French Public Research—Saved?

On 7 January 2004, an open letter to the French government and the launch of the petition “SAUVEONS LA RECHERCHE” (Save Research) started the most powerful and spontaneous protest of scientists throughout France since the 1960s. The flash point was reached after a succession of catastrophic research budgets for 3 years in a row, exacerbated by last-minute funding freezes and the elimination of 30% of the entry-level permanent research positions. This amounted to sacrificing a whole generation of young scientists. The petition gathered 75,000 signatures among working scientists and support from more than 80% of the general public. After a series of street demonstrations in French university towns, nearly half of all French laboratory directors from the main research agencies gathered on 27 March in Paris to post their resignations. A week later, after an opposition landslide in the regional elections, President Jacques Chirac disowned the research policies of his previous government and asked the newly appointed ministers for education and research to reestablish the lost academic positions, and even added 1050 university lecturer positions. After 6 months of self-organized debates in all major scientific centres, 1000 French delegates met in Grenoble on 29 October to finalize a voluminous report meant to inspire future reforms. Top government officials and national leaders of all major political parties attended this meeting.

Undoubtedly, the longest-lasting benefit of this year-long movement was the realization by scientists and politicians alike that scientific research enjoyed unexpected strong support from the general public. “Scientific research” has been brought back into the political vocabulary and is now an electoral issue. In November, the government announced an overall 2005 budget for civilian R&D of 9.27 billion euros, a 10% increase. The number of permanent research positions in the national agencies is also maintained, and 200 temporary positions have been created to help encourage the return of foreign-based French postdocs. Yet a closer reading of this budget casts a number of shadows: One-third of the money is for fiscal measures to promote industrial R&D, and another one-third is dedicated to an ill-defined National Agency for Research. Thus, France is still only devoting a mere 0.60% of its gross national product to civilian public research, which is short of the 1% goal that a European Union directive commits us to reach by 2010 and is below the level reached in 2001 (0.74%).

There is also frustration that a year-long movement did not result in bolder proposals to reform the French academic research system and put it more in line with the organization prevailing in other leading scientific countries, including our closest European partners. In particular, the civil servant status uniquely enjoyed by French researchers from the very beginning of their careers remains unchallenged, even if it limits the number of research positions offered to postdocs and Ph.D. students and corresponds to salaries 30% lower than those offered in Germany or Switzerland. Also unchallenged is the absence of a stringent selection process for entering French universities (all of them government-funded), creating a population of rather unmotivated students. Professors are overwhelmed by teaching loads and mentoring responsibilities incompatible with serious research. Thus, despite an increase in government support, the French public research system might not retain international competitiveness without addressing these politically touchy issues. Offering more attractive (better salary, less teaching) and more numerous (but perhaps less secure) entry-level jobs will be key to retaining our most promising young scientists as well as attracting foreign-based talent.

Fortunately, things are not yet settled. The Save Research movement is gaining momentum again, after the recent release of the government’s first draft of the 2006–2010 Research and Innovation Framework Act. Some scientists are concerned that the new National Agency for Research is not making enough room for curiosity-driven basic research and is keeping too much money away from existing agencies, including CNRS and INSERM. Having learned its lesson last year, the government has already postponed the presentation of the bill until June and has promised additional rounds of consultation. French research needs to be rescued, but it will require restructuring of an academic system and a government agenda by saviors on both sides.

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