

UK NEWS

The vital question over statistics Call for wide overhaul of official statistics Shake-up in government statistics service urged

Treasury blocks reform on statistics

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Safeguard urged for objective statistics

By Christian Wolmar

GOVERNMENT statisticians are being exposed to "undue pressure" from politicians because they operate in an "inadequate" institutional framework, eminent statisticians have warned.

The working party of the Royal Statistical Society, set up last year in the wake of growing concern over the manipulation of statistical findings, has also recommended the passing of an Official Statistics Act to safeguard the autonomy of official statistics.

Its report, published yesterday, said that British statistics, once regarded as the best in the world, have caused "anxiety" in the international community "about the apparent lack of control which the Government Statistical Service has over its product".

It suggests the creation of a "central statistical service" rather than the present decentralised system, and of an advisory commission "to support the objectivity, timeliness and scope of UK official statistics".

However, the report's findings fall short of the outright condemnation of current government practice on the collection and use of statistics from some practitioners which led to the establishment of the working party. It says that while there is scope for pressure, there is little evidence to show such pressure has been used.

Monday evening Ministerial was capturing news pages, a long slide from the Social Security, income inequality in the world war. Its media attention is to be focused on commentators of government being "truth".

It pressed another seven month in the integrity of its statistics. It is needed to be in the way of others, and routines are out on television and the news-dominated with little all print.

real story in the report, since body of work to 1978. It that showed the bottom 10 per cent since one to power, comes rose by

government statisticians. The responses have elevated even the most well-meaning members of the working party, who say that their fundamental aim of the seven-11

Professor Peter Moore, a former principal of the London Business School, who chaired the working party, said: "The Government has not moved on its promise of an overhaul of the way public confidence in the output and coverage of official

Government was a major employer of Royal Statistical Society statisticians. The Government has not moved on its promise of an overhaul of the way public confidence in the output and coverage of official

in industry and the City are not the only ones who are affected. The City's own statistics are not as good as they should be. There is a strong case for a working party to investigate the accuracy and reliability of the data and to recommend ways of improving it. The working party has already done this and will continue to do so.

Mr George Hardley, former director general of the Bank of England, said: "The current system of official statistics is not working. It is time for a major overhaul. The Government should set up a working party to investigate the accuracy and reliability of the data and to recommend ways of improving it. The working party has already done this and will continue to do so."

The society made the following recommendations which it said would cost no more than was already being paid for statistics of "reduced quality".

A marked change towards centralisation and control. A Central Statistical Service; A new research unit; Creation of a National Statistical Commission to bridge the gap between statistics producers and users.

A new Statistics Act to safeguard the autonomy of UK official statistics. Official Statistics: Counting with Confidence. RSS, 25 St. James's Place, London W1N 2BH.

Counting up the concerns in official statistics

about the integrity of government statistics
The Royal Statistical Society to investigate.
Peter Davies reports on its findings

Disseminates statistics, the society set up the inquiry stemmed from a public meeting it hosted last December to air concerns about the integrity of official statistics.

That meeting had in turn arisen partly from a Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme — to which the *Journal* contributed — highlighting the same worries. The Royal Statistical Society's report calls for:

- a more centralised statistical service;
- a research unit to strengthen the methodology and evaluation of statistical services;
- a national statistical commission which would report to Parliament and protect statisticians from political interference;
- a Statistics Act to give weight to these recommendations.

While the inquiry absolves government statisticians of any lack of confidence misplaced, it was not misplaced. So the working party agree there was a problem with integrity? Well, no, only a problem with public confidence.

