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François Gros, Permanent Secretary of the French Academy of Sciences

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Abstract: François Gros was Permanent Secretary of the French Academy of Sciences from 1991 to 2000. His immense scientific knowledge, his tireless efforts to develop international relations, particularly with developing countries, and his exceptional personality have greatly contributed to the modernisation and influence of the Academy.

Keywords: François Gros, French academy of sciences, Permanent secretary

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I met François Gros in 1976, when the two of us dined together in Moscow on the way to an interminable trip that took us to Tashkent, Vientiane, and then Hanoi, where we were received by Prime Minister Phan van Dong and General Giap. It was the beginning of a great friendship that lasted until the end.

At the time, François Gros was a professor at the Collège de France and director of the Institut Pasteur. The following year, he was elected a correspondent of the Académie des sciences, and a member in 1979. In 1991, he was elected permanent secretary, succeeding Alfred Jost, who had died prematurely. He was fond of telling the story of how he accepted this post after a conversation in front of the magnolias in the second courtyard with Jean Hamburger, whose persuasiveness I can personally attest to.

His term of office lasted 10 years (June 10, 1991–December 31, 2000), 10 years of happiness but also of hard work and considerable investment. François Gros made a major contribution to the renovation and modernization of our Académie, both through the many scientific initiatives he led and through the development of our activities, which led to the reform of our statutes in 2003, led by Jean Salençon and Roger Monnier, with the support of Claude Allègre, then French Minister of Education. The reform was not completed until three years after the end of his term of office, but François Gros played a very important role in shaping the ideas that led to the success of this major reform. In fact, the end of his term did not prevent him from continuing his commitment to the Académie as honorary permanent secretary. In fact, at the age of 96, he continued to visit his office at the Académie every day, as committed as ever to his work and much sought after for his experience and the depth of his opinions.

In close collaboration with Paul Germain, and later with Jean Dercourt, he promoted the development of the Applications Committee of the Académie des Sciences, the CADAS, which a few years later gave rise to the Académie des Technologies. More generally, he got on very well with Jean Dercourt, the permanent secretary of the First Division, whose personality, temperament and interests he himself recognised as complementary. He also got on well with the five successive Presidents: Jean Hamburger, Jacques Friedel, Marianne Grunberg-Manago, Jacques-Louis Lions and Guy Ourisson.

François Gros' work as permanent secretary was essentially scientific, placing his immense knowledge and synthesising skills at the Académie's disposal. Together with Pierre Buser, Jean Rosa, Michel Tellier and François Mathey, he played an active role in the revival of the *Comptes Rendus* in the biology and chemistry series. François Gros was the first to open up the vast field of relations between science and society by setting up a committee which he kindly entrusted to me to chair. A few years later, this committee became the Science, Ethics and Society Committee.

François Gros coordinated, and in fact largely wrote, many of the reports on science and technology that the Académie produced during this period. He was particularly involved in the preparation of an outstanding report on the genome, in which he was able to express the depth of his culture and thought, *Development and application of genomics* [1]. Other reports include those on animal and human physiology, the plant world, genetically modified plants, and pharmaceuticals.

In 2006, he personally coordinated a major report entitled *Science and Developing Countries* [2], a subject that was particularly close to the heart of the Pasteurian he was.

He endeavoured to create close links between the Académie and the public authorities. Thus, President Jacques Chirac approached the Académie on the vast subject of the expected development of science in the first decades of the 21st century, particularly in relation to the environment and living conditions, information sciences and health. He set up the 2000 Committee, chaired by Jacques-Louis Lions. The drafting of this report generated a great deal of enthusiasm among all those involved, and all the members of the delegation who presented the report to the President at the Elysée Palace have fond memories of it. Still on the subject of relations with the public authorities, it is worth mentioning the extremely high number of opinions requested from the Académie at the time by the Ministries, the Parliamentary Office for Scientific and Technological Choices, and sometimes also by the Senate, the Economic and Social Council, and so on.

He was involved in the organisation of a number of high-level symposia, in particular on the Enlightenment, with the German Academy of Sciences, the Leopoldina, and on biology and developing countries. François Gros also made great efforts to forge closer links with foreign Academies, not only with the major European

Academies, in particular the German Academy, with which the Humboldt Prize was created, but also with the Academies of developing countries, as part of the creation of the Committee for Developing Countries (COPEDE).

His many personal contacts enabled him to establish highly interesting collaborations. He developed a close working relationship with the Weismann Institute of Science, which led to the creation of FIRAS (Fondation internationale pour le rayonnement de l'Académie des sciences) with Robert Pariant. This enabled him to raise substantial funds to support his work at COPEDE, as well as the renovation of the Pasteur House in Arbois, which coincided with a major celebration of the centenary of Louis Pasteur's death. On another front, he worked closely with Alain Mérieux, with whom he developed a close friendship. He took an active part in the work of the Board of Directors of the Fondation Christophe et Rodolphe Mérieux at the Institut de France and in the creation of a prestigious prize to support research into infectious diseases in developing countries in the most effective way.

I won't go into detail about his major scientific contributions, but I will highlight the modesty with which he spoke about them, a modesty that did not prevent him from being very determined. In a scientific environment that is not always benevolent, I never heard any criticism of him or his activities. On the contrary, I would like to stress his great humanity, his kindness, his generosity and his exceptional availability, both to his friends and colleagues, French and foreign, and to the staff of the Académie, who learned to turn to him for the most diverse problems. As he used to say with humour, his problem was that he did not dare to contradict his interlocutors. His radiant personality was such that we feel he is still with us and must continue to inspire us.

1. Disclosure of interests

The authors do not work, do not advise, do not own shares, do not receive funds from an organization that could benefit from this article, and have not declared any affiliation other than their research organizations.

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