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The Politics of Publicly-funded Social Research¹

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The current economic crisis enveloping the advanced democratic world since 2007 has not only led to the election of a new public finances austerity-committed administration in the UK, formed of a Conservative-Liberal coalition, but has sparked enormous changes in the world of university funding and public research support. This latter issue extends across all areas of academic enquiry – medicine, humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. In each area vigorous campaigns led by university-based scientists have warned about the dangers of under-investment, particularly in pure research. Applied research has fared better in the recent years but researchers continually underline the importance of doing pure research for the country's long-term development of knowledge. The shift to greater funding for applied research correlates to the more general move to fee-based courses and user responsiveness in the UK university sector.

As such this development marks a major change in public expectations about universities in the British polity and political economy. The expansion of public funding for social research commenced in the post-war social democratic consensus about state planning and the need for accurate empirical data to guide social programmes aimed at amelioration and social mobility. This consensual view faced its first major challenge and reform under the shift to neo-liberalism that developed after the economic and social crises of the 1970s, and was expressed in public policy enacted under the Conservative government led by Mrs Thatcher. This second stage included a rigorous review of the social science research agency, which induced funding instability and political uncertainty for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), renamed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 1983, but accepted the value and appropriateness of the public funding of a

plurality of social and economic research, some of the findings of which might be politically unpalatable for the prevailing government.

A continuity of language between the first and second eras permitted the principle of critical research findings. However, since 2010 a third phase in the state funding of social research has unfolded in which it is increasingly linked to measurements of impact, that is, the impact that the findings of publicly funded research has on policy decisions – in the language of the ESRC, its interest in research aimed at ‘influencing behaviour and informing intervention’. This third phase retains some continuity of language with the previous eras in terms of acceptance of the need for publicly funded social research. But its location in an era of high-austerity public finances and prioritization of impact in the parallel research assessment process (the Research Excellence Framework 2014 exercise) mean that, beneath outward signs of continuity of assumptions and language, there may be considerable change in the content and scope of how publicly funded research is understood. The key issue – which will only be addressed over the next few years – is whether the production of knowledge critical of prevailing ideas and policy assumptions continues. As the current economic crisis demonstrates, fostering critical views of our understanding of how basic economic, social and political processes operate is a key task of social researchers and a fundamental obligation of the public university.

Towards public funding of social research

Since the public funding of research began in the twentieth century and especially as it expanded massively from the 1940s, a single contentious question about this investment developed and recurred: should public funding of research require measurable results in applied outputs or should it finance basic science or basic research? In practice it does both. But the perceived conflict between the two activities has been a dominant theme particularly in the politics of social research (though it features, too, in the world of natural science funding). Several sub-themes have flowed from this core issue. First, what methodology is most suitable to social research? Should it be a positivist framework broadly imitative of the natural sciences or a methodology distinct to the specific issues involved in measuring the social world? And how tied should publicly funded social research be to research themes or

intellectual questions formulated by governments through research councils. In the UK these issues have been there since the SSRC/ESRC was founded in 1965. Moments of salience include the early 1980s when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Education Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, ordered an investigation into the research council, certain that it funded inappropriate or trivial research questions. The investigation, in fact, vindicated the research council (though compelling a change of name) and since then its existence has not been in doubt (Rothschild Report 1982).

However, the purpose of the ESRC has been subject to wide discussion. At the founding of the SSRC, there was considerable discussion of how the new body should fund research activity in respect to content (applied or basic research) and to the degree of guidance (should the council structure grants with its own themes or solicit individual applications?). What has changed now is the extent to which the ESRC's funding shapes the content of research activity in social science. For critics, the council's agenda of strategic or thematic priorities runs the danger of squeezing other lines of research activity because it reduces the funds available to them.

