



A Commentary on 'Blackett: Operational Research'¹

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This paper was the first published article in an OR journal in the world. The author, PMS Blackett, FRS (later Lord Blackett) is regarded as the 'father' of OR in the UK and was certainly its most influential figure in the early years of OR. (The OR Society's prestigious annual Blackett Lecture is named after him.) In this paper he touches on some points relating to the methodologies of OR and its organisation. Surprisingly, by conventional standards this was not an influential article despite its pedigree. Apparently it has only been cited twice in the sources abstracted by the ISI in the last 20 years. But many of the themes it addresses remain live issues for the various OR societies across the world. Blackett first considers the issue of the scientific nature of OR and while this has been much discussed² the debate has now moved on to examine OR in its various institutional settings. The key question Blackett addresses of contemporary interest is the novelty of OR: what does it add beyond the social sciences in general? Where is its 'added value'? It is not, Blackett claims, 'the material to which the scientific method is applied'. It is the level at which the work is done. He saw OR workers operating with comparative freedom, observing the daily activities of senior executives, and even searching out their own problems. But as Kirby³ points out, the organisational approach adopted in wartime did not easily translate into the peacetime activities of a mixed economy. Blackett's recommendations as to what was desirable for effective OR increasingly cut across the grain of the developing manag-

erial culture of the UK⁴. Interestingly, Miser's reflections⁵ on US success over the same period had none of the same wartime flavour, despite being based on the lessons he had learnt in the US Airforce.

In summary, Blackett's paper, despite its apparent neglect, touched on many of the controversies that the international OR community has discussed in the 50 years since its appearance: OR as a science, the uniqueness of OR, the staffing of the OR team and its operational relationship to senior executives in the organisation. But there are no hints here of the difficulties OR was to face in the latter part of the century. Rather it made the all too easy assumption that the future of OR and its success across industry, commerce and all areas of government would be achieved in much the same way as it had during its focused activities in the Second World War.

References

- 1 Blackett PMS (1950). Operational Research. *Opl Res Q* **1**: 3–6.
- 2 Keys P (1991). *Operational Research and Systems: The systemic nature of OR*. Plenum Press, New York.
- 3 Kirby M (1999). Blackett in the 'white heat' of the scientific revolution. *J Opl Res Soc* **50**: 985–993.
- 4 Fildes R and Ranyard JC (1997). Success and survival of operational research groups. *J Opl Res Soc* **48**: 336–360.
- 5 Miser HJ (1998). What we learned early in the US Airforce about establishing and maintaining operational research groups. *J Opl Res Soc* **49**: 336–346.