That absurd mealy-mouthed has enabled the Government to dismiss their proposals with ease. Why on earth should it be remotely troubled by the Society's criticisms when the Society cannot even bring itself to say what is actually going on? Why did the working party not report on what is happening rather than confine itself to listening to people that were mostly part of the system under

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Russell Ecob

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The **Radical Statistics Group** is a group of individuals based on the distribution of this newsletter. The small amount of central administrative work is done by a committee elected at the Annual General Meeting known as "The Troika". The editorship of this newsletter rotates - the next editor will be Mike Parker (this year expanded by co-option of two volunteers), whose address appears below. Apart from producing this newsletter, the work of RSG is done by its subgroups whose membership is open to all interested parties. Please consult the contact people below if you wish to get involved. Use the newsletter to advertise if you wish to start a new subgroup

The Troika

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This newsletter produced by **Russell Ecob**

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Deadline for copy: **November 30th 1990.**

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Surveys for Pressure Groups: Dave Drew, Sheffield City Poly, Sheffield, 0742-20911.
Trade Unionists: Peter Ramage, 71 Benhurst Court, Leigham Court Road, Streatham, London SW16.
Nicaragua Statistics Fund: Steve Simpson, 41 Park Crescent, Bradford, BD3 0JZ

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Radical Statistics, c/o London Hazards Centre,
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Health group report

Our activities since the AGM have mainly involved contact with other groups. In a separate report, Yoav Ben Shlomo describes a meeting with the NHS Federation. This arose out of a suggestion at the AGM that we should affiliate to them. It had been decided not to affiliate, but to make contact and exchange newsletters. Since the meeting, the Federation has approached us to see if we have amongst us any possible contributions to a series of papers they would like to publish about the NHS.

Since the beginning of the year, we had been trying to write a joint leaflet with the Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons about the need to spend less money on 'defence' and more on the NHS. We were having difficulties in finding out information about the effects of trying to convert from military to socially useful methods of production and whether, if this was done in the way we would advocate, there would be any immediate saving of money which we could press to have spent on the NHS. As we were wrestling with this, one M. Thatcher seized on the idea of the 'peace dividend', as a way of releasing military money to make tax cuts in the run up to the general election. We decided that the ground was moving so fast, that we should shelve the project for the moment. Since then, of course, the 'peace dividend' has gone out of fashion in the rush to pour military might into the Middle East, while no estimates are available as to how much income was generated in recent years through arms sales to Iraq.

On a more optimistic note, a newish magazine, 'Health matters', has asked us to contribute articles and news items. Ashok Bhat has offered to be our link with the magazine, and coordinate contributions which they may request or we might want to offer. He can be contacted on 081 878 8042 (home) or 081 672 9944 ext 55495 (work).

Progress on the new 'Unofficial guide to official health statistics' continues to be slow. Further contributors have emerged, but a strong push is needed to get us all going.

There has been an encouraging influx of new members, and a half day meeting is being organised so people can get together to meet each other and discuss what we want to do in the future and how we are going to organise it. Anyone who is not currently on the Health Group mailing list is invited to contact Alison Macfarlane, 40 Warwick Road, St Albans, Herts AL1 4DL for details. If you want to get on the mailing list, please enclose some empty stamped envelopes addressed to yourself.

Meanwhile, an open meeting has been organised at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on **Monday November 12**. George Davey Smith, Mel Bartley and David Blane will talk about inequalities in health ten years after the Black report.

Alison Macfarlane



PLATE 3 The consultation (2)

Nicaragua Statistics Fund: 1986 - 1990?

Radical Statistics internationalist links: Forward ever.

I think it is time that the Nicaragua Statistics Fund closed. I have had no reply from the main groups of statisticians in Leon and Managua for some 18 months now, and our representative Elsbeth Epema returned to the Netherlands last year. I am hoping that contacts will still be made - for example see RS45 for contact in Bluefields - but I've run out of ideas for continuous contact. This isn't particularly because of the election result in February against the Sandinistas. The economic siege had already disrupted many of the social projects that were generating statistical work; and perhaps there were changes in personnel that we don't know about from afar.

By way of a report of work done, here's a few figures on finance that show we have been able to offer some support internationally and therefore can do so again in the future (as in the further past - I remember the Slide rules for Mozambique appeal).

Raised from individual donations, events, and sale of reports:	£1,187.97
Total financial expenditure	£1,061.90
Materials bought for Nicaragua	£608.30
Transport of these and many donated books, journals and calculators	£219.21
Production of booklet 'Statistics in Nicaragua'	£192.40
Administration	£41.49

The materials that we sent included electrostencils for the new Mathematicians and Statisticians Association (ANEM) newsletter, although we've not seen the second or subsequent issues. The RSS agreed to send ANEM the JRSS. Thanks to all of those many readers who contributed in every way up to now.