Pursuing an increasingly utilitarian conception of research and, in particular, articulating broad research themes, partly in tandem with government priorities, the ESRC's role as the agent of research funding is one balanced on a tightrope. I will suggest in this chapter that while the ESRC has mostly avoided falling into an excessively pro-government stance in supporting research funding, its most recent statement of principles brings it perilously close. The agenda has firmly shifted toward funding and producing government-friendly research findings about what policies work or how policy can influence individual or household behaviour. Gone is any debate about the appropriateness of engaging in particular policy.

The most recent list of strategic priorities issued by the ESRC emphasizes the themes of (a) economic performance and sustainable growth, (b) influencing behaviour and informing interventions, and (c) a vibrant and fair society (ESRC 2010). However, the council underlines on its website that these three priorities are 'not a steer to how research grants will be made'.² Nonetheless the ESRC wants to be relevant to government as its discussion of these three priorities reveals. Research grants will continue to be made on the basis of peer review, but the topics deemed appropriate to study are shaped by the priorities. With

universities keen to increase research-funding success, their own research priorities are increasingly adjusted to those of the research councils with a further narrowing of perspectives.

Origins: avoiding ‘spurious orthodoxies’

The public funding of social science and humanities research in the UK is a product of the embrace of economic planning in the post-1945 decades. The so-called post-war consensus privileged the idea of state intervention, manifest in economic planning and welfare state programmes, as the means for managing modern societies. The same principle set the background for public social science funding and injected a distinct rationale into such public spending. In the articulation of this principle, however, there seemed to be a clear understanding of university researchers as professional members of a class in direct association with the political class of politicians and administrators. In other words, a common ethos might shape the direction of research in ways consistent with the needs of social and political objectives and their administration.

A year after the end of the war, in 1946, the Committee on the Provision for Social and Economic Research, chaired by Sir John Clapham, issued its report, strongly endorsing such state spending: ‘it is a platitude that modern industrial communities rest on a knowledge of the subject matter of the natural sciences. It should be also a platitude that their smooth running and balance rest upon a knowledge of social needs and social responses’ (Clapham Report 1946: 3). For example, the committee averred, economic policy could not be ‘properly viewed without knowledge of economic quantities and economic institutions. In simpler societies it may have been safe to base social policies on hunch and traditional wisdom. But in more complex conditions such a basis is not enough’ (Clapham Report 1946: 3). Reading as slightly naive about the straightforward meaning of ‘social science knowledge’, this first public review of public funding absorbed the idea that state finances should help scholarly research in social science, the products of which would benefit society. This role reflected wartime successes and a perceived alignment in elite opinion and wider public opinion about social purposes. The sociologist A.H. Halsey argues that at the end of the Second World War, state planning was viewed as an instrument of social

improvement: 'by general consent a world fit for heroes and cripples was to be created, giving civilized substance to peace and justifying the sacrifices of war' (1994: 432).

However, while supportive of additional funding Clapham's committee did not recommend a dedicated research council, mainly because of reservations about how scientific social science could be. The Clapham Report stated: 'We believe that the parallelism which is suggested between the present needs of the social and natural sciences is ill-founded. The social sciences have not yet reached the stage at which such an official body could be brought into operation without danger of a premature crystallization of spurious orthodoxies' (1946: 12). In its report, the committee emphasized the value of data compilation for government in modern societies, a process that it believed could be reinforced with augmented funding. In respect of university funding, the Clapham committee recommended an increase in social science research funds over the coming years, administered by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Despite the caveat to avoid 'spurious orthodoxies' this recommendation for enhanced funding (which was acted upon) and the creation of a standing Interdepartmental Economic and Social Research Committee in Whitehall signalled greater state involvement in social science funding.

Founding a research council: 'long run utilitarian standards'

The pressure from universities and some government departments for greater investment in social and economic research and the creation of a specialist research council grew in the years after the Clapham Report appeared. Rhetoric about technology's importance, the value of planning and economic intervention became accepted as commonplace, and growing intellectual respect for social science fanned this trend.³ The suitability of state-directed planning became a theme in David Glass's Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics in 1950: 'I take it as axiomatic that planning even more in the social than in the economic field, is here to stay' (1950: 17). Glass advocated the need for a comprehensive research programme to ensure a firm basis for such public policy: 'the larger the area of governmental

responsibility in the field of social policy, the greater the urgency for governmental action to be based on and tested by social research' (1950: 18). His proposals convey the intellectual and political mindset of post-war professional civil servants, public intellectuals, engaged politicians and academics about the likely dividends in terms of improved social and economic policy to follow from deeper empirical knowledge in society, demography and the economy. This view was widely held and fashioned a support network for the creation of a research council – eventually recommended by the Heyworth Committee in 1965. Support for greater social research extended into the private sector too, with the Heyworth Committee recording 'a remarkable amount of sympathy with the aims of the social sciences and an appreciation of the benefits to be anticipated from their application as shown by their demand for more' (Heyworth Report 1965: 28).

The Heyworth Committee issued a report recommending the establishment of a research council exclusively to fund social science in 1965. The road to this recommendation was lengthy and required overcoming doubts about how such social research could be judged.⁴ Four types of issues shaped the committee members' articulation of the case for a social science council. First, opinion differed as to whether funded research should be measurably applied and utilitarian or supportive of individuals' own creative choices. Both types of research activity benefited in the long run. Second, the committee admired but could not hope to emulate the scale of American public investment in funding social science research. Third, engaging in predictive scientific analysis was to be limited. The committee members preferred applied empirical research and were doubtful about the capacity of social science to be scientifically predictive, and articulated a preference for middle-range hypothesis setting and testing rather than all-embracing integrated theory. This preference was a further differentiation from the United States where National Science Foundation funding of social science took the high road of theory building from the start of its funding (see Kleinman 1995; Larsen 1992). Last, the committee acknowledged a standard positivist model of social research, including training in statistical methods. The report adumbrated: 'it is essential that ... no student will in future graduate in the social sciences without a good working knowledge of statistics' (Heyworth Report 1965: 32).

Despite the general political context, which viewed social research as a tool of improved public policy-making including social amelioration,

the Heyworth Committee sought to evaluate the validity of this precept. Opinion divided between those who wanted basic research funding unrelated to any policy application and those who stressed the importance of prioritizing applied research. The latter position was the majority one. Among the critics the London School of Economics sociologist Duncan MacRae (Committee on Social Studies 1964: 3) thought social theory separate from applied policy-making and problem-solving. Nuffield sociologist A.H. Halsey shared this view for different reasons – he wanted social scientists to be social critics, elaborating: ‘I am very worried that our Social Science Council will too much represent that kind of legitimate [utilitarian] interest as over against the very much more difficult problem of inviting a society to have the nerve to build into its own establishment arrangements, arrangements for criticising its own establishment’ (Committee on Social Studies 1964: 19–20). The importance of this argument has recurred ever since in discussion about the purpose and legitimacy of publicly funded social research. For instance, the Rothschild Enquiry recognized the need for social researchers at various points to have independence from political pressures to complete objective research.

The dominant view in discussions informing the Heyworth Committee’s deliberations and report assumed that social research derived its value, and in many ways its legitimacy, from the potential to be applied in policy. Economist Alec Cairncross set out the utilitarian justification. He contended that ‘social problems are meat and drink to the social scientist, they are what he is engaged in discussing’. Cairncross reduced this approach to two types of research activity: first, modelling social and economic forces to assist in the prediction of future developments, an activity justifying the label ‘science’; and second, Cairncross and others argued that investigating the success and efficacy of government policy in achieving stated ends constituted crucial research. Combining theory and evidence was essential since, ‘it is often a very bad thing if your theorists are cut off from application,’ with an obvious danger of theoretical vacuity. For Cairncross what contemporary policy-makers call the ‘impact’ of research was a basic criterion of evaluation: ‘you cannot absolve yourself from some kind of long-run utilitarian standard in the social sciences’ (Committee on Social Studies Minutes 1964: 1, 3, 8–9). Committee member Noel Annan expected SSRC funding to enable a cadre of social science graduates ‘educated in a particular technique of dealing with social problems’ (Committee on Social Studies Minutes 1964: 18).

