

Social Science at NSF Needs Pruning, Says Proxmire

Senator William Proxmire (D-Wis.), a constant crusader against fiscal profligacy, has been wondering out loud recently about the worth of some of the social science research projects supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Picking on projects with funny-sounding names is an old congressional game, pursued with varying degrees of seriousness. Proxmire is usually worth listening to, particularly in this case since he is chairman of the subcommittee in charge of NSF appropriations. But this year, at least, his views don't seem to have enough support to affect the fiscal 1975 budget.

According to a Proxmire aide, the senator thinks the social science component of NSF (formally included in the agency's mandate in 1968) has not yet found its mission and is still wandering down unproductive by-ways. As Proxmire, criticizing "capricious budget planning," said in an early June press release, "the American taxpayer would get a better return on his money if he put it into White Russian bonds."

Proxmire's criticisms have been directed at perhaps three dozen projects which have received support either through NSF's basic research division or its RANN (Research Applied to National Needs) program.

Taken out of context, and without any explanatory material, some do sound quite out of the way. And, generally, the smaller the grant, the funnier-sounding the project. "Newari psychosocial processes" is one. "Interpersonal relationships within the family" is another. Then there is "Comparative Polynesian syntax," "Structure and function of the heart in medieval medical philosophical and scientific texts," "An in-depth comprehensive technology assessment of integrated hog farming," and the obscurely named study on "The effect of the level of hope on the contemplation of distance to death."

Proxmire believes a number of RANN projects would be more appropriately funded through other agencies. He thinks that a number of studies related to crime, a "Comparative study of the disposition of felony cases," for example, belong with the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, as should "Conflict, justice, and cooperation," a basic research project about the resolution of conflicts in "traffic challenges." A study on "Performance criteria for new community development" belongs with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The hogs should go to the Department of Agriculture. To which NSF replies that one of its functions, particularly in RANN, is to take projects that "fall between the cracks." NSF says other agencies have too narrowly defined research mandates to cover some projects, and they believe that other projects are worthwhile but they can't afford to fund them. Proxmire thinks some of the basic social science research belongs in the National Endowment for the Humanities but NSF believes some studies, in anthropology and linguistics for example, are more amenable to the scientific rather than the humanistic approach.

The NSF is not apologetic about any of the projects that have come under Proxmire's fire, nor does the social science division feel it is wandering through the

woods in search of a *raison d'être*. "Our mission is to try to achieve a greater body of knowledge on how people interact that is scientific in nature," says Howard Hines, division director for social sciences.

Public reaction to the senator's criticism of one project—a \$135,000 study of language behavior in the chimpanzee—would seem to bear out NSF's view. While the research was not mission-oriented, many scientists see hope that the results can open the way to developing new means of treatment for autistic children and for stroke victims who have lost the power of speech.

Many basic research programs in the social sciences are particularly vulnerable to ridicule on the face of them because the words on the title page are comprehensible. A "Theoretical investigation of a lexical aspect of meaning" might arouse some skepticism, but few lawmakers have the technical knowledge to question a project in the physical sciences that any scientist would perceive to be sheer nonsense.

While you can't judge a project by its title, there is no doubt that the government at times spends in mysterious ways. Some of these are documented in a June 1974 report on 35 government-funded projects, which was compiled by the General Accounting Office at the request of some congressmen who had read a widely publicized article written by the director of the National Taxpayers Union.

One expenditure was a \$68,000 "payment to Queen Elizabeth for not planting cotton in Mississippi"—a farm subsidy paid to a company in which the Royal Family is a major stockholder. Another was the \$375,000 "Pentagon frisbee study," an ill-fated effort, terminated in 1970, to develop an improved aircraft-launched naval flare. Another project, made much of by Representative Bob Daniel (R-Va.) was a "study to figure out why children fall off tricycles." This was a \$20,000 project to develop safety standards for the operation of off-the-road wheeled vehicles, and the researchers did in fact get down to tricycles. An outstanding oddity was an attempt by the Office of Economic Opportunity, using a \$47,000 grant, to get teen-aged males interested in responsible sex by offering coupons to subsidize the mail-order purchase of condoms. Teen-age America did not jump at this opportunity. Finally, there is the old chestnut that was the brunt of much humor in the House of Representatives some years ago: a \$500 award by the National Endowment on the Arts to the author of a one-word poem: "Lighthouse."

The NSF has so far succeeded in justifying its social science research activities to the satisfaction of relevant congressional committees, if not of the senator from Wisconsin. Proxmire has not singled out NSF, which he thinks is a fine agency, for special criticism. He also plans to look hard at the research of the other agencies within the purview of his subcommittee which includes HUD, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Veterans Administration. The senator would undoubtedly be happier knocking off something big, like the space shuttle, but since eternal vigilance is the price of thrift he is chipping away wherever he can.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN