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# Treasury blocks reform on statistics

THE Government has angered statisticians by rejecting their proposals to protect collection of official figures from political interference.

A Royal Statistical Society working party, which included Sir Claus Moser, former head of the Government Statistical Service, had suggested changes in the system for collecting figures.

Its nine-month investigation found "a serious erosion of public confidence in UK official statistics". It said the organisation of the statistical service allowed a "potential for political influence"; the quality and adequacy of some publications had created "unease"; some figures, notably on the balance of payments, were seriously deficient; and ministers manipulated the release of statistics so that bad news received

minimum exposure. The working party was set up after repeated criticisms of government statistics by academics as well as opposition politicians. Since 1979, there have been 30 changes in the way unemployment figures are calculated, of which 29 have reduced the total. The definition of poverty has also been changed, the critics say, so that there are a million fewer poor people.

The working party proposed that the statistics collected by government departments should be centralised under the chief statistician. A national statistical commission should be set up to monitor the objectivity, integrity and scope of official figures.

The report was sent to John

By Rosie Waterhouse

Major, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose department is responsible for the Central Statistical Office. Replying on his behalf, Richard Ryder, the Paymaster General, said: "The Government has no intention of changing the way in which successive governments have organised official statistical services." If the working party had found lack of integrity among government statisticians, it would have been "a matter of great concern". But the Government had every confidence in their professionalism, Mr Ryder wrote, "and it came as no surprise to me, therefore, to see that you found no such evidence".

A message from the Prime Minister followed. Like Mr Ryder, she said: "I have every confidence in the integrity of government statisticians". The responses have infuriated even the most restrained members of the working party, who say that their indictment was of the system, not of individual statisticians.

Professor Peter Moore, a former principal of the London Business School, who chaired the working party, said: "The Government has put forward no proposals of its own to reverse the waning public confidence in the quality and coverage of official statistics."

Because the Government was the country's largest employer of statisticians, the Royal Statistical Service was "greatly concerned with the image of the profession as a whole", he said.

Members of the working party say that, even if the Government is satisfied with its statistics, users in industry and the City are not. Bill Myers, chief UK economist for the City analysts UBS Phillips and Drew, said last week: "There is a strong case for a watchdog, not only to discourage political intervention and manipulation, but more importantly to improve the efficiency and accuracy of the figures. Basically they just do not add up."

Sir George Blunden, former deputy governor of the Bank of England, told a recent conference that "the current account figures are wildly inaccurate". Between 1986 and 1988 "the errors and omissions in the British balance of payments were more than double the sum of the errors and omissions in the balance of payments statistics of the United States, Japan, Canada, France, Germany and Italy combined".