Making links doesn't need a special group. If anyone is going to Nicaragua and has books, computer discs or calculators that can be taken out, then do so. Anyone making contacts with interesting work there, write it up for Radical Statistics.

If you want to carry on the Nicaragua Statistics Fund work intact, let me know before the end of the year. If you have a particular idea for use of the balance of £126.07 let me know too - I suggest it goes to a project involving numeracy or statistics in Central America or Southern Africa, or, failing that, to the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign's general fund for Nicaragua social projects.

Steve Simpson,
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Tel: 0274 635469 (home)

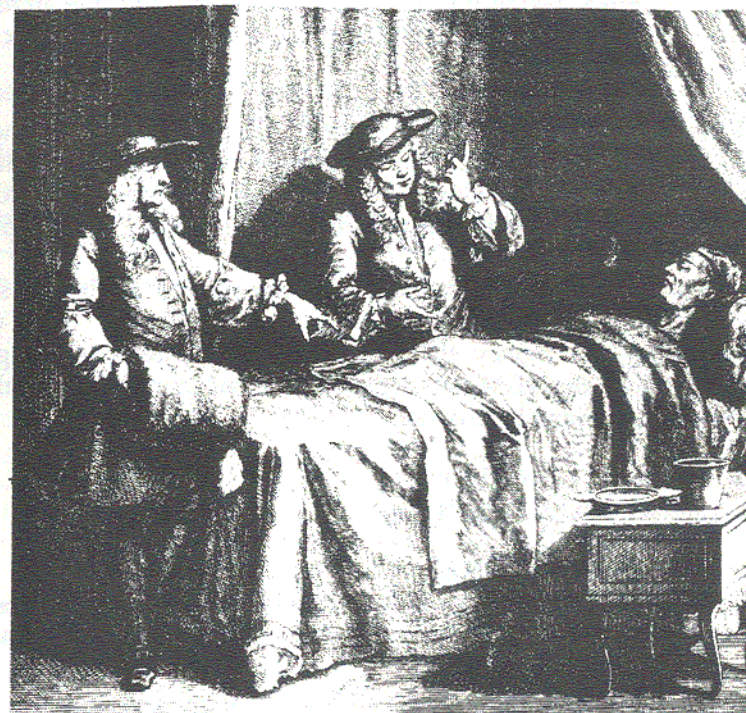


PLATE 2 The consultation (1)

Health group meeting with the NHS Federation

The Radical Statistics Health group meeting held on Monday 21st May at the LSHTM was concerned with the future of health care in the UK. The guest speakers were from the NHS Federation. Ann Carlton, the Secretary, and Prof J. Jarrett, a member of the Federation, were invited to speak about what they saw as the future of the NHS after the White Paper and the role of the NHS Federation in opposing the Government's plans.

Ann Carlton briefly discussed the history of the NHS Federation, which primarily arose out the conflict between consultants and managers at Guy's Hospital in relation to opting out, and its main functions. The Federation was an apolitical non-partisan organisation predominantly composed of doctors but with other paramedical professionals. It tries to raise local awareness and opposition to the opting out of hospitals. There appeared to be no interest in the effect of the White paper on general practice or primary health care. More generally, the Federation was attempting to draw up alternative proposals to the White Paper and saw a possible role in organising discussion forums as well as possibly publishing pamphlets/papers on the possible effects of the reforms on health care. It was in this capacity that a possible collaboration between the Federation and Radical Statistics could be fruitful.

Prof Jarrett discussed the implications of the changes in the NHS from a personalised view of their impact at Guy's hospital. Despite being one of the Government's flagships as part of the Resource Management Initiative, he painted a much more gloomy picture with non-compatible computer systems and information networks still struggling to provide costings. The Pharmacy would still not have computerised all their drug lists for another year. This is in a hospital that has had the advantage of both time and money to help it get these systems working, unlike the other 80 odd hospitals and units that have decided to opt out.

