Berlin row threatens support

Munich

AN apparently parochial row in the West German Bundestag (parliament) over research support for West Berlin may turn out to have wider implications. In a dispute over the licensing of a nuclear research reactor at the Hahn-Meitner Institute (HMI), the only federally financed Large Research Establishment in West Berlin, the conservative coalition in Bonn may have found an issue that could split the six-month-old Social Democratic (SPD)-Green coalition in West Berlin's governing body, the Senate.

The newly renovated reactor will serve primarily as a neutron source for physicists, chemists and biologists, mostly from outside HMI. Of the total cost of DM 150 million (\$79 million), 90 per cent was paid by the Research Ministry. In a letter sent on 22 September, West Berlin Governing Mayor Walter Momper (SPD) assured Research Minister Heinz Riesenhuber (Christian Democrat, CDU) that the reactor would be licensed by May 1990, assuming that all technical details (such as signing a contract with the United States for radioactive waste disposal) could be cleared up by then. He said he would be

prepared, if necessary, to issue an executive order (*Sofortvollzug*) to eliminate bureaucratic delays.

But Bundestag member Christian Lenzer (CDU) openly doubted Momper's word, saying he expected the licensing procedure to drag on indefinitely, as in the case of the completed but unlicensed fast breeder reactor at Kalkar. The Bundestag science and technology committee then threatened to cut off the financing of new projects in West Berlin unless the reactor licensing moved ahead. The committee's conservative majority demanded a "clear, reliable course" from the West Berlin government.

Although its rhetoric is critical of science and technology — for example, calling for more studies of the impact of technology on society — the SPD-Green government has not yet taken any strong positions against science. In closing the academy, Momper said the money would be better invested in improving conditions at overcrowded universities. But, with elections a year away, the SPD and the Greens have sent out conflicting messages about issues such as nuclear power.

Social Democrats in the Bundestag

attacked the committee's threat in a tumultuous plenary debate. Edelgard Bulmahn (SPD) charged the conservative parties with "unprecedented interference" in the internal affairs of the *Land* (state) of West Berlin tantamount to "blackmail", which could have "lasting consequences." And the issue could even break up the SPD-Green coalition.

If Momper makes good his promise, it will put Environment Senator Michaela Schreyer of the *Alternative Liste* (AL), the local branch of the Greens, in the unaccustomed and difficult position of having to sign a reactor licence. The distinction between research and power reactors is not seen as relevant by the many AL members who oppose the reactor.

Although HMI welcomed the pressure from Bonn, saying that it was "very useful" that Momper had now set a deadline for licensing, the heavy-handed approach of the conservative coalition in the Bundestag offended West Berlin industry, traditionally supporters of conservative causes. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IHK in German) warned that the committee's threat may drive new investment away from the city.

West Berlin is dependent on the Bonn government for most of its research support, as it is, in fact, for 52 per cent of its overall budget. It receives 6 per cent of all federal research funds, although it has only 3.1 per cent of the total population of West Germany. Research, basic and applied, is an economic lifeline for the city.

Steven Dickman

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Adviser learns Japanese

Washington

THE new director of the US Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), Allan Bromley, admitted last week that the system for transferring technology from federal laboratories to industry was beset by "byzantine complexities" and promised that improving it would be high on his agenda for the 1990s. His plans include setting up a new industrial technology section within the OSTP with a powerful presidentially appointed director, and he suggested that both government and industry had a lot to learn from the Japanese.

Under a grilling by members of the House of Representatives subcommittee on regulation, business opportunities and energy, Bromley said he was "committed to emphasizing the 'T' in OSTP" much more than his predecessors, and suggested that the United States adopt some features of the Japanese system, the success of which he attributed to "putting basic researchers, development engineers, manufacturing engineers and materials experts in groups, stirring briskly, and then assuring them of stable support in their pursuit of broadly specified goals".

The features that make the Japanese system work, he said, are: the targeting of key technologies for special attention; a long-term commitment of money and

people "even if results are slow in coming or don't come at all"; cooperation between industry, government and universities; collaboration between basic researchers, development engineers and experts in manufacturing and materials; and the training of a large cadre of highly-specialized "supertechnicians".

But in the United States, Bromley said, individual companies waste expertise, time and money reinventing basic technologies, and the division between research and manufacturing means that US-designed products may be intrinsically difficult to make, and thus expensive. And the lack of "supertechnicians" means US companies must often go to Japan for samples of materials invented and developed in the United States. Bromley stressed, however, that he did not advocate "slavishly copying" the Japanese model, but rather selecting parts of it.

The consequences of the poor US system were laid out in a report by the subcommittee staff, which calculated that the return to the government in 1988 from licensing of federal inventions and discoveries amounted to only 0.00005 per cent of the research investment. It also complained that federal laboratories are ignoring new technology transfer laws and called for a top-level administration executive to take responsibility for monitoring

their technology transfer efforts.

The report was endorsed by Robert Brumley, former general counsel for the Commerce Department, who said that "the problem with the federal technology transfer program is that no-one understands it".

While working at the Commerce Department on technology transfer related to the space station, Brumley attempted to invoke the Federal Technology Transfer Act of 1986 to force the government to increase its technology transfer efforts and found that "not one member participating either from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department of Defense, the State Department, the Office of Management and Budget or the White House" was aware of the provisions of the act.

James Ling, a science adviser to former president Ronald Reagan, blamed federal officials for taking the attitude that "every company is trying to 'rip off' the government". Unless the situation improves, he proposes taking radical steps: "If we can't get more out of these activities we should scale them back or even shut them down", because they are tying up resources that could be better used in the private sector.

Christine McGourty