailed "assignment letter" from Allègre, spelling out an ambitious program of changes at the agency. One of her first tasks will be to ask the scientific directors of all seven departments to resign. Although many of them may be reappointed to the new team, in some cases new people will be asked to take over. Bréchnignac will also be expected to carry out a sweeping program of "debureaucratization" at the agency. "The central administration of



New broom. Physicist Catherine Bréchnignac.

the CNRS is too fat and complex," Courtillot says. "We are thinking of cutting down by a factor of 2." Similarly, the plethora of committees and meetings that fill researchers' time will also be drastically reduced. At present, "any ranking scientist over 45 thinks he must be on a plane traveling to a meeting in Paris twice a week," says Courtillot. "This is a disaster."

Another major priority for the new director-general will be to recruit young scientists to gradually replace the CNRS's aging scientific talent pool. Allègre had earlier announced his intention to end a freeze on scientific employment and to hire several thousand young researchers in the universities and public research agencies, beginning this autumn (*Science*, 13 June, p. 1638). Moreover, Courtillot says, the government expects the CNRS and other agencies to do more to accommodate researchers from the universities and industry who want to spend time in CNRS labs, and vice versa. Another possible change, which is certain to be controversial, is to limit how long senior scientists are encouraged to do research. "We are not so sure all of them should expect to continue in a full-time research career," says Courtillot.

But one change that will be welcome to many researchers is a reversal of the previous government's policy of earmarking large sums of money for special programs and projects, often at the expense of individual labs. "We want the CNRS to restore funding to the labs, so they can function on the philosophy that you can't program discoveries," Courtillot says. "A research policy does not consist of programs, but of hiring high-quality scientists. When you hire someone good, you've made your research policy for the next 20 years."

—Michael Balter

GENETIC RESEARCH

Clinton Backs Broad Genetic Safeguards

In an effort to prevent the misuse of human genetic data—and remove a potential roadblock from some types of genetic research—President Clinton this week urged Congress to pass a new federal law forbidding discrimination based on a person's genes. Speaking to a select audience of Administration officials, legislators, and health care activists at the White House on 14 July, Clinton said he wants to make it illegal for any health insurance company to deny coverage to a healthy person simply because medical data indicate that the person is at risk for an inherited disease. He said he will join forces with a bipartisan group in Congress to write legislation to that effect.

"It is wrong for an insurance company

to use genetic information to deny coverage," Clinton said, adding that "we cannot allow our progress in science to be undermined" by concerns over the misuse of genetic data. Clinton said that people are so worried that negative genetic test results will cause them to lose insurance coverage that many are afraid to participate in genetic research.

Although the president did not release the text of his proposed legislation, he said that he aims to build upon several existing bills, including the Kassebaum-Kennedy package that became law in 1996. That legislation makes it illegal for anyone who provides group health insurance to deny coverage on the basis of genetic information. Ac-

cording to a White House information sheet, the president would like to extend this protection to people who buy individual policies. He would also like to make it illegal for companies to raise premiums on the basis of genetic data.

In addition to banning discrimination, Clinton is calling for new regulatory controls to prevent the "inappropriate disclosure of genetic information." Although the details are yet to be worked out, a White House statement says the president would like to protect privacy by "preventing health plans from releasing or demanding access to genetic information" without the consent of clients. He would specifically limit the sharing of genetic data among insurance providers and authorize the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services