The general discussion that followed raised several issues, the most important of which was the current lack of objective criticism and alternatives to the Government's proposals, apart from the King's Fund and the Socialist Health Association. The lack of explicit policy from the Labour party was noted. This seemed to be an area of importance that would benefit from more research and discussion. Radical Statistics, with its own group of "experts", was another body that could and should be contributing to the discussion.

Yoav Ben Shlomo

Health group meeting with the NHS Federation (cont.)

More recently, Ann Carlton met Andrew Pepper and Alison Macfarlane to pass on information about the series of papers the Federation hopes to publish about the NHS. They are looking for papers about 3,000 words long and wondered whether any of us have material, languishing in an unpublished state, on any of the following topics:

- A guide to analysing business plans
- The resource management initiative
- How to make the NHS more user friendly
- Experience of GP contracts
- What should be done about waiting lists?
- What do people really want from the NHS?
- Accountability and democracy in the NHS
- Levels and nature of health care provision in other countries

If you have anything, or know someone who does, please contact Andrew Pepper, 41 Churchill Road, St Albans, Tel 0727 64200. Andrew has offered to continue to liaise with the Federation for Radical Statistics.

Initiatives on the NHS by other organisations

Other organisations, with whom the Health Group is in contact, are also concerned about the apparent lack of interest in democratic accountability and real alternatives to the government's changes. The Socialist Health Association had a conference on 'Democratic accountability in the NHS' on September 15. Health Rights is holding a joint conference with the TUC on the theme of 'Facing the future: the NHS in the 90s'. It is on October 30 and we have been invited to send a representative, so, with a bit of luck, there will be a report in the next newsletter.

Alison Macfarlane

A RadStats group on Local Government finance and the Poll Tax?

The idea of such a group has been mooted before. But everyone seems to be to busy. Individuals who have expressed interest include Conall Boyle, Ted Harding, Dave Gordon, David Hutton, Roseanne McNamee, Kathy Marsh, Charlie Owen, Janet Shapiro, David Shepherd, Steve Simpson, and Chris Yewlett. I volunteered to organize a computer conference using the Open University's CoSy system for anyone prepared to use this medium. But no one has volunteered to take overall responsibility for organizing a group.

The idea of using computer conferencing would be to facilitate discussion and reduce (not necessarily substitute for) face-to-face meetings. The Open University's CoSy conferencing system is accessible via JANET and through dialup nodes in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, etc., and could be used without charge. Five of the individuals listed above are already users of JANET:

David Gordon US-DG@UK.AC.BRISTOL.CM5
Charlie Owen OWEN@UK.AC.LON.EDUC.ISIS
Ray Thomas R_THOMAS@UK.AC.OPEN.ACS.VAX
Cathie Marsh CM10@UK.AC.CAM.PHX
Ted Harding EFH2@UK.AC.CAM.PHX

Roseanne McNamee and Janet Shapiro are not currently JANET users, but could get system names and access to terminals.

Ray Thomas

Proposal For A Book on Official Statistics

Demystifying Social Statistics appeared more than a decade ago. There is little doubt that it is still an important and useful text which retains its relevance today in terms of the general issues it raises and the critiques given from a radical perspective. Nevertheless, the last decade has seen a serious deterioration in official statistics and it is now clear that the CSO is under fire from all sides. But there is no substantial and accessible radical appraisal of the current situation. To fill this gap a book has been proposed which will confront the demise of official statistics post-Rayner and (hopefully) offer a serious assessment of what lies behind the 'ropey' statistics.

It is anticipated that this would require an initial paper on the roots, history and ideology of Rayner followed by a series of specific case studies. Those suggested include the poll tax and/or local government statistics, poverty and low incomes in Britain, the assessment of educational performance, health statistics and the NHS, race statistics, employment and/or unemployment statistics, statistics of community care, international comparisons, and economic and/or industrial statistics. A final paper could be used to map out the consequences and our response to it.

We are open to suggestions and anyone interested in editing or contributing should contact

Andrew Philpott-Morgan
20A Dunollie Road
London NW5 2XP
Tel: 071 485 9968

Troika news

An idea for a critique of official statistics has been mooted several times; perhaps a campaigning, propagandising pamphlet on the Thatcher years and Alternatives for official statistics for the people; or more of a reference volume making use of existing critiques by RadStats members and others of particular official series. Anyone wishing to collaborate on this one, contact Andrew Philpott-Morgan.

