

SOUVENIRS DU CNU, 1999-2002, version abrégée

Michael Harris

One evening in the spring of 1999 a colleague for whom I have a great deal of esteem called me at home to inform me that my name was on a list of potential candidates for the CNU on the ticket sponsored by Qualité de la Recherche et l'Enseignement. As a professor I naturally had a general understanding of the CNU's responsibility for qualification of candidates for university positions and for promotion of university faculty members. My impression of the institution was negative on both counts. Qualification I remembered from personal experience, recalled below, as a pointless bureaucratic obstacle. As for promotion, I could not help but be aware of the intense pressure for the small number of promotions made available each year, and although I was relieved to learn that my turn had come for promotion to Classe Exceptionnelle, I was conscious that this would likely expose me to the jealousy of many of my colleagues.

In spite of, or rather because of my misgivings about the CNU, I felt it was important for me to accept this invitation, on the very simple grounds that did not consider myself entitled to criticize the workings of a system I had not seen from the inside. I had only the vaguest idea of the principles of the list QRE or the other lists. The thought of being elected on a list that was "étiqueté à droite," as my colleague put it, was not a pleasant one, and I was only moderately reassured to learn that it had been founded by Laurent Schwartz, who could not be suspected of being a rightist, since that was a long time ago and political organizations evolve, usually in the wrong direction. I explained that I considered myself obliged to serve in the CNU, for the reasons I just mentioned, but that I would prefer to do so as an individual rather than as a member of a list whose principles I did not necessarily endorse. My colleague was sympathetic but explained that it was impossible for an individual to be elected to the CNU. As far as section 25 was concerned, he explained that in practice, the trade union lists, which were nominally to the left of the QRE, used the same criteria as he and the other members of the QRE list; this he could confirm on the basis of a full term as elected CNU member.

In the end, I agreed to allow my name to be placed on the QRE list. I attempted to read their campaign material but found myself no more informed about their principles than before. Since I could not really determine what the QRE stood for, and since I did not have (and to this day still do not have) the faintest idea who their leaders are nor how my name was chosen, and since on the other hand I knew quite well that I had no particular qualifications to be a member of the CNU, I abstained from voting. I was nevertheless elected, along with four (or five) other members of the QRE list.

The *liste des qualifications* may or may not be unique to France, but I had never encountered such a system until I learned in 1993 that I could not be considered for a position that had just become available because I was not "qualified." The friend who told me the bad news explained that the system of qualification was a pointless invention of bureaucrats in the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. I have ever since been unable to shake the image of bureaucrats creating rules like bakers bake cakes,

because that's their job. The following year I resolved to obtain my qualification, though no position had yet been announced. The names and addresses of the CNU rapporteurs arrived at my American address three days before the deadline, which was met (more or less) following an extraordinary mobilization of the household. I had already gathered the required collection of documents, including a notarized photocopy, acquired through a series of frauds and deceptions, of my Harvard Ph.D. diploma. In my country the diploma is a purely ornamental object that mainly serves to decorate one's parents' living room wall. I have never forgiven myself for lying to my father about the reason I asked him to take it down from the wall, where it had remained for seventeen years encased in its wooden frame, and mail me a few photocopies. The diploma itself is in Latin, and though Harvard was happy to provide an English translation (which I could then translate into French, and have authenticated at the French consulate in Boston), they refused to notarize the photocopy, since they had not had access to the original, which after a quick trip to the local copy shop was back on my parents' wall 500 kilometers away. I was on the verge of giving up but finally located a notary willing to stamp the photocopy without having seen the original. The upshot is that the copy of my diploma was not properly notarized, and so my qualification for the position I now occupy can be considered fraudulent. You may want to bear this in mind while reading what follows.

Most of my colleagues at Paris 7 agreed with the friend who regarded the system of qualification as a pointless exercise. I had discovered many other such pointless exercises during my five years at Jussieu, especially in connection with faculty recruitment, and had come unaided to the conclusion that administrative responsibility was a thankless task that one accepted as a favor to one's colleagues, on the principle that the burden was not going to go away but could at least be shared equitably. The attitude I have just described is quite common in the United States, where the specific tasks are different, but the burden is comparable. I approached my first *session de qualifications* considering it to be an unavoidable duty but not to be taken seriously. My suspicions were confirmed when I discovered that several of the applicants whose dossiers I was to examine had not gone to the trouble of notarizing the photocopies of their diplomas; when I raised my concerns on this point with the President of the 25^{ème} section he assured me that no one would ever know the difference.

