

NEW WORLD

Public Interest Groups Meet

by our Washington Correspondent

PUBLIC interest groups have, during the past few years, gradually established themselves as an important feature on the political landscape in the United States. But although they have won some stunning victories, they often find it difficult to match the huge scientific resources that large corporations and government agencies are able to call upon. Moreover, the haphazard growth of the public interest movement has resulted in much fragmentation and little coordination.

Some of these problems could, however, be alleviated following a meeting held in Washington recently. Leaders of many public interest groups met to discuss the possibility of setting up an organisation to coordinate the groups' activities, provide a registry of scientists who are willing to lend their expertise on specific problems, and generally provide a service to existing organisations.

The idea is chiefly the brainchild of Dr Samuel S. Epstein, Professor of Environmental Health and Human Ecology at Case Western Reserve University, who has played a leading role in the fight against unsafe food additives, drugs and pesticides. Epstein persuaded the Monsour Medical Foundation, a Pennsylvania-based medical organisation, to sponsor the meeting, and the foundation will also underwrite some of the costs of getting the new public interest organisation off the ground. It could greatly increase the effectiveness of public interest groups in the scientific arena, but a few doubts were raised at the meeting about the need for yet another outfit.

Epstein is quick to point out, however, that the new organisation will not in any way compete with existing groups, but will complement their activities. The plan is for it to avoid such causes as bringing court suits, and testifying before Congressional committees, but to help other public interest groups in their efforts in those areas. First, it will assist in the publication of a newsletter, to inform each group of what the others are doing, and it will also probably help to set up *ad hoc* coalitions to handle specific issues. Second, and perhaps most important, it is hoped that it will be able to establish numerous contacts within the scientific community so that groups can be put in touch with expert help on the matters they are fighting. It will also probably be an information clearing house, and there is even talk of starting up a

journal devoted to scientific issues involving public concerns.

Epstein said at the meeting last week that the public interest movement has been forced to take a "brush fire" rather than an anticipatory approach—unsafe pesticides and drugs have been banned, but only after they have been used extensively, and there is always a new fight imminent—and he said "the odds are against us if we continue with this approach".

It is ironic, however, that just as the public interest groups are considering

setting up this new coordinating body, some of the most powerful organisations are in danger of losing an important source of funds. The *Washington Post* recently disclosed that the Ford Foundation is considering withdrawing its financial support from legal groups which have been active in environmental concerns. The reason, it seems, is that the foundation would like to focus more on environmental research than on legal action, and has asked the groups to investigate other sources of funding by 1975.

SAKHAROV

Keldysh Replies

by our Washington Correspondent

MSTISLAV KELDYSH, President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, last week publicly defended the campaign by Soviet authorities against Andrei D. Sakharov, the Soviet physicist who has been in trouble for his outspoken criticisms of Soviet society. The defence came in an unusual open letter sent to Dr Philip Handler, President of the United States National Academy of Sciences (NAS), in which Keldysh said in effect that Sakharov has brought the attacks on himself and that the NAS should stop trying to meddle in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. The letter was an official reply to a telegram Handler sent to Keldysh last month, protesting the harassment Sakharov has received in the past few months.

Handler warned, in his telegram last month, that further harassment or detention of Sakharov would seriously jeopardise the scientific agreements that have recently been reached between the United States and the Soviet Union. He was particularly critical of a letter attacking Sakharov which was published in *Pravda* and signed by some forty members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Such attacks, he said, "revive memories of the failure of our own scientific community to protect the late J. R. Oppenheimer from political attack".

But Keldysh replied that "My colleagues from the Praesidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences and I cannot but strongly object to the content and tone [of Handler's telegram], which are not in accord with either the substance of the matter or with the spirit of the relations between our Academ-

ies". He pointed out that the *Pravda* letter condemned Sakharov for urging western governments to insist on changes in internal Soviet policies before accepting normalised relations with the USSR. "By such acts", Keldysh said, "Sakharov harms the interests of not only the people of the Soviet Union, but also of other countries who sincerely aspire for a detente".

Keldysh's letter goes on to point out that no action has been taken against Sakharov and that "even today he has every opportunity actively to conduct research". That, at least, seems to imply that some basic freedoms have not yet been denied to Sakharov and that he may be safe from further harassment, at least for the time being.

One of the chief points in Handler's telegram was that the treatment of Sakharov could upset the scientific accord and exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union, to which Keldysh replies: "The attempts to use this exchange to influence the Soviet scientist's political stand are absolutely unpromising, let alone the ethical aspects of this matter". He concluded that "We stand for an extensive development of scientific cooperation provided that the traditions and way of life of every country are mutually respected and observed".

An important aspect of Keldysh's letter is that it was published in the Soviet weekly newspaper *Literary Gazette*. It was therefore written with at least an eye on internal propaganda, and its seemingly unpromising stand against Sakharov should thus be seen in that light. Since the letter contains a summary of Handler's telegram, its publication also brings to the attention of the Soviet public the fact that the harassment of Sakharov has sparked off a series of protests in the West.