

# Standing up to be counted

## Commentary



Melanie Phillips

**A**N extraordinary scene took place this week. Mr Jack Hibbert, the head of the Government Statistical Service, appeared in front of some 300 statisticians at a public meeting to defend the reputation and integrity of his service and the official information it purveys. It was an unprecedented public appearance by the ultimate grey man in front of a deeply critical and anxious audience of greyish men (and a few women). So sensitive was the occasion, approval had to be given by none other than the Cabinet Secretary and the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury before Mr Hibbert could be exposed to the harsh winds of public controversy. For offi-

cial statistics have become tainted by more than disagreement: the charges being levelled against the service amount to the politicisation of knowledge, a form of intellectual corruption and a scandalous abuse of power.

Concern has been growing for some time now, voiced not only by the media but also by some high-powered academics, ex-civil servants and former senior government statisticians, that official information which should be wholly objective is being distorted, suppressed or otherwise interfered with to serve the political ends of the government. This anxiety has been fuelled by, for example, changes to the basis of counting the numbers of unemployed people, changing the index for measuring poverty or using official figures to claim that the health service is enjoying unprecedented prosperity. In addition, the Rayner review of the service introduced not only cuts but a new philosophy that official figures, which previously had been for the service of the nation as a whole, were now to be tied far more closely to the requirements of the government of the day.

The statisticians are rightly extremely troubled by the loss of public confidence in official figures. Official information provides the basis on which voters can decide on the record of the government and accordingly make an informed electoral choice. As custodians of objective facts, statisticians

know that the priceless asset of the truth must never be squandered in the interests of political expediency, not least because the public will then refuse to believe information that is actually true.

The grave claim that politicians are muddying the clear statistical waters has been made on a number of occasions now by Sir Claus Moser, a former head of the government statistical service. He repeated his worry this week about the changes to the unemployment and poverty registers and the apparent wish to change the basis of the retail price index. Professor Sir David Cox of Nuffield College, Oxford, an expert on — among other things — Aids statistics, no doubt had uppermost in his mind the Prime Ministerial axing of the Lifestyle Aids survey when he referred to increasing political pressure and lamented the sinking reputation of official statistics. And a former deputy head of the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys, Mr Philip Redfern, trenchantly criticised his erstwhile colleagues for lacking the openness and courage to swim against the political tide.

Faced with all this, Mr Hibbert's speech was a masterpiece of sanitised complacency which looked pitifully inadequate as a response to such well-placed anxieties. The statistical service, said Mr Hibbert, was completely open about its methods. Yes, said his critics, but it was a different story if anyone tried to get access to the information behind those methods. The recent report by Professor Richard Benjamin, for example, had castigated the government for deliberately obstructing access to certain data such as the Family Expenditure Survey.

Then there was the troublesome question of the unemployment statistics. Publishing the old figures compiled from Job Centres, said Mr Hibbert, alongside the new ones might have been a good idea just to show how misleading the old

ones had been. For good measure, up popped Mr Peter Stibbard, Director of Statistics at the Department of Employment. Mr Stibbard appeared outraged by any suggestion of impropriety. The change in the figures appeared to be due to things like administrative convenience. Total professional integrity! he smoothed.

But then up popped Mr Geoffrey Penrice, one of Mr Stibbard's predecessors. In 1979, he said, the incoming government had felt the unemployment figures were too high. Ministers wanted to change their presentation and their content. The expression on Mr Hibbert's face didn't change. He continued to nod and smile. But Mr Penrice had given the game away. The figures had been changed for political reasons.

The crucial distinction drawn by Mr Hibbert and others is between the figures themselves, simple pure as they are, and the possibly misleading use made of them by politicians and others. In other words, the statisticians are anxious to prove that their hands are clean, however stained politicians may be. But it's not as simple as that. To say, as Mr Hibbert did, that statisticians cannot publicly dispute any misleading use politicians may make of official information is a weaselly argument. They have a duty to set the record straight, otherwise they are conniving at falsehood. Philip Redfern suggested it should become standard practice for statisticians to put their professional advice on the record. There is no valid argument against such an obvious improvement to the democratic process. But to speak out publicly without fear of retribution statisticians must become wholly independent of government, as happens in many other European countries.

And this august body of quintessential back-room people must now press loudly and firmly for this to happen. It's not enough to imply, as Jack Hibbert did, that protests

are being made to ministers behind the scenes. It's understood that he has now been twice to complain to the Prime Minister that ministers are trying to make his staff do things he finds improper. Brownie points for guts, if true; but public confidence is not going to be restored in the integrity of official information unless it is seen to be properly independent of the government machine that is now exerting its improper pressures behind closed doors.

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