

the talented people thrown out of academic laboratories indecently soon after some committee has turned down their application and the design of the research people say in their applications they will attempt, in which caution takes precedence over imaginativeness.

What the US research enterprise really needs is not a tighter competition for research funds, but a looser one. A shift (modest to begin with) towards a system of support for laboratories and institutions (for which laboratories and institutions would compete among themselves) would help to make the US research enterprise more durable and more productive. Nobody could guarantee that the result would save money for the Congress, but it need not cost more. To the extent that the unrecognized victims of present competitiveness include neglected students, the benefits of change for the enlargement of the stock of skill in the United States could be substantial.

The recommendation that the intramural research programme of the National Cancer Institute should be trimmed back (see page 267) is a different kettle of fish. For many years, it has been anomalous that the intramural programmes at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as a whole are not objectively evaluated by others than themselves. It can only be in the US public's interest that this should now be done; the cancer institute is simply the first in line. But again, the solution is not simply to cut back on intramural budgets. Especially in turbulent times such as the years ahead are likely to be, there will be a continuing need for places and programmes at which researchers known to be productive can be kept at work. NIH's intramural programmes could marvellously complement those of external institutions if they were more able to employ people for short spells of time on projects whose purpose had been demonstrated to be productive.

The turmoil ahead for NASA is even bigger in scale (see page 266). Daniel Goldin, the head of the agency, seems to have borrowed freely from the proposed restructuring of the Department of Energy laboratories a few weeks ago (see *Nature* 373, 457-458 & 463-464; 1995). The idea is to hive off specific chunks of NASA's interest in science to "institutes" sponsored by universities, but initially supported by NASA. It seems unlikely, in the present climate, that NASA will be able to offer much in the way of long-term security to the people transferred or to the universities that take them on. It will be interesting to read the fine print in NASA's first agreement with a university. Only then will it be possible to be sure that the plan is not a way of dispensing with people whose cost can no longer be afforded.

Meanwhile, the universities themselves are not in particularly good shape. It is not a good sign that the University of California, for example, is persuading members of its faculties to take early retirement and then rehiring them to shoulder a reduced teaching load, largely because the academic pension fund is in surplus, but the state is broke. Much the same is true elsewhere in publicly funded higher education in the United States: the states are having to skimp on essential infrastructure just when the Republican revolutionaries are cutting back on indirect costs.

Unless the Congress is more careful than it has been in the past few months, there is a serious danger that it will seriously damage one of the best things the federal government has done in the past half century. But will not market forces ensure that the useful research is done (and that public money is not wasted on research that serves no purpose)? That is the Republicans' last defence. But precisely because the link between research and industrial utility is so intangible, that market is not an efficient market. Experience elsewhere, in Britain for example, shows that clearly enough. The Congress should put dogma to one side in its treatment of research. □

## Xenophobia bubbles up

**A Russian deputy's attack on Mr George Soros and his good works in Russia is an ominous and regressive sign.**

THE Russian Duma (parliament) has not been a pleasing place for many years, but it seems to have outdone itself last week. The chairman of the Security Committee, Mr Victor Ilyukhin, whose role is to oversee the remodelled KGB, has written to *Sovetskaya Rossiya* with an account of his analysis of the work of Mr George Soros in Russia over the past few years. Ilyukhin is one of the old guard in the Duma, but his language is nevertheless an unpleasant echo of almost forgotten usage.

Thus, Ilyukhin says, many of the people employed by Soros in Russia to administer his two charitable funds are also "agents of the CIA", the US Central Intelligence Agency. He is particularly suspicious of the Soros scheme for making awards of cash to teachers and professors at Russia's schools and universities, which is intended to "change the mentality of Russian society". He fears "the degradation of social, patriotic and national consciousness" and worse: he goes on to accuse Soros (whose hedge fund made a killing from selling sterling short just before the British government's exit from the European Exchange Rate System in October 1992) of having manipulated the Russian ruble two years later, causing it to fall in value by a quarter. Ilyukhin now wants the Duma to legislate for strict regulation of foreign philanthropic organizations in Russia, especially for those with interests in the scientific field.

This is an unpleasant business because Ilyukhin means to be nasty. And his following in the Duma will listen to what he says, despite the counter-resolution being prepared by a member of Gaidar party in the Duma. It is also a convenient time to raise a protest of this kind. The Soros fund for science is now almost spent, so that it is unlikely that the fiercest resolution in the Duma will have much effect on the flow of funds to Russia. Yet Ilyukhin's protest is an ominous development. Russia's traditional habit is xenophobic. The survival of the tsars and their successors exploited that. It will be a shabby (and a self-depriving) business if it comes into bloom again. But true xenophobes do not believe that philanthropy can be disinterested and altruistic. They are their own worst enemies. □