

# LTD ANSWER TO SOCIAL SCIENCE FACTORY

The whole nature of social scientific research has been of some concern to me recently.

Given the rapidly changing forms of funding of polytechnics bidding for student numbers, finding a more secure or regular form of funding for our research rather than teaching activities seems ever more imperative.

The visit of Professor Howard Newby, new chairman of the ESRC, to our polytechnic recently was quite reassuring. It seemed that he was completely au fait with the issues and quite sympathetic to the problems. But the ESRC does not have great largesse to distribute, despite the fact that Newby has successfully negotiated an increase in budget. And how the funding is distributed at present still seems to militate against social scientific research in polytechnics.

The system of "peer review" and more balanced representation on the groups, boards and the council of the ESRC has been reviewed and revised, but polytechnics remain sadly under-represented, at least formally speaking. There are only two polytechnic members, of the council and board, and they are both directors. For the moment, "peer review" and initiating research programmes or ideas, seem to be confined to university representatives.

However, these developments do perhaps have a very specific character. It appears that increasingly research and teaching are now being done sequentially rather than simultaneously, probably because of the increasing teaching loads.

As another instance, two members of my department, quite separately, have secured for themselves funding for research secondments for a year - one to be a research

fellow at a university, with no teaching responsibilities, and the other to a research division of a government department. These may well be the augury of things to come.

For a moment last week I began to think not. I had been invited to give a paper at Bradford University. As I walked through the doors to the main building, I spotted a neat little sign which announced "Bradford University (Research) Limited".

I was astonished and immediately struck by the contrast in imagery that this presented to me from my own institution. It turned out, however, that the few academics that I met did not feel that the university was now more oriented to research than to teaching. They still felt the pressure to try to develop both, and were also finding it increasingly difficult to do both simultaneously.

The paper that I gave turned out to be, somewhat inadvertently, I must admit, alarmingly current. I was talking about the uses to which social science research on the family has been put in the policy process. I concentrated on a historical and comparative perspective. Earlier that week these issues had been alluded to in two public policy discussions.

One was Lord Mackay's announcements about proposals to alter the law on divorce. I believe that he used the evidence collected



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and assembled by the Law Commission and by the various research projects on families in divorce and divorce conciliation to reach his conclusions. He argued that it was "better" for children for the process of divorce to be drawn out, and if possible for a reconciliation between the two parents.

That may be true in an ideal world but at present the world of families in Britain is not ideal and much of the research evidence that I know of is much less unequivocal than Lord Mackay's statements would indicate. Taking issues about child rearing in different types of families in the context of family violence, including marital and

child abuse, it is not obvious that all children benefit from two parents. It appears that Lord Mackay is trying to use this very complex research data to present a clear ideological statement about what amounts to Conservative family policy.

A remarkably similar refrain was also sung at an invitational conference that I attended a few days ago, organized by the Institute of Economic Affairs who had invited Charles Murray, an American social researcher, to present a paper on the emerging British underclass, following from his study in the USA. Murray's paper was a model of careful and eloquent presentation but I at least was left pondering the remarkably contrasting cavalier policy conclusions and solutions that he drew from the complexity of the issues that on his own admission he identified.

He claimed that an underclass could be identified by the types of behaviour that were exhibited, which distinguished it from other people and groups in poverty. These were illegitimacy, and rising levels of violent crime. Asking is illegitimacy such a terrible problem, he answered with his own self-professed stridency and certainty. He claimed that "births to unmarried mothers was the single most disastrous influence on the underclass". And he added that, "parenthetically, the underclass is deeply intertwined with race or being

black".

Now all of this may be true but it was the solutions that he drew that I found difficult with agreeing with. He seemed to be the prophet of doom, implying that the USA was ahead of Britain in the development of this social problem and that it had already reached disastrous proportions there.

He pleaded for limited government as "good" - to withdraw government support for "welfare mothers" in the hope of persuading them to form stable marital relationships before conceiving children. Yet he did not look at the research evidence about marriage and the family to see whether this particular solution might work.

Given the pool of marriageable partners from which the young women in question might draw - by Murray's research evidence young black men involved in violent crime - it might be perfectly rational for such women not to choose to marry. The social research evidence that I know of does not demonstrate that there are clear connections between illegitimacy, race, and violent crime, given mediating factors such as gender, class and region. What troubled me the most, however, were the ready elisions that Murray was making between what may be entirely separate social phenomena and then drawing simplistic public policy solutions.

But I am worried that he thinks they admit of such "quick fix" solutions. I just wish that the welter of social scientific evidence from which they are drawn would point me as easily to some policy proposals that admit of ready implementation. I guess that I am still to be convinced that social research can provide simple evidence for simple solutions to complex social problems.