My attitude to qualification was simple and, I hoped, bureaucratic in the extreme. If the candidate had obtained a diploma or an habilitation in mathematics from a French university, that was qualification enough in my eyes. A Ph.D. in mathematics or equivalent from a foreign university was qualification as *maître de conférences*, a tenured position in a North American mathematics department was sufficient for *habilitation*, and otherwise I looked at the papers published in reputable journals and drew my own conclusions. These criteria were loosely based on a form we had been asked to fill out for each candidate, indicating the basic elements of the CV: date of birth, title of thesis, lists of publications, and the like.

The session did not begin as I had expected, however. Instead of answering yes or no to the question of qualification — I expected "yes" would be accepted as self-evident, whereas "no" would require substantial justification — the *rapporteurs* presented capsule biographies of each candidate, together with a description of their significant results and, in most cases, a value judgment usually accompanied by an adjective selected from among "*remarquable*", "*excellent*", "*très original*", and the like. In

short, the candidates were defended as if they were being presented to a *Commission de Spécialistes* (Hiring Committee), except that there was no competition and no positions at stake. Presentations ending with "thumbs up" lasted at least three minutes each; some CNU members spoke upwards of five minutes of candidates they found particularly interesting. As I had expected, "thumbs down," which was recommended only very rarely, required much more extensive discussion, usually with active participation on the part of the body of the CNU.

At this point I was still naïve enough to believe that it was up to the local Commissions de Spécialistes to decide whether a candidate's dossier was "*remarquable*" or "*excellent*", and that "*adéquat*" or "*acceptable*" or "*conforme aux normes*" was all that was required for the CNU to send the fortunate candidate on to the next hurdle. All my candidates were obviously qualified in this respect and it was in this spirit that I presented my first rapport: nom, date de soutenance, titre de thèse, et "conforme et donc je recommande la qualification." The president of the CNU looked at me expectantly. I had not finished my report. Indeed, I had not even begun.

Somehow I managed to improvise a minute's worth of patter about each of the candidates I had been assigned, but I left the first day's session perplexed in the extreme. My first step was to consult the legal texts concerning the nature of the qualification procedure. Little enlightenment was to be found there:

Art. 24. - Les demandes d'inscription sur la liste de qualification aux fonctions de maître de conférences, assorties d'un dossier individuel de qualification, sont examinées par la section compétente du Conseil national des universités. La qualification est appréciée par rapport aux différentes fonctions des enseignants-chercheurs, telles qu'elles sont définies à l'article 55 de la loi du 26 janvier 1984 susvisée, et compte tenu des diverses activités des candidats.

Somehow I missed the crucial clause two paragraphs later:

Les rapporteurs, qui peuvent recueillir sur les dossiers des candidats l'avis écrit d'experts extérieurs, établissent des rapports écrits.

Though a rapport écrit could also in principle take the form of a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down, I can understand in retrospect that a purely quantitative bureaucratic criterion could also require reports to meet a minimum weight.

I was nevertheless curious enough to begin asking members of the CNU, as well as outsiders, what they thought was the purpose of qualification. Their responses fell within six broad categories. Here is a copy of a document I circulated informally the second or third day of the session des qualifications in 2000. The quotations are verbatim.

A quoi sert la procédure de qualification?

Quelques hypothèses proposées par des collègues entre décembre 1999 et mars 2000, classées par catégorie:

A. Tautologiques

1. "Parce que c'est la loi."

2. "Il faut une instance centralisée."
3. "C'est une obligation, il faut que quelqu'un le fasse."

B. Pessimistes

1. Pour décourager les candidatures fantaisistes (et ainsi réduire le travail des commissions des spécialistes).
2. Pour éviter les abus (copinage, recrutement local).
3. Pour éviter les abus nommés ci-dessus dans les autres disciplines, de telles abus ne concernant pas la 25ème section.

C. Optimistes

Pour montrer au ministère qu'il y a un nombre considérable de candidats qualifiés, et qu'il faut donc créer des postes.

D. Cyniques

1. "Pour faire plaisir aux bureaucrates."
2. Pour décourager les candidatures étrangères.
3. "C'est quelque chose que le ministère donne aux syndicats qui ne coute pas cher."
4. "La procédure de qualification ne sert à rien."

E. Inclassable

"Si tes collègues n'ont pas réussi à te convaincre je ne pense pas pouvoir le faire... mais la seule chose que je peux dire c'est que n'étant pas du tout convaincu tu avais le droit de refuser d'être sur une liste et qu'en cas de force majeure tu es toujours libre de démissionner."

