

Le Monde

Climate: an academy under influence

Prior to COP21, the Academy of Sciences wished to produce an opinion on global warming. Its eventful drafting testifies to the permeability of this institution to climatoseptic theses. Investigation of a French exception.

By David Larousserie and Stéphane Foucart Published on 12 November 2015 at 4:27 pm - Updated on 02 December 2015 at 10:16 am



The Institut de France, quai de Conti, in Paris, is home to the Academy of Sciences.
OLIVIER METZGER FOR "M THE WORLD MAGAZINE"

This letter is dry as a bone. It measures barely six lines on a computer screen, but six pages of signatures follow. On June 1st, they are nearly 200 French astrophysicists writing to other astrophysicists, their peers who sit at the Academy of Sciences. They are stunned. *“It is with astonishment that we learned by way of press the content of certain debates taking place at the Academy about the opinion that it should issue on climate change (...),”* they write. *“Astrophysicists or planetologists like you, we are dismayed that a position denying the reality of an–thropic global warming can still be upheld at the Academy, in the face of the objective accumulation of evidence and in an ethically dubious manner.”*

The missive did not accuse its addressees: it rather enjoined the astrophysicist members of the Academy to go into battle. "*We measure with fear the damage that such a position could produce, a few months before COP21, if it were to be expressed in the official opinion of the Academy,*" the researchers said. "*You have our full support for the Academy to issue an unambiguous opinion.*"

Friends of Claude Allègre

Today, no one doubts the reality and the human causes of the ongoing climate change. No scientific institution - not in the major hydrocarbon-producing countries, or anywhere else for that matter - questions them any more. No longer any? Not quite. At the French Academy of Sciences, a small group of diehards - most of them close to Claude Allègre - are still resisting scientific consensus. Convalescent since a cardiac accident in Chile in January 2013, the geochemist and former socialist minister, himself an academician, is no longer there to cross swords in person. But the confrontation he left as a legacy is still not over.

Embroided in a latent war that has been going on for almost ten years, one of the world's most venerable learned societies, which will celebrate its 350th anniversary next year, has never emerged from climatosceptic ambiguity. When it tries to do so, it is troubled. And at the price of fierce internal struggles, whose violence contrasts with the serene calm that reigns in the corridors of the Institut de France, whose majestic dome on the Quai de Conti in Paris houses the five great academies. The French Academy, of course, but also the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, the Academy of Fine Arts and, thus, the Academy of Sciences.

With the imminence of COP21, psychodrama was inevitable. It happened irreparably. In 2014, one year before the Paris conference, the Academy created a group of ten academics - known as the "COP21 group" - with the task of preparing an opinion on the climate, in support of the negotiations to be held the following year. Within the group, geophysicist Vincent Courtillot supports a climate-sceptic position. "*The first meetings of the group went very badly, the tone loudened, and it soon became clear that the group would not be able to reach an agreement,*" says an academician who, like almost all those interviewed by Le Monde, requested anonymity - at the Institute, it seems, there is a surprising climate of fear.

"Ethical Problem"

A flamboyant character, a great orator and a regular in the media, Vincent Courtillot is Claude Allègre's former right-hand man. At the end of 2014, this world-renowned specialist in terrestrial magnetism presented in a public session of the Academy a series of graphs and data intended to support his ideas on climate. Murderous e-mails circulated. Climatologist Edouard Bard, an academician and member of the COP21 group, bluntly questions his colleague's ethics. "*You have shown five diagrams of your work from 2008, 2009, 2010 which have all been refuted in several peer-reviewed articles,*" he wrote to Vincent Courtillot, copying in so many academics that the questioning became widely public. The presentation of invalidated works posed "*an ethical problem,*" the Collège de France professor said, adding that much of his opponent's presentation was either taken from a fake scientific

journal published in China or inspired by a climate-sceptic blog... Mr. Courtillot did not reply. Heavy atmosphere under the dome.

