

MARK ABRAMS

Mark Abrams, pioneer of market research in Britain, died on September 25 aged 88. He was born on April 27, 1906.

TOGETHER with Henry Durant, Harry Henry and others who were graduates of the London School of Economics, Mark Abrams helped to establish in the late 1930s the profession that is today the backbone of the marketing and advertising industries. In 1946 he was one of the core that founded the Market Research Society, which still today sets the standards and guides the processes of market research in Britain.

Mark Alexander Abrams was educated in London, first at Latymer School, Edmonton, and then at the LSE. After a period as a research fellow at the Brookings Institute in Washington (a link with survey researchers in the United States which continued throughout his life and strongly influenced his work) he returned to take up a job in the research department of the London Press Exchange. Always a researcher and never a pollster, he led the way in establishing the value of social surveys in modern society, mainly through his market and opinion research company, Research Services, which he founded in 1946, but also through the Market Research Society.

His principled and careful approach to survey design and its execution had far-reaching consequences. The findings, particularly of his opinion surveys, were well publicised and he both wrote and spoke widely about their conduct and uses. For example, he

played an influential part in the Labour Party's change of direction in the early 1960s, when a survey carried out by him (and subsequently published by Penguin as *Must Labour Lose?*) provided striking evidence of the extent to which the party had lost touch with changes in the electorate.

Looking like a dishevelled professor, Abrams did not find his welcome assured at first in the upper reaches of the party. Aneurin Bevan was reputed to



have accused him of "wanting to take the poetry out of politics" and, confronted with his opinion surveys, attempted to argue that they were superfluous since "it was the role of the politician to know instinctively what the electorate needs and wants". Hugh Gaitskill, on the other hand, recognised the value of having Abrams on his side in his battle to bring the Labour Party up to date. Once he became leader, Harold Wilson — with his statistical back-

ground — was captivated by Abrams's commercially objective and wise analysis of the political market.

Abrams continued to carry out surveys on behalf of the Labour Party and helped to establish their use as a normal and respectable part of the political process. After nearly a quarter of a century, first as managing director and then as chairman of Research Services, he took up another influential post as director of the (then) Social Science Research Council's survey unit, advancing the use of up-to-date survey techniques within the social science community.

What made him such a successful survey researcher was not merely his professional approach but, perhaps more important, that he was motivated by a firm belief that the views of ordinary members of society could be gauged and should be taken into account by decision-makers. He championed many causes, believing, like Mayhew in the 19th century, that only by understanding more about the disadvantaged could their condition be ameliorated.

From long before his own old age he gave his advice and time to causes such as the National Old People's Welfare Council. Later on in his career he helped to set up the Age Concern research unit, which he headed for nearly a decade so that campaigns should be guided by firmly grounded evidence about the lives and circumstances of older people.

He was twice married and is survived by his second wife, Jean, their daughter and a daughter from his first marriage, a son from that same marriage having predeceased him.