



Statistical Reform Team
Room 3/07
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Parade
London, SW1A 2HQ

12 June 2006

INDEPENDENCE FOR STATISTICS: A CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT

RESPONSE BY TOM GRIFFIN

My response is as an individual. I am Managing Director of an international consultancy company: www.TheStatisticsPartnership.com. I was formerly Director of Statistics at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva (1992-1999) and before that head of strategy in the UK Government Statistical Service.

Summary

I firmly believe that trust is the most important quality required in official statistics and yet it is the quality that is most lacking in the UK. Visible independence, if enacted in the right way, could help a great deal. My comments are limited to a small number of points that I believe to be crucial to the aims of the proposed reform. They may be grouped under two themes: *keeping statistics free of political control* and ensuring that *the key decisions are made by the National Statistician*.

Independence for statistics in the UK

I begin by applauding the government's aim to make official statistics more independent and its willingness to legislate for it. It is an important step in the right direction. But some of the most important proposals need to be revised.

Trust and quality

The main objective of the proposed reform appears to be to promote trust in UK official statistics. I believe this to be paramount. The relevance and other qualities of UK statistics are not lacking compared to other countries: from my own experience, I know that UK statistics and statisticians are highly regarded internationally. But *the perception in the UK* is that our statistics are not sufficiently trustworthy.

Legislation

The government's willingness to legislate is also laudable and necessary in order to establish visible independence and to avoid its erosion in the future. The legislation must of course address all major statistics of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) including those produced in policy departments (health, crime, education, migration etc.) and not just those of the ONS.

Non-ministerial department (NMD) and the Treasury connection

If the ONS is to be independent, and to appear so, then the proposal to make it a non-ministerial department is also an important step in the right direction. However, the consultative document assumes that statistics will be *spoken for in Parliament by a Treasury Minister*, which puts an unnecessary limit on the break with the present unsatisfactory arrangements. The brief history given in the consultative document does not mention the important move of the CSO (as it was then) to the Treasury in the 1980s from the Cabinet Office where it had been since its creation. I recall very well that the reason for transferring statistics from the Cabinet Office to the Treasury was to bring them under greater political control. To sever the link with the Treasury now, and to have *the Cabinet Office speak for statistics in Parliament*, would be a very visible and important move towards independence. Given the breadth of government statistics (health, welfare, education, migration, crime and so on) the *Cabinet Office is the only department that can legitimately speak for them*.

By way of background I should mention that in countries around the world the statistical offices are connected variously to the office of the President or the Prime Minister or another department of government including the finance ministry.

An executive Board versus a non-executive Commission

The creation of an executive Board, intended to replace the advisory Commission and to take key decisions on official statistics, is the most controversial and potentially damaging proposal in the consultative document.

Statistical Commissions work well elsewhere. The proposal is perhaps a response to the lack of impact of the Statistics Commission in the UK? But Commissions work well in statistical systems around the world. Many UK statisticians may be familiar with the successful Irish experience for example. Therefore the UK Commission needs to be reformed so that it operates in a similar way to those in comparable countries including Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and France as well as many others.

The UK government statistical service is not so 'different'. It is sometimes argued that the UK is exceptional because its statistics are 'decentralised'. But no statistical system in the world is completely centralised. They are all hybrid in varying degrees. However, most of the more sensitive statistics are outside the ONS, and must be encompassed by the proposed legislation.

Committees cannot run enterprises – they can scrutinise and support. According to the consultative document, the new Board would take over many of the responsibilities and powers of the National Statistician. But evidence suggests that committees cannot run enterprises, private or public; it is not obvious why the ONS/GSS should be an exception. *Parliament and the public need to know that the responsibility for UK statistics rests with the independent professional National Statistician.* They also need to know that the functions of the National Statistician are scrutinised - and supported where necessary, especially with respect to the independence of the office, by an independent body that is *not itself responsible for decisions regarding official statistics.* The distinctive and discrete roles of the board and the National Statistician need to be clearly defined in legislation.

The new board should oversee – not duplicate. A shortcoming of the UK Statistics Commission has been that it has tried to 'second-guess' the National Statistician. The replacement body should not present papers that attempt to tell the ONS, and the wider Government Statistical Service (GSS), how to do its job or how to improve its standards. Quality management is for the professionals in the institution itself to do. The new commission or board should rather ensure that the ONS/GSS provides evidence that it is being done properly.

Advance notice of new statistics for Ministers

To quote the Phillis report of January 2004 "An Independent Review of Government Communications" which is also quoted in a different context in the consultative document: "R.9.4. *We see no need for the 40 hours of notice of National Statistics that Ministers receive*". Some very important statistics are delayed until after Ministers have had a day or two to consider them. Even though there is no evidence of Ministers attempting to use the time to have the numbers changed or suppressed in the UK (which happens in less scrupulous administrations elsewhere in the world) it nevertheless creates suspicion and there have been embarrassing leaks. Given that public trust in official statistics is such an important aim, and advance notice to Ministers serves so little purpose, it should stop as soon as possible.

The release of statistics by Ministers

Closely related to the advance notice of statistics to Ministers is the release of statistics by Ministers in departments – often with whatever gloss or ‘spin’ the politicians wish to put on them. This also undermines public trust in the numbers. Government departments are inevitably the source of many statistics and especially those that derive from the administration of health, education, justice and so on. But it does not follow that departmental Ministers should be responsible for their release. *Political comment needs to be separated.* The RSS evidence goes into some detail on how the release of statistics could be independent of Ministers. It would make an important contribution to the promotion of public trust.

Ministers deciding which statistics are ‘national’

At the moment, Ministers effectively decide which statistics are ‘national statistics’ and should therefore come under the purview of the National Statistician. This arrangement also undermines trust in government statistics and should change. The National Statistician should make such decisions after consultation with the departments and others, including the advisory body. This is very important because more statistical work is done outside the ONS than within it and some of the most sensitive statistics are outside the ONS.

Other issues including the effects of regional devolution and funding

There are many other issues that need attention including for example regional harmonisation of statistics in the UK. Most are effectively addressed in the RSS evidence, with which I agree (I am a Fellow of the Society and have commented on the RSS evidence in draft). I have also seen the comprehensive contribution of William McLennan, former Director of the CSO and Head of the Government Statistical service, and I completely agree with his analysis and his conclusions.

Conclusion

The issues that I address here, which are also addressed in the RSS and McLennan contributions, are those that are most relevant to the overwhelming need to restore trust in official statistics in the United Kingdom.

I wish the government well in its drive to give UK statistics the quality they most lack, which is also the most important quality of all: public trust.