Unsurprisingly, the COP21 group ended up disintegrating. It only took two press articles about the disaster, one in *Le Monde*, the other in the monthly magazine *La Recherche*, for the group to stop meeting without having given the slightest opinion. The end of the story? Not quite. "*In the last week of October, we were stunned to receive in our mailboxes, by the band, an eight-page unsigned draft text, whose author is unknown,*" says a member of the institution. In a message addressed to *Le Monde*, Mr Courtillot suggests that "*almost all the members*" of the COP21 group "*held some part of the opinion*". According to our information, however, several members of the group have not been officially informed of the existence of the document. "*The opinion was in no way drafted by the COP21 group,*" confirms physicist Edouard Brézin, member of the group in question and former president of the Academy.

The working version was then reduced from eight to four pages, after "*24 iterations,*" says Mr Courtillot. But several academics interviewed by *Le Monde* denounced the opacity of the process. And for good reason: in this opinion on climate, in the end there is very little mention of climate. Because once the text was reduced from eight to four pages, most of the exclusively climatic considerations disappeared. "*The 24th draft [of the text] was discussed and debated in front of the plenary assembly of members (about 100 in attendance) and various changes were made during the meeting,*" says Mr Courtillot. "*There was no unanimity on the climate section, but there was almost unanimity on the conclusions regarding energy, which was considered to be the most important part of the opinion.*"

An unnoticed opinion

"*Initially, we were supposed to have an opinion on the climate, then it became "climate and energy", and in reality we end up with an opinion that is essentially about energy,*" grumbles an academician. "*Which is completely ridiculous since the Academy already gave an opinion on energy transition earlier this year...*"

The opinion of 3 November is a striking example of the bitterly negotiated compromise: no explicit reference to human responsibility for the current warming, no mention of the climate projections conducted by the scientific community, no characterisation of the risks posed by global warming, The opinion was discussed at the general assembly on 3 November, put to the vote and adopted by 78% of the members present. Published the same day, it passed remarkably unnoticed, as no one considered it worthy of interest... "*The text is not disgraceful, however,*" Mr Brézin assuages. "*At least we have avoided the worst.*"

This is not everyone's opinion, as some academics do not have words harsh enough to criticise the definitive opinion. How can we explain the influence of the climatologists at the Academy of Sciences? To understand, one has to take a five-year leap into the past.

Let us recall: at the beginning of 2010, Claude Allègre published *L'Imposture climatique* (Plon), one of the best-sellers of the year, in which he accused the community of climatologists of being a "*mafia*" using various tricks and "*totalitarian methods*" to impose the idea of anthropogenic warming... "*It was an incredible situation,*" recalls climatologist

