

## Social Sciences under Attack in the UK (1981-1983)

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## Brief Background Notes

- 1 The Social Science Research Council (SSRC), born by Royal Charter, was created by the Science and Technology Act of 1965. It was the youngest of a family of five sibling councils, sometimes referred to as « quangos », a sardonic acronym adopted in the UK and the US by conservatives to abbreviate « quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organisations ». These organisations had the task of spending a part of the government's science budget, the remainder of which funded governmental research projects, many of which addressed Defence needs.
- 2 Similar to the Scandinavian model, yet unlike most continental European nations, which typically governed research through one unified council covering the whole of « science » (often including the humanities), the five research councils were each responsible for their own group of sciences. They were loosely co-ordinated by the Advisory Board on the Research Councils (ABRC), and the whole system was overseen by the Department of Education and Science, which had a fairly senior Cabinet Minister called the « Secretary of State » as its head.
- 3 Members of the various councils and their chairmen were appointed by ministers and served for fixed, renewable terms. In my case, I was appointed to the SSRC by a Labour Secretary of State in January, 1979, and served much of my term under Mrs. Thatcher's Conservative government, which was elected in June, 1979. During my term, Secretary of State Sir Keith Joseph seriously considered dismantling the SSRC. Lord Rothschild, a notable and widely experienced natural scientist, was commissioned in 1981 to investigate the utility and necessity of the SSRC. His report brought about a reprieve for the council. The SSRC is still alive and well, operating under the name of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

## The UK Research Council System

- 4 Government support for research grew on an increasing scale from the 1930s onwards. Originally, this support had been provided partly through the establishment of

government-owned and -administered laboratories, but more substantively through government finance to universities. In fact, most of the notable achievements made in fundamental science by Britons were made by university professors. Their work was financed by university funds, and despite the fact that the government may have often served as the ultimate paymaster, in the eyes of the professoriat it was the « University » which authorised expenditure, generally with a large degree of autonomy.

- 5 Increasingly through the 1940s and 1950s, this system came to be regarded as inadequate. Government bureaucrats were uncertain about the ability of the universities' financial systems - the universities were, after all, mainly concerned with teaching - to successfully cope with large-scale laboratory work and the cultivation of dedicated staff members dedicated to research. Additionally, the universities themselves were reluctant to have large sections of the research performed by « their » professors funded directly by government bureaucrats.
- 6 The model of the Medical Research Council, a body dating from the 1920s, attracted proponents from both sides of the issue. On the one hand, the universities supported it because Medicine was one of the ancient *libres professions*, fiercely independent of any form of Government intervention; on the other hand, bureaucrats favoured it, because the tradition of « peer review » - the selection by scientists not only of what projects would be pursued but also of who would receive funding-provided a certain guarantee that public money would be wisely allocated.
- 7 Hence, in the 1960s and 1970s, four additional research councils were established:
- 8 1) The Science Research Council, which would later be renamed the Science and Engineering Research Council (« Science » in Britain traditionally meant chemistry, physics and mathematics): by far the biggest council, measured by budget, number of researchers supported and general public prestige;
- 9 2) The Natural Environment Research Council: covering non-medical biology, geology and, more recently, climatology;
- 10 3) The Agricultural Research Council: later to become the Food and Agricultural Research Council
- 11 4) The Social Science Research Council: the latest to arrive, the smallest, considered a somewhat atypical addition, it covered sociology, human geography, social anthropology, economics, social statistics, economic history and certain aspects of psychology, legal studies and linguistics.
- 12 All of these Research Councils employed an administrative staff, the senior members of which were highly qualified and experienced. The councils made strategic decisions themselves, and beneath them served a complex committee system covering all the main fields in their respective sciences. These committees consisted primarily of university professors and high-calibre researchers from independent laboratories. Their work formed the basis of the peer review system, and they had the authority to decide which projects would be pursued and which researchers would be supported.
- 13 There has always been discussion about the relative powers of Ministers, the Advisory Board on Research Councils, the councils themselves and their subordinate committees. One idealised, liberal and well-respected view was that it was the task of these various groups of distinguished citizens to preside over the impersonal peer review system which, like any truly democratic system, would in reality be self-governing and self-justifying. No doubt the truth was less simple and more controversial.