When the RSS report on official statistics 'Counting with Confidence' was due out, the Troika asked Alison MacFarlane to attend their press conference and co-ordinate a press release from Radstats in response - see elsewhere in this issue. We got a mention in a couple of newspapers' write-ups over the following week and I had a letter in the Guardian.

Christy Maginn volunteered after the February conference, and has been co-opted onto the Troika, taking on publication orders, holding the archives of past newsletters and reports. He is in the process of making an index of the main contents to these.

The Troika is meeting between each newsletter date; the next editor and each sub-group co-ordinator are invited - the next meeting is on Saturday November 17th at UCL, 66-72 Gower St., at 3.30pm. Any member is welcome too (but let us know beforehand because we won't be booking a room for 300).

Apologies if you were one of the few who were asked in July to send a subscription cheque when you already have a standing order. Don't worry, I'm not accepting any money that is not due. The records are getting straighter, but I hope the AGM will agree to move subscriptions to a calendar year basis to make things a little easier.

Radstats now has a new address !.... It is:
Radical Statistics/c/o London Hazards Centre,
3rd Floor, Headland House,
308 Grays Inn Road, London WC1 8DS.

Mail to this address will be forwarded weekly. Please mark envelope if for attention of a particular subgroup. For non-urgent messages you can phone on 071-837-5604.

There may be a leaflet for the magazine Health Matters sent with this issue. We have done this for a sympathetic Group in exchange for an advert for RadStats and the Health Group in their next issue. They hope the leaflets will help them to reach their circulation target.

Archive Material Wanted

A copy of each newsletter and publication by Radstats is being sought to compile an archive. I am looking for a single copy of each of the following Newsletters.

No's: 2, 39.

If anyone has an extra copy(ies) of any/some/all of the above Newsletters I'd be grateful if they could send it/them to me, Christy Maginn, at 12 Spring Close, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 7HA.

1991 AGM and Conference

(For those of you who don't read Editorials) -

Note that the AGM and annual conference will be held on 23rd February 1991 (provisionally) at the Department of Public Health and Medicine at Leeds University, kindly hosted by Waqar Ahmad, Trevor Sheldon & Colin Thunhurst.

Anyone with ideas as to the programme should get in touch with Waqar on 0274-733466 Ext 6262 up to 1st December and either Trevor (0532-344854) or Colin (0532-459034) after.

Are you interested in getting in touch?

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17 September 1990

Dear Mr. Simpson,

I was interested to see your letter in the Guardian (1/8/90) concerning the government handling of statistics. At present I am engaged in post graduate research into the field of comparability of official statistics, with particular attention to European labour force and unemployment statistics. Obviously the question of government integrity has real significance for the limits that can be put on comparability, especially when one considers the controversies that have raged in Britain and France over the measure of unemployment and the coming to light of a whole series of data and categories from Eastern Europe up to now shrouded in bureaucratic mystification. My work so far has put me in touch with Henry McLeish MP and the Unemployment Unit, I would be grateful if you could provide me with any information or interesting people to contact in this area, particularly with the work of the Radical Statistics Group you mentioned in your article.

Yours sincerely,



Matt Perry

Radical Statistics is available by subscription. Current rates are £5 per year for low waged and £10 for waged, institutions and overseas. The cost to the unwaged is £3. This newsletter is available from the Radical Statistics Group, care of Steve Simpson, 41 Park Crescent, Bradford BD3 0JZ

Radical Statistics is usually produced three times per year.

All members of the Radical Statistics Group are invited to contribute to the newsletter - Articles may vary from brief notices to detailed articles. Letters and reviews are also welcome.

Articles should be sent to the next editor, address given below.

Data Protection act

In accordance with the Data Protection Act, any member of the Radical Statistics Group is entitled to ask:

- a) For a printout of his/her personal details and the record's name and address (as kept on the Radical Statistics computer)
- b) That his/her personal details do not be so stored. Anyone wishing to avail themselves of this right, please contact the Troika (address on inside front cover) with requests in triplicate.

Editor of Newsletter No 47

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