Soviet academy

Winds of change discerned

THE general meeting of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which opened only three days after the accession of Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, was quick to respond to the tone of the new regime. In his opening speech, the president of the academy, Anatolii P. Aleksandrov, put special emphasis on Mr Gorbachev's remarks at the Central Committee plenum urging all Soviet scientists to "more active involvement in the solution of important economic, public health and cultural tasks".

Such exhortations are not, of course, new. For the past two decades, every party directive on science has urged closer ties between research and production. This time, however, there was a note of urgency not always apparent at academy meetings. In a rare moment of self-criticism (relayed, incidentally, by Moscow radio), Aleksandrov noted that since the 26th Party Congress in 1981, "many scientific developments which seemed to be economically productive, important and accessible to our industry, were made use of only after a long delay".

The lag in implementing research results in Soviet production is a well-established fact of Soviet life and seems to be endemic in the central planning system, which makes no provision for the non-productive weeks or months necessary for modernizing plants or installing new equipment. The traditional scapegoat, however, is the planner or the factory manager; for scientists to accept at least part of the responsibility is, to say the least, unusual.

Whatever the explanations, Aleksandrov went on to say, Soviet scientists must now apply their efforts to finalizing the plans for the coming five years. Although the "basic directions" have already been decided by the academy and the State Committee for Science and Technology, "certain revisions are required".

What these "revisions" will entail is not too difficult to guess. This year, Konstantin Frolov, a specialist in mechanical engineering, has been elected as an additional vice-president. Each academy vice-president is responsible for a major field of research within the academy institutes; Petr Fedoseev for social sciences, Yurii Ovchinnikov for chemical and biological sciences, Evgenii Velikhov for physical and mathematical sciences, Aleksandr Yanshin for Earth sciences and so on. Although all these sectors have their applied and technological aspects, the election of Frolov to the vice-presidency suggests a policy change that would restore to the academy the technology institutes of which it was shorn in the reforms of the early 1960s.

Another field not often stressed at academy meetings is that of military research but, at a special session devoted to the 40th anniversary of the end of the

Second World War in Europe, the contribution of Soviet scientists to the allied war effort was much lauded. Then, Aleksandrov continued, the level of development of Soviet science still directly influences the country's defence potential, countering "the military superiority of the forces of imperialism". The academy went on to adopt a resolution calling on "scientists of the world" to ensure that atomic research is directed towards peaceful purposes only and that space technology is used not for "star wars but to support the cause of peace and progress".

For the most part, however, the academy meeting ran true to form. Reports were presented, foreign contacts noted (28,500 Soviet scientists posted to socialist countries during the past five years) and the "complexities" of relationships with the United States over the past five years deplored. A few major innovations were mentioned almost in passing, in particular the establish-

ment of a centre for public opinion research at the Institute of Sociological Research. Some difficulties were glossed over. Academic secretary Georgii Skryabin correctly reported the "successful research" into computer software but said nothing of the difficulties in training computer engineers recently noted in *Izvestiya* by Vyacheslav Elutin, the All-Union Minister of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education.

Perhaps, however, the most significant tribute to the new Gorbachev era came in the TASS announcement that, as expected, Aleksandrov had been re-elected president of the academy. Leading Soviet scientists are, in general, as remote from the public as are political leaders and, at 82 and in failing health, Aleksandrov has been more remote than most. Almost ten years after his first election to the post, TASS has nevertheless decided to give him something more of a public image, Aleksandrov's career was "a flurry of brilliant ideas and decisions". "He is cheerful and sociable", TASS went on, "likes a good joke and a hearty laugh. But he is furious when he sees injustice".

Vera Rich

Soviet geneticist

Smuggling charge dropped

Dr David Goldfarb, the Moscow Jewish molecular geneticist, who last year was accused of trying to smuggle Soviet "national security material" — bacteriological strains — to the West, has been informed by the KGB that the smuggling charge against him has been dropped. He is now threatened, however, with prosecution for advocating a Western boycott on his behalf.

Dr Goldfarb, whose emigration visa for Israel was apparently obtained by supporters in the Academy of Sciences bypassing the normal emigration and security channels, had that visa rescinded last April, a few days before he was due to leave. His research notes, personal papers and strains were confiscated and he was informed that the strains were the property of the Soviet Union. In fact, all the strains involved had originally been obtained from laboratories in the United Kingdom or the United States, either directly or through the good offices of Wladyslaw Kunicki-Goldfinger, or of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Recently a group of biologists from the United States and Europe proposed a moratorium on the sending of strains to the Soviet Union until Dr Goldfarb's materials were returned to him and he was issued a new exit visa. During his recent conversation with KGB officer Gusev, Dr Goldfarb was confronted with a copy of a letter he had written to Professor Elie Wollman of the Institut Pasteur in Paris, supporting the idea of the moratorium. Gusev said that the letter might constitute a case of "anti-Soviet propaganda" and made Dr Goldfarb sign a document to that effect. The document, together with the

letter, will be forwarded to the prosecutor's office, in order to determine whether any further action is necessary. When Dr Goldfarb asked how Gusev had got hold of the letter, he was told that "someone picked it up in the street". Gusev added that, in any case, the moratorium would not be effective, since the Academy of Sciences said that only a few letters of protest had been received from the West".

Gusev then returned to Dr Goldfarb all the confiscated written materials (but not the strains), and said that the smuggling charges had been dropped. According to a representative of the New York-based Helsinki Watch Committee, this is the first known incident of the KGB returning confiscated material, or informing a suspect that the charges against him had been dropped.

In a telephone conversation with his son in New York, Dr Goldfarb said that so far it is unclear whether the return of the material indicates that he will be allowed to emigrate, or whether it merely marks a change in tactics by the KGB in response to Western reaction to the "strains affair". The Goldfarb case was raised during the negotiations last January about the possible resumption of the bilateral exchange agreement between the Soviet Academy of Science and the US National Academy of Sciences. According to Professor Alex Rich, a member of the United States team, Dr Yurii Ovchinnikov, a vice-president of the Soviet Academy said: "Of course this strain thing is not serious and we are trying to clear it up. But there is not much that we can do as it is in the hands of the KGB".

Vera Rich