F. Honnête

"Je ne sais pas à quoi ça sert."

A noter que les tenants des hypothèses dans les catégories B, C, et D n'ont en aucun cas accompagné leurs propos avec les éléments matériels permettant d'en établir la validité, ce qui me fait croire qu'il s'agit dans ce cas de croyances mystiques, susceptibles ni de preuve ni de réfutation.

Before my first session most of the arguments I had heard fell into categories A. and D. The text already quoted from the Journal Officiel naturally fits in the tautological category. There had been some talk along the lines of B. 2, and several of my colistiers from QDLR spoke darkly of departments where recrutement local would proceed unimpeded were it not for the filtering of the CNU en amont. Several informants independently mentioned the specific case of Valenciennes. Nothing was said to contradict the judgment of the final sentence of my pamphlet. There were no names, no dates, no incidents, much less statistics indicating the relative importance

of the phenomena that seemed to motivate either the pessimists or optimists (or cynics, for that matter).

More importantly still, no evidence was given to support the claim that the three days of endless qualification reports had the slightest incidence on the phenomena (abuses or creation of positions) in question.

I confess that, not having looked back at this material in several years, I had forgotten response E, to the point where I am not quite sure who spoke to me in such uncompromising language. Une telle franchise n'a pas de prix. Actually, I think I know who it was, the person in question having turned out to be quite likeable after the fact, in spite of this unpromising start.

After my first session de qualifications I continued to seek enlightenment regarding my recent ordeal and thought I might find it in the campaign material distributed to all colleagues eligible to vote in CNU elections. I still have the unmarked ballots — because I didn't vote — but not the *professions de foi*. I vaguely remember that one of the union brochures made claims along the lines of the optimist hypothesis C above. In the campaign literature for the apparently unrelated elections to the *Comité technique paritaire des personnels enseignants titulaires et stagiaires de statut universitaire*, whose functions must be as complex as the committee's name is long, I have found a *profession de foi* for the list "Pour la qualité de l'université française," which may or may not have anything to do with the list on which I was elected, promising that the candidates

"défendront une politique de qualité dans le recrutement et la gestion des carrières en veillant au rôle joué par le CNU, garant national de notre statut."

This intriguing hint, which makes it sound like I was an elected member of a sort of academic Coast Guard, was unfortunately not backed up by any concrete evidence. In last year's CNU elections one of the trade union lists reported that

Le CNU 25 a délibéré chaque année sur environ 280 dossiers de demande de qualification MCF, dont 20% n'ont pas été qualifiés aux motifs "hors section" pour l'essentiel ou "de niveau scientifique insuffisant", don't la moitié pour absence de travaux récents ... Le CNU 25 a examiné environ 110 candidats aux fonctions de PU. Plus de 80% d'entre eux ont été qualifiés PR.

This is undoubtedly accurate, but begs the question of "why bother?" until we reach the final sentence:

Les candidatures étrangères nombreuses montrent la capacité d'attraction des équipes de mathématiques et de notre statut d'enseignant-chercheur.

This once again sounds like it was written by an Optimist, but remembering how I had to notarize the photocopy of my diploma I wasn't quite sure where to place the border between Optimists and Cynics. As a rule I have a hard time reading French university campaign brochures; I never know where to start.

Later that fall, a more systematic opportunity to get to the bottom of the mystery presented itself when I received the following message, along with everyone else in the Institut de Mathématiques de Jussieu, from one of the trade union representatives:

Les prochaines sessions CNU de qualification ont lieu début 2001

Des membres du CNU, 25 et 26 èmes sections, syndiqués ou non, seront là pour en parler.

JEUDI 7 DECEMBRE 13 à 14 h salle 7E91

The meeting was organized for the benefit of students about to finish their theses, and my presence was something of a surprise. When I asked for an explanation of the purpose of qualification, mentioning that I had never seen statistics proving that the practice had any effect whatsoever, one of the organizers responded with hostility (as in hypothesis E above) while the other organizer, who knew me as a number theorist, listed some of the Pessimistic hypotheses, while assuring the assembled students — who were uniformly as unconvinced as was I that the procédure de qualification was somehow in their interest — that none of them was in danger of being disqualified on grounds of "niveau scientifique insuffisant." When I claimed that the number of candidates disqualified was too small to justify the length of the sessions or the burdensome procedure for the candidates themselves, I was corrected: some 20% of the candidates were disqualified, and not primarily because they were "hors section."

