

Appreciation

Mark Abrams

MARK ABRAMS (*obituary, September 27*) was a Labour supporter and had been a friend of Hugh Gaitskell since the thirties. Few in the party were interested in using the new techniques of opinion polling and advertising. Most Labour politicians thought they knew what ordinary people wanted and gave it to them through policy leaflets, largely unread.

Attitudes were changing, however, and between 1956 and 1958 Abrams conducted three low budget surveys. Some in party headquarters dismissed or resented the operation. At one NEC publicity committee meeting he was likened to Dr

Goebbels! Aneurin Bevan, the party treasury and deputy leader, blocked further surveys and memorably complained that polls were "taking the poetry out of politics".

Abrams achieved some fame when he (with Richard Rose and Rita Hinden) wrote the best-selling *Must Labour Lose?* (1960). In 1959 Labour had lost its third successive general election. When the NEC refused to provide funds for a major survey, Abrams raised some private money and, helped by the magazine *Socialist Commentary*, conducted a survey. It showed that the party's traditional "cloth cap" image was a diminishing asset in a more upwardly mobile society. Dr Abrams was henceforth firmly associated with revisionism in the Labour party and bitterly attacked by the left wing which regarded the use of survey research as an invitation for the party to abandon its principles. The Labour party then made a breakthrough in its use of market

research. Between 1962 and 1964 Abrams joined a team of volunteers from the communications industry to plan Labour's campaign. His work was strongly supported by Gaitskell and then Harold Wilson.

In spite of the authority which he had before 1964, Abrams was always modest about his role and discreet. Thereafter his interest tailed off. The party publicists were looking for somebody more dynamic and less committed to the party.

Dennis Kavanagh

Eric Midwinter adds: Especially through his valuable work with Age Concern England, Abrams made a major contribution to research into old age during the last decades of his own long and busy life. *Beyond Three Score and Ten* (1978), based on a survey of 1,646 elderly people, was one of the first attempts to measure the needs and condition of modern old age.

Abrams pointed to some of the positive aspects of old age, demonstrating how many older people get a good deal out of life. Such research helped shift the thinking toward a *third age* view, with old age seen as an opportunity as well as a problem. A pleasing example of his insistence that old age was *ordinary* and not automatically a time of despair and social casualty, was his revealing study of older people as shoppers. While many had guessed that inappropriate product sizes — a carton of eggs, family-sized soap powder — were the difficulty, Abrams showed that larger and more remotely located shopping facilities and a lack of lavatories caused most anxiety. Abrams showed older age was a significant field for social analysis. In a kind of personal generation game, his son Philip held a chair in social science, and his grandson Dominic one in psychology.