

Research Absurdities

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THE OBSESSION with social "research" seems to be on the increase. Any subject, it seems, will do for an exercise in statistics. I should not be at all surprised to hear of a research group deliberately hiding a needle in a haystack so that they could measure the time and complexity required to find it.

These thoughts have been provoked by the latest report of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, an organisation that conducts researches

into a variety of relevant or irrelevant matters with government financial assistance.

The Institute's eleventh industrial enquiry was carried out in December, 1968. Managements of 110 firms in the metal industries were interviewed and a postal questionnaire was sent to a number of large firms in the chemical industry. The report contains some fascinating statements.

"We have been unable to include a report on the paper industry as no firms responded to our enquiry."

"Small firms are not adequately represented in the sample. This may account for the discrepancies between figures reported by the firms and official estimates."

"The limitations of the enquiry should be noted."

"Some firms were able to give only very rough estimates in reply to certain questions."

"The results are provisional."

What was all this about? Output, employment and exports! And what conclusions are drawn from these provisional results? That the limitations to growth of business were the demand for the product, labour shortages, and shortage of capacity. Who would have guessed? This kind of information reminds me of the reports sent out by the Ministry of Agriculture informing farmers of the weather conditions for the previous month.

Thirteen foolscap pages tell me that firms could produce more with more demand and with more labour—and they give estimates as to how much. Since the figures differed from firm to firm, and from product to product, what on earth is the use of this information except to the firms concerned? Surely, they could carry out their own research. When you collate and strike averages you have something quite useless for acting upon.

Nearly 70 per cent of engineering firms reported that their exports had increased more rapidly than during 1967. The report says: "Almost all of these firms gave the same explanation for this—increased export demand and more competitive prices as a result of devaluation." Now who would have thought that?

The report also reveals, as a result of the research undertaken, that firms imported certain goods because they were cheaper or because they could not be obtained on the home market! (What other reasons did the researchers imagine importers might have?)

Another revealing outcome of the research was that firms would continue to import this year at the same level as last year unless they had reason to import more!

"The import deposit scheme," say the researchers innocently, "had been published too recently for most firms to be able to give their responses to it."

There is much more of this kind of stuff which provides one with a "blinding glimpse of the obvious."

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Cynics would say that the Government requires this information so as to help in the formulation of national economic planning, but that the Government is too timid to do its own dirty work itself so it gives it to the quasi-private bodies to do.

Research can, of course, be valuable if done for the right reasons and used for the right purpose, and

it can tell us something useful that we don't already know. Research into land ownership and land values—a modern Domesday Book—for instance, would be both revealing and useful—but perhaps too useful. It is significant that the Whitstable pilot survey was undertaken on a shoe-string budget and without government financial support.