

Save the GLC!

You will be aware that it is the current government's policy to abolish the Greater London Council and other Metropolitan Authorities. This policy has been expounded in the White Paper "Streamlining the Cities". Why am I bothering Radical Statisticians about this? Well I work for the Intelligence Unit where most of the GLC's statistics are collected, disseminated and analysed. We are seeking support both for the GLC and for the Unit, but I also wish, see below, to lead into a more general discussion of the place of objective information in today's political scene.

There are many good reasons why the GLC (and other metropolitan councils) should not be abolished. The most important is local democracy. After that comes the financial fact that, contrary to Radical Conservative (i.e. right-wing) propaganda, any alternative bureaucracies devised to do the essential work of the councils will inevitably cost more in total (though rate-payers in Westminster may gain). (Reading between the lines of the White Paper one can easily see that even the DoE civil servants foresee increased costs.) However I do not wish to rehearse any more arguments here about the general matter but to address the problem of a research and intelligence function for London as a whole.

In 1960 the Royal Commission on London Government (the Herbert Commission) mentioned the need for a central intelligence function in very strong terms. It said, "The first requirement of all is that the Council for Greater London should set up a first-class Intelligence Department" (para 758). Again, "The Intelligence Department which we envisage would serve not only the Council for Greater London but the central government, the Boroughs, and the general public. ...we emphasise that the function of such an Intelligence Department is primarily a public function" (para 761). The London Government Act of 1963 which set up the GLC was based on the Commission's report and the Intelligence Unit is the principal group of staff charged with carrying out the intelligence function (section 71 of the Act).

In contrast, the White Paper makes no specific mention of this area at all beyond advocating repeal without replacement of section 71. It says that the powers to undertake research need not be replaced as the London borough councils already have general powers to do this. However this ignores the question of the collection and dissemination of information on a co-ordinated London-wide basis and mechanisms for achieving it and acting upon conclusions.

When approaching the RSS about this matter we went on to describe the work of the Unit: population studies, statistics publication, carrying out sample surveys, analysing data for policy papers, etc. If you are interested in more details follow RSS Council's discussion or contact me. It is difficult to know how best to advise you how to help in our struggle, but at the least expressing arguments against the strong pro-Thatcher attitudes in the press would be helpful.

read on!....

The Place of Information in Radical Politics

This has all raised in me something I should like to discuss with you all. Over the past few years British party political life has become much more radicalised. I define radical (controversially?) as the extremes of each wing. Thus Thatcher and Kinnock are radical of their kind; Heath and Hattersley more traditional. As this move has been made away from the centre, "you can't tell the difference between them" of the 50's and 60's, I have noticed a marked decline in the demand for information, especially quantitative, to aid policy making. Obvious examples are the decisions not to have censuses in 1976 or 1986 and the severe Raynor cuts on statistical services. The fact that intelligence/information are not mentioned at all in "Streamlining the Cities" shows that no one is now interested in finding out what life is really like. They know what is good for us, and that's what we'll get.

This is not just a fault of the Radical Right. The Radical Left is equally, if not more, at fault. This is why I am writing to you, presuming you fall in the latter rather than the former camp. Do we go along with our political fellows in devaluing the importance of hard facts? If so, how do we square this with the work we do? If not, what are we doing about it? Our problem used to be persuading people not to abuse statistics. Now it is persuading them to use them at all.

While the GLC Intelligence Unit is joining the grand fight against abolition it is facing cuts of 10% imposed by Red Ken's crew. Money thus saved is being directed to the grants for which the GLC is getting so famous. Pleas that we need information to fight abolition fall on deaf ears.

Heather Booth in an article elsewhere in this issue is fighting this fight on the "Britain's Black Population" 2nd edition. We have said that this edition will be more radical and less statistical than the first. But now we are being pressured to exclude facts which may be used by other people to fight discrimination, only to include facts where they illustrate our own particular angle. I find this attitude extremely worrying. Sometimes I am pessimistic enough to believe that if things carry on on this road we will be lead into a society of confrontation, each side not knowing anything about the other, and thus not being able to communicate. I suppose that is when the revolution happens. Oh dear! That's not what I had in mind for my New Society. One where facts are used only for partisan ends. One where facts are altered in the cause of the revolution. I suppose, though, that this is the first newsletter of

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