Topics singled out by the Heyworth Committee for detailed study under the rubric of applied research included: economic growth and development, including incomes policy, the application of science in industry and industrial efficiency; regional development; environmental issues including land use, planning and urban renewal; education; welfare; health; immigration; law and society; and international relations. Housing policy was cited as a prime candidate for applied investigation. The list is practical and policy-oriented. In sum, the Heyworth Committee's recommendation for a dedicated social research council and for educating publicly more researchers rested on a conception of social science research as primarily applied in character.

Based on the evidence submitted and solicited that the 'social sciences are ready to move to a new level of performance and for this they need funds for research on a larger scale' (Heyworth Report 1965: 47), the Heyworth Committee presented its recommendation for a Social Science Research Council. While there was increasing demand for the products of social research by users, the latter were unable to provide sufficient resources for substantial progress to be made; public funding was crucial. Social science research had become routinized in universities and the number and quality of researchers had expanded substantially. The report dismissed Clapham's fear of 'spurious orthodoxy': 'the considerable developments in the social sciences since the Clapham Committee have removed any dangers of the establishment of "spurious orthodoxies"' (Heyworth Report 1965: 46). A council would be able to monitor and direct research, ensuring that appropriate needs were addressed. In addition, an expansion in funding of postgraduate studentships was recommended. Both proposals were enacted.

Set up under the Science and Technology Act 1965, the Social Science Research Council reflected the values dominating the Heyworth Committee's assessment of social science, in particular the assumption that research could produce information and valid relationships between policies and effects or outcomes usable in public policy. Its remit was to fund research activity by scholars in universities and to allocate studentships for advanced training in the social sciences. The disciplines it covered were sociology, human geography, social anthropology, economics, social statistics, economic history, political science (later international relations, too), and some parts of psychology and law. Organizationally the council had a set of senior administrative staff and a set of committees covering the disciplines and particular tasks, which

were staffed by academics from universities and some senior researchers. Decisions about grant allocation and studentship awards rested on anonymous peer review, the evaluations of which were considered and adjudicated on by the relevant council committee. This structure remains largely in place, although there is now a chief executive appointed for five years at a time. There is also an advisory board.

Surviving a challenge: ‘an act of intellectual vandalism’

Aside from continuing struggles to maintain its annual budget to fund research and graduate studentships, the biggest crisis for the ESRC followed the election of the Conservative Party to government in 1979 under the leadership of the New Right figure, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. The forewarning from Halsey that a social research council might acquire the role of engaging in institutionalized criticism seemed to have arrived. Several intellectual luminaries in the Conservative Party doubted the value or even possibility of social research (particularly if it was called a ‘science’) and through their own think-tanks, notably the Institute of Economic Affairs, expanded and promoted economic ideas such as monetarism out of favour with the prevailing Keynesian consensus supported by the research council (Crockett 1994).

Amongst the new Prime Minister’s inner circle, her Education Secretary Sir Keith Joseph was doubtful about a publicly funded commitment to social science,⁵ although he was far from uninterested in the types of research projects and questions social scientists addressed. He was sceptical about the term scientific and the resources needed. To assess the council’s value and necessity he commissioned a distinguished natural scientist, Lord Rothschild, to review the work of the SSRC.⁶ The appointment was in December 1981 and Rothschild completed and published the results of his enquiry in May 1982. The parameters of the enquiry were to assess the extent to which a research council was required and able to identify top research projects, the best way of undertaking that research and what means would best address the questions posed.⁷ Rothschild consulted widely with leading academics in social science, citing their opinions and judgements in his report. These were almost uniformly positive about social science and the role of the SSRC in facilitating social research.

