

INDEPENDENCE FOR STATISTICS

Professor Sir Denis Pereira Gray OBE FMedSci
Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter

Personal response to the Treasury's consultation document

Importance

National statistics are a uniquely precious resource. They are the building blocks for information and they inform Government, academics, and society generally about the world in which we all live. They underpin the whole process of democracy.

Concerns

There are currently great concerns, arising particularly from the results of surveys organized by the Statistics Commission. A large majority of the population now say they mistrust national statistics. This is a tragedy and seriously undermines democracy and all governments of all parties. In particular, it undermines two groups of people: politicians and civil servants and it is much against the wider public interest that these groups should be so damaged.

At the Conference run by the Statistics Commission, the Royal Statistical Society, and the *Financial Times*, on 17 May 2006, I gave a keynote lecture and stated that in my personal opinion, trust by the public is progressively reducing. Something needs to be done and soon.

The principal reason for the loss of Trust is the feeling that Government is interfering with the figures—a form of spin.

The recent proposal by the Treasury to act to secure greater independence for national statistics is therefore to be strongly welcomed.

Definition

The first issue is definition. What is and is not a national statistic?

I suggest starting with a definition that a national statistic is a statistic issued under the direct authority of the National Statistician.

Devolution

A new and disappointing development is that data are now, since the Devolution Acts, being classified and kept differently in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

This is a tragedy and will prevent a numerous important natural experiments on different governmental policies being objectively compared.

It is urgent that steps be taken to ensure comparable data recording in these four countries.

Advance release to Government Departments

Currently information about statistical reports is released in advance to Government departments. This does not happen in some other western countries. The result is that the press offices of the Departments of State often put out a press release which naturally takes the Department's interest, but which is often the first news that the public hears. The official statement by the National Statistician may come later and the message may be diluted or even confused. Short term gain is being bought at the expense of long term loss.

The objective is to ensure that the first news to reach the public comes from a truly independent National Statistician.

National statistics should not be released to anyone else before publication.

A truly independent governing body

If the Statistics Commission is to be replaced, as seems possible, then any successor body must be even more independent and in particular must be seen to be independent from ministers.

Organizational relationships

At present the Office of National Statistics (ONS) relates to the Treasury.

In future ONS should relate direct to Parliament and report to Parliament.

A new Parliamentary Committee should be established including representatives from all the major political parties and both Houses of Parliament.

The National Statistician should present an Annual Report on ONS to Parliament in front of the press.

Controversial issues

It is inevitable that from time to time controversial issues will occur.

A protocol for dealing with them needs to be established.

A new mechanism is needed to identify topics generating serious controversy. This should be part of the new role for the new independent body replacing the Statistics Commission. In addition, certain highly prestigious organizations of national standing, such as the Royal Statistical Society and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, could be empowered to identify say one issue per year, each.

Once a topic is so identified the National Statistician should be charged and funded to report on it setting out, in clear English, the reasons ONS is taking whatever view it is currently adopting. This statement should be published.

This should do much to protect politicians and civil servants who are otherwise exposed to the assumption that they are manipulating the issue behind the scenes, even if they are not.

Departmental statistics

All statistics emanating from any Department of State should be signed by a named statistician.

Two-tier system of statistics

Currently, there is a two-tier system of national statistics in which the statistical processes in ONS are more rigorous than in some Government Departments, where statistical advice may come from relatively junior staff and may be over-ruled.

The long-term aim should be to ensure the highest standards for statistical work in all Departments of State.

In the short term, given the widespread use of Departmental figures to monitor target fulfilment, it is unlikely that all ministers will readily give up control.

Better therefore, in the first stage, to secure the highest possible standards for ONS and deal with the Departmental statistics later ie maintain for now the two-tier system.

In time, the standards of Departmental statistics will rise progressively, especially if they all have to be signed by a qualified statistician.

Pressure from the press will gradually lead to departments, one by one, asking the ONS to take over their statistical releases, if only to avoid some of the bad publicity some Departments of State have recently received.

PROPOSAL BY THE TREASURY

HM Treasury it to be warmly congratulated on identifying one of the most serious problems in British public life and making an important proposal for strengthening the independence of National Statistics. That principle has to be right and should be strongly supported.

This is a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to safeguard the independence of national statistics and place the UK at the top of the world rankings for such independence. This would be likely to have spinoffs internationally in term of the reputation of the UK and also for inward investment.

This evidence is based on a keynote address delivered at the conference held by the Statistical Commission on 17 May 2006.

Writing. 999 words
Independence for Statistics
June 2006.