### Political Background

- 14 Mrs. Thatcher, elected as Conservative Prime Minister in 1979, brought with her much firm Tory rhetoric. She also had the support of several important conservative ideologists who helped fashion her Programme of Government. Mrs. Thatcher's contribution was chiefly a firmness of purpose, a determination to methodically carry out the programme she laid down in her early years in power. Perhaps her most typical and most appreciated speech was the one in which she quipped « You fellows may U-turn if you wish, but the Lady [Mrs. Thatcher herself] is NOT for turning ».
- 15 Sir Keith Joseph, who became for a few years the arch-symbol of the modern Tory radical, eventually earned a reputation as a tolerant, middle-of-the-road conservative gentleman eager to serve his country. While in office under Mrs. Thatcher, and for a few brief months in 1970 under Mr. Heath, he adopted an assortment of radical principles. Yet when his opinions were found to be distasteful, he was more ready to « turn » than his leader. His willingness to change, however, was not due to weakness, but rather to a genuine receptiveness to intellectual counter argument and to the difficult lessons of expérience vécue.

### Foes and Allies

- 16 I propose to address the state of the SSRC during these years by examining the five « forces » that determined its fate. Some of these forces were collectivities held together by similar interests or ideologies, others were simply small groups of individuals brought together by their educational, ethnic or work-related backgrounds. The five forces were: the SSRC'S Clients, Intellectual Princes, the Heads of the other Research Councils, Philistines and the Ideology of Conservatism.

### SSRC's Clients

- 17 Those applicants who received grants were generally acquaintances of council members. Most of the established university staff of the time were aware that the research councils were created to act as voting bodies, with the goal of maintaining a wide range of committees and referees who would judge applications by standards of academic quality. In the SSRC's early years, when applications were few relative to funds available, most senior applicants received grants, engendering mutual admiration between the council and its applicants.
- 18 In fact, during my early days in the council, one of our criteria for success was the number of projects supported. Much of our funding was allocated to pay the fees and modest maintenance costs for post-graduate research or course work. As stated earlier, these students were often acquaintances of council members, as were the many professors who received this steady influx of students. Thus, even if these professors were not themselves applicants for SSRC research grants, they still benefited from the Council's decisions.
- 19 Yet as the financial cuts of the Thatcher Government began to take effect, this happy state of affairs was quickly disrupted. The new Thatcher Government, in first few weeks of power in the summer of 1979, was determined to impose some immediate symbolic cuts in expenditure: each Ministry had to play its part. SSRC'S parent Ministry (Education and Science) chose to make SSRC one of its small sacrificial lambs. At very short notice, we had no alternative, in July, but to cut research student places (already announced) for October 1979. The amicable relationship of the students with the SSRC, and that of their respective academic supervisors, was disturbed. The SSRC was blamed for accepting the

financial cuts. Research grants for mature scholars grew scarcer, and over the following months the council seemed, to some of its academic clients, to be pursuing methods of research investigation and funding antipathetic to the traditional disciplines.

20 These were other problems. In particular I had judged it right to begin, lowly in 1979, to argue that while it was right for universities to nurture the individual disciplines, the SSRC's proper focus was « areas of research ». It was true that individuals trained and experienced in various disciplines were the most qualified to conduct research; nevertheless, the goal was not simply to provide laboratory space to help hone disciplinary skills.

21 This controversy diminished the enthusiasm of an active minority of established scholars, who had been uncomfortable with the idea of a research council in the social sciences from the beginning.

#### Intellectual Princes

22 Some of these established scholars, particularly political scientists and sociological theorists, regarded the SSRC with disdain. While these « Intellectual Princes » may not have seen themselves as active enemies of the SSRC, they behaved arrogantly to its staff. A handful of Oxford dons and several key professors at the London School of Economics believed that the creation of the SSRC had been a mistake. Some found the claim to « scientific » status erroneous, while others took exception to the notion of a « social science » (although they may have accepted that there did exist disciplines which could be called « the social sciences »). Additionally, a number of political scientists and historians, who generated what they were proud to regard as scholarship rather than research in the North American sense, expected little benefit and potential harm, from the intervention of a research council in their work.

23 However, as one may have expected, few academics closely engaged in empirical research were among the critics. Their work required the collection and careful interpretation of data, a costly and labour-intensive activity for which government finance increased when the SSRC was created. These professors, along with a number of eminent theoreticians, took a friendlier stance.