Rothschild himself reported favourably about the SSRC. In fact, his

report concluded in ways entirely the obverse of the perceived views of the Education Secretary and Conservative government. Rothschild declared, 'there is one course of action which could not be easily corrected: that is the dismemberment or liquidation of the SSRC. That would not only be an act of intellectual vandalism ... it would also have damaging consequences for the whole country' (Rothschild Report 1982: para. 11.19). In other words the evidence and arguments that led the Clapham and Heyworth committees to recommend expanded public funding of social science research were vindicated in the quality of research Rothschild encountered and in the appropriateness of research questions investigated under SSRC funding. And those earlier reports' support for expanded graduate studentship programmes was also supported by Lord Rothschild. He wanted a steady state in the council's annual spending allocation to give its administrators stability to plan and fund research appropriately.⁸ Finally, as a natural scientist Lord Rothschild proved fully able to assess and justify the scientific status of social science research as plausible and well adhered to in best practice research projects.

A month after its publication, the Rothschild Report was the subject of a debate in the House of Lords initiated by Lord Max Beloff, the Oxford academic. Previously a critic of the research council (notably in his views about the Warwick Industrial Relations Research Unit),⁹ he now accepted, in the light of Rothschild's conclusions, that the council merited supported and continued existence. Beloff explained:

First, that while the social sciences are a particularly difficult and sensitive area of research because of their political and social connotations, they nevertheless deserve a measure of public support, for the same reason as public support is sought for the natural sciences or for the humanities; that is to say, because there are certain forms of addition to our knowledge, to our treasures of information, which it is right for the state to support.

He continued, that on the basis of the report, 'while far from perfect, the Social Science Research Council is probably, or could be if reformed, as good a single instrument for supporting such research as it is likely one could devise; and the only alternative, which is not fully considered in the report, would be wider dissemination of public money to universities, to learned societies in the field, and so forth.'¹⁰ Indeed Rothschild's report gave the SSRC, in the words of this fellow peer, 'a fairly clean bill of health'.¹¹

Rothschild was highly supportive of government funding for research in the social sciences (and for such funding to be orchestrated under the SSRC). He argued first that certain disciplines, such as social anthropology, would perish without such research support: 'they are peculiarly dependent upon governmental support through Research Councils, and their results and their methods are of great interest to a number of disciplines, both practical and theoretical.' The continuing and vital need for empirical research, based on 'high academic standards', to inform major public policy decisions was a further reason for state funding of research. Rothschild was healthily sceptical of the precarious knowledge base upon which much 'entrenched common sense' commonly rested. Finally, Rothschild judged that the absence of publicly funded research findings would in practice overwhelm the users of such research bereft of intellectual and monetary resources to undertake the necessary research: it would 'impose a burden on 'consumer' departments and agencies which they could not sustain' (Rothschild Report 1982: 21).

The name of the research council changed to its present-day Economic and Social Research Council. This modification came some months after the delivery of the Rothschild Report, as the Education Secretary accepted the findings not to dismember the council but achieved a symbolic victory in getting 'science' excised from its title. This change was a modest price to pay for the council's defenders and beneficiaries who had known that the prospect of abolition was real.

The Rothschild Report is thirty years old. The research council's survival of this challenge put an end to any serious consideration of the ESRC's abolition (even in the current era of no-holds-barred austerity measures). Its role as a public agency required to respond to social and economic trends through purposeful research funding (including subsequently greater use of directed research programmes) was secured; and the legitimacy of increasing the number of postgraduate-educated social scientists in the UK – an ambition of both the Clapham and Heyworth reports – was affirmed. Both of these facets – that some social research should be publicly underwritten because of the inherent nature of the activity and that education be expanded – withstood therefore the challenge of New Right neo-liberal economic arguments which gained prominence first under the monetarist-inspired deregulatory and anti-state revolution initiated by Mrs Thatcher, and also withstood the end of the Cold War, the outcome of which had constituted a victory for anti-statism and free-market economics. The scale of this achievement has

perhaps been insufficiently remarked upon: born as a handmaiden of a Keynesian-dominated, post-war consensus, the country's social science research council managed to retain its legitimacy and purpose in the very different post-1970s world of neo-liberal, pro-market and anti-public spending politics. And this account is not intended to imply that the SSRC/ESRC ever had an especially easy time of negotiating annual allocations for research or graduate studentships. For instance, in the fiscal year 1981/82, 880 postgraduate studentships were awarded, 50 per cent below the allocation three years earlier (ESRC 2005: 24).