A word about "hors section": these are candidates in applied mathematics, physics, computer science, or occasionally more exotic fields, who hope to be included on the pure mathematics liste de qualification in order to apply for the positions open only in this field. Why they would expect to have a better chance than candidates who are actually pure mathematicians is one of the many mysteries left unsolved at the end of my experience, but there always were such cases. The organizers of the December meeting with students were convinced that there were also enough dossiers of "niveau scientifique insuffisant" to justify an annual three-day session de qualifications. This is not how I remembered the spring 2000 session, and I resolved that at the following year's session I would keep scrupulous records. Of course I can no longer find them, but I did find the message I sent to the Président of CNU section 25 one month after the session in 2001:

Pour la rubrique "recommandations pour 2002" je pense que ce serait utile de mentionner les tendances statistiques observées lors de la dernière session des qualifications: pourcentage de refusés pour raison de section, pourcentage de refusés pour raison de niveau (ici il faudrait être plus diplomate), et analyse de ces chiffres en termes de parité hommes/femmes et diplômés français/diplômés étrangers (sans préciser l'origine nationale). Ceci non pas pour accuser quiconque de mauvaise volonté, mais plutôt pour constater une situation réelle, dont les autorités publiques devraient tirer les conséquences (surtout en ce qui concerne la parité hommes/femmes).

This suggestion, on which I believe no action was taken, was motivated by my statistics that showed that women, who represented a distinct minority of all candidates for qualification, were significantly overrepresented among refusals for "raison de niveau." I believe the proportion of women rejected for this reason was

twice the proportion of men. More striking still was the surplus representation of applicants from North Africa and the Balkans among the small pool of the rejected.

When I did resign three years into my four-year term, it was not in order to take the hint of colleague E who disdained to convince me of the utility of the qualification procedure, of whose pointlessness I was already thoroughly convinced. It was rather because I had also given up on the ostensibly useful side of the CNU's work, which was to leave decisions on promotions to democratically selected members of the corps d'enseignants lui-même.

My first year I had indeed felt satisfied with my experience debating promotions. There were far more deserving candidates than available promotions and it was impossible to satisfy conflicting demands for equity on grounds of geography, age and seniority, and mathematical specialty. Nevertheless some of the candidates I supported were promoted; my time in the CNU had not been entirely wasted. The second year was even better: for some reason the President of the section seemed determined to make the number theorists happy, and I found myself in the middle of a tight and unified bloc all of whose top candidates were promoted, to the detriment of the analysts, whom I learned that day were our hereditary occasional enemies and at least one of whom did not hesitate to make his disappointment known in a noisy outburst.

Candidates I supported outside my discipline did not fare so well, however. Already the first year I found myself in the position of defender of the Russians, more actively than the two native Russian CNU members. This was not because many of the Russian candidates for promotion were my friends, although this was in fact the case. My motivation was my memory of my arrival in the French system. The colleagues who had arranged for me to be hired warned me I would have to start at the bottom of the scale of Professeur 2ème classe, like all new recruits, but they had also assured me I would be immediately promoted to 1ère classe as soon as the "réconstitution de carrière" was complete, within a year or so of my arrival. This is indeed what happened; had it not I would have returned to the United States. Please understand that this is not a matter of vanity, nor do I think I was necessarily more deserving than other candidates competing at the same time. My feeling was rather that, after spending half my career in the United States, where I had already been Full Professor for some time, remaining at the rank of Professeur 2ème classe would have amounted to a demotion I did not deserve.

The same reasoning applies to anyone who considers moving to France mid-career. The French press and some of my colleagues like to repeat that France has the second most important mathematical research community in the world, but it is strikingly insular and growing more so, which cannot bode well for its vitality in the long run. The clearest symptom of this insularity is the essentially complete absence of mid-career moves of foreign mathematicians to France. Foreigners make up a substantial component of the research community in pure mathematics in France, but they have nearly all arrived early in their careers, or indeed received their doctoral degrees in France. Moving to France mid-career means being willing to be treated as a beginner. It's hardly surprising, though some of my colleagues harbor persistent illusions in this regard, that established mathematicians rarely move to France,

especially since the treatment is quite different in English-speaking countries, where there is a constant influx of foreign senior scientists, including a growing number of French mathematicians.

I would have thought my CNU colleagues would be aware of the problem and would make a special effort to guarantee that senior colleagues arriving in France mid-career be recognized at their proper level, as I had been when I moved here. The number of promotions had dropped since then, however, and had remained low for several years, and the CNU had decided to impose a one-year waiting period, soon to increase to two years, before any new professor could be promoted to 1ère classe.

