

Autonomy by stealth for French universities

Paris. Thirteen conservative deputies last week provoked a rerun of an old debate on the status of higher education in France; they are promoting a bill in the National Assembly that would give universities a modestly greater say in their own affairs.

This seemingly trivial private members' bill has reopened the traditional struggle between those who maintain that the homogeneity of the Napoleonic university system is an obstacle to progress (the Girondins) and those who see a plot to lead France down the road to an Anglo-Saxon model of competitive universities with restricted entry (the Jacobins).

Successive left-wing governments have attempted to reform the university system while keeping its nationalized status — the most recent with some success — while the right has regarded privatization as a remedy. Both have been impeded by the resistance to change of powerful lobbies of students and *professeurs*.

Francois Fillon, the new conservative minister for higher education and research, seems bent on continuing this political ping-pong, but by stealth. Alain Devaquet, Fillon's counterpart in the 1986 conservative government, resigned after making public plans to end the cherished principle of open access and to let universities set their own fees; there were riots, during which police killed one student accidentally.

So Fillon has emphasized the continuity of his policies with those of the former Socialist government, playing down talk of change. "I remain attached to pragmatism", he says. But doubts as to his intentions surfaced last week in the National Assembly, during debate of the contentious bill, which he supports.

The bill would let universities opt out of the 1984 Savary law, which specifies national norms for such things as the composition of a university council, course structures and basic curricula, the organization and status of associated laboratories and financial controls. It would also extend indefinitely the three-year dispensation already accorded to the seven new universities created over the past two years.

Opting out would allow universities to experiment with new forms of organization, perhaps cutting the number of classes for a subject or switching to a tutorial system. Fillon says this would allow universities to adapt themselves to local needs. But for the time being he discounts the possibility of universities opting out completely, saying that he will consider requests for "experiments" only on a case-by-case basis, and not if they were "contrary to the objectives of a university, or would jeopard-

ize its national character".

Fillon expects no more than a dozen opt-out requests this year. By choosing this system, which requires a majority vote by a university council, instead of imposing change, Fillon may ensure that reform gains momentum gradually, while avoiding dissent.

In last week's debate by deputies, Julian Dray (Socialist) described Fillon's strategy as "the art of camouflage". Why, if the bill was as harmless as the government claimed, had it chosen to debate it when the students were sitting examinations? Dray accused Fillon of "chasing the myth of America's competitive universities," and asked, "but for one Berkeley or Harvard, how many state universities are without talent?"

Officials at the higher education union (SGEN-CFDT) are also unconvinced by Fillon's promise to maintain financial equality between universities in different regions,

to uphold the national degree and to forbid universities from raising course fees. "We don't want to create a hierarchy, where a degree, from say Strasbourg, has more value than one from somewhere else," they say; "it's the thin end of a wedge towards creating an Anglo-Saxon system, which we do not want."

Ironically, Fillon's plans for university autonomy are sustained by a system introduced by Socialist minister Lionel Jospin, which predetermines a university's activities in a four-year contract negotiated with the ministry. That allows a university to spend its budget as it chooses and gives it the freedom to be different.

Fillon has further strengthened the principle by uniting the previously distinct contracts for research, teaching and general expenditure. The final piece in Fillon's plans for greater university autonomy is legislation, expected to be in place by autumn 1995, that would devolve day-to-day administration, including control of staff careers and budgets, from his ministry to each university. "It's ridiculous," he says, "that every decision, no matter how small, needs permission from Paris."

Declan Butler

ESF in quandary over EC relations

Munich. The search by the European Science Foundation (ESF) for a more relevant role in the new Europe continues, but last week's council meeting at Strasbourg came no nearer to deciding exactly what it should be.

ESF represents 59 national research councils and institutions in 21 countries, nine more than the membership of the European Communities (EC). At present, it spends its FF60 million annual budget on two major activities: science programmes and science (people) networks. It is not a grant-giving agency, but instead provides funds to facilitate communication and collaboration between research groups in different countries. The ESF's third major activity — 'Euroconferences' — is supported by a further ECU1.1 million grant under the EC Framework 3 programme (1990-94).

Relations with the EC are at the root of ESF's soul-searching. Last year, it embarked on a 'strategic reassessment' at the urging of French members, who argued that the 20-year-old foundation should match its goals to the changed political circumstances in Europe, and should in particular seek to complement EC research activities with more clearly defined strategies. Member states were asked to put forward their suggestions; it is still hoped that there will be agreement in time for the general assembly in November.

Last week's council meeting brought consensus only slightly nearer. Internal changes have been the more easily agreed. Thus there is general agreement to strengthen

the influence and decision-making power of the standing committees, which judge the quality and relevance of grant applications. The variable importance of these committees has long been a sore point.

On the other hand, complementary links with the EC are seen as a double-edged sword. There is agreement that the ESF should have a more formal advisory function at the European level, and that there should be links with the EC allowing ESF's independent advice to be efficiently sought and given.

But some members fear that the foundation could end up playing a role subservient to the EC, thereby allowing its fiercely guarded political independence to be eroded. The suggestion that ESF could provide a grant refereeing service for the EC and smaller member nations has been coolly received for the same reason, and also because individual countries believe they can manage with the refereeing arrangements they already have.

This introspection takes place against a general background of change at Strasbourg. Peter Fricker, former head of Switzerland's research council, the Nationalfonds, took over as secretary general in April for a five-year period after the retirement of the United Kingdom's Michael Posner. And the president, Umberto Colombo, is planning to step down in November because of his appointment in May as Italy's minister of universities and science. Nominations are being solicited for his replacement. **Alison Abbott**