The ESRC after Rothschild

The ESRC faced tough times in the first half of the 1980s as budgets were tight and the aura of having been challenged by the government endured. From the middle of the decades it consolidated. Three aspects of that consolidation bearing noting.

The integration of research and government policy

One theme developed in the Rothschild Report was the desirability of enhanced connections between industry and social research to ensure, as he saw it, that social research had some sensitivity to the needs of employers and industrialists. This motif was present in both the Clapham and Heyworth committee reports, though more so in the former. It is a theme that has reverberated and increased since the 1980s. And in an early formulation of what has become the notion of 'users', Rothschild talked about the 'ultimate customer' or consumer of social research financed through a publicly funded council. Whereas Rothschild argued that the consumer of applied research was enormously widely spread – from policy-makers through to the media and general public – the idea of the user has become a narrower one in subsequent research council practice. It is presented as widely based but, unless researchers are fortunate enough to get their results presented in a documentary or other mass media format, informing the general public as user is hard. Lord Ardwick, a former administrator at the Nuffield Foundation, summarized this view:

The social science customer includes all those who have a part to play in The decision-making process. The decisions to which most of the research sponsored by the council contributes are essentially governmental. But in a democratic society these decisions are not the sole concerns of Ministers or officials. The beneficiaries of this applied research are Members of Parliament, journalists, academics and the public at large. There is no single customer who might take out a contract. So though much research may still be commissioned by such customers as Government departments and private organizations, the public interest requires, Lord Rothschild says, an independent source of funds for research which such customers cannot be expected to undertake.¹²

The parallel here with the reincarnations through which the idea of measuring public significance of academic research has gone – now called ‘impact’ – in the RAE/REF exercise is salutary. From a modest origin this notion of impact will constitute the basis for 25 per cent of awards in the 2014 assessment exercise and subject panels have been bolstered with members deemed non-academic users able to drive the impact judgement. While the need to identify research users and research impact both constitute strategies to make certain aspects of public spending politically palatable, the effects of such initiatives bear wider reflection.

Various important initiatives occurred in the ESRC in the 1980s and 1990s. The idea of dedicated research centres began with the council funding initially and then the host university picking it up. The work of the Centre for Ethnic Studies at Warwick and Centre for African Economics at Oxford are notable achievements. But the council also moved more towards thematic research programmes, allocating funds for large research initiatives funded by programme directors seconded from their normal university position. While not the sole activity of the council by any means, organizing research allocations and other activities in terms of such themes or challenges acquired greater significance. By 2011 these were termed strategic priorities, the three of which were identified above. In the previous strategic plan these were called challenge areas including: New Technology and Skills; Global Economic Performance, Policy and Management; and Global Uncertainties.

Publicizing the findings

To address the recurrent issue of failing sufficiently to publicize and explain its activities – a role both Heyworth and Rothschild underlined – the ESRC has a public engagement programme including periodic Festivals of Social Science and publicizing the results of its funded research.

Professionalizing postgraduate training

The SSRC-ESRC has played a key role in advancing research training for postgraduates in the UK. From the early 1990s the ESRC introduced Postgraduate Training Requirements which imposed rules and expectations on university studentships, supervisors and students. These and subsequent measures align the research council with a quantitative and positivist view of the discipline, increasingly so over time, as ESRC recognition came to be seen as a ‘kite-mark’ for doctoral programmes and most universities sought recognition for all their departments offering social science PhDs.

