

Plant research

Success breeds privatization

THE British government is to go ahead with its plan to sell off its institutes for the development and marketing of new varieties of plants. The government has long seen the sale as politically desirable, given its philosophy that the role of the private sector should be expanded. But it was only last week that a merchant bank confirmed that the sale will also be financially profitable.

The two organizations to be sold, the National Seed Development Organization and the Plant Breeding Institute (PBI), might seem to form a natural couple. PBI, belonging to the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), runs large-scale programmes in plant breeding which have produced nearly all the new varieties sold by the National Seed Development Organization. This has been a profitable business, generating £4.65 million for the government last year. Given that support for plant breeding research at PBI cost just £2.5 million last year, the institutions are bound to seem an attractive buy.

In the short term, researchers in plant breeding may benefit from privatization. In recent years, they have suffered the same cuts in research council funds that have been felt elsewhere and one breeding programme, for *Triticale*, the family that includes grasses and cereals, came close to being abandoned. Private industry should provide funds more closely related to profitability. But there must be some

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doubts about the longer term. Before privatization, PBI's molecular genetics and cytogenetics sections will be split off and combined with other AFRC institutes to form a new Plant Sciences Institute. That, according to PBI's director Professor Peter Day, will threaten a much admired quality of the institute, its ability to "couple disparate activities" under one roof. Whether it makes sense to remove the plant breeding part of the institute from its more basic molecular genetics research section just when the impact of molecular genetics is beginning to be felt must be a matter of controversy.

Much will depend on the buyer. The favourite is the Agricultural Genetics Company, a private company partly own-

ed by the British Technology Group that was set up in 1984 and given first option to develop plant biotechnology discoveries made at AFRC institutes. Although the company is well placed to ensure that fruitful cooperation between the privatized institutes and the research laboratories of AFRC continues, it lacks size. It is still a small organization with fewer than 30 staff, based at Cambridge's Science Park. Big multinational agricultural companies are bound to recognize the appeal of the two institutes and to be able to offer far more money for them. The only reservation they are likely to have is that the Agricultural Genetics Company has already gained the right to commercialize

many of PBI's discoveries. Whether the government will accept the Agricultural Genetics Company's view that it is "the natural vehicle for maintaining the integrity and future development" of the institutes within the private sector should be decided within the next few months.

The future of the remaining "plant sciences" fragment of PBI is unclear. The new Plant Science Institute will be completed by the addition of the John Innes Institute, the Unit of Nitrogen Fixation at the University of Sussex and a small part of the Rothamsted Experimental Station. But no provision has been made to bring the various parts together at one site: the "institute" will be more of an administrative convenience. Again, it is not clear if AFRC will itself profit from the sale of PBI or whether the proceeds will accrue directly to the Treasury. **Alun Anderson**

US-Soviet exchange

Relations thaw in the far north

Washington

AN agreement between the University of Alaska at Anchorage and the Siberian Branch of the Soviet Academy of Medicine to study problems of human adaptation to circumpolar living was endorsed by a Soviet delegation visiting Washington last week. But last minute uncertainty about official Soviet participation pointed up the fragility of US-Soviet relations.

For five years, Ted Mala, associate professor of health sciences at the University of Alaska, has been trying to work out an agreement with Siberian scientists to study health issues relating to life in the far north. Mala wrote to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who responded favourably to his suggestions for cooperation, and arranged meetings with officials of the Soviet health ministry as well as the medical workers' union. The US-Soviet Exchange Initiative Office, established after last winter's summit meeting between President Reagan and Mr Gorbachev to encourage people-to-people exchanges, supported Mala's efforts.

Last week an agreement between the University of Alaska and the Soviet Ministry of Health was due to be signed through the US-Soviet Exchange Initiative Office, and Mala was summoned from Alaska for the signing ceremony. But on arrival in Washington, the Soviet delegation declined to sign a formal agreement, saying the exchange could take place only under health agreements in effect since 1972. The delegation did sign what amounted to a memorandum of understanding saying that Mala could visit the Soviet Union to complete arrangements for the exchanges, but formal plans would have to be approved next by the US-USSR Joint Health Committee formed under the 1972 agreement — a committee

that has not met for seven years.

Although health exchanges between the United States and Soviet Union have never stopped, there has been a slowing down in the past seven years. In 1972, the two countries signed two self-perpetuating agreements to cooperate in health sciences. The Joint Health Committee, consisting of senior health officials from both countries, met each year, but the United States cancelled the 1979 meeting following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In recent years the climate has been changing, and a 1984 speech by President Reagan called specifically for the renewal of cooperation in the health sciences, a call given added impetus by last year's summit meeting.

A three-step plan has been worked out to improve relations. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and Dr James Mason, director of the Centers for Disease Control, will visit the Soviet Union in October to discuss cooperation in the realm of public health. James Wyngaarden, director of the National Institutes of Health, will make a similar journey in November to discuss biomedical cooperation. Finally, the Joint Health Committee is to meet again next spring after nearly eight years.

As Mala's proposed exchange is strictly a private agreement between the University of Alaska and the Soviet Institute of Medicine, the US government has no control over what Mala plans to do. But the Soviet Union is placing things on a government-to-government basis. Harold Thompson, deputy director of the Office of International Health at the Department of Health and Human Services, says the US government is not happy with that arrangement, but does not feel that it should be allowed to interfere with exchanges. **Joseph Palca**