



Queen Mary
University of London

Queen Mary, University of London
Mile End Road, London E1 4NS
Telephone 020 7882 5001
Facsimile 020 8981 2848

From the Principal
Professor Adrian Smith FRS
Email principal@qmul.ac.uk

Statistical Reform Team
Room3/07
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON SW1A 2HQ

12 June, 2006

Dear Sir

INDEPENDENCE FOR STATISTICS: A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

This is a personal response to the consultation document *Independence for Statistics*. I am a past President of the Royal Statistical Society who had considerable involvement in the debate that led to the formation of the Statistics Commission and was on the panel that appointed the original Chair and members of the Commission. I very much welcome this consultation. It is clear that much more needs to be done if we are to increase public confidence in official statistics. I would wish to emphasise the following points.

National Statistician. The proposed Chief Statistician role (and title!) does not properly reflect the importance of the National Statistician role that is required for national and international credibility. It is vital that the following key elements of the role are retained and reinforced: Chief Statistical Adviser to the government; Statistical Director of the Office for National Statistics (which should be separated from a Chief Operating Officer role); Head of Profession for all statisticians across government; Overseer of the Code of Practice. In the proposed new Board framework, the National Statistician must also act as statistical adviser to the Board

The Code. In my view, the consultation document does not sufficiently acknowledge the inadequacies of the current Code and the failure of many departments to fully comply with it. An absolutely vital element of the new arrangements has to be a revised statutory Code of Practice that applies across all government departments.

The Board. The document refers to arrangements to make the ONS accountable to a new independent board. However, it is vital that the Board also relates to the statistical work in all areas of government, with empowerment of the National Statistician and the Board to scrutinise aspects of the statistical work of all government departments. In particular, the Board must have a scrutiny function for ONS itself. The proposed composition of the Board confounds scrutiny and management functions and must be re-thought. To ensure accountability of the proposed Board to parliament, I would recommend that the Board report to the Public Accounts Committee (or a specific sub-committee established by the PAC). The Board itself should be made up largely of non-executives, appointed

Patron: Her Majesty The Queen

Incorporated by Royal Charter as
Queen Mary & Westfield College,
University of London

independently of ministers by a process to be agreed by the PAC and following standard Nolan procedures. The Board should review and advise parliament, through the PAC, on annual plans covering all the statistical activities of government. The Board will require the support of staff to carry out its audit and compliance role.

National Statistics. The Board must have a potential scrutiny and audit role for all statistical work in government departments and agencies. The consultation document would seem to limit this role to statistical series that have been designated as 'National Statistics' by Ministers. This simply will not do if we are serious about democratic audit and in restoring public trust and confidence. I agree that Ministers should, of course, have the right to propose series for designation as National Statistics. However, the Board should have the power to decide whether any such proposed series are of appropriate quality and fitness for purpose to be so designated (ie meet the standards of the Code). In addition, the Board should have the duty to bring to the attention of parliament, through the PAC, any important "gaps" that they perceive in series put forward by Ministers for designation as National Statistics. Ministers should have no role in declaring whether any particular statistical output is Code compliant.

ONS Governance. I agree with the proposal that ONS be established as a non-ministerial department. However, it is important that there be absolute clarity in the separation from ministerial or Treasury authority and influence. I would recommend therefore that ONS be a Cabinet Office department.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AFM Smith', written in a cursive style.

Professor AFM Smith, FRS