24 Keith Joseph's biographer (M. Halcrow, 1989) has already discussed Joseph's interest in intellectual matters. Although Joseph had an unshakeable academic base as a Fellow at All Souls' College, Oxford, and as the recipient of a post-graduate *conours* of great prestige, he tended to seek the company and advice of academic gurus. These gurus included «... the Letwins, Bill and Shirley, respectively a political scientist and a philosopher at the London School of Economics, who admired [Joseph's] intellect but felt that one function they had to perform for him was to teach him the academic process of working out that A logically leads to B, which leads to C. » (Halcrow, p. 105-6).

25 My own view was that Joseph needed little instruction in such rudimentary logic, but it may be that the Letwins' instruction was what brought about Joseph's startling question to me during the course of a pedestrian squabble about cuts in my budget: « Tell me, Mr. Posner, do you think the social sciences observe the Popperian paradigm? »

26 That was a fine example of the sort of issue which engaged the minds of these « princes », and it was this doubt about whether the social sciences were in any effective sense « scientific » which formed one part of the case against the SSRC. I myself was never concerned with philosophical speculation on the nature of the social sciences and their research methods. I knew that good economics required both high-grade theoretical

frameworks and careful investigative techniques, and thus assumed that other disciplines proceeded with the same care and sophistication.

- 27 Another influential voice against the SSRC was that of Lord Max Beloff, an Oxford professor and a Fellow of All Souls' College. He wrote a hostile letter to Lord Rothschild about the SSRC, specifically using the word « bias » to describe key areas of the council's work, in a context where this clearly meant political bias. Beloff, a political theorist of high reputation, was a supporter of sociological studies at Oxford, but favoured a contemplative and historical strand of sociology rather than alternative tendencies, deemed by him to be meretricious and superficial. This scorn for what might be called the « wrong sort of sociology » went hand in hand with Beloff's desire to counter the false political faith of collectivism with a true doctrine of belief in the rights and duties of the individual (cf. e.g. M. Beloff 1970, 1978).
- 28 Beloff therefore provided a key link between those opposed to the SSRC due to intellectual disagreement and those opposed on the grounds of the Ideology of Conservatism, which I will discuss below. It is noteworthy that when the affairs of the SSRC were later discussed in a House of Lords debate (after Rothschild's report was published but before the matter was resolved), Beloff seemed reasonably persuaded, on intellectual grounds, that some of his earlier objections were mistaken.
- 29 In hindsight, I now believe that several of the SSRC's intellectual critics were suggesting the following: in the sort of academic work that I do, the meddling of a research council is neither necessary nor useful. If I need a typist or a research assistant, I should be able to get that from the university that elected me to my chair.
- 30 This could be sensible for some disciplines, but scholars in many other branches in the social sciences engaged in more co-operative, empirical research benefitted greatly from more organised support. It is however a criticism of the SSRC, and of the professoriat generally, that this distinction was not widely accepted before the drama of Joseph's attack on the SSRC.
- 31 Lord Beloff died in early 1999, covered with honours and appropriately eulogised by his Oxford College. By historical irony, just a few months later, Oxford University announced that its « first Department of Sociology would... take forward Oxford's tradition of empirical social research ». The head of this new department was formerly the director of the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends, an organisation funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (the new name of the SSRC). *Eppur si muove*, as Galileo should have said.

#### Heads of the other Research Councils

- 32 An important source of support for the SSRC came from the Heads of the other Research Councils (HORCs), who helped the SSRC in the distribution of government funds. They too heard the rumblings of discontent from their clients in the universities, clients who disputed research council decisions on such matter as the favouring of big science versus small science or of a well-equipped physics laboratory in all universities as opposed to a first-class laboratory in only some universities.
- 33 The HORCs were therefore a source of advice and sympathy for me and my colleagues at the SSRC in our most trying periods; they firmly defended our interests to Joseph, both in public and in private. They were, in a sense, our bigger brothers, richer and more powerful, often shielding us from harm. They brushed aside doubts about the SSRC's

34 « scientific status ». The reason for this may perhaps be that working scientists, in my experience, do not concern themselves with methodological debate; they simply believe that « good » science is what « good » scientists do. Yet in the final analysis, the HORCs displayed a high degree of solidarity with the SSRC, which may have surprised Joseph and isolated the disgruntled « intellectual princes ».

