

US academy

Press for Soviet visit

Washington

THE US National Academy of Sciences is to re-establish links with its Soviet counterpart, having suspended relations in 1980 in protest at the exiling of Andrei Sakharov. Dr Frank Press, president of the academy, announced in his annual report last week that he would visit the Soviet Union early next month to "explore new modes of interaction" between the two scientific communities.

At a press conference following the announcement, Dr Press refused to provide details of the proposals he is taking to Moscow. But he said that the US academy had plans for new kinds of links to resurrect the relationships that existed 20 years ago, when distinguished scientists from both sides took part in exchange programmes. He said the academy's concern about Dr Sakharov was undiminished, but that its members felt it was essential to resume contact with Soviet scientists at a time of mounting international tension.

The US and Soviet academies established a formal exchange programme 25 years ago. Since then, some 500 scientists have travelled in each direction, but the volume of the exchanges dwindled after the US academy declared a moratorium over the Sakharov affair. During 1983, there was a small number of individual exchanges; but in regional meetings last year, members of the US academy called for an expansion of exchanges.

Dr Press's announcement was contained

in a wide-ranging annual report in which he excoriated Congress, the Reagan Administration and the universities for adopting policies that could hit research. He said he was concerned about the impact of "unwise and misguided" proposals within Congress to meddle with the structure of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation, which is under pressure to place a greater formal emphasis on engineering. He criticized the administration for proposing national security controls that could stifle scientific communication. And he deplored the trend towards the use of political lobbying instead of peer review to win funds for research facilities.

These issues are expected to be high on the agenda of the Government-University Industry Research Roundtable, a new body created under the aegis of the academy to provide a new forum for discussing contentious issues in research policy. Membership of the new body, whose chairman will be Dale Corson, former president of Cornell University, was announced last week. It will include the five senior figures in federal research policy; George Keyworth, the presidential science adviser; Richard DeLauer, Under Secretary of Defense for research and engineering; Edward Knapp, director of the National Science Foundation; Alvin Trivelpiece, director of research for the Department of Energy; and James Wynn-gaarden, director of NIH. **Peter David**

West German education

Devolution in vogue

WEST Germany's federal government could be left without a ministry of education if an unlikely suggestion made at a meeting of the chairmen of the *Länder* (regional) Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) parties is implemented. They want to disband the Bund-Land Kommission (BLK) for educational planning and research, which is the main discussion forum where federal policies can be worked out. The suggestion reflects the strong centrifugal tendencies which have been provoked by the proposals for a new framework law for universities, and an antagonism towards the social democratic policies incorporated in the large-scale plans which have since 1973 emerged from BLK.

The chairman of the Rheinland-Pfalz CDU would like the law revoked and the entire responsibility for universities to be restored to the *Länder*. Opposition to BLK comes not only from the *Länder* with CDU administrations, but also from the remaining minority of social democratic *Länder* who are said to be unwilling to compromise with the CDU policies that BLK might now put forward.

However, partly for financial reasons, the CDU federal administration finds that small is beautiful in educational planning and it is directing BLK towards the consideration of more topical issues such as the application of new technologies and the support of gifted students. Acknowledging that some sort of consultative body is essential, the ministry does not feel threatened and expects BLK to survive the reassessment due at the end of 1985.

Another aspect of cooperation between the federal government and the *Länder* which could change is the 50:50 funding of major building projects. The excessive costs associated with the Aachen clinic (*Nature* 5 April, p.484) could be the death blow of this policy.

Problems already arise over differences between qualifications obtained in different *Länder* and consequent restrictions on university places and jobs. Greater differentiation between the *Länder* can only make these worse. Although in the long term student numbers will fall drastically, educational problems are now escalating: 1.27 million would-be students for only 750,000 university places, youth unemployment, graduate unemployment and a shortage of apprenticeships in some areas and of trained personnel in others. It looks as if one of the first jobs of the new Max-Planck-Institute for research into institutions could be to examine the educational decision-making and coordinating bodies of the federal government and the *Länder*.

Sarah Tooze

In vitro fertilization law too late

Canberra

IN Melbourne last month, legislation governing *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) procedures in the State of Victoria was deferred at least until the spring (September) parliamentary session, after opposition parties had protested that the issues needed wider discussion. The deferred Infertility (Medical Procedures) Bill (1984) was the outcome of recommendations in August 1983 by the Waller committee on the use of donor gametes in IVF. Eight of the nine committee members had supported the use of donor sperm and ova in IVF and all but two supported the use of donor embryos. Another bill, passed in the upper house and now under discussion in the lower, formalizes the status of IVF offspring as children of not, as previously, the genetic parents, but of the social parents, including those in a stable *de facto* relationship.

Many critics of the proposed legislation dispute the moral basis of the recommendations, asserting the humanity of embryos, objecting to their use for "organ bank" therapeutic purposes, freezing and thawing, experimentation and wastage and to surrogate motherhood.

With test-tube offspring now holding alumni picnics in city parks, events have overtaken the Victorian legislators, especially since the arrival in Melbourne of the world's first donor-embryo baby in



November 1983, the first IVF quadruplets in January 1984 and Zoe, the first freeze-thaw embryo baby, in March 1984. The Waller committee's report on freeze-thaw techniques and the disposition of surplus embryos is due in three months, their report on surrogate motherhood in the IVF context perhaps by December. **Jeffrey Sellar**