

## EDITORIAL

### IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE...????

This Newsletter has been put together mostly from contributions offered by a small and unrepresentative group of people whose work is known to the editor, and who could be talked into offering contributions. I think myself very lucky to have talked them into it, but am rather dismayed that it was necessary to do it that way. Under these circumstances, it does not surprise me one bit that the BSSRS are thinking of winding up, and I believe that *Radical Statistics* should also carefully consider its position. That the editorship of its Newsletter should be left to someone relatively marginal to the *Radical Statistics Group* who is, after all, not even a statistician, gives us reason for some careful thought and discussion.

So I'd like to use this Editorial to ask: How does this kind of thing happen? People are not quiet out there. There is a seemingly endless demand for information, accurate information, on the state of society. People are sick of being bamboozled. Sir Claus Moser (I think) once termed social statistics the conscience of society, others have regarded it as the unconscious, the bits we need to look at more carefully than perhaps some would like to, in order to clean up the murk of injustice and discrimination.

Perhaps this is part of the answer. The demand for something like *Radical Statistics* has grown because the murk has deepened, with consequences for us all. Vital and social statistics used to be a legitimate conscience. Some of those who profited by ignorance may not have liked the effects of faecally contaminated water, smoking or class-discriminatory education being exposed. But the exposure of hidden evils was both a political and a professional task. The publications of the *Radical Statistics Group* find their way onto reading lists and into the libraries of academics and health service administrators as well as reformers. In the present climate, the borders of the political have shifted, however. Social critique is no longer a legitimate part of the work of professional researchers -- we who must now spend our time preparing grant applications on "The Prevalence of AIDS amongst Managers of Small Businesses" (the ESRC was recently re-christened the Small Firms and Enterprise Research Council by one of this country's foremost authorities on unemployment).

The painstaking accuracy visible in the Group's publications has been both a guarantee of their usefulness for activists and an example to anyone learning how to assemble and disseminate information. Now such a concern for accuracy

is itself seen as "political". My favourite example is the refusal of the Met Office to give out temperature forecasts during the cold winter of 1986-7, as if anyone would believe them anyway, in case Age Concern asked questions in parliament. As a result, farmers' crops froze as well as elderly citizens.

So perhaps the consciences of professional researchers, in statistics or any other branch of natural or social science are bothering us? In order to stay in business at all, we are faced with the necessity to fudge: "One can tell the truth under this government" a leading researcher once commented to me, "but only once in a career." Many people must feel (I do certainly) that there is a stark choice to be made, either do a high proportion of work we don't believe in, or be prepared to find ourselves out in the cold. To this is added the enormous growth in pressures on teachers and researchers. Money must be brought into the Department! More or less at all costs. And the costs are both a loss of belief in what one is doing and a sort of pervasive exhaustion. In order to maintain some semblance of a career, especially for the growing army of contract workers, everything but work must be set aside.

The possible demise of BSSRS has reminded me of a period in the distant past when young intellectuals were accused, rightly, of being in danger of substituting themselves for the worker-militants they could not wish into existence. It is a sign of how much worse things have got that we now have to ask ourselves whether even the intellectual-militants still exist. I think that they do, because truth is militant. This government have realised it too. As a result people need all their political energies just to do a decent job in any form of research which aims at discovery rather than expediency. The question may now be, what is the form of organisation appropriate to this state of affairs?

The contents of the Newsletter reflect all these concerns. The paper on employment of people with disabilities is an example of the sort of study that used to be carried out. Two of the authors are academics, the third has experienced, as well as an academic training, a lifetime of struggle against the injustices it reveals. The paper was written after consultation with pressure groups representing the interests of people with disabilities. The research reported in Claudia Martin's paper was the occasion of both a "micro" and a "macro"-political furore. The first was caused by a journal referee insisting that the effects of factors such as Calor Gas stoves and human respiration (breathing) on household damp had not been controlled for. The researchers had the courage to take the unusual step of refusing to accept a journal's decision in turning down the paper and insisting on another reviewer, who recommended publication. The second furore arose in the Scottish Office, one of the funding bodies of the unit (though not the study in question) due to the paper we publish here not having been "submitted" to them "in time" before being given at a meeting of the Maternity Alliance. The description of the work of the Association of DoH/DSS Funded Research Workers speaks for itself. And Charlie Owen and Monica Walker's papers show what is

still possible.

The pressures on the people whose work is published here are therefore a good cross-section of what many of us face. Overt "political suppression" is just one, and perhaps the easiest to fight. The discouragement produced by the more subtle forms is insidious. Two of those involved in the housing and health study, which has now become a "classic" and a standard reference, nevertheless had their careers disrupted because they felt unable to continue working in the Scottish Office funded unit. Who has still the energy to do a piece of research just because they think it important, knowing that it may not get published? What effect does it have on the quality of research when authors are unable to be sure whether a paper has been rejected on valid grounds or for "political" reasons? I think that *Radical Statistics Newsletter* should either cease to operate or be willing to make more effort to ferret out important work that would otherwise fail to see the light of day, whatever the professional allegiances of the authors (demographic historians, geographers etc.). Anyone who suspects that their work is being ignored (*not* just "suppressed") because it is not the flavour of the month should be able to turn to the Group and the readers of the Newsletter for a fair hearing. The Group can continue to behave as if research were a serious business; this is perhaps the most "radical" response to the present situation.