

16. SSRC Survey Unit

One reason is that I am not, by any definition, a good administrator of an organisation. You know I like doing work and I like talking to people who are doing good work, or even bad work [laughs]. But I like talking to them about work, and doing research. But the idea of organising people and doing things methodically and seeing that the right items are on the agenda for the next meeting, and that there is a next meeting even ... I don't do well at all. Very badly. It has pursued me all my life. Fortunately at Research Services I had Dorothy Darling who could do all that for me ... wonderful! And then, when she left, I had Joan Wright who could do it for me, up to a point¹. So that was one reason -- that I was not a good administrator. I would sit through management meetings and think, "Oh God, why am I wasting my time on this? You know, I could be over in the computing room, getting more tables run and so on ... and we have heard this all before and who the hell wants to know what the precedents are for paying paternity leave to academics under the age of 30? ...either give them money or don't give them the money." I was no good at that at all.

The second reason was that, I think I aroused a great deal of animosity among academics.

DA: How?

MA: Well, because very often ... well let me start a little earlier than that. Even before I came, the Social Science Research Council was rejecting 70% of all applications, on the grounds that they didn't think, usually, they didn't think people sending in the applications were capable of doing the research they wanted the money for. Now, when the figure stayed at that after my appointment, and it was fairly widely known that any application that involved a survey might be discussed with me and shown to me as one of the assessors, perfectly properly, and didn't get through, they said, "Ah, it's because Mark said thumbs down on that." Now in some cases, in order to overcome that, what I would say is, "I don't think the way this is written, is set out, really tests the hypothesis that the man or woman has in mind." or "I don't think it will really collect the information that is really relevant to an adequate knowledge of this particular phenomenon. But, tell the person who has put in the application, if they care to come to me, I would be only too pleased to help them". Now the way that was handled was to write to people and say that "If you care to go and get the advice of Mark Abrams we will reconsider your application." And that was the kiss of death you see. They

¹ John Hall comments, Joan was with him at the SSRC/SU and was the only typist in the Unit. We felt embarrassed asking her to do any typing until we got our own typist. This was well before word-processors and PCs.

thought, “Why? We’ve been in this chair for 15 years running a highly successful department and they tell us we’ve got to go and get him to tell us how to do surveys.” So, the two reasons combined: if I’d been a good administrator, I would have followed up the thing and seen that the letters that went out were much more diplomatic, or altered them and said, “Mark Abrams is terribly interested in your project and would be grateful if you would let him come and talk to you about it.” You know, there are ways of doing these things I suppose. So, you know, it became, “Oh God, you know, we put in this application. If we get through all right it means we may have to have him looking over our shoulders. If we don’t get through, it is because he has said no.,” and so on.

I remember the strangest event of that kind was when an old, old friend of mine, a woman called Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, had her application turned down. And someone who had not the slightest knowledge of what had happened in the process, said, “Oh it must have been because Mark said no.” She never had anything to do with me after that. Until, finally someone told me that it was because she knew that I had had her application rejected. I’d never seen her application, let alone rejected it. In fact I have never spoken to her since then either because I’ve never had an opportunity to. So I think those two things.