

THE CLOSURE OF THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Centre for Social Science Research, Keele University, closed down on 30 September 1975, just over seven months after the highly-controversial decision to close it had been taken by the University Senate. On 11 October, following an investigation by a two-man sub-committee of the British Sociological Association - Professor Philip Abrams of Durham University and Professor David Weir of Glasgow University, the Executive of the B.S.A., issued a statement stating that they are "shocked and disturbed" by the closure and deploring the "lack of humanity with which the staff of the Centre were treated." We believe that the decision, and the way in which it was taken, are illustrative of the way in which universities (or at least this one) take decisions, the perilous state of full-time University Research in the Social Sciences and the way in which the current round of "economic" cuts may be 'used'.

The Centre was established out of the existing Statistical Research Unit in Sociology in 1973 following a report by Sir Roy Allen which specified an extended role for it in the fields of methodology development and consultancy. Some of his recommendations, such as the establishment of more tenured posts were never implemented, although a so-called Management Committee was set-up.

After the Director left last summer this Committee announced two pre-requisites of continuation of the Centre: namely the appointment of a new Director and a change of location nearer to other Departments. There was a freeze on new appointments at the time and we, the members of the Centre, took the Management Committee's statement as an indication of the importance of the Director's post and as a reason why it must be "unfrozen". We certainly had no objection to moving although it scarcely seemed a "pre-requisite" for continuation. The Expenditure Review Committee (E.R.C.) refused to unfreeze the post. In the light of their earlier decision the Management Committee recommended that the Centre must close, and so it did, despite the fact that the Director's salary had always been financed by a bequest from the Muffield Foundation, which the University had invested in housing. All other posts except the Assistant Director's were outside-funded and therefore the total salary cost of the Centre to the University was only about £4,000 p.a. out of a total Academic Salary Bill which must be about £1½ million. **Even that was only saved because of the subsequent resignation of the Assistant Director.**

Furthermore, neither the Acting Director nor the other members of the Centre were given any chance to present any case to the E.R.C. when it met to consider the Director's post, and neither did any other consultations with the staff take place. The only occasion in its two years existence on which the Management Committee ever met the members of the Centre was to inform us of their closure recommendation! They also told us that they were to continue in existence to advise the University on the future development of quantitative methods in the Social Sciences. We congratulated them on achieving a permanence for themselves that they had been unable to achieve for the Centre they were set up to manage! As a result of those deliberations some of the members of these committees will now have their own departments enlarged. Naturally, this leads us to ask whether the financial crisis was used as the excuse to effect changes, the real reasons for which should have been the subject of a full and open debate within the University. But the University retains a secretive and unrepresentative decision-making structure which affords little or no rights to junior members of staff. One of our number serves on a Local Authority where all committees are open and no-one's views or votes can be sheltered behind the cloak of secrecy. It contrasts sharply and favourably with the University system. To this day, no statement of the costing of the Centre has ever been produced nor has the E.R.C. stated the grounds on which it decided its priorities.

It is, of course, difficult to find the channels to fight such a decision when representation on the relevant committees does not exist. The obvious channel might seem to be the Association of University Teachers. The Chairman of the A.U.T. at Keele, was also Chairman of the Centre Management Committee, a member of E.R.C., Chairman of the Board of Social Sciences, a member of Senate, and finally, an adviser to the Vice-Chancellor! The Chief Shop Steward was P.A. to the Managing Director!

What about the individual members of the Centre? The University states, quite correctly, that all contracts were due to expire by 30 September (and that therefore all legal obligations have been honoured); but this was not an unusual situation. Often in the past members have stayed on having planned to do so either by negotiating further contracts on the same project or by changing to other on-going research in the Centre. Some of us have had three successive contracts on one project. The closure, at relatively short notice, effectively removed these options for the members of the Centre.

It also hardly helped them in their applications for new jobs! Three have still not found new jobs. Closures like this, and that of the S.S.R.C. Survey Unit, encourage the tendency, already apparent, for full-time research to be only attractive to those in the first few years after graduation when the need for security is not so great. There is a desperate need for a career-structure in full-time university research to avoid this hand-to-mouth situation. It also illustrates the peculiar vulnerability to research to other pressures, particularly at places like Keele which are strongly undergraduate-orientated.

Space does not permit us to consider the Academic consequences to the University and to the local area (which benefited from some of the research) of the closure except to say that they will be deleterious. We have concentrated on how the decision was taken and we are pleased that an independent investigation by two Senior Professors has upheld many of our grievances. We have protested because to suffer in silence only makes it more likely that the next in line will also suffer. There are lessons which others can learn from our experience. Firstly, fight for representation, or at the very least consultation, in the decision-making process for everyone from the secretary upwards. Secondly, fight for all committees to be open. Finally, beware that the current drive for economy is not used as an excuse for taking decisions which someone wants for other reasons.

**The Ex-members of the Centre for Social
Science Research, Keele University.**