

Social sciences

Lobby success in Congress

Washington

LEGEND has it that Congress's scientific committees possess a document known as the "silly research book", a continuously updated collection of explanations and defences of social science research supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The book is brought to budget debates to help blunt the criticisms of the many congressmen who, like Wisconsin's William Proxmire, believe the bulk of social science to be little more than a cruel hoax perpetrated on the taxpayer by the intellectually self-indulgent. When the Reagan Administration arrived in office, even the silly research book seemed to offer little hope of averting a nemesis for social science research. The administration lost little time in making plain its antipathy towards social science: in proposals for NSF's budget for fiscal year 1982, the White House asked for reductions of 75 per cent in the social and economic sciences, 67 per cent in the behavioural and cognitive sciences and 39 per cent in the anthropology programme.

Four years later, all that has changed. Social science continues to prosper, if not thrive, within NSF and the other federal agencies which sponsor research. In the administration's budget request for fiscal year 1985, spending for social science by NSF is almost back to its 1980 levels.

Why the change of heart? At least part of the reason is the unexpected success of the US social science community in using traditional congressional lobbying techniques to build up support. At the heart of this lobbying effort is a fledgling Washington-based organization called the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), established in 1981 by half a dozen learned societies representing key social research disciplines. Led by a combative historian, Dr Roberta Balstad Miller, COSSA is given much of the credit for pulling off a remarkable reversal of social science's fortunes.

Although it represents a collection of learned societies, COSSA operates much like any other political lobbying organization in Washington. Last year its spokesmen testified in front of a dozen congressional committees to argue the case for sustained government support of social research. The high-water mark for COSSA came in a fraught budget debate in July 1981, when social scientists were still stunned by the administration's proposal to cut NSF's social research by 75 per cent. Before the debate, which was to determine whether Congress would accept the administration plans, COSSA launched an unprecedented campaign to muster political influence.

Some 4,000 social scientists were asked by their disciplinary associations to call on their local congressman and urge opposi-

tion to the cuts. Every member of Congress received a letter from COSSA and many were visited by delegations of academics from their home states. Sympathetic congressmen were even provided with texts of arguments that could be made on the floor of the House of Representatives to support the case against the administration. In the end, the administration's budget for NSF was defeated by 264 votes to 152, after a debate studded with unaccustomed allusions to the national importance of social science research.

At the very least, the debate appeared to teach the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that there could be no politically painless cuts in social science research. And the creation of

COSSA provided social science for the first time with a single-minded watchdog that can be relied on to howl in outrage whenever the disciplines it represents are treated unfairly in the budget process.

Yet social science has not been entirely unchanged by the advent of the Reagan Administration. In many agencies, support for social research has changed to reflect short-term policy goals with clear links to the agency's mission. Some years ago a famous (and, by all accounts, excellent) study of the population of nineteenth-century Philadelphia was given substantial funds by the National Institute of Mental Health. It is doubtful whether a similar project would be supported today. COSSA may have been able to blunt much traditional antipathy towards social sciences, but the Reagan Administration has also seen to it that there are fewer candidates for the silly research book. **Peter David**

Europe's environment

Glimmer of hope for forests

EUROPEAN environment ministers last week accepted the principle of reducing air pollution from industrial plant by means of fixed emission limits. Spurred by concern about damage to forests in central Europe, the ministers adopted a framework directive that will allow tough emission controls to be introduced in later legislation. One major implementing directive, on limiting emissions from large combustion plants, is already waiting for formal decision.

The controversial clause in the directive adopted last week says that fixed emission limits shall be introduced only with the unanimous agreement of the Council of Ministers. That represents a compromise wording insisted upon by Britain, which is opposed to the use of Community-wide emission limits if they can be avoided. An earlier draft of the framework directive allowed for the introduction of fixed emission limits by a two-thirds majority, a feature which Britain contested. The revised clause also allows ministers to take account of "excessive cost" and the "nature, quantity and harmfulness of the emissions".

The British view is that emission limits laid down in Brussels would introduce an unnecessary tier of authority. Britain's chief industrial air pollution inspector, Dr Leslie Reed, recently argued forcefully that the British concept of "best practicable means" might be adequate to deal with many pollutants. But new British legislation will now be necessary. The implementing directive on emissions from large combustion plants that is now awaiting formal discussion incorporates a belt-and-braces approach: fixed emission limits for new industrial plant, and also large percentage reductions in total national emissions of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and dust. It is left to individual countries' discretion how compliance should be achieved.

The compromise now reached would in

theory allow any member state to veto the further directives, although it seems unlikely that any country would risk the odium of all the others on such a sensitive issue. Scandinavian countries were this week making representations to Britain to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions. Officials in Britain will admit privately that there is a good case for taking some action to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions, but are not impressed by the Community's argument that uniform emission standards applying to all new plant would lead to fairer economic competition.

The real argument is now likely to begin in earnest, over the numbers to be plugged into the implementing directives. The Central Electricity Generating Board has condemned the present targets of 60 per cent reductions in national sulphur dioxide emissions and 40 per cent reductions in nitrogen oxide and dust emissions as excessive. Even a 50 per cent reduction in its own emissions would, it says, cost £1,500 million in capital investment and £300 million a year, raising electricity prices by up to 15 per cent. The board also argues that there is no good evidence that reducing emissions would achieve the desired effects. Many others think that the balance of the evidence has now swung in the favour of reducing emissions. Much is made of a study by the US National Academy of Science which, according to one directive, "established . . . the existence of a linear relationship between emissions and the quantity of acid depositions".

Before adopting any detailed directives on measures to combat air pollution, the council of ministers will want to seek an opinion from the European Parliament. A rapporteur has already been appointed to prepare comments on the directive relating to combustion plants.

Tim Beardsley