

DO STATISTICS INFLUENCE POLICY? SHOULD STATISTICS INFLUENCE POLICY?

by Ray Thomas, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University

"Statistics often seem to carry the day in political arguments" says Ian Miles in the last issue (p 34). This is one area in which he agrees with Sir Derek Rayner who in his review of the Government Statistical Service asserted that the prime function of statistics is policy formulation (Rayner, 1980, p 5).

I challenge that view. I don't think that statistics do play much part in policy making. Policy making is about deciding directions. A compass is useful. An indication of the direction of the wind is useful. But precise measurement is used only when the direction is decided.

The new Government in 1979 decided to go for monetarism in spite of the plethora of statistics which were geared to the needs of Keynesian policies. The government tried for a while to find monetary statistics to help justify its policies, but since the use of these statistics was shown to be invalid they have received little attention. In recent years the only substantial contribution of statistics to economic policy making has been the use of statistics of prices to monitor the effectiveness of policies.

The Thatcher government is not exceptional in this respect. The 1945 Labour government did not use statistics to determine its massive nationalisation programme. It did not need statistics to justify giving massive priority to housing - the housing shortage was apparent.

It might well be thought that statistics produced from survey like those conducted by the OPCS often lead to new policy developments. But in practice it doesn't happen this way. The Rayner report on the

OPCS pointed out that regionalism, abortion law reform, divorce law reform, and immigration legislation all led to work being required of the OPCS (OPCS, 1981, para 8.15). The policy developments preceded the surveys. The surveys were conducted later.

The large scale publication of statistics creates the impression that these statistics have got something to do with democratic decision making. But this is so in only the very limited sense of telling us how well or how badly governments have performed.

The main function of these statistics is to contribute to organizational coordination (Thomas and Stanyer, 1984). They enable central government departments, local government, other public bodies, and large private organizations to achieve a degree of coherence in their activities. Statistics are the nervous systems of organizations, and are the means by which organizations - particularly in the public sector - communicate with each other.

Within government and other organizations statistics enable administrators to protect themselves against the more extravagant demands of their political leaders or their top managers. They also enable members of organizations to defend themselves against members of the public.

That is why, as Ian Miles pointed out in the last issue, statistics are regarded with distrust and suspicion. Statistics are also used by organizations against individuals. The confidence of the teenager with a Kawasaki that he or she can drive safely counts for nothing against the insurance company's charge which is based on statistics for the age group.

Statistics belong so much to the organizational world that we should be chary of statistics being used in policy making. Winston Churchill established the Central Statistical Office in order to reduce discussion about statistics (CSO, 1980, p 2). Harold Wilson did not count his expansion of the CSO as a significant part of his Governments' policies (Wilson, 1971). He emphasised instead that Government is about asking questions rather than finding answers (Wilson, 1973, p 2).

As the Government Statistics Collective pointed out in the Demystifying book, statistics "imprison us in the concepts and concerns that dominate official political and economic life" (Irvine et al, 1979, p 130).

One reason why official statistics are stultifying in this way is that they are often related to the problems of earlier periods. The questions in the Census of Population on housing are a legacy from the days when overcrowding and lack of basic amenities was a large scale national problem. The National Food Survey dates from war-time conditions when there were fears about malnutrition. Most of our economic statistics were designed in a period when it was assumed that growth was the only sensible economic policy.

Statistics could often be made more relevant to current conditions if they were democratized. The individuals who use these statistics, and the form-fillers who provide these statistics, should play a part in determining the nature of statistics collected and on deciding the nature of the system for distribution and publication. If that happens there is a chance that these statistics would not so commonly be focussed on the concerns of yesteryear.

You might have guessed that this is a trailer for a paper. The paper is called "Why have government stat-

istics? - and how to cut their cost", but the crucial part is about user participation in the design of statistical systems. You can get a copy from me.

One reader took exception to the piece in the last time issue of the Newsletter because it mentioned the availability of the paper by Thomas and Stanyer "Towards statistics for policy making" from the Open University Social Sciences Faculty without saying that you would be sent an invoice for £2 with your copy. My apologies. I didn't know what the cost would be at the time of writing.

I can assure you that there will not be any charge for reprints of "Why have government statistics? .." (published in the current issue of the Journal of Public Policy) for as long as my stock lasts.

REFERENCES

Central Statistical Office, Review of government statistical services, CSO, 1980.

Irvine et al, Demystifying social statistics, Pluto Press, 1979.

Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, Review of government statistical services, OPCS, 1980.

Rayner, Sir Derek, Review of government statistical services - report to the Prime Minister, CSO, 1980.

Thomas and Stanyer, Towards statistics for policy making, Social Sciences Occasional Papers, The Open University, 1984.

Wilson Harold, The Labour Government 1964-1970, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1971.

Wilson Harold, "Statistics and decision-making in Government", JRSS Ser A (Gen), Vol 136, Part 1, pp 1-19.