

Statisticians show number power

By Stewart Tendler

At the age of 32 Dr Henry Wynn, lecturer at Imperial College, London University, will be installed this week as president of the Royal Statistical Society. Not only will he become probably the youngest head of any learned society, but he will also be the first president of the society to be elected to the position.

After two years of internal political struggle, his succession on Wednesday marks a victory for a reforming group within the society, which so often in the past has been the instigation of reform elsewhere. The hapless victim of the struggle has turned out to be Sir Campbell Adamson, formerly director general of the Confederation of British Industry.

Until last year the council of the society filled vacancies among its 30 members nominating new members unopposed.

Last year Sir Campbell was nominated to join the council but a group of fellows decided to challenge the council's nomination and forced an election.

It was the first such election to be held, and Sir Campbell was defeated. Then the council this year nominated him to become president.

The society has also over the years adopted a system whereby presidents chosen from inside the society are alternated

at intervals with a president appointed from outside. The idea was to bring in new blood and ideas.

In recent times such "external" presidents have included Sir Harold Wilson, who described the position as the greatest of the many honours bestowed on him.

The reformers, having triumphed last year, decided to fight again, and Dr Wynn was nominated by six fellows to challenge the council's choice.

Sir Campbell was defeated by 933 votes to 614 in a turnout representing 42 per cent of the membership.

The reformers insist that there was nothing personal against Sir Campbell and emphasized that they were fighting for democracy in a struggle with the council, which includes a number of well known academics and statisticians in the public field.

On the other side there is a feeling that a number of younger "radical statisticians" struck common ground, with some unhappy at the idea of an external president and others unhappy about Sir Campbell's candidacy.

At the end of the day it appears that the society might ponder the words of a nineteenth-century essayist: "Democracy is the power of numbers. It assumes that numbers have a right in the nature of things to rule."

