



# 50 YEARS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

*It's 50 years since the Economic and Social Research Council was established. In that time it has resisted outside pressure from many directions, and has brought economic and social science to bear on the most important issues of the day*

**T**he Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was born in the full flush of the 1960s' push to modernise Britain. Higher education was expanding, the Fulton Report had recommended sweeping changes in Whitehall, and the political parties had come together in the belief that mobilising knowledge through social research would bring business, government and society into the brave new world. Its tasks, then as now, were to fund postgraduate training and stimulate research, although the balance between the two has shifted. So has the ratio between 'directed' spending (where the research council steers the topics and priorities for investigation) and 'responsive' spending (where universities and other higher education institutions and researchers propose topics for research), with more money now going to projects and programmes regarded as ESRC themes and priorities.



Ironically, what the ESRC does now is closer to the vision of the SSRC's first chair, Michael Young, than the original spending pattern of the 1960s. He favoured more directed research and fewer free-standing ideas from academics, and thought the SSRC should itself be a research institute rather than channelling money to universities.

The SSRC spent most of its budgets in specific subject areas for its first two decades. In 1967, the line up was economics, sociology, politics, management and psychology, followed by social anthropology, education and statistics. Early focuses were on: how deprivation is concentrated in particular areas, educational priority areas and urban deprivation; human relations at work and the sociology of management; and, from as early as 1967, investment in data resources. In the 1970s, the SSRC joined with the Department of Health and Social Services on a programme of research into whether disadvantage is transmitted through the generations. Social science tended to say no. There is much fluidity in and out of low incomes. But the senior Tory Sir Keith Joseph, who became education secretary in 1981, had strong views to the contrary.

The SSRC had made enemies on the political right and Joseph ordered inquiries into the running of its industrial relations unit at Warwick University, which was accused of Marxist bias. As a centre for thinking about trade union issues, it was a natural Tory target. But in addition Joseph doubted the idea of the SSRC itself. On his behalf, Lord Rothschild took extensive evidence and reported that while the administrative costs of the SSRC could be cut, social science research was under-financed in the UK.

### A NEW ERA FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES

Responding to these pressures, the SSRC relaunched in 1984 as the ESRC, its headquarters moved out of London, in common with the other research councils\*, and it became more attuned to users of research in business and government. Postgraduate training was also reorganised. The ESRC's survival was confirmed in 1984, when Margaret Thatcher approvingly cited social scientists' findings on crime and unemployment.

But financially, the 1980s were tough. By 1992, the ESRC was receiving nearly £23 million of top-rated research proposals per year, but could fund only £8 million-worth. Fifty per cent of such proposals to the Medical Research Council were being supported, and 90 per cent by the Natural Environment Research Council. Such figures led the peer and academic Lord Sewel to call the ESRC "the Cinderella of the research councils".

But from the 1990s on, Cinders came out of the kitchen. The ESRC's budgetary fortunes improved. The Major government decided not to add the arts and humanities to the ESRC portfolio and within a decade moves were afoot to create a separate research council for these subjects. Sticking to its own subject area, the ESRC won applause for its innovative use of social science techniques in understanding environmental change. *Nature* noted that nearly all the reports from the UK government's Technology Foresight programme relied heavily on social science and fell within the ESRC's remit, adding that this implied a bigger budget for the smallest of the research councils.

It has not always been plain sailing since. But for the past 15 years the ESRC has become a valued partner to the other research councils and a mainstay of RCUK. Austerity has bitten here as elsewhere, but the ESRC has enjoyed broadly reasonable levels of funding, including significant investment in data collection and analysis, and a new birth study starting in 2014-15.



## THESE EIGHT SOCIAL SCIENCE AREAS HAVE BENEFITED FROM ESRC FUNDING IN THE PAST 50 YEARS. DAVID WALKER REVIEWS SOME OF THE SOCIAL ISSUES THEY HAVE COVERED, AND AT THE IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF THIS RESEARCH



### MONEY & BUSINESS

*The 'back-bedroom' computer games industry becomes a global enterprise*

Improving the quality of management was one of the earliest focuses of the SSRC. Other longstanding themes include organisational performance and innovation, and one of the first acts of the reconstituted ESRC was to convene a cross-research councils committee on the management of innovation. The Advanced Institute for Management looked in depth at how organisations use knowledge to improve productivity, offshoring, risk assessment, response to regulation, and the clustering of kindred businesses. One of its projects showed how the UK computer games industry can retain its massive creativity as it grows from a back-bedroom hobby activity to a properly structured global enterprise. There has also been microeconomic analysis of topics such as regional assistance, the housing market and small business. This work has stayed up to date with work on internet shopping and the future of the high street.



