

COMMENTS ON "INDEPENDENCE FOR STATISTICS"  
- A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

1. I offer these comments as a private individual but against the background of 30 years' experience in the Government Statistical Service, followed by later work as a consultant to Eurostat and as a member of the 2001 Census workforce.
2. In general, I welcome the Consultation Document ("the Document") as a once in a lifetime opportunity to achieve a measure of independence for official statistics which should be taken speedily and wholeheartedly. I am, however, concerned that the Document is biased towards anchoring departmental statistics to policymaking, that it misunderstands the traditional significance of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and that it leaves future Censuses without secure funding. Suggestions are made below for dealing with each of these concerns.

DEPARTMENTALISM AND "NATIONAL STATISTICS"

3. In 1971, the Bolton Report on Small Businesses [1] envisaged "that twenty years from now, businesses will be required to make a carefully articulated annual cycle of returns which will suffice for purposes of tax assessment, for census and other statistical purposes, for the requirements of the Companies Acts and indeed for most purposes of government. All departments would have access to the relevant and necessary data about all businesses, so that the need for many departmental surveys would disappear and those remaining could be simplified... We therefore recommend that the Government should quickly establish within a central department a powerful and expert secretariat, whose function would be to plan, in collaboration with the Central Statistical Office (CSO) an integrated system of administrative and statistical returns, based on a databank, to form the basis for a single and comprehensive system of business records."
4. Plans were indeed made to locate labour statistics and construction statistics with the production statistics then being dispersed to Newport in the new Business Statistics Office. Differences between the Departments concerned then intervened. In the event, the co-location of labour statistics did not take place for another twenty years. As for construction statistics, a wholly artificial departmental division of responsibilities respectively for long-term statistics and for short-term statistics continues, I believe, to this day. In the meantime, the interests of departmental policymakers have doubtless been well served but those of form-fillers in businesses and of other users such as national accountants have probably not been.
5. The lesson from this history seems to be that careful thought is needed about how to avoid the recurrence of similar situations in future with other sorts of statistics or at least to weigh equally carefully the relative merits and demerits of accepting the situations. Unfortunately, the Document's use of the concept of "National

Statistics” is unlikely to help in this. What began, I recall, as a modest proposal for a few key statistics to help citizens judge national performance (by analogy with key ratios used by company accounts analysts) was surely not intended by its originators to become institutionalised. Given the fixity of departmentalism in the bureaucratic culture, there must be the risk that “National Statistics” are what the new Non-Ministerial Department (NMD) ends up doing, leaving everything not so described as fair game for the other departments.

6. It is therefore my view that any forthcoming legislation should avoid mention of “National Statistics”. What the Head of the NMD should have is the power to provide citizens with trustworthy statistics. It may not be easy to define these statistics legally but perhaps a start could be made with those which meet internationally recognised norms.

#### THE GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL SERVICE

7. The Document sees the GSS as a conduit for “ensuring the availability of skilled professional statisticians across government” but there was a time when it was much more than this. As described by Boreham in 1984 [2], the GSS was an integral part of the mechanism by which the old CSO at the centre co-ordinated the entire official statistical system, viz:- “The purpose of the co-ordination is...to make sure that the cabinet need never argue about statistics. Common definitions, classifications and methods are the main media for the co-ordination; central staff management, a felt membership of a professional group, formal and informal consultations between people in different departments are the procedures to achieve it.” The co-ordination was by no means perfect and sometimes could do no more than acknowledge serious departmental disagreements, as mentioned above. But it was probably the only way of ensuring that the decentralized system did not fall apart completely.
8. While Boreham’s “main media” have subsequently been reinforced by e.g. the Quality revolution and EU statistical legislation, the situation with his “procedures” seems less fortunate. The centrally-managed Statistician Group has gone and personal mobility between different departments is complicated by sometimes considerable disparities in pay and conditions of service. The Document’s proposal that the new department should still be within government rather than in, say, Parliament evidently does not preclude the desired mobility but other measures seem to be necessary to make it actually happen.
9. Als [3] has described how France in the 1990s operated a decentralized statistical system while creating the appearance of a centralized one and achieving some of the benefits of both. According to Als, most professional staff in departmental statistical services (SSM) were actually seconded from INSEE, the national statistical institute, which retained responsibilities for their funding, professional training and career progression. Another possibility would be to operate something akin to Eurostat’s Detached National Official scheme which enables

people from national statistical institutes to work at the EU level for standard daily allowances.

#### THE CENSUS

10. The separation of Registration from Census activities is sensible but the placement of the Census as something in but not of the NMD blows an uncertain trumpet. While it is true that the contents and purposes of particular Censuses vary from decade to decade and that Census activities stand somewhat apart from other statistical ones, these are not sufficient reasons for excluding them from NMD special funding arrangements. There is surely a case for promoting the Census as the national, unifying and permanent centrepiece of the NMD's work.

#### TITLES

11. Finally, I would like to suggest that the NMD should be called the Central Statistical Office and its Head the Director General.

John Knight  
Bristol, UK  
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#### References

[1] Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Small Firms ("the Bolton Report") Cmnd 4811, HMSO, November 1971

[2] Boreham, Sir John: Official Statistics, Present Position and Potential Developments: Some Personal Views, JRSS Series A, Vol.147, Pt2, 1984

[3] Als, Georges: Organisation of Statistics in the Member Countries of the European Community, Eurostat, Luxembourg, December 1992