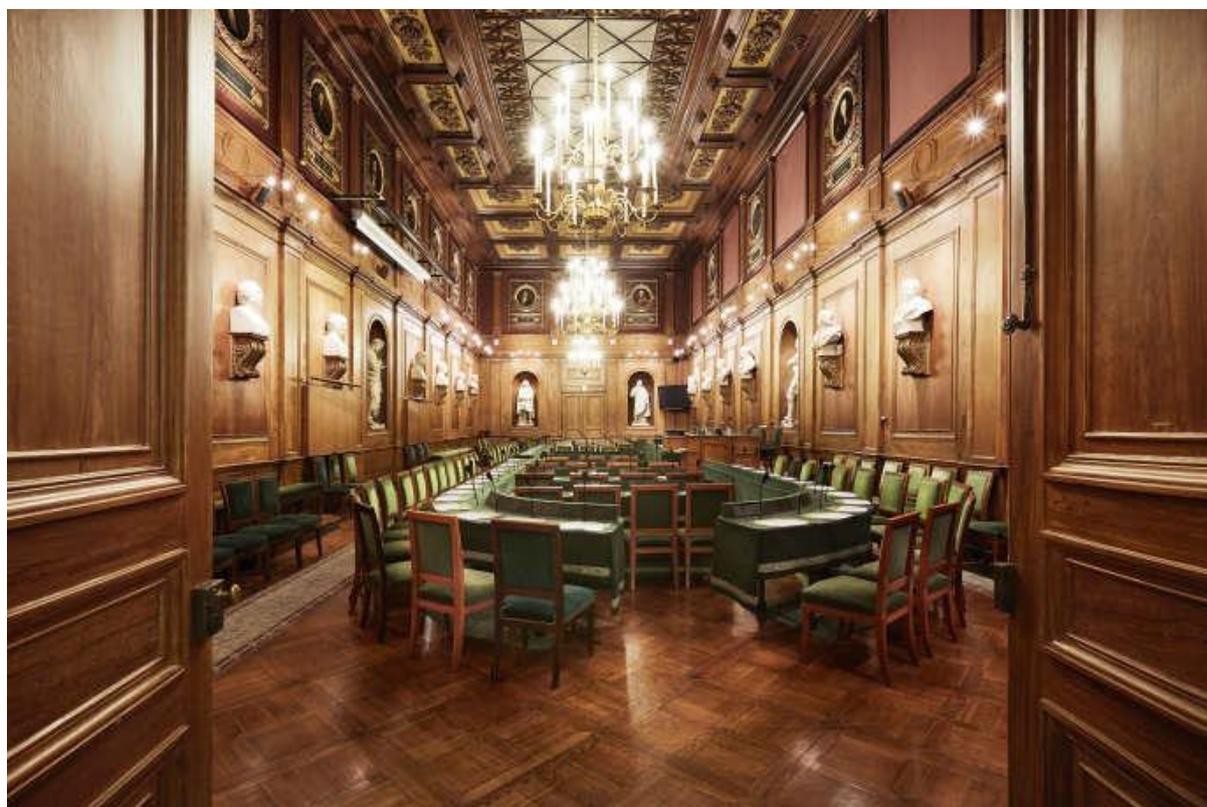
Eric Guilyardi (CNRS, University of Reading). *“A whole scientific community, which was insulted all the time on television programmes, waited for its guardians to react... and for many weeks nothing happened.”*

To puncture the abscess

Researchers in climate science finally defended themselves, with an initiative unprecedented in the history of French research: more than 600 scientists signed a collective letter denouncing the *"false accusations"* of two of their eminent peers - Claude Allègre and Vincent Courtillot, influential members of the Academy... When questioned, the physicist Catherine Bréchnignac, the Institute's permanent secretary, puts things into perspective and reminds us that the history of science is marked by violent confrontations: the fierce opposition of Marcelin Berthelot (1827-1907) to the atomic theory; or the virulent confrontations over the theory of Jacques Benveniste (1935-2004), the famous "memory of water"...

“The scientific process is made up of discussions, and maintaining intellectual diversity is important,” says chemist Bernard Meunier, president of the Academy of Sciences. *“We don't want to mould minds. Only in the time of the USSR were there opinions with absolute majorities.”*

At the risk of slandering opponents? In 2010, approached by 600 researchers furious at being insulted, the then Minister of Research, Valérie Pécresse, ordered the Academy to organize a contradictory scientific debate on climate. This abscess had to be punctured.



Créée en 1666, l'Académie des sciences fêtera cette année ses 350 ans d'existence. OLIVIER METZGER POUR « M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE »

A range of researchers specializing in this field, including Eric Guilyardi, were invited. Not much leaked out of the meeting, but in a very recently published book (*What would you do if you knew? Des climatologues face à la désinformation*, Le Pommier, 190 pages, 17 euros), the researcher recounts the background to the debate: “no transparency in the preparation of meetings”, “hidden process of invitation”, “contributions, written in advance, forbidden from release”, “exchanges held behind closed doors, with no journalists being admitted”, “speeches organised by internal disputes”. ...As for the debate itself, “it did not seem to go beyond the level of a talking shop”, says Eric Guilyardi, who notes, however, that “many academics also blocked out” the climate sceptics.

A Foundation supported by EDF, Alstom, Schlumberger and Cristal Union

"The peak was reached by an academician who rose to confidently stated that "climate scientists are talking nonsense since they predicted an ice age in the 1970s, which didn't happen!"", writes Eric Guilyardi. Curious, climatologists questioned him to find out his sources. *"The academician, embarrassed, ended up confessing, during coffee break, that he got this information from the disaster movie The Day After [by Roland Emmerich], which has just been on television..."*. The debate painfully gave birth to a brief statement, again bitterly negotiated and devoid of any scientific content, acknowledging with lip service to the consensus: yes, the climate is warming, and yes, human activities are responsible for it...

