

British Library cuts

David Gordon

I have just had a question answered Parliament on the cuts in Scientific Periodical subscriptions being made by the British Library. This is the first time in history that the British Library has had to cut its subscriptions and it is being done to save a paltry sum of money. £81 960 probably wouldn't keep a Chieftain Tank in fuel and spare parts for a year!! Most of the cut journals come from Eastern Europe and won't be available from anywhere in the country.

The question asked on 19th. November, 1990 by Mildred Gordon, Labour MP for Bow and Poplar was:

To ask the Minister for the Arts, what is the total number of subscriptions to scientific periodicals that has been suspended by the British Library; and if he will give a breakdown showing the number suspended and the amount of money saved thereby in each major subject area.

The reply given by David Mellor on 26th. November, 1990 was:

The British Library has suspended subscriptions to a total of 200 scientific periodicals. A breakdown by subject area and the savings expected are:

| | No. | |
|---|-----|---------|
| Agriculture | 4 | £1 290 |
| Biology | 17 | £6 515 |
| Biomedicine | 9 | £3 628 |
| Biochemistry/Chemistry | 49 | £20 017 |
| Computing (inc Automation) | 7 | £2 466 |
| Ecology/Environment | 4 | £1 356 |
| Electronics/Communications | 6 | £2 535 |
| Engineering | 19 | £8 612 |
| Mathematics | 28 | £11 821 |
| Physics | 37 | £16 295 |
| Other (Geology, Metallurgy, Mining, etc) | 20 | £7 425 |
| Total | 200 | £81 960 |

The library is arranging alternative access where possible to the scientific journals and hopes to reinstate them in 1992. Most of them will continue to be taken by the Library's Document Supply Centre in Yorkshire.

Parliamentary questions about official statistics

Alison Macfarlane

In October, Jeremy Bray, who was a statistician before he became an MP and continues to take an interest in statistical matters, tabled 28 parliamentary questions about government statistics. If you want to read them in all their glorious detail, you can find them amongst the written answers in *Hansard* dated 30th. October, 1990 at columns 485-493. The weekly edition of *Hansard* can be found in most main public libraries.

About a third of the questions relate specifically to the accuracy and availability of economic statistics, and the proposals in the Pickford report, which led to changes made in February 1989. Many refer more directly to issues in the RSS report, however. The replies include some delightful examples of the art of evasiveness in replying to parliamentary questions, and others where the Government seems to feel grateful that the RSS has let it off the hook.

The response to a general question about the report brought the reply that 'The Government welcome its conclusions that there is no evidence of any failure of integrity by members of the Government Statistical Service. But the Government do not intend to change further the way in which successive Governments have organised official statistical services by centralising all statistical services.' The reply to a subsequent question asking what priority is accorded to public confidence in official statistics received the inevitable reply that it accords it high priority. A further question asked what safeguards there are to protect integrity and what steps are being taken to improve this. The answer is that members of the Government Statistical Service follow the practice set out in the guidance note issued in February 1985 by the then Head of the Service, Sir John Boreham!

A question asking what account the Government take of needs other than their own when determining the work of the Government Statistical Service and what specific consideration is given to the information needs of parliament, business, academia, the media and the general public received the reply 'Government departments do, where necessary, consult relevant bodies about the collection and use of statistics. In addition, some statistical information is collected for the European Community under the terms of certain Community measures. The large body of data is, where practicable, made available outside Government on terms which cover the costs of dissemination'. Other replies show that the Government is less than enthusiastic about passing data to the European Community, even though it has seen fit to second two statisticians to its statistical office.

Several questions deal with the timing of publications. If you have any worries on this score, you will be glad to hear that 'The Central Statistical Office publishes its statistics as soon as possible after they are compiled'. For more reassuring reading, rush to your local library.