

## Referees' pain ahead

**The Soros fund will need the help of an army of referees in the weeks ahead. It should be given what it needs.**

THOSE who referee articles intended for publication or research grant applications for public and private agencies had better brace themselves for another shock — the flood of grant applications from researchers in Russia and the other republics of the ex-Soviet Union from the organization set up by Mr George Soros to spend his \$100 million (see *Nature* 364, 749; 1993). The deadline for applications is 25 September. Applicants for grants, for sums up to \$100,000, have been asked to nominate their own referees. (In a delicate touch, the organizers have asked them to vouch for their referees by citing at least one publication in a respectable journal for each referee, which in itself will ensure that a high proportion of the referees are in the West.) Each application may be sent to up to six referees, and there may be 5,000 or so applications.... Plainly the world's referees are in for some hard-working weeks.

It is to be hoped that they will rise to the challenge. The Soros fund is a unique and imaginative contribution to the survival of ex-Soviet science and, in that role, deserves the support of all who are able to help. The first part of the project, to award grants of \$500 to people able to boast of three papers in internationally recognized journals, seems to have confounded the scepticism of those who complained of the apparently mechanical method of selection. (The distribution of cheques in Moscow is now complete; this week they will be going out to Novosibirsk and Kiev.) That money, and the \$10 million so far spent on travel, has helped enormously to keep ex-Soviet scientists in touch with the rest of the world. But the major research grants now in prospect, on which the advice of referees is needed, will cut deeper into the ice.

Will there be enough good applications? A year ago, when this idea was hatched, it seemed likely that the Soros fund would be overwhelmed. But now there is less certainty on that score. So many able people have since left, perhaps only for the time being. But that in itself will be something worth knowing, while opportunities will certainly abound for making grants to groups well placed for the recruitment of students. Whatever the case, the grant scheme now coming to fruition will have left two permanent lessons; first, it will have demonstrated that a system of awards based only on merit is feasible even in the former Soviet Union. Second, it will have provided ex-Soviet science (not to mention many Western foundations) with a proof that even the most complicated tasks can be done quickly and well.

There remains the question of what will come after the Soros fund. The plan is to award between 500 and 2,500 grants between now and the end of the year, when the \$100 million will almost all have been spent. Thereafter, there will remain for a year an organization that is part travel agent and part procurement agency and that is skilled at moving money about and talking to the banks. It will be a shame if that is

allowed to turn into dust, especially when the West is full of foundations that say they would do anything they could to help save ex-Soviet science if only they had a mechanism for doing so. What ex-Soviet science (and the rest of us) need is that the Soros mechanism should be made permanent and used for a diversity of funds. Who will take up that challenge? □

## Reinventing government

**The United States government would do well to follow the advice of Gore's task force.**

GOVERNMENTS are forever studying their own administration under the rubric of reform. Sometimes they even follow the recommendations of the task forces they create for the purpose. The United States seems next in line. Vice President Albert Gore, since his inauguration last January, has been the head of what has been called the National Performance Review, intended to examine and, as necessary, streamline the immense bureaucracy of the United States. Gore's report, out this week, will no doubt seem to many familiar vested interests as a signal to begin another bout of lobbying. This time, the research community should not be left behind, on at least two important issues.

First, and perhaps most politically controversial, Gore recommends that Congress should allocate resources to federal agencies on a budget cycle that spans two years rather than one. In principle, were this to be accepted (which is doubtful), it would go some way to meet the research community's plea for more stable funding. Simply knowing how much money is available, some argue, would contribute to progress in research by relieving the psychological stress of uncertainty. This year's budget cycle, which has thrown several important projects into limbo, shows how damaging can be the hesitations of the Congress even for projects that are eventually supported. Whether a two-year rule would mean less time spent writing grant proposals is less clear.

Gore has also intelligently suggested abandoning the government's monstrous hiring system (the Federal Personnel Manual's rules and regulations run to 10,000 pages), which often discourages able scientists from taking positions in US science agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, at which excellence in research is greatly needed. Gore would hand over to the agencies themselves the responsibility for recruiting employees (and offering bonuses and other incentives) to what is known as the Senior Executive Service. It is a suggestion that should be implemented — soon.

But that may not be all. Gore's report, called *Reinventing Government*, is likely to have implications throughout the US government service. The trouble is that they will be signalled only in the fine print. Who will read that with an eye for the implications it may have for the research enterprise? There are many in the British research community still kicking themselves that they did not realize that a plan in 1986 to privatize government agencies would chiefly affect laboratories. □