But a few months later, while the embers of the controversy were still burning, the Institut de France agreed, at Claude Allègre's request, to house a new foundation of which he was the founder, the Fondation Ecologie d'Avenir (Foundation of the Ecology of the Future)...

Immediate row. Scarred by repeated climate scandals, some sixty academics, including the former president, the physicist Edouard Brézin, addressed the Institute's chancellor, Gabriel de Broglie, at the end of October 2011 to ask him to abandon the project. “As you know, our colleague Claude Allègre is the standard bearer of climatoscepticism for French public opinion,” they wrote. “Whereas according to the evidence, climate change is undoubtedly one of the major issues requiring immediate action to preserve the environment and allow human societies to adapt.”

To no avail. The Fondation Ecologie d'avenir, supported by EDF, Alstom, Schlumberger and Cristal Union, will indeed be housed by the Institute. On the condition - surprising for an organisation designed to deal with the environment - that it refrains from tackling the climate issue. A commitment that it has so far respected...

But several of its members also belong to the executive bodies of the Academy.

Starting with Catherine Bréchnignac, who makes no secret of her climatosceptic tendencies. Or President Meunier who, “not being a climate specialist”, does not speak out either for or against the scientific consensus. In its June edition, *La Recherche* thus noted that two of the four members of the office [of the Academy], the holy of holies of the scientific society, belonged to the Fondation Ecologie d'Avenir. In addition, the scientific monthly added, of the fourteen academicians who are members of the foundation, several sit on the select committee - the second governing body of the Academy .

As promised, the foundation is not speaking out on the climate issue. Its members, however, do, even though none of them are specialists in the field.

A Foundation singled out by the Court of Auditors

The famous foundation, however, has been wounded. The Court of Auditors is to blame. Published in April, its report on the functioning of the Institut de France and the five academies noted that "*the functioning of [this] foundation appears very idiosyncratic*". "*Under the terms of an agreement concluded with an association called "Association Ecologie d'avenir Claude Allègre", all the expenses of the foundation, in particular for the organisation of colloquia, are channelled through this association, created for this purpose and chaired by another member of the Academy of Sciences*", the Court's magistrates explained, judging such an arrangement to be "*unjustified*". With some suplicity, the "wise men" of the rue Cambon added: "*The association, incidentally, is a light structure; it has only one employee, close family of the founder [Mr Allègre]*." The chancellor of the Institute of France, Gabriel de Broglie, did not respond to the requests of *Le Monde*.

The chemist Christian Amatore, academician, member of the foundation and president of the association Ecologie d'avenir de Claude Allègre, is shocked by the questioning of the structure created by Claude Allègre. He says he has resigned from some of his mandates at the Academy "*so as not to risk that tendentious remarks with defamatory connotations would reflect on [his] actions*". "*The result of this slanderous presentation of the foundation and the association was that the Chancellor decided to eliminate all means of financing employees from the accounts of associations linked to the Institute's foundations*," added Mr. Amatore in a message to *Le Monde*. "*As a result, I had to dismiss Laurent Allègre [a close relative of Claude Allègre] and hired no one in his place, which de facto stopped the organization of the colloquiums*." However, will the climate-scepticism that reigns under the dome be stopped?

The Academy of Sciences in figures

263 members, 125 foreign associates and 91 correspondents make up the Academy of Sciences. It employs 46 people.

24.5 million euros, including nearly 4.3 million euros of State aid (Court of Auditors, April 2015) for the budget. The Academy has 135.6 million euros in assets.

63,000 euros approximate annual allowance for the secretaries; members receive 5,240 euros per year.

45 opinions and reports were published between 2000 and 2013.

80 prizes are awarded each year, worth 3.8 million euros.

18,090 "sealed envelopes", supposed to contain discoveries to be protected, have been registered as of February 1, 2014.