

Response by Civitas to the consultation on ‘Independence for statistics’

Several of the aims of the consultation document are worthwhile steps forward, but some specific measures need to be strengthened.

The Role of Parliament

The consultation document leaves it open to Parliament to decide how best to ensure accountability. We recommend that the proposed ONS Board should report to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) or a sub-committee of the PAC, which should operate according to the same conventions as the parent committee.

The consultation document envisages making a funding allocation for the ONS outside the normal spending review process. We recommend that funds should be allocated by a direct Parliamentary vote just as they are for the National Audit Office.

The Board

We support the proposal to make the ONS a non-ministerial department run by an independent board. The overwhelming majority of the board should be non-executives representing the interests of the public. It should have a non-executive chairman. The proposed Chief Statistician should be the chief executive.

The consultation document proposes that ministers appoint members of the Board, including the Chairman and Chief Statistician. We recommend that ministers should not make appointments, which should rather be made according to guidelines approved by the Public Accounts Committee on behalf of Parliament according to Nolan principles for public appointments. Under Nolan guidelines ministers have ultimate responsibility, but since the ONS will be a non-ministerial department, the Public Accounts Committee should have the final say.

Who Employs Statisticians?

Many departments gather information that is used to appraise their own performance. To remove the temptation to manipulate the figures, responsibility should be transferred to the ONS. The ONS Board should decide, after consultation with ministers and the PAC, which statistics are of sufficient national importance to be declared National Statistics, which would mean removing the preparation and publication of information from departmental control. All leading crime series, for example, should be controlled by the ONS and not by the Home Office. Similarly, waiting list and other information about the

performance of the NHS should be under the control of the ONS, not the Department of Health.

The consultation document envisages that statisticians working on National Statistics will remain in government departments. This would lead to a confused chain of command and a better method of ensuring that statisticians remain independent would be for all who work on National Statistics to be employees of the proposed Chief Statistician. To ensure that they retain close contact with the raw material on which they work, statisticians would be located in departments on secondment. This would allow them to be in close contact with departmental colleagues but remain accountable to the Chief Statistician.

Advance Notice

The consultation document envisages giving ministers advance notice of the release of statistics, but this puts them at an advantage compared to Parliament as a whole and the wider community. To create equality at the time of release, National Statistics should be simultaneously released under embargo up to 12 hours in advance to Ministers, shadow ministers, key independent commentators (to be determined by the PAC) and the press.

The Raw Material of Democracy

These measures were inspired by the proposal put forward by Jack Straw, when in opposition in 1995. He said that ‘how people perceive changes in the economy, the crime rate, the health service, the school system, will make all the difference’ to how they vote. Therein, he said, ‘lies the temptation to politicians in power to manipulate the flow of information to the public to the best effect’. That temptation, he continued, ‘is there, at all times, and in all systems.’ The consultation document is based on an awareness of this danger but does not, as it stands, guard against it. As Jack Straw recognised in 1995, the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office have established a reputation for genuine independence when auditing government accounts. The information on which we appraise government performance in health, education and crime control is akin to the information on which we appraise its financial propriety. For this reason, the Public Accounts Committee model should be adopted for control of the reformed ONS.

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