

France needs a chief science adviser

France is at a crossroads, facing environmental and social challenges that are profoundly altering its society. Yet, the French government keeps prioritizing short-term political gains over long-term evidence-based planning for major transitions that France, like most countries, will undergo over the next 20 years. There is an urgent need for France to implement long-term science-informed policy-making.

France has recently shown a paradoxical relationship to science. Last December, French President Emmanuel Macron made an impassioned plea for supporting research, touting a major reorganization of the nation's research structure. Yet, 2 months later, the government cut the French budget by 10 billion euros to address the country's deficit, including a disproportionate 904-million-euro reduction in the research and higher education budget. Rather than a sudden change of heart toward science, these actions reveal the government's failure to grasp the breadth of societal benefits from investing in science across academic disciplines. For Macron and most French politicians and high-ranking civil servants, research primarily benefits society by fostering industrial innovation and supporting economic growth. Consistently, the "revolution" Macron advocates seeks to strengthen government oversight of the national research agenda, aligning it closely with these objectives. But focusing narrowly on research for industrial innovation overlooks the broad value of scientific guidance in addressing complex issues. Recent policy decisions highlight this neglect of scientific advice. Last year, the French parliament yielded to pressure from the far right to adopt a repressive immigration law that went against scientific knowledge and included restricting foreign scientists' and students' ability to work and study in France (this was later ruled unconstitutional). And earlier this year, violent protests by farmers, orchestrated by "Big Ag" unions, led to a major step back on the transition to sustainable agricultural policies, jeopardizing a plan to reduce the use of pesticides by half by 2030. Both decisions prioritized short-term political considerations over established scientific consensus. Ignoring scientific evidence in favor of political interests or industrial lobbies is a major obstacle to developing long-term solutions to current crises.

How can France, with its deep-rooted Enlightenment ideals and institutions that blend scientific insights with governmental policy-making, show such disregard for sci-

ence? Its Ministry for Higher Education and Research is mostly a technical administration, managing the day-to-day operations of universities and research institutions but lacking the clout to sway government policies. The impact of France's numerous institutional and ad hoc scientific councils is diminished by their poorly coordinated actions, along with their low public visibility. This is epitomized by the most recent committee, Macron's Presidential Science Council of 12 prominent French scholars, which was announced last December but without articulation of a clear mission or agenda. This group is meant to give the president advice on science policy, but not to inform public policies with science. By contrast, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and other Commonwealth countries have chosen to appoint a chief science adviser to their president or government, tasked

with integrating science and technology considerations into policy-making. This adviser, acting alone or as spokesperson of one or several councils, provides advice to the highest level of government and promotes productive dialogue between the public, scientists, and the government. Independence from political interference is guaranteed and, accordingly, they provide advice but do not take part in decision-making.

France cannot face the challenges of the 21st century blindfolded. Last year, the Alliance of French Academic Learned Societies proposed the appointment of a full-time chief science adviser tasked with four main missions: familiarizing policy-makers with scientific evidence; strengthening the administration's ability to implement evidence-based policies; fighting against misinformation through public education; and representing France in international scientific forums focused on global world challenges. This full-time scientist would base advice on the input of an interdisciplinary scientific council and would receive operational support from an independent administrative authority akin to the British Government Office for Science. Hiring this adviser would also provide an impetus to rationalize and coordinate the current landscape of French scientific councils. As France navigates critical times, the imperative for informed decision-making independent of major ideological or industrial lobbies has never been stronger, urging a greater role for the sciences in building a resilient future for the nation.

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