### PUBLIC SERVICES

*More home care will free up hospital beds*

Prominent names include Chelly Halsey, the Oxford sociologist involved in the 'educational priority' areas, Christopher Hood and his studies of the 'new public management' and regulation, Carol Propper on competition in health, and Alan Maynard with the pioneer health economics centre at the University of York. In a recent finding, they have shown that 'bed-blocking' is a real effect, and that hospital beds can be freed up if more care home capacity is created. Also important was research on a very different public service – with the Ministry of Defence on matching the structure of armed forces to projections of the UK's place in the world.



### POLITICS & GOVERNANCE

*What does it mean to be British?*

In the 1970s the SSRC began supporting the sequence of British election studies that had begun with the 1964 general election, amassing evidence of the 'de-alignment' of class and voting. The ESRC later became a supporter of the annual British Social Attitudes survey, which over the years since the early 1980s has provided a great sweep of changing views on topics such as what it means to be British or the fairness of the benefits system. Large projects in the 1990s looked at Whitehall and territorial and local government and elected mayors. With devolution, the ESRC has instigated programmes on constitutional change, most recently the Future of the UK and Scotland project, launched to provide voters in the September 2014 referendum with facts and analysis. Thanks to the ESRC, social scientists are now part of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, helping MPs with fact and analysis. In the great debate of 2014, the Institute of Fiscal Studies was a trusted source of analysis on the financial aspects of a possible independent Scotland.



### INTERNATIONAL

*How do British attitudes compare to international neighbours?*

The SSRC was an early partner with other countries in Europe, launching a data-sharing protocol in 1976. Later the ESRC backed UK participation in the European Social Survey, producing comparative data on attitudes towards topics including migration and engagement in the European Union (itself now the subject of research aimed at informing a possible referendum on UK membership). ESRC researchers have been encouraged to access EU and US funds. During the Cold War, Soviet and east European societies and political systems were a focus. Later the ESRC supported the Centre for the Study of African Economies at the University of Oxford, launched pioneering accords with Brazil and began close collaboration with the Department of International Development.



## JOBS & GROWTH

*Wellbeing at work can be as important as wealth*

SSRC and ESRC work on definitions of GDP now embrace ideas of 'wellbeing' and, after the banking crash, have been basic to UK economic policymaking. Lord Layard, a world leader in happiness economics, has been a long-term recipient of ESRC funding. Also important have been the historical perspectives on the UK's comparative advantage from the work of Nick Crafts and others, and the macroeconomic modelling, forecasting and fiscal policy activities of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Data from studies such as the Workplace and Employment Relations Study (jointly sponsored with government departments) show change over time in management practice and workforce attitudes to the workplace.



## ENVIRONMENT

*Are controversial 'food miles' necessarily a bad thing?*

In the early days 'environment' meant cities, and work on the spread and 'hollowing out' of conurbations and the inner cities by the likes of Sir Peter Hall, who died in 2014. This strand continued with Duncan Maclennan on housing, and the University of York's centre for housing policy, John Muellbauer on housing markets, the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham, and the Centre for Urban & Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University, plus extensive studies of urban transport. Later 'environment' came to imply the sustainability of natural resources. The ESRC's global environmental research programme supported pioneering work showing how important it is to get the economics and sociology of climate change right as well as the physics. In parallel, major programmes such as Rural Economy and Land Use (co-sponsored with other research councils) looked at farming, forests and food, for example querying 'common sense' around importing foodstuff from across the globe. It found that 'food miles' didn't mean greater environmental impact.

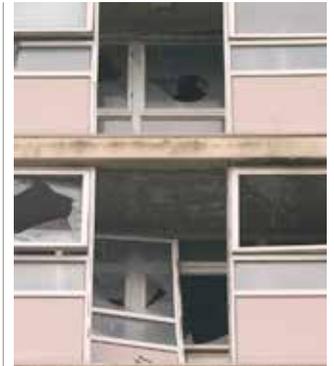


## SCIENCE & WELLBEING

*What effect do schools have on their pupils?*

Children were a focus under the SSRC, which commissioned studies of the effects of TV and the effectiveness of schooling, informing 15,000 Hours, the groundbreaking 1982 study by Sir Michael Rutter. ESRC work has included collaboration with neuroscientists on learning and early years development, studies of children in care and, based on data from the British Household Panel Study, the costs of child rearing. At the other end of the life course, the ESRC has helped create a large body of work around ageing, pensions, staying in work, personalisation of services, housing adaptation and inter-family relationships.

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## SOCIETY

*How your home and school determine your life chances*

The SSRC created specialist units to study ethnic minorities and the interaction of the law and society, not just in terms of crime but also of access to justice. An early focus was the 'rediscovery' of poverty in the late 1960s and 1970s through the work of Peter Townsend and David Donnison. Over the years, the Office of National Statistics and its predecessors have been partners in studies of the birth rate and data from the census. Allowing for the different perspectives of economists and sociologists, we can compute social mobility and know the relative weight of home and school in determining life chances. Another long theme, pursued by the Religion and Society programme is secularisation, and the persistence and renewal of religious faith.