

Cuts in the Government Statistical Service

Two years have now passed since a 25 per cent cut in expenditure on the Government Statistical Service was announced in a White Paper on the subject (Cmd 8236). This was part of a review of the whole Civil Service done by Sir Derek Rayner, an executive from Marks and Spencer, which lent him to the Prime Minister to advise her on 'efficiency'. His task completed, Rayner has now been returned to his patron saint and given a life peerage.

At the time the White Paper was published, it was not clear exactly what effect the cuts were going to have. Although it was claimed by Sir John Boreham, the head of the Government Statistical Service, that the aim of the review was to make it more efficient, the White Paper was mainly devoted to itemising the numbers of staff to be disposed of and the money to be saved as a result. The White Paper was enthusiastically supported by Boreham, to whom it gave additional powers, but was publicly attacked by his predecessor, Sir Claus Moser.

The White Paper rested on departmental reviews which were also published at the time. These had been written by people within each department who had been asked to recommend cuts and report to Rayner over the heads of both their civil service bosses and their departmental ministers. The reports made it clear that they were only suggesting cuts and that these were not necessarily the ones which would be implemented.

Two years later, the pattern of cuts is becoming more apparent, though it is still far from clear. We are outlining some here and hope to gather fuller information by following up the questionnaire sent to people on our own mailing list and also to research departments of public sector unions and to other relevant bodies.

The cuts in the Government Statistical Service were singled out as an example of 'better value for money' in the Government's White Paper on the cuts published in September 1982 (Cmd 8616). As the Council of Civil Service Unions pointed out in its reply, the White Paper's title 'Efficiency and effectiveness' was somewhat inappropriate as, as far as statistical services were concerned at least, this is not what it was about. It did state that 690 posts had already been cut, reducing spending by £10 million, and it anticipated that abolishing a further 840 posts would save a further £7 million.

Doing this, it claimed, 'has already reduced by 10% the burden of enquiries on industry and other organisations'. (Query - how do you measure 'burden'?). The Council of Civil Service Unions pointed out in reply that the CBI is less than happy with the decline in the quality of statistics and that it has protested about the non-availability of floor space statistics. We have also been told that commercial concerns have complained about cuts in the International Passenger Survey.

Cuts have taken a variety of forms. Sometimes far fewer details are now collected as is the case with statistics about home helps. Sometimes whole series are suspended as happened with statistics about education provided for handicapped children. There have been cuts in sample size, as happened in the General Household Survey. Other regular surveys are done less often. For example the annual census of employment has been made triennial.

Other cuts have affected the extent to which data are analysed, For example, a number of the planned analyses of the 1981 Census have been dropped, including the production of data about the populations of areas defined by the kilometre squares of the National Grid. This means that people who intended to use the analyses which have been cut have to pay a high price for them to be done specially. The costs of these and other ad-hoc analyses done for outsiders, for example analyses of the National

Travel Survey done for the Transport and Road Research Laboratory, are high as they are based on the charging scales used by commercial computer bureaux. In the past when the people for whom analyses were done worked for semi-official or government funded bodies, charges were waived, but this now happens rather less often.

One of departments singled out for cuts was OPCS Social Survey Division. Rayner proposed that instead of being funded centrally as at present, departments who wanted it to do a survey should get it to tender against the private sector. The private sector already does surveys for government departments. Many of these are of lower quality than those done by Social Survey Division, and it is unusual for the results of surveys done in the private sector to be published in a publicly available report, as is usually the case with Social Survey Division. This issue of putting Social Survey Division on a 'repayment basis' was the subject of a report commissioned from J M Merchant of the Civil Service College, but no final decision has been made. Meanwhile the staff of Social Survey Division has decreased by 25% through natural wastage.

Rayner's White Paper took the view that as government statistics were collected by government for its own purposes, there was no obligation to publish them. Where data were published, the price should reflect the cost of producing them. In other words we should have to pay through the nose for them. This, in fact followed an earlier set of price rises which had followed reorganisation at HMSO which was intended to put it on a more commercial basis. Here are a few example of what happened:

Social Trends

Year of publication	Number of pages	Price, £
1979	269	7.90
1980	314	12.90
1981	254	16.50
1982	290	19.95
1983	210	19.95

Criminal Statistics (Home Office)

Data year	Year of publication	How published
1979	1980	One volume with all tables, 549 pages, price £16.80
1980	1981	Main volume, 209 pages, price £9.60 Rest of tables in 3 supplementary volumes, total price £60.00
1981	1982	Main volume, 220 pages, price £10.65 3 supplementary volumes, total price £30.00

OPCS Mortality Statistics, Series DH1

Data year	Year of publication	Number of pages	Price, £
1978	1980	102	7.10
1979	1982	59	6.80
1980	1983	18	4.10

The introduction to the 1980 volume included an explanation that some of the missing tables could be obtained from OPCS on request; while others had been transferred to a new volume to be published five-yearly. Some of the latter would probably be on microfiche. This may be convenient for people with their own viewers, but certainly isn't for those who don't have them.

Health and Personal Social Services Statistics for Wales

Year	Number of pages	Price,£
1978	126	4.00
1979	132	5.25
1980	138	20.00
1981	128	3.00

The last example illustrates a different trend in the publication of government statistics. After HMSO put up the price of the volume to £20.00 in 1981, the Welsh Office decided to publish it itself using a word processor. It appeared two years late, presumably due to teething problems, but at a fraction of the cost. This has happened in other departments. For example OPCS has published some Social Survey reports itself to keep the cost down, but as the publications do not appear on HMSO lists and individual departments have no means of distributing publications to bookshops, this makes it more difficult for people to find where they can be bought.