Philistines

35 One very audible group of opponents of the SSRC and its clients were those that I will refer to as « Philistines » (later to be stigmatised by Rothschild as « vandals », but I prefer the Biblical term). They argued that « taxpayers' money » should not be wasted on research with no evident public benefit carried out by troublemakers with silly or even subversive agendas.

36 Early in my stay at the SSRC, I was summoned, in my capacity as Accounting Officer for the SSRC, before the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, a senior and prestigious body with a reputation for dealing harshly with bureaucrats. My staff colleagues spent a great deal of time preparing me for the ordeal; nevertheless, my heart sank when I saw that several of the Conservative committee members had before them the voluminous SSRC publication entitled « Research Supported », an exhaustive list of all our projects.

37 Two particular projects caught their attention: the first discussed « Caravan Routes in contemporary North Africa », and the second focused on « Kinship and Sex Roles in a Modern Polish Village ». Their question was inevitable: « Do you believe that these projects are a good use of the taxpayers' money entrusted to your care ? »

38 I believed (and still do) that I mounted a spirited and intelligent, although entirely impromptu, defence on the grounds both of intellectual interest and potential utility to those charged with British foreign policy. Despite my efforts, I emerged somewhat scarred from the ordeal. The press heaped a great deal of ridicule on my Social Anthropologist clients and myself.

39 Lord Rothschild devoted a whole chapter of his report to an eloquent defence of Social Anthropology, yet even after my own sad experience, I never thought that this sort of attack was a source of real danger. Keith Joseph may have disliked social scientists, but his ethnic origin, his academic training and his personal style would not allow him to be a philistine.

Ideology of Conservatism

40 The primary danger for the SSRC was not the philistine heresy but the new Ideology of Conservatism that appeared in the early years of Mrs. Thatcher's Government.

41 Sir Joseph was at the heart of this ideological revolution. In the 1970s he underwent a political conversion, leaving behind his old Tory principles to embrace what he referred to as « True Conservatism », which came to be known as « Victorian Liberalism », later renamed by Ralph Harris of the Institute of Economic Affairs (see Halcrow p. 64 and Chapter 8). As the doctrinal authority on True Conservatism and a very close friend of Margaret Thatcher, Joseph attracted great respect from his colleagues. Although his own practical achievements in the Thatcher government at the Department of Industry and at the Department of Education and Science (DES) were slight, he inspired both the Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues to many of their radical successes in economic policy, privatisation and the bringing of the Trades Unions under legal constraints.

- 42 The Tory governments of the 1950s and the early 1970s had generally accepted the post-war middle ground consensus forged by the Labour government of 1945-51. Departing from this tradition, Joseph urged his colleagues to build a new « Common Ground » nearer to a Victorian Liberalism that embraced market economics, reduced state powers, preached self-reliance in social policy and prized lower taxation and lower government spending (Halcrow p. 103).
- 43 The middle ground, however, had been pushed further and further to the left by each successive Labour government; hence, the more conservative Common Ground espoused by Joseph and his colleagues would have to be regained by struggle and stern effort.  
The Battle is Joined
- 44 With these issues in mind, along with his scepticism about the « scientific » status of the social sciences, Joseph was disturbed to find, in the portfolio of his responsibilities when he arrived at the DES in 1981, the duty of funding and protecting the SSRC. Society, socialism, sociology - this trinity of errors had been acceptable in the days when Tories had compromised in order to achieve a middle ground consensus, but Joseph's new conservative Common Ground could find no place for them. Public money could not be spent to support such error.
- 45 This was not merely a generalised, deep-seated prejudice, although such hostility did exist amongst back-bench politicians and certain newspapers. For Joseph and other ideologues, several specific portions of the social science community stimulated particular distrust, a distrust that was in turn reciprocated. Economists in academics were very critical of the « monetarist » doctrines of Mrs. Thatcher's Treasury; conversely, Conservative ministers were critical of the intellectual ability and objectivity of the economic establishment in the universities.
- 46 Although some of Joseph's academic supporters would have been described in continental Europe as « sociologists », the empirical sociology of those who studied crime, poverty and ethnic relations almost always arrived at conclusions and solutions contrary to Mrs. Thatcher's policies. For instance, the common university doctrine on industrial relations, which stated that it was almost always counter-productive to allow legal proceedings to interfere with industrial disputes, was in clear opposition to the policies pursued by the government. Moreover, the academic findings in the fields of education and teaching methods increasingly differed from the views of Joseph's supporters in the conservative think tanks.
- 47 Attitudes have changed much in the last twenty-five years. As Joseph may have predicted, many Thatcherite views that seemed extreme at the time are not far from today's « common ground ». Nonetheless, in the early 1980s, the differences of opinion between the Secretary of State and the SSRC and its client universities seemed irreconcilable.
- 48 A prime example of these conflicts was the dispute over the « cycle of deprivation », to which Joseph devoted a speech in 1972 during his pre-revolutionary days as a Tory (he served as Minister in charge of the Social Services in Mr. Heath's government from 1970-1974). He linked the problem of social deprivation to patterns of parenting, arguing that the problems of one generation of deprived individuals tended to reappear in their children. In other words, deprivation might in effect be « transmitted » from one generation to the next.
- 49 Many researchers had encountered similar issues and formulated similar hypotheses, and, with reasonable goodwill on both sides, Joseph, who was then head of the DES,



financed an SSRC-led investigation into this set of problems. The work began and a series of studies appeared in the early 1980s.

- 50 The investigation proved to be a remarkable joint enterprise, with quality results (see, for instance, M. Brown and N. Madge, 1982). Although many members of the research team believed that the perpetuation of an underclass was attributable to social, economic and political processes rather than the personal or
- 51 familial transmission mechanisms stressed by Joseph, most of his hypotheses were given fair consideration as they appeared in the reports.
- 52 Unfortunately, in 1974, early in the research process, Joseph made a further contribution to the discussion. At this time he was in opposition to the newly elected Labour government and well on the way towards his eventual « conversion ». On this occasion, as his biographer recalls (Halcrow p. 81-5), his focus was startlingly different. He believed he had evidence that families with low incomes or other disadvantages also tended to have more children. « The balance of our population, our human stock, is threatened. A high and rising proportion of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world... ».
- 53 Joseph's speech created an uproar in national politics, and led some of the social scientists working on the project to believe that they had been trapped into a collaborative exercise with an unacceptable agenda. Joseph, I believe, was unhappy about the controversy he had caused. When he returned to office as one of Mrs. Thatcher's Ministers, he never responded to my reports to him on the progress of this academic work; perhaps he regretted that the research programme had not simply gone away.
- 54 In retrospect, it seems to me that a moderate belief in eugenics was pretty common in the Europe of Joseph's youth, and not at all confined to National Socialist theorists; be that as it may, both the 1974 speech and the continuing research project provided not a bridge between the Secretary of State and the SSRC but a concealed and awkward barrier.
- The SSRC Must go
- 55 These disputes reached a climax in late 1981. Joseph decided that a clear position should be taken - the SSRC must go. Those researchers of exceptional quality that truly needed financial support would receive it, Joseph thought, from their Colleges or from the British Academy.
- 56 Clearly, much funding is needed to conduct atomic research or to work in organic chemistry. For sociology or economics, however, all one needs are a clear head and a sharp pencil. At that time « quangos » were unpopular, and doing away with one of these socialist creations would have impressed many conservative supporters. Even so, the political elite was cautious. They respected existing institutions, even the youthful ones. Thus, instead of proceeding unilaterally, Joseph and his staff attempted to garner support for their cause.
- 57 He canvassed informal opinion amongst Cabinet colleagues, several of whom supported his instinct that the SSRC should be dismantled. But Joseph did not see himself as a righteous warrior fighting against dangerous heresy. He believed in reason, argumentation and the enlightened opinion of the intellectual elite. Instead of rashly using his political might, he decided to enlist a member of the intelligentsia to support his decision. This turn of events proved to be the salvation of the SSRC. As in many of the policies that he proposed at the DES, Joseph allowed himself to be persuaded against his

original radical intentions. This was certainly not true of the Thatcher government in general: Joseph was either wiser or weaker than his colleagues.

