

# **SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL**

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Research in the social sciences is in trouble both in Britain and in the United States. Early in 1981 David Stockman, President

Reagan's budget director, cut government funding for the social sciences by 75%, while in the last month in Britain Sir Keith Joseph has both cut the budget of the Social Science Research Council by £1.1m, and set up an enquiry by Lord Rothschild into the very need for the SSRC to exist. In both countries, conservative politicians have disparaged social research and questioned whether the state should fund research which may undermine the state or, probably a more pressing danger to them, expose the consequences of government policies. Meanwhile in France the Mitterrand government has just held a conference of 2000 researchers to discuss a substantial expansion of French research, in the social as well as the natural sciences.

The SSRC has always been the most controversial of the research councils which provide funds for academic research in Britain. Like the other research councils, the biggest of which is the Science and Engineering Research Council, it divides its funds between support for the research work of academics, paying for research assistants or equipment, and support for postgraduate students as they undertake PhD or Master's courses. Set up in the 1960s as a contribution to the economic regeneration of Britain, it has always spent much of its budget on such fields as economic management, planning, industrial relations and educational research, but it is also responsible for the 'purer' social sciences, psychology, politics, sociology, human geography and economic and social history.

With this wide responsibility the SSRC can be, and has often been, criticised at the same time for being too pure and too applied, for funding research in obscure areas of social anthropology, for pretending to rigour in such fields as industrial relations and, in a combination of the two attacks, for fostering revolution by teaching theoretical sociology.

Much of this criticism is pure philistinism, made easier by the fact that the jargon of the social sciences seems easy to understand and is easy to caricature. Many social scientists must wish that, like the doctors, the biologists or the mathematicians, their jargon and thus the titles of their research work were incomprehensible to anyone without a degree in the subject. As it is, every list of social science research topics produces guffaws from the *Daily Telegraph* or, in the United States, the 'golden fleece' award given monthly by an American senator to the activity which has been the most ludicrous use of public funds. The social sciences deal with topics which we all think we understand; they thus do not have the

aura of respectability and profound knowledge which surrounds science, mathematics or the humanities and which seems to deter critics.

More serious for the SSRC, at least until the recent political attacks, has been the failure of social scientists to agree about how their work should be organised and about whether it should try to be useful, to contribute to policy-making. Early in its life, the SSRC pursued academic respectability; its structure paralleled the traditional academic divisions between subjects, it fought shy of taking initiatives and commissioning research, and much of its effort went into the training of research students to staff the new social science departments set up in the polytechnics and universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Gradually, however, partly under pressure from successive governments and from the other research councils, the emphasis has changed. After an earlier report from Lord Rothschild, more attempt was made to get research under way which would be directly relevant to the needs of policy-makers. The SSRC began to commission and initiate research — for example in race relations and in socio-legal studies — and to encourage research which cut across traditional subject divisions. At the moment, in the culmination of this process, the present chairman, Michael Posner, is reorganising its work to concentrate on 'problems that are seen to be important in national and international affairs'.

Social scientists are deeply divided about these changes. Many sociologists think that they represent a capitulation to the state and to relevance at the expense of the pursuit of knowledge; many economists think that the changes merely recognise reality and are a sensible organisation of resources towards the problems that really matter. Everyone realises, however, the danger that some outside body will choose the research which it thinks is important and deny funds to research which may produce inconvenient results.

This is the spectre which is raised by Sir Keith Joseph's actions; the cut in the SSRC budget is not for financial reasons, for £1.1m, though substantial in the SSRC's funds of £20m, is a drop in the ocean of the £400m allocated to the research councils. It has, in any case, been reallocated by Sir Keith to the natural sciences. The Rothschild enquiry is seen by Joseph, as letters to and from Sir Geoffrey Howe which were leaked to *New Society* make clear, as a preliminary either to winding up the SSRC or to forcing it to become a client of the government, paid only to do the research that government wants.

Winding up the SSRC is probably impossible, whatever Tory backbenchers might like; someone has to give grants to research students and fund academic research, unless research in the social sciences is to cease altogether — the universities are in no condition to pick up the bill. But there is a considerable danger that the ‘pure’ social sciences - anthropology or economic history, for example — might be separated from the rest and financed inadequately through an organisation like the British Academy, as are the humanities at the moment. This would leave the more contentious subjects — economics, sociology, management and industrial relations — in a revamped SSRC dependent upon government grants or private contracts for specific research projects and thus subject to the whims of government departments and ministers.

In such circumstances, free enquiry, which is expensive in these subjects, would be impossible. ‘Academic freedom’ is easily abused as a rallying cry, but in the social sciences academic freedom is very close to political freedom. That is why the SSRC must be defended.