Such a stance is entirely consistent with the expectations of the authors of the Clapham, Heyworth and Rothschild reports that postgraduate studentships should train graduate students as social scientists. This emphasis has certainly not meant the neglect of qualitative subjects such as international relations or social anthropology, although proponents of these disciplines have often felt such oversight; and many supervisors have blanched at the training requirements imposed uniformly on recipients of graduate studentships regardless of the student’s methodology or research topic. Even more resented in some universities is the diffusion of ESRC postgraduate training standards as the norm for all graduates on courses winning the coveted ESRC training recognition award. In my view this objection is entirely misplaced as the benefits of proper training in research methods and professional skills has hugely benefited the standard of graduate provision in the affected disciplines.

The establishment of Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) from 2012, however, marks a modification of this development. Whereas there was a significant degree of concentration in the distribution of awards to recognized departments through the studentship competition, the anticipation of cuts to funding led the ESRC to abandon the competition in favour of quota awards assigned to DTCs (involving some forty-two

universities, some in collaborative arrangements with neighbouring universities, to form twenty-one DTCs in all). The other universities, who were previously recognized, have lost recognition.

In fact, this policy outcome appears consistent with government policies for concentration and selectivity in research across the sector and will further the tendency to create a hierarchy of universities, with a limited number of research-intensive universities at the top. This ‘hierarchization’ is linked to the policy of differential fees for undergraduate programmes, and the removal of the teaching block grant from arts, humanities and social sciences. Student choice will determine the distribution of subjects available at universities. To the extent that social sciences are perceived as priority subjects, it is through their role of augmenting undergraduates and postgraduates competence in quantitative methods (see MacInnes 2009). In terms of postgraduate research, it is significant that HEFCE is now undertaking a consultation on the distribution of the quality-related research (QR) element of funding associated with postgraduate research (the equivalent of the undergraduate teaching block grant and worth about a similar amount, i.e. making up half the income a university received for postgraduate home research students). The terms of the consultation suggest the concentration of postgraduate QR funding in fewer universities.

Fiscal crisis and social research: the imperative to ‘to broaden and accelerate’

The Great Recession (2007–8) and its continuing effects – with an expected lack of economic growth for ten years in the worst affected advanced democracies – have two key implications for a public research regime. First, they reaffirm the urgency of publicly funding researchers and new graduate students in the key disciplines that attempt to understand the causes, processes, outcomes and long-term effects of such exogenous shocks to stable democracies. But, second, they underline the need for a research council to expand its openness to innovative research projects designed to understand both the present malaise and pending black swans. ‘Innovative’ does not simply mean interdisciplinary (though there should be more of that, for example, combining economic history and sociology), nor embracing some current fashionable turn (such as

behavioural or experimental economics, the results of which often give new meaning to the blindingly obvious). Rather, it means recognizing a plurality of research projects targeted on a set of problems thrown up by the Great Recession (public sector versus private sector conflicts, money and politics, regulatory regimes and income inequality trends, for instance), and the value of posing large themes and explanatory factors such as those associated with political economy and political institutions.

This kind of thematically rich and intellectually deep research and analysis perfectly complements and interacts with the kind of applied research already undertaken by the research council funded scholars and anticipated in the Clapham and Heyworth reports. But we need both types.¹³ And for the reasons Rothschild celebrated in his report – only an independent research agency can be expected to fund research which may produce politically unpalatable findings – the university community must insist that the ESRC continues to take a broad-stroke view of research activity and is not only overly harnessed to any particular agenda. Thus, in terms of the historical debate about whether public research councils should fund merely applied or pure research, the latter should retain equal weight in the allocation of resources. It is exactly this view that explains the financial investor George Soros' funding of the Institute for New Economics Thinking (INET). Through its research funding the institute promises to 'broaden and accelerate the development of new economic thinking that can lead to solutions for the great challenges of the twentieth first century'.¹⁴

Thus, ironically, while many politicians may view the present scale of the fiscal crisis of the state as the moment to view public funding of social science research as an unaffordable luxury, it is in fact precisely the occasion when we most need to secure and fund our national community of researchers. Publicly funded research is an important and necessary function of the public university.