

CONFERENCE REPORTS AND PAPERS

Official statistics

Allison Macfarlane

The purpose of the session was to outline what had happened and our response, and to discuss the need for a further response. Although some of the ground has been covered in earlier newsletters, it is summarised briefly here.

At the Royal Statistical Society meeting on integrity in government statistics on December 6, 1989, Jack Hibbert, head of the Government Statistical Service set out three questions which he felt should be discussed:

- a) Why is a distinction so rarely made between statistics produced by the Government Statistical Service and the uses to which others - both inside and outside government - put them?
- b) Are the practices and conventions currently followed adequate? Does anything need to be done to strengthen them?
- c) How should statistics which the government does not need for its own purposes be produced and financed?

The discussion which followed ranged much more widely. For details see the report in the Royal Statistical Society's journal 'Statistics in society'. At the meeting it was announced that a Working Party had been set up to consider the problems raised. Having deliberated, the Working Party released its report at a press conference in July 1990 and the report was subsequently reproduced in 'Statistics in society'.

The Working Party reported that it had discussed the importance of retaining public confidence, whether there was cause for concern and who the Government Statistical Service served. It considered the use of administrative sources of statistics and how to get value for money. It concluded that there was no lack of integrity among individual government statisticians, but the organisational and operational framework was inadequate. To tackle this, it recommended structural changes: a centralised statistical service, independent of government departments; a research

unit to strengthen methodology; a National Statistical Commission; a UK Statistics Act to bring the above into being.

Radical Statistics attempted, not very successfully, to respond with a press release saying that the recommendations would be all right if we had a government which really cared about statistics, but that is not the case. Ludl Simpson wrote a letter to the Guardian, which was published.

Eight months later, the Royal Statistical Society had not yet organised a meeting to discuss the report, although there was to be a meeting on June 12 to discuss the proposal for a National Statistical Commission. Since the AGM, the Working Party has agreed to talk to a meeting of the RSS' Official Statistics Study Group in Autumn 1991, over a year after publishing the report.

In November 1990, the back bench House of Commons Public Accounts Committee took evidence from Jack Hibbert. Although this was mainly about the reorganisation of government economic statistics, he was also questioned about the Royal Statistical Society's report. Also in November, as reported in Radical Statistics 47, statistician MP Jeremy Bray asked a long series of parliamentary questions about the same subjects.

Opening the discussion, Andrew Philpott Morgan said that a variety of institutions were complaining about the integrity of government statistics and that the issue had been fudged. Deterioration had occurred within the context of the same statistical system. He stressed that we should not give way to right wing demands for privatisation.

Another ex-government statistician, Tony Finkle, said that centralisation was at the heart of the issue and that decisions about statistics should be part of the democratic process. The question of reinstituting axed series was raised. Who should make the case about what is missing and what was never collected in the first place. Someone said that we should not appear as a profession under threat and that a methodology was needed to assess the value of information. Andrew Pepper, another ex-government statistician said he felt that there had been a sea-change since Thatcher's resignation and pointed out that John Major had been responsible for the reorganisation of economic statistics when he was at the Treasury. Not everyone shared Andrew's optimism.

There was a brief discussion about what Radical Statistics could do on this issue, followed later in the day by a longer discussion. This led to the two meetings planned for May 30 in Bradford and June 17 in London (full details of which are in this issue). Both of these will discuss the need for a new agenda for official statistics, although the Bradford meeting is primarily intended to bring together Radical Statistics people in the North, while the London one is aimed at bringing in people from outside Radical Statistics as well.

Northern Group

Meeting on official statistics

Speaker:

Cathie Marsh
Manchester

followed by a discussion on future events in the North

Thursday 30 May, 7.30 pm

University of Bradford (Rm. E1)

Contact Anthony Staines for details
tel. 0532 443517 (work), 0532 343486 (home)