In the aftermath of the White Paper, there was considerable activity to oppose the cuts in the Government Statistical Service. The Royal Statistical Society held a meeting on the subject, receiving some attention in the press as a result. In the House of Commons, Alf Morris moved an adjournment debate about the cuts in OPCS Social Survey Division. The Equal Opportunities Commission prepared a report on the way the cuts were going to affect statistics about women. The Social Research Association has set up a cuts committee which has worked to develop a case to oppose more general cuts in social research.

Not surprisingly, the most sustained activity has come from the civil service unions, who have been opposing cuts in the Government Statistical Service along with all the other cuts in the civil service. Although they have been very conscious of the needs of users of statistics, their efforts have not, on the whole, been very visible outside the civil service. So it is not surprising that when in March 1982, the Council of Civil Service Unions tried to launch a campaign to 'Save our Statistics', it didn't seem to take off, though it received good press coverage at the time.

Why, you may ask, is anyone in Radical Statistics worried about cuts in government statistics, given the amount of effort we have devoted to criticising them and the political processes which made them less useful to us than they might have been, and ^{given that} the view has been expressed more than once that we should be better off without any of them! Fortunately Radical Statistics has not degenerated to that unfortunate state of affairs where we hold a unanimous party line, and others of us see some use in some government statistics, despite the reservations which make us stress the need to handle them with care. We mentioned the cuts in the sample size of the General Household Survey, for example. It includes a number of questions on smoking and the data from it are used in research which is trying to detect occupational hazards from substances which may cause adverse health effects which can also result from smoking. On another level, to cite another example, we find it no accident that statistics on home helps are being cut at the very time when the Home Help services are themselves being cut, by how much we shall now never know. In the conclusions to the second edition to 'The unofficial guide to official health service', we opposed the approach used in Rayner's cuts in that they were simply designed to save money. In contrast to this we suggested that we should want, on many occasions, to replace inadequate health statistics by better statistics.

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PS This is intended to be a preliminary attempt to write an article on this subject for, if we can manage it, a more widely read publication (megalomania?) Therefore we should like to receive both criticism and more information.

Statistics of the cuts - suggestions for a Radstats strategy

Following the steering group meeting on April 15, I was asked to put down some thoughts on how Radstats might approach a Statistics of the cuts project. This is clearly a far more ambitious thing to attempt than Cuts in Statistics (see elsewhere in this newsletter). But first, what sorts of issues come under the heading Statistics of the cuts?

Issues

A recent article in Guardian by Melanie Phillips sets out the difficulties in establishing when a cut is really a cut in the face of Tory propaganda. Norman Fowler seems to be claiming that he has INCREASED spending on the NHS. The trick takes the following moves:

- a. Make a cut in something. This saves money.
- b. Spend the saved money on something else. Call it "increased expenditure" through "efficiency savings".
- c. You may then take inflation into account. If inflation is less than was earlier predicted, then there is more money to spend. Call this "increased expenditure", also.
- d. You then do not take into account that extra resources are needed anyway just to maintain services at the same level in the face of demographic changes (more old people), and technological advances (sic).

Evidently, even monitoring the cuts in inputs to public services is pretty nightmarish. And we would probably want to on to look at cuts in service outputs, and even follow through to impact on users - i.e. health outcomes, quality of education, transport, etc.

I would imagine that such topics can only really be pursued via fairly detailed and specific case studies, which expose cuts as cuts and document their adverse effects.

Perhaps we should go a little further and ask what are the real objectives behind the cuts. On the face of it, they are to reduce public expenditure. Yet the entire sum involved in the NHS three card trick is only £50 -100 million; a mere quibble next to the odd £billion on hand for fighting the Falklands war. Another possible objective is simply to reduce the number of public employees, simply for ideological reasons. Or to get people confused enough to blame the public services - the NHS, British Rail, Education Authorities, etc - rather than the government itself, for the deteriorating quality of service. After all, it is these bodies who have to implement the cuts; and cynicism about their work builds support for privatisation and further shrinkage.

The Bulletin of the Civil Service Unions (Feb '83) documents a number of cuts that cannot possibly be justified financially on cost-effectiveness grounds. For example cuts in the VAT inspectorate leads to a disproportionate loss of VAT revenue; cuts in MAFF inspectors leads to increased government spending on inappropriate and trumped up grants to farmers. This article also describes the effects of cuts in DHSS local office staffing - increased delays and frustration, and increased public disillusion with the welfare state.

Possible strategy

Why go beavering away at this ourselves when dozens of academics and trade union research officers have been at it for months?

Stats of cuts...../cont.

A possible strategy and timetable might be:

1. Radstats members, if possible through their groups, could respond to the above by mid June, sending to the next steering group meeting any comments and specific ideas along the above (or other) lines.
2. The steering group could then gum this together with what it had learned of trade union interest in the issues through the Cuts in Stats exercise.
3. If it seems feasible, we might try and set up a one day conference inviting TU and academic researchers to contribute.

Needless to say, these suggestions are based on a discussion at the last steering group. Your comments, please.....