Michael Posner

Michael Posner was born on 25 August 1931 and died in Oxford on 14 February 2006 at the age of 73. He was another economist, of whom many (including Sir Hans Singer) have been mentioned in these pages, whose presence in the UK owed much to oppressive regimes in Europe. His father was a refugee from Russian pogroms and his maternal grandparents had also come to the UK to avoid persecution in Eastern Europe.

He spent his early years in Ilford but after the war the family settled in Croydon and he attended Whitgift School. From there he won a scholarship to study history at Balliol College, Oxford. His formal education was briefly suspended by a period of National Service (in the RAF) but resumed immediately afterwards. His tutor, to begin with, was Christopher Hill but Posner switched from history to a study of philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) at an early stage. He graduated with first class honours in 1953 and immediately embarked upon a career as an academic economist taking a post as Research Officer at the Oxford Institute of Statistics where he remained until 1957.

After a very brief spell in the USA he moved to Cambridge where he stayed until 1979. He held the posts successively of assistant lecturer, lecturer and reader. He was elected a fellow of Pembroke College in 1960 and served as secretary of the faculty board of economics for and later its chairman in 1974–75. In 1966, he co-authored Italian Public Enterprise and in so doing gave notice of his developing interest in public policy. While teaching at Cambridge he held a series of part-time governmental advisory posts, primarily in the policy areas of energy and macroeconomics, starting as director of economics at the Ministry of Power (1966–67) and culminating as deputy chief economic adviser to the Treasury (1975–76).

Thereafter he joined the boards of British Railways (1976–84) and the Post Office (1978–79). It was while he was at the BRB that he had his first negative encounter with the Thatcher government which initially rejected the Board’s plans for mainline electrification on which he had worked extensively. After leaving the BRB he served as a trustee of the railways pension fund (1986–98) and was one of the first to warn that the fund was headed for financial difficulties.

The second encounter with the Thatcher government, and more especially her Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph, was much more bruising but it earned Posner a reputation as a skilled political operator. More importantly, although there were some criticisms to begin with, once the scale and importance of his achievement became apparent, it earned him the undying gratitude of all UK social science researchers.

Although the crisis erupted in 1982, its roots can be traced back to the beginning of 1979 when Posner was appointed as Chairman of what was then called the Social Science Research Council. The appointment was made by a Labour government which was shortly afterwards (in May 1979) replaced by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Instinctively suspicious of any intellectual activity, she was particularly suspicious of social scientists who she saw as tending to complicate the analysis of economic and social issues and acting as a barrier to her essentially simplistic, black and white, judgements and the remedies that she felt followed therefrom. The fact that so much social science research seemed also to lead to ‘leftish’ policy prescriptions (or at least to the spending of public money) only made matters worse.

In September 1981, Sir Keith Joseph moved to the Department of Education and promptly set out about questioning the credentials of the SSRC. For Joseph, ‘science’ meant hard science and it was carried out, for the most part, in laboratories. To him, the fact that social research could dignify itself in this way was anathema (and an illustration of the arrogance to which left-wing academics were prone). His answer was to invite Lord Rothschild (an earlier Chairman of the Central Policy Review Staff and an acquaintance of Posner) to conduct a one-man inquiry into the SSRC before taking action (to close it). The inquiry began in February 1982 and the Report was to be delivered in May. For a period of three months, Posner worked heroically to convince Rothschild of the value of the research that the SSRC was funding. In this, he proved very skilful at persuading leading figures in the other research councils (some of whom at least might have been expected to share Thatcher’s prejudices against social science) to support the public funding of all research. No doubt many rallied to the flag because they could see that an attack on the public funding of one area of research would establish a precedent for querying the merits of all public funding. In the end, Rothschild’s Report was more critical of any suggestion that the SSRC should be closed than the government could possible have anticipated, referring to the possibility as an act of ‘intellectual vandalism’ which would cause immense damage to the country. Joseph and Thatcher won a minor battle in that the name of the SSRC was changed to the Economic and Social Research Council (with no mention of science). But Posner’s view was that this was conceding a battle to win the war, a judgement which virtually all social researchers came subsequently to accept.

In 1986 he was appointed General Secretary of the European Science Foundation (ESF) in Strasbourg, a post he held for seven years. During that period, he worked hard to persuade national research councils to increase their contributions to the ESF which he saw as an essential counterweight to the power of the European Commission to fund (and influence) social science research.

He is survived by his wife Rebecca (née Reynolds) whom he married in 1953, and by a son and daughter.