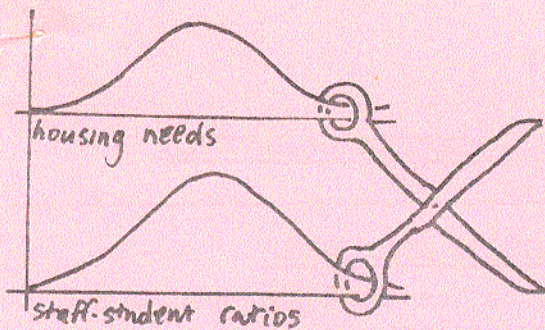


Radical Statistics

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EDITORIAL

At the Radical Statistics conference at the end of September, the discussion often came round to the theme of the current cutbacks in public expenditure which were affecting the salaries and job-security of most of the people present. It was decided that the next issue of the Newsletter should be devoted solely to this topic.

The articles cover a fairly broad spectrum of work places. There are broad themes which emerge, but of course there are disagreements too.

The kind of cutbacks in public expenditure that we are witnessing at the moment are small changes which are just slowly and constantly eroding standards and cutting resources; posts are frozen, duplicating costs are restricted, and staff/student ratios are increased. Neither of the two examples of closure that are mentioned involves the loss of more than 12 jobs. But this is just the thin end of the wedge; the recent budget forecasts paint a very dismal picture of the amount of resources that will be available for the kind of work that most of us are involved in. And perhaps even more worrying is that the government has shown its preparedness to make cuts in areas of long-term investment, where it is clear that even if the present "economic gloom" were to pass, would take years to re-establish.

We should be very wary of those who are arguing that this time of economic crisis will have a beneficial spin-off in that it forces people to ask really radical questions about the whole way in which their work is organised. The cuts are not being applied to the least efficient in cost or any other terms; they will not impose rationality on an irrational system - the government is cutting wherever it thinks it can get away with it. It is just as irrational in bad times as in good.

Another feature of this attack on public expenditure is that calls for

authorities to "open the books" become meaningless. Certainly, as the CSSR people at Keele point out, lack of money is often used as a blanket excuse for a decision which in reality was based on other motives. But by and large, the trouble is not that the respective authorities have got their sums wrong; they really are having their budgets substantially reduced, and would love to open their books to show this to you.

There are three different possible responses to all this.

The first is to accept that there has to be a belt-tightening period, because the economy is in such a mess, and to await the return of better days. The problem here is that if our basic industries, our machine tools industry, our education industry, our health industry or our steel industry continue to be run down at the present rate then the return of better days in the reasonably foreseeable future is just not on.

The second is to resist the cuts, but to do so selfishly. For example, people are often tempted, when arguing against closure or redundancies in their particular place, to argue that cuts are OK so long as they do not affect ME and MY PROJECT, which is so immensely valuable. The academic world is very competitive and has a notoriously bad record for this kind of back-stabbing activity. We should oppose this short-sightedness, because it plays into the opposition's hands.

The third (and in my opinion correct) response is to oppose all cuts, wherever they occur and whatever they are about. We must be prepared to say, when another 12 jobs go down the drain, that whatever the merits or demerits of the work that those 12 people were doing, that is 12 jobs less on the market. Of course I realise that this is not "realistic" in terms of the present cake - or rather in terms of the present recipe for making the cake. But, if I may be allowed to

take the metaphor slightly further, the basic ingredients are still there; the present crisis is a crisis of methods of organising the economy rather than a shortage of the basic resources required. So, although in the last analysis, waging an effective struggle against the cuts will mean a revolutionary change in the organisation of the economy, it does at least mean that we are not fighting a hopeless fight.

But how?

Bob Gilchrist, in his article, says that publicising these cuts is a very important part of the battle; at the moment they are not always very clear, and F. Mulley is going around saying that no cut-backs "in real terms" have occurred. But we have to go further than this and, having persuaded people that these swingeing cuts are going on and will get worse, next persuade them to fight about it. We may think that we are not strong enough to resist these cuts because our bargaining power is not great; the research sector alone cannot bring the country to a halt overnight, it is true, but there are ways in which we can put pressure on our employers.

The simple fact is that this sector will have to be very united in this fight. The longer we leave building this unity, the longer we let the number of redundancies rise and standards fall, the more difficult it will be to resist the cuts; once people are really desperate to find new jobs it will be very difficult to persuade them to stick together over some issue that perhaps does not concern them directly.

Two contributors have pointed out difficulties with AUT being the main negotiating union; it is certainly hard when your immediate opposition is also secretary of the AUT branch! But changing unions won't help matters. By and large a union gets the officials and shop-stewards that the members deserve; the task is to make the membership of AUT or any other union aware of what is happening and prepared to respond.

We have to get to a position where we can move fast in response to a threat in any area and act as one. It may involve going on strike over the closure of a place you don't really know, but we have to be prepared to do this. The alternative is much, much worse.

Cathie Marsh

MEETINGS OF INTEREST

MULTIVARIATE STUDY GROUP

Meeting on Tuesday 4 November, 2 pm, Birkbeck College.

John Bibby, F. Marriott and others will address a forum on

The Aims and Methods of Teaching Multivariate Analysis.

MEDICAL SECTION

Meeting on Tuesday 25 November, 5 pm, at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Miss A.J. Macfarlane (of the London School of Hygiene) will address a meeting on

Short Term Changes in Mortality

MULTIVARIATE STUDY GROUP

Meeting on Tuesday 2 December, 2.15 pm, Chemistry Theatre, Birkbeck College, Mallet Street, London WC1.

Professor Christopher Foster (LSE), and Professor Peter Self (LSE) will address a meeting, chaired by George Stern, on

Cost/Benefit Analysis: Optimisation or Obfuscation?

Cost/benefit analysis is constantly used, especially by public authorities, to justify or help decide on mammoth road schemes and similar projects affecting everyone. This discussion is about a very live and practical issue, and all are welcome to attend or contribute.

RADICAL STATS - ECONOMICS GROUP

Next meeting of the whole group will be Friday, December 12.

Convene either at 5.30 in Cathie Marsh's room at the Survey Unit, 89 Kingsway, at 5.30 or in the bar at the LSE at 6.00.

Topics will include the work of the wages and prices statistics sub-group.

Those of us working in education have already felt the cuts. At the well-publicised North London Poly, we received a 5% cut in staff some 18 months ago, an economy nicely facilitated by the Poly Administration's policy of keeping vacancies unfilled. We have since been told to prune staff numbers still further, and to halve expenditure on part-time teachers. As tax-payers, it makes sense to want rationality in staffing, but the real problem with blanket cuts is that they bite deepest in the most hard-pressed areas. Thus staff are most likely to leave if they are employable elsewhere; this means that the greatest mobility of staff is likely to occur in those areas which are popular and have most students. Their non-replacement is likely to be felt by their colleagues whereas the (unlikely) departure of a scientist, for example, would impose

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The recent government cuts of £1250m are expected to mean further cuts in expenditure on education by £500m over the next 4 years. Also there may be a possible further cut of £50m this year if inflation persists.

THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE NEWSLETTER

The editors for the next issue of the Newsletter are John Irvine and Paul Dixon. Contact them at 14 Upper Wellington Road, Brighton, or phone Brighton 684424. This issue will contain reports of the September conference. Please send neatly typed copy, single-spaced on one side only of A4. Production and mailing can be arranged by contacting John Bibby whose new number is 0908 63844.