The SSRC's Judge and Guardian: Lord Rothschild

- 58 Lord Rothschild, known by even distant acquaintances as « Victor Rothschild », was chosen to determine the future of the SSRC. The choice was not made by an exhaustive search of qualified applicants. Although Rothschild and Joseph were not, as I understand it, close friends, their lives and careers had crossed before.
- 59 Both came from the Anglo-Jewish patrician class: Joseph was a baronet and the Rothschilds had been ennobled in several countries since the 19th century. Both had been educated at the prestigious Harrow School, which boasted Winston Churchill and Pandit Nehru as former students. Rothschild went on to Cambridge to study natural sciences and Joseph, ten years later, enrolled at Oxford to study law. Rothschild received much distinction during the war, earning a high decoration for bravery and becoming involved in secret intelligence. Joseph did creditable service in the artillery and was wounded in the Italian campaign.
- 60 Rothschild was a distinguished research biologist, a Fellow of the Royal Society and a respected member of the Cambridge scientific establishment throughout the post-war period. He directed research for the company Shell, and for many years was closely involved with the operation of the Agricultural Research Council (one of the SSRC's four big brothers). He was persuaded by Prime Minister Heath to become the first head of the new government think tank, the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), created in 1971. In that role he closely interacted with all of Heath's Ministers, including Joseph.
- 61 William Waldegrave, who was to become one of Joseph's junior ministers in 1981, and who was, like Joseph, a Fellow of All Souls' College, Oxford, had worked for Rothschild at CPRS. I have always assumed that Waldegrave had some part in suggesting Rothschild to Joseph as the « Guardian » to decide the SSRC's future. I am also sure that if he did so it was in good faith, ensuring that Joseph received clear and fair advice.
- 62 When I first heard of Rothschild's appointment, I knew we would receive a tough and fair hearing. I regarded him as a friend, albeit a distant one, and as a judge from whom we could neither conceal our weakness nor expect a cover of kindness.

The Rothschild Report

- 63 In December, 1981, Lord Rothschild was appointed to conduct a study that would be used to determine the fate of the SSRC. He completed his report by May, 1982, an extraordinarily rapid timetable by British bureaucratic standards. He engaged in a detailed inquiry that would permit him to draw wide-ranging conclusions regarding the fate of the SSRC. The essence of his approach was embodied in the preamble of the Advisory Council on the Research Councils's opinion offered to Rothschild: « The prime function of a Research Council is: to identify the best research that may be done in its field; to identify the best way of getting it done; then to provide the means by which it may be done » (Rothschild Report, 1982, paragraph 2.7).
- 64 I imagine Rothschild did not need to be reminded of these goals - much of the feedback he received surely dealt with issues with which he was intimately familiar. Naturally, to find the answers to his inquiries, he canvassed the opinions of the « leading experts » in any given field - he called them simply « the best people ». If he could not find the experts, he would seek help from a specialist he knew to be « best » in a related field.

- 65 When he found his experts, he listened, argued, cross-referenced and searched for hidden flaws. If all the advice seemed to lead to a particular conclusion, he would try to find a contrary opinion and see if it could stand up to his rigorous examination.
- 66 Evidently, much depends on what is meant by leading experts on the « best people ». They will not necessarily be individuals from a chosen social class or with certain political opinions. Only those recognised by the scientific community as embodying the highest levels of excellence in their field would be considered. To find such individuals, Rothschild searched his list of acquaintances working in the social sciences, selecting them based on integrity, intelligence and achievement.
- 67 The report is therefore full of the opinions of these experts. The structure of the report is diffuse, varied and often difficult to summarise. However, one could capture its essence by stating that in spite of a slew of minor complaints about the SSRC, the « best people » generally agreed that a research council for the social sciences was both useful and necessary.

#### The Coup de Grace

- 68 Thus, instead of a report by one trusted expert, Joseph received a host of opinions from a large group of specialists. Perhaps if Joseph had not had such high standards of intellectual integrity, he could have ignored the recommendations of the report. Yet considering his background and training, Joseph could do nothing but agree with the forceful conclusions made by the report, such as the following taken from paragraph 11.19: « There is one course of action which could not be easily corrected: that is the dismemberment or liquidation of the SSRC. That would not only be an act of intellectual vandalism... it would also have damaging consequences for the whole country... ».
- 69 This account of the methods used in the Rothschild report broaches the oft-discussed question of the intelligentsia's role in a democratic society. Who will guard the people from the power and influence of the enlightened elite? The answer is surely not the Ministers.
- 70 It is perhaps true that the whole research council system should be called into question from time to time. The broad review conducted under the ministerial leadership of William Waldegrave in the early 1990s was a good example of a productive inquiry. Still, another even more fundamental review is needed, one that may call into question the future of the social sciences in the UK.

