

Merger II

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Statistics Should not be "Professionalised"

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The debate about the merger between the Royal Statistical Society and the Institute of Statisticians continues and more and more the arguments centre around one particular issue: whether the professional association ethos should be introduced into statistics. It took sometime for this central question to crystallise partly because of the superficial attractiveness of having a single body to represent statisticians in this country. The pro-merger arguments had mostly been about administrative convenience, cost and the added prestige that a single body would have in speaking out on national issues.

Let me start by dealing with the last point. The ability of a body to speak effectively has two sources. First an organisation only does it if it has the political will to do it. In fact the reverse may be the case. The Royal Society, the most prestigious learned society of them all, rarely holds forth on anything. The more a body represents the senior members of a profession, and the council of a merged body would have its fair share, the less it may want to challenge the authority of the government or cause ripples by pronouncing on controversial issues. In this country much of the radical and critical comment comes from smaller and often very democratic organisations. Radical Statistics is an excellent example. The RSS has in recent years been taking an active part in debate on "matters of public interest" but is still rather reluctant to take public stands, although its recent criticism of the Rayner cut-backs in the Government Statistical Service and its contribution to the data protection band-wagon are exceptions. Would the larger organisation be more effective? I doubt it.

It is clear to me from the Institute of Statisticians news sheet "The Professional Statistician", and from personal contact, that a substantial section of the IOS sees it developing into a professional association more like those of the doctors and lawyers. This has important implications and it is these which I believe were not properly aired in the early stages of the debate. In its extreme it means self-regulation, codes of conduct, fixing of fee levels and above all the conferring of professional status. In some cases lack of such status means a prohibition on practising. No one is as yet suggesting all of this. But the flavour is there. Also this professional association style often goes hand in hand with a more commercial approach to the operations of the organisation. I cannot afford to go to the IOS conferences! Now I have no objections to the IOS going down this road. What I would not like to see is it dragging the RSS with it. It is argued that the two philosophies can live under the same roof, that a form of merger can be found that will preserve the professional status concept and still retain the more free-wheeling anyone-can-join tradition of the RSS. It may be the case, but why take the risk? Why should both organisations sacrifice their birthrights merely for administrative convenience.

The increased bureaucratisation that would accompany the merger and the concessions to professional status that would have to be made also have long term implications for the subject matter of statistics. There would inevitably be some of what I shall call "creeping standardisation". Good conduct in statistics, or the conferring of status as a statistician, implies to some extent the notion of "good statistics". It is one thing to give people qualifications and set examinations; it is quite another for the organisation itself to start laying down standards. This happens in other

professions and we have to expect that it will start here. I have never thought that this was a role for the RSS. It must provide the forum for debate to take place and always allow new and radical ideas an airing. Professionalisation can lead to ossification of the subject matter. In any case the whole area of statistics and data-processing is moving far too fast to be able to settle back into a nice cosy professional environment from which non-professionals are excluded. The world will pass us by. One of the best aspects of the RSS tradition is the freedom of contact that it encourages with other areas: economics, medicine, engineering demography and so on. Indeed many of the best ideas in statistics came from these areas and in some, such as control theory, they beat us at our own game. Science is not the rigid scheme of ideas that it was thought to be in the nineteenth century when many professional societies were started. It is huge, rambling, interconnected and often controversial. Statistics is technically a relatively small corner but its very survival depends on its claim of being of universal application. It is more like applied philosophy of science. (I hope no one is going to form the Association of Practicing Philosophers of Sciences). The merger conditions as they stand at present would exclude many people who use statistics and many who know a great deal about statistics. Are demographers in or out? Market research? Actuaries? Some people such as seismologists and astronomers analyse breath-taking quantities of data. Shall we sit in judgement on them before they can be chartered fellows.

There is a possibility that the John Bibby solution of retaining the qualifications but removing the idea of chartered fellow may be accepted by the IOS. I have always thought this unlikely because of my reading of the IOS intentions. They would be betraying their own ideals if they did this. However if all of the trappings of professional status were given up then certainly the main objection to a merger would be removed. I would not oppose a merger on this basis. We would just have to make sure, then, that the hard-won and rather mild democratic improvements in the elections inside the RSS were not drowned in a sea of new bureaucratic rules. Also the radical and critical tradition of the RSS which has been carefully, if slowly, rejuvenated in recent years must not be curtailed by a larger and more conservative council.

Finally, I would not wish my criticism of the professional ethos for statistics to be mistaken for Friedmanite union-bashing. Clearly statisticians need the protection of trade unions just like everyone in employment. But this is not the role of the RSS and the IOS would be ill-advised to move towards such a role. These organisations exist to advance the subject not to carry out day-to-day negotiations on pay and conditions of work. To even suggest that either of them should or could is absurd. But it is a slippery slope. It is not such a long step from awarding status to having to defend that status against government and employers. This job is best left to those with the power and skill to do it effectively.