

Britain in Numbers: The Essential Statistics
by Simon Briscoe

London: Politico's, 2005, 328+xviii £14.99

Review by Danny Dorling, University of Sheffield

Accessible, exciting, authoritative, comprehensive, and – relatively – cheap! Simon Briscoe's guide to the social statistics of Britain is clearly much needed. It is not intended to be read from cover to cover; but it is a testament to the author's ability to be both succinct and entertaining, that this book can simply be read from start to end. It is probably not unfair to say that it is a book which had to be written by someone working in journalism for it to achieve this level of readability – especially given a subject that is potentially so tedious. Simon is the Statistics Editor of the Financial Times, and *Britain in Numbers* was published two weeks prior to the general election of 2005.

What I found most entertaining about the book were the series of allegations or assertions it made. Here is a taster:

“There is a statistical disregard, it seems, for measuring the performance of the NHS in terms of patients' health.” (page 157) and “On this fairly basic level, the Department of Health fails.” (page 149).

“Trusting [departmental statisticians] to produce impartial data has been likened to giving an alcoholic the keys to a pub.” (page 30).

“... researchers are fully aware that ministers require the New Deal to be seen to be a success and had the collection of figures be[en] too rigorous and purposeful, there is a chance that they might have pointed to its being an expensive failure.” (page 135).

“The Chancellor is not renowned for his modesty and many of his claims merit close inspection.” (page 198) “... the Chancellor has been economical with the truth as to the origins of the current low inflation” (page 207).

Changes to the government's target on child poverty give: “suspicion that the minister is up to no good” (page 13).

The above list provides only a limited sample of where *Britain in Numbers* is at its most entertaining and of why no government publication can compete – as it could not be so candid. Briscoe goes on to cast doubt on the purpose of the current Atkinson review (page

15), on the Chancellor's definition of government debt (page 218) where he has "tweaked the [Golden] rule" (page 16), offers much more on the misrepresentation and falsification of National Health Service statistics (such as on page 27) and even of the calculation inflation rate (pages 16 to 17).

At times this reader was left with the impression that Simon Briscoe harbours a particular dislike of Mr Brown which extends at times slightly towards the point of obsession; although that would, perhaps, be understandable given the author's day-job. However, the attack is somewhat relentless and I could not help wondering whether it was too focused on the Minister (and potential future Prime Minister) who, by the end of the book, the reader can begin to feel a little sorry for. For instance, when reading statements such as this "his stewardship as Chancellor has seen Britain's share of world exports fall from 5½% in 1997 to 4.9% in 2003." (page 210) I wondered whether such trends were as problematic as Mr Briscoe concludes – given that Britain's share of world population is 1% and falling. In a more equitable world this country's share of exports would fall similarly. Along the same lines, in response to Simon Briscoe's complaint that:

"Partly by design, it seems, the Treasury not only fails to help the reader, but at times seems to obfuscate even more. A perfect example of Treasury-induced complication is the creation of tax credits, which count as negative taxation rather than additional spending on social benefits." (pages 221-222);

is it not sensible to confuse the international accountants (jackals of capitalism that they are) by making a benefit rise look like a tax cut? Who loses out other than those economists who enjoy the suffering of the poor?

There are an unusual number of typos throughout the book; but this reflects its tight deadlines and does not harm the overall quality. The section on employment is especially good. The layout is also much more entertaining than is usual in books for this time, again especially in the employment section. On pages 126 and 127 alone are three graphs, seven other "text boxes" including quotes and well set out tables, commentary and references. In general the coverage of topics by this book is much wider than is usual for texts on social statistics, it is comprehensive and the style is very accessible. I am already using it as a source for information which I did not know existed as the official sources are so confusing!

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There are many issues that informed readers might take issue with – but that too is inevitable in a book of this size produced at the speed required to be current. Most importantly it appears that the author does not realise that the website he has used for information on migration is one which many academics will not refer their students to given the offensive nature of some material there. It is difficult to say more but I sincerely hope that a reliable source is used in any future editions of the book.

At times the lack of sources for statements made is frustrating. For instance my reading of the literature suggests that all the statements in the following sentence in the book are untrue “Teenage parents tend to have poor ante-natal health, lower birth-weight babies and higher infant mortality rates” (page 170) but also that the headline figure quoted in the book for the number of teenage mothers is wrong by a factor of three (unless each teenage mother in Britain has adopted two children, on average, in her teenage years – see Lawlor and Shaw 2002, Shaw et al. forthcoming)!

At times through the book, some aspects become apparent of what may be read as the author’s more personal opinions. Of course, opinions only appear personal when they don’t agree with the reader’s and so these comments say as much, if not more, about this reviewer than about the book! For instance: the author appears to be concerned that the number of civil servants is too high (page 271, and too many are taking ‘sickies’), but police “strength” is too low (page 274, and not a word querying sickness rates in the police); that abolishing child poverty within 20 years is a “ridiculous target” (page 43), and , although petty, it could be argued Simon does not appreciate the true nature of the Jedi revolt (page 105). More seriously, he suggests that it would be better to monitor the number of prisoners as a proportion of crimes (pages 26 to 27) for the purposes of international comparisons. He is probably not aware that:

“...given that one of the most prevalent ‘crimes’ in the UK is ‘failure to pay the TV licence’ while the most common crime in Turkey is ‘being rude to a public official’, there is not even a theoretical prospect of being able to make meaningful international comparisons of the extent of crime...”(Hillyard et al. 2005, pp. 62-63).

Similarly motoring crimes are labelled as ‘offences’ (page 188) despite road deaths being deaths and not ‘accidents’ (page 179). It is assumed

that children's abilities can be usefully measured at age 11 (page 28 on the grammar school debate) and that the United States is efficient in providing its public services (page 225). Admittedly not having sufficient public services for when, say, a hurricane hits, does save money – but whether it saves money net depends on the value that is placed on different people's lives.

Given the extremely wide scope of the book the above list of quibbles is very short. I have to admit that it perhaps also reflects a little jealousy on the part of this reviewer (I could not produce a book as comprehensive as this, as timely as this, and certainly not one appearing as well balanced as this!) The author is often diplomatic by omission – for instance the name of the first chair of the Statistic Commission is not given although it is said to have “got off to a slow start” (to save readers the trouble of searching, it was Sir John Kingman). There are many other occasions when Simon Briscoe appears to have diplomatically pulled his punches – but his overall level of frustration with complacency, cronyism and officialdom in general is clear to read and makes this book so readable.

Throughout the book the author complains about the lack of data in many areas – my favourite being on the prevalence of sexual activity (page 32) for which I believe the “Briscoe notch count” should be inaugurated by ONS. However, the book as a whole is testament to just how much information is out there if you look hard enough. But to end on a more serious note there are two extra things that the book does need. Firstly it needs an index, if only to be able to see where all those references to “the Chancellor” are without having to plough through the entire text. Secondly it will need updating by the time of the next election. Much of what it refers to is current and will date. Order a copy now if you are at all intrigued – it will be interesting to see how the sections in this first edition relate to subsequent editions. I find it hard to imagine that there will not be more editions.

This book marks a new era in UK social statistics. As the author says, although not as rallying as the cries fraternity, liberty, equality, “...the statisticians are here and will not be going away.” (page xiii). Above all, this book tells official statisticians that now is the time for the minority to end their dodgy fiddling of the figures.

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Editor's note: the book is available from bookshops 328+xviii pages @ £14.99, Published in 2005 by Politico's Publishing, Methuen Publishing Limited, 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London. 2005, www.methuen.co.uk/politicos

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