#### The Aftermath

- 71 In May, 1982, the survival of the SSRC was still being decided. Together with Dr. Cyril Smith, the Secretary of the SSRC, and with Cathy Cunningham, the Deputy Secretary, I worked very hard to defend the SSRC. We had supplied Rothschild with a plethora of well-ordered reports and were now eager to receive the letter from the Secretary of State Joseph announcing his intentions. The summer months had been difficult, with Joseph re-considering even further financial cuts.
- 72 In the meantime several other difficult issues needed to be addressed. The most trying of these was the requirement that I mount an inquiry into accusations of bias in the work of our industrial relations group at Warwick University. My investigation lasted longer than Rothschild's, and although the panel that conducted it at the SSRC's invitation eventually exculpated the accused, it brought about undeserved suffering and career disruption (see the authoritative account by W. Brown, 1998).

- 73 Another of these issues was the idea that the SSRC should change its name. This was the result of a compromise I reached with Joseph, with little compunction on my part. I recognised that Joseph, a senior Cabinet Minister, had been burdened for several months with report on one of the smaller « quangos » sponsored by his department. I also recognised that despite the fact that he could not now dissolve the SSRC, he could not fail to demonstrate his power and displeasure.
- 74 Joseph opted for a public, but very light punishment: a change of name. I told him that I could persuade scores of academics to accept a name change if he would promise, on the record, the continuing independence of the SSRC. He agreed, and the SSRC was duly renamed the « Economic and Social Research Council » (ESRC). The significance of this change was the omission of the word « science », which Joseph had insisted upon and which many of us at the council and in academia found it difficult to accept.
- 75 In explaining my willingness to accept this penalty as the price for a continued existence of an independent spending agency for supporting the social sciences, I often reminded academics of how the (Protestant) King of Navarre became King Henri IV of France by changing his religion, saying « Paris vaut bien une messe ». Alas, nobody ever laughed at this joke – I used to think it was because social scientists lack a sense of humour, but in retrospect it may be that they took their « religion » a bit more seriously than I did.
- 76 As the negotiations came to a close, the leadership of the former SSRC and I realised that with Rothschild's help we had succeeded in saving the council for the time being; yet we also understood that future would be little easier than the past.
- 77 In hindsight, it is clear that this confrontation was less significant than the larger struggle which ultimately favoured Joseph and the Thatcher government. Brushing aside the statist and Keynesian basis of the post-1945 consensus while they were in power, Joseph and the Thatcher government succeeded in establishing their cherished conservative Common Ground.
- 78 It turned out to be neither simple nor necessary to dismantle the SSRC. Perhaps this setback, along with a number of others, was useful in defining the limits of this new conservative state. If what Rothschild and the rest of the SSRC achieved had any really lasting effect, it was to reinforce for at least another decade or two the well-being of the research council system in particular and of the social sciences in general. My impression is that with the careful assistance of my successors at the Economic and Social Research Council, those active in social science research have made good use of the time.
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**Mots-clés:** social sciences, UK Research Council System, Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC, Social Science Research Council, SSRC

## AUTHOR

### MICHAEL POSNER

Michael Vivian Posner : Balliol College, Oxford (MA 1st class Philosophy, Politics and Economics, 1953) ; Lecturer, then Reader in Economics, Cambridge University 1958-79 ; Fellow, Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1960-83 ; Member of British Rail Board, 1976-1984 ; Member Post Office Board, 1978-9, Chairman SSRC 1979-1983 ; Director Railways Pension Trustee Company, 1986-2000 ; Secretary General, ESF, Strasbourg, 1986-1993. Publications (selection of books) *Italian Public Enterprise*, 1966 ; *Fuel Policy*, 1973 ; *Energy Economics*, 1981 (edited) ; *Resource Allocation in the Public Sector*, 1977 ; *Demand Management*, 1978 ; *Problems of International Money*, 1972-1985. Numerous articles).