

## Comments on HMT Consultative Document on ONS Independence

*Note:* in view of the fact that I have done some work for ONS, I thought it appropriate to put in a brief background note on this. Please note though that my views are primarily as a user of official statistics, and my comments are as an individual and not on behalf of any organisation.

### Background note

I am a former civil servant who used to work for the Central Office of Information (COI), Reference Division, between 1972 and 1994 helping in the compilation of material for distribution overseas via British Embassies and High Commissions. This included writing chapters for the official publication *Britain: An Official Handbook* and articles for the former FCO publication *Survey of Current Affairs*, together with writing booklets on various economic topics. Part of my work involved selecting statistics for inclusion in these publications, including the preparation of suitable tables, so I became familiar with using some of the key official statistical publications, such as *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, *Monthly Digest of Statistics* and *Social Trends*, together with some of the departmental publications on topics that I would cover, such as *Transport Statistics GB*.

More recently, I have been doing freelance writing and editing, including some work on the successor publication to the Britain Handbook – the *UK Yearbook*. Responsibility for this publication was transferred from COI to ONS in the late 1990s, although the publication is currently suspended. I have also done some other work for ONS, such as proof reading.

### Comments

1. Looking at the consultative document, there is a lot with which I would agree. I certainly concur with the view that it is important that official statistics are of ‘the highest professional quality and integrity’ (Consultation Document para 1.4) and that they should be ‘free from political interference’ (para 1.9). It is unfortunate that there have been a few occurrences in recent years where the quality and integrity of statistics has been queried, such as over the classification of Network Rail, and that these have undermined overall confidence in official statistics. So I welcome any steps to prevent such problems arising again.
2. Turning to the Government’s proposals, the key principles set out in para 4.3 all seem very reasonable, as indeed do the proposals for independence for ONS, including establishing it as a non-ministerial department (paras 4.5 and 4.6). And again I would support the statutory high-level objectives set out in para 4.17.
3. But I do wonder whether the proposals go far enough. Although ONS is responsible for quite a range of important statistics, many other key statistics are produced by other government departments. I would have thought that there is definitely a case for having these other statistics – especially those produced by the big government departments (such as Home Office, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Transport, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Trade and Industry, and HM Revenue & Customs) and by the territorial departments (National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) – produced in a similar way to those compiled by ONS. One option might be to have them produced at arm’s length from their parent department or, perhaps more radically, the departmental statisticians could be grouped under ONS. Doing this

would, I believe, strengthen the independence of official statistics and reduce the possibilities of political interference.

4. I will use just one example to support this argument. The government department that is probably most under public scrutiny at present is the Home Office, and there has been a lot of comment recently about statistics on foreign prisoners etc. But it is another aspect of Home Office statistics on which I wish to comment. This concerns statistics on crime. For England and Wales there are two main sources of statistics: recording of crimes by the police; and the British Crime Survey. I understand that the latter is considered to give a more complete picture as it includes offences that are not reported to the police. But, by their differing nature, these can produce a different picture of what is happening on crime. I have followed with interest the media coverage of the statistics when they have been published. I feel sorry for the statisticians concerned as it is very difficult to present these figures without having the charge of political interference levelled at them. And in the current climate regarding the Home Office, I can't see how this won't arise again. If though the crime statistics were produced at arm's length from the Home Office, then I feel sure that the statistics would command greater confidence among users of the figures and among the general public.
5. There is just one other comment that I would like to make. This is on the proposal to abolish the Statistics Commission (para 4.48). I think that the Commission has made a reasonably effective contribution to the debate concerning official statistics, so I was somewhat surprised to see this proposal. The proposed changes regarding independence are quite significant and I feel that there is a case for the Commission continuing at least until the new system has been in operation for a reasonable length of time so that it can monitor this. After a suitable time has elapsed, then perhaps the Commission should be reviewed to see whether it is still needed.

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13 June 2006