

Radical statistics in operation?

The deliberations of Baroness Young's committee are expected to be published soon (perhaps even beating RS19 to the news stands) but rumours suggest that it will not recommend the total break-up of the ILEA. However, there is widespread conjecture that the Baker report was hatched by those close to the thinking of Mrs Thatcher, so it is unlikely that ILEA will survive unscathed.

At present, education in London is controlled centrally by the ILEA, with the exception of the Universities. ILEA is a body distinct from the GLC but with GLC representatives, in addition to representatives of individual boroughs and a few teachers' representatives. Recently, Tory members have thrown a lot of flak, mainly concerned with democratic and financial accountability but also questioning academic standards. The Baker committee was set up by the Secretary of State, Mark Carlisle, under the chairmanship of Kenneth Baker, MP, to examine and make recommendations on the future of education in London. The report claims that local people, teachers, parents, rate payers, have no direct say in the running of their local education service; moreover, ILEA prepares its own budget and levies the inner London Boroughs and the City through a rate precept which cannot effectively be challenged. The report ~~further~~ claims that the high educational expenditure in London is not matched by academic achievement and produces selected statistics to demonstrate this.

Unfortunately for the committee, the well oiled ILEA machine has been able to discredit much of the report by showing that many of its claims are unfounded (for example, by noting that there is no absolute significance in pass rates; a more valuable measure is the proportion of the entire age group that is achieving success in examinations). It is also clear that London has the particular (and costly) problems of a large city; a large immigrant population, the need for special schools, etc, and devolving control to Boroughs is unlikely to reduce costs; if anything, the reverse.

A concerted effort has been made by 'leftist' groups to mobilise support for ILEA and it seems unlikely that the Government will adopt some of the more bizarre suggestions of the Baker report; viz the implicit suggestion that Adult Education Institutes would be financed by individual boroughs, making attendance very restricted despite the vagaries of borough boundaries. What may be missed in this committment to save ILEA is

that there are problems with ILEA; it does suffer from the problems of an organisation which has been under the control of a small group of people for many years. It has become rather unresponsive to pressures other than those of the traditional Labour party movement (for example, a grouse of teachers' organisations is that major debates are restricted to the two major parties so that teachers' organisations get no hearing). But yet ILEA is one of the most progressive education authorities in the country and is efficiently run by its officers (efficiency which on one hand makes it the first authority to control its budget on a staff student ratio basis but which, on the other hand, is sufficiently forward thinking to have avoided teaching staff redundancies in the present financial climate).

Life is never easy!

UNIVERSITY STAFFS LEFT GROUPS.

If anyone is interested or has any ideas about the issues raised in the following letter from Ankie Hoogvelt, please get in touch with a member of the troika or direct to Ankie.

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Dear Heather Booth,

Thank you for your response to our note in BSSRS Bulletin. I am a bit at a loss as to how to clarify our request to you as we are obviously in a rather nebulous area here and the idea of the conference itself is to assist clarification.

I'll give you first a bit of background information. In several places throughout the country, and fairly recently, University Staffs Left groups have been formed. As the name suggests the objective of these groups is really to get a closer involvement of academics in socio-political issues in general and in the labour movement in particular. On May 10th we had a national conference, here at Sheffield, and one of the things we discussed, rather too briefly, was how academic research is often for reasons of ideology and/or financing oriented to serve the needs of - let's say the ruling classes - (business, defence, etc.) and how rarely it is geared to explore and solve the problems of the labour movement. Now, this may appear as a rather uninteresting truism to you

but the crucial point is that it rarely surfaces as a "problem" for academics, not in the least because of the myth of value free science in conjunction with the distinction between basic and applied research. Our task is therefore to give the whole issue of academic research and its a) financial basis; b) political bias; c) class restricted application, a place in academic discourse. The idea is that once people realise the myth of value freedom they might be more inclined to deliberately choose and adopt research areas and problems which are of direct benefit to the labour movement.

So how to proceed? Since none of us present on May 10th were at all knowledgeable about any of this we thought a conference (some time next year) would be the answer. The objectives of the conference would be

- a) to raise consciousness through fact finding
- b) to define some parameters for the evaluation of research in respect of its social relevance
- c) - more in the long run - to facilitate positive intervention to help tie research to the interests of the labour movement.

Now we come to the point where you probably are still not clear as to what we would want from you (or anyone else interested). Basically we want people, sources and information as building blocks for the conference. On the fact finding issue we need to know people (with a view to inviting them as contributors to the conference) who have done work on f.1 the number and nature of defence contracts currently undertaken in British Higher Education. Its monetary value in relation to overall expenditure on research in Higher Education, etc.

We would also want a paper on industrial research contracts in relation to overall research expenditure in Higher Education and again perhaps a paper on the amount and nature of research funded by, say, the Trade Union movement in various Higher Education places (Ruskin/North London Poly) and the success/failure of such schemes as the SSRC's "open door" scheme.

On the evaluation problems we would welcome people and papers who can contribute something on the distinctive basic and applied research. Is it appropriate/inappropriate, true or false? Is it relevant or irrelevant with particular reference to the present stage of scientific and technological development, etc? We would also want a few theoretical papers on value freedom and such.

And finally on c) facilitating positive intervention, I can envisage some brainstorming workshops on labour movement oriented research, examples thereof and ways to introduce them and fund them.

As you can see, we are only standing at the beginning of this adventure. You may find me excessively ignorant in which case a few references to well placed manuals will be most welcome. If not you may possibly agree with me that it will be useful to have a conference that will bring together whatever has been researched in the wider frame of, say, "the class basis of the Academic Research".

So if you can help by sending me names of "resource persons" and possibly a list of relevant literature, I shall be most obliged - and of course I'll be looking forward to hearing any suggestions for the widening or deepening of the topic belaboured above.

Ankie Hoogvelt