

French 1984 budget

Fabius backs space, electronics

Paris

THE French Government has been "super-selectif" about its research and development budget for next year, said industry and research minister Laurent Fabius last week when introducing his first budget. The total to be spent in 1984 on civil research and development increases by 15.5 per cent (to FF 36,800 million, or £3,700 million) but the figure seems to conceal big differences in the increases offered to different sectors of the budget.

Space science does spectacularly well — with a 28 per cent increase (to FF 4,100 million, or £340 million) in the total budget of the national space agency, CNES (Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales). CNES does even better in terms of "programme authorizations" (money excluding salaries which may be committed but not necessarily spent). Under this heading, CNES gains 38 per cent next year, marking the shift of French space interests away from international collaborations (such as Spacelab) towards its national programme.

Back at the ministry, Fabius is giving his staff a 20 per cent increase (to FF 1,220 million or £102 million) in their discretionary funds to be spent mainly on selected applied research and on higher degree grants to students. Spending on electronics, through the ministry plan for the industry (the *filère électronique*) grows to FF 1,800 million (£150 million) — only 12 per cent up on 1983 — but support for the French computer company CII-Honeywell-Bull doubles to FF 1,000 million (£83 million).

The budgets of other organizations will, however, increase more modestly, usually by 10 per cent or so. Thus the principal source of support for basic science, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), will have a 10 per cent increase to FF 7,600 million (£630 million) but will have to pay increased salaries out of that. Programme authorizations at the CNRS do a little better, rising by 12 per cent to FF 1,900 million (£160 million). The medical research council, INSERM, whose relatively few researchers fare well compared with their biological colleagues at CNRS, has a 10 per cent increase in programme authorizations to FF 465 million (£39 million); and the agricultural research council INRA, increasingly supporting biotechnology for agriculture, will have a 14 per cent increase in programme authorizations to FF 373 million (£31 million).

However, everything does not depend on money alone, and French laboratory directors should benefit next year from a loosening of ties on exactly how to spend their budgets. Until now, French research budgets have been defined and controlled in suffocating detail. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy promised recently that new

decrees will enable scientists to spend, for example, travel money on equipment or materials funds on a conference, allowing more supple management of what money there is.

But all these figures have to be compared with a 6 per cent inflation rate, and what is worse a 16 per cent fall of the franc against the US dollar over the past 12 months. The strength of the dollar (or the weakness of the franc) hits biologists especially hard, according to the secretary-general of the Institut Pasteur, Mme Marchand, last week. Although the Institut Pasteur will apparently do well next year, with a 32 per cent increase of government support, but this is mostly all capital spending on a new building for biotechnology. Running expenses at the Pasteur will increase by "considerably less" than 10 per cent, whereas almost all journals and laboratory materials have to be bought in dollars. This will force the Pasteur to rely even more heavily



Fabius — his is the only ministry with an increasing payroll

on private support and industrial contracts, which usually make up just half its income, Mme Marchand said.

One other weakness of the budget is its provision for new posts for scientists and technicians. There will be some 710 new posts, giving a 2 per cent increase in posts for scientists and a mere 1 per cent for technicians. This contrasts with the promise in the "law for science" passed by M. Fabius's predecessor of 4.5 per cent per year (on average) to 1985.

Even so, no other ministry has any new jobs whatever to hand out in the 1984 budget. For the government as a whole, the average budget increase is only 7 per cent. So science, if not exactly doing well, has less to complain of than most other sectors of the economy. For the future, everything depends on whether and how fast the French economy can pick up. There are signs that it is doing so, helped in the export market by the weak franc. **Robert Walgate**

France on Europe

Paris

FRANCE is too small, the French Government has concluded; too small, to sustain alone its policy of technological growth. This seems to be the feeling behind a sixteen-page memorandum on industry and research deposited by the French Government with the Council of the European Commission (the European Community's decision-making body).

The document "A New Step for Europe: Common Ground for Industry and Research" lists six major steps that Europe must take to avoid the "grave menace" of industrial and technological underdevelopment.

- Increase the combined spending power on research. ESPRIT, the \$1,500 million commission-inspired programme on information technology (likely to be agreed in December) is the first step but France now says "we must go beyond that".

- Open public markets for technology across Europe. (For example, though this is not mentioned in the memorandum, British Telecom contracts should be open to French and other European industry and, in parallel, the French PTT to British industry and so on.)

- Be prepared to raise tariffs, if only temporarily, against imports from outside Europe to protect an emerging industry. (French efforts to keep out Japanese video recorders come to mind.)

- Support the formation of trans-European industry.

- Support a new domain of community action, where specialist European groupings might be encouraged to tackle specific subjects (as the European Space Agency now tackles space, for example). This would not always require participation of the European Community.

- Launch projects to improve the physical communications of European countries (such as a continental high speed train, and the Channel Tunnel).

Speaking on Monday, industry and research minister Laurent Fabius argued strongly that the French proposals are practical, were not interventionist and could be achieved without the creation of new bureaucracies. M. Fabius said he has "no shopping list" of projects — that would be for agreement among member states — but that the topics that came immediately to mind were informatics, robotics, biotechnology, optical fibres, the exploitation of the sea and a regularization of degrees and diplomas to improve the mobility of researchers.

The proposals clearly have political support at the very highest levels in France, and can be expected to be pursued vigorously when France takes up — for six months — the presidency of the Council of the European Community in January 1984.

Robert Walgate