

THE VIEWS OF THE STATISTICAL COUNCIL

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1 INTRODUCTION

I think I can assume that anyone attending this symposium is both interested in, and relatively well informed about, the institutional arrangements for the collection and publication of official statistics. I will presume that the broad outline of the Government Paper "A New Institutional Structure for the Central Statistics Office", which contains the "Report and Recommendations of the Statistical Council" as an Appendix, is already familiar to the attendance. So, in the next section I will only briefly summarise the main findings of the Council's report and the corresponding contents of the Government Paper.

However, there are two other topics that I do want to find time for. The first relates to the general approach adopted by the Council in preparing its report. The second concerns the thinking behind some of the points in the Council's report, especially in regard to recommendations of the Council that did not find their way into the Government Paper proper or that are less emphasised in that Paper.

2 THE COUNCIL'S REPORT

The Council believed that a statistical service should have the powers and resources to assemble data from both public and private sector sources so as to permit prompt publication of a full range of

accurate data,

be responsive to the needs of the various categories of users, including, in particular, Government agencies, and,

have independence and objectivity in the compilation and publication of statistics

These objectives imply that there should be

- (1) a mechanism by which priorities can be assessed and a multi-annual programme with advance budgetary approval established,
- (11) the organisational flexibility to reallocate and deploy resources to meet changing needs and priorities, and,
- (111) an appropriate legal framework conferring appropriate powers

The feasibility of the features (1) and (11) interact with institutional structure. The Central Statistics Office is part of the Civil Service proper and as such is subject to the full range of administrative controls exercised by the Departments of Finance and the Public Service. New initiatives in particular are the subject of quite detailed scrutiny especially as far as the implications for numbers of staff and expenditure are concerned. No significant redeployment can be undertaken without the sanction of the Department of the Public Service. The same process of comprehensive control is applied by the Department of Finance in relation to non-staff resources such as equipment, field costs, etc.

The Civil Service controls are exercised with a view to ensuring uniform conditions with regard to general administration and staffing across the whole Civil Service. While this may be a desirable objective in overall terms, which may not adversely affect the operation of Government departments in general, it can create serious problems in certain circumstances where the operational requirements call for a flexible response. In the case of the CSO, a

substantial part of the work is of a constantly changing nature according as new surveys are initiated and existing ones are run down or discontinued. Examples include the Census of Population, large-scale Household Budget Surveys, Censuses of Distribution and Agricultural Censuses.

The constraints imposed on the CSO by this Civil Service environment are considerable and the Council concluded that if the CSO is to be adequately responsive to changing needs then more flexible arrangements are required. Such arrangements should also provide means of keeping the Office in touch with user needs in different areas of statistics as well as facilitating the assembly of data by the Office. For these and other reasons given in the Report, the Council recommended changes in organisational structure permitting

- a Board or Council to which top management of the CSO would report on a regular basis. The Board should produce an Annual Report. Communications between Government and the CSO should be made via the Board,
- an adequate number of users' groups/liaison groups,
- a new mix at senior staff level with a much greater emphasis on managerial and administrative roles,
- multi-annual planning,
- an ongoing Research and Development section to facilitate adaptation to change,
- an annual budget at the disposition of top management, subject to the approval of the Board,
- adequate powers for ensuring co-ordination of statistics from all sources

The Council felt that an environment incorporating these features could be obtained by having the CSO operate as a special State-sponsored body outside rather than within

the Civil Service system Other Council recommendations and suggestions related to aspects of staffing in the CSO, to response rates in surveys, to the content and format of CSO publications and to issues in computerisation/data processing

The Government Paper has absorbed many of the Council's recommendations into its own proposals It has not retained all and has perhaps re-emphasised some, but, on behalf of the Council, I would like to record how pleased we are that so much has been incorporated The National Statistics Board, with the features and responsibilities described in sections 23 and 29 of the Paper, and the User and Supplier Liaison Groups, described in section 44, embody important elements of Council thinking

3 GENERAL APPROACH OF THE COUNCIL

The general approach adopted by the Council and the spirit in which it prepared its report reflected the very positive attitude towards statistical information that was implicit in the original questions the Taoiseach addressed to the Council at its initial meeting I want to stress this point now Our report is an affirmation of the value of statistics and the importance of enhancing the service, made at a time when all State expenditure is under pressure due to the problems of the public finances I am sure many people here know that a very different approach was adopted in the Rayner (1980) Report on the UK statistical service

The Taoiseach's questions to the Council were

- (1) Would changes in the way the Central Statistics Office was organised lead to improvements in the timeliness and reliability of statistics?
- (2) How could the problem of delays in data publication due to poor response from industry be tackled?
- (3) Were official statistics sufficiently responsive to the needs of users? In this context should there be more emphasis on professional staff with

backgrounds in economics or the social sciences?

- (4) What general improvements should be made in the publication of statistics?

These questions clearly show an acceptance of the importance of statistics, not only for Government but also for other users. This spirit was adopted by the Council in preparing its report and has remained embodied in the main text of the Government Paper. The emphasis is on improvements, on relevance and usefulness to users, and generally on increasing the perception of the value of statistics. Perhaps it is unfortunate that this whole process has only been conducted now, when public finances are so constrained, rather than years ago. But it is still a positive development.

It may be of interest to make some comparison with the UK Rayner report. This recommended a 25 per cent cut in the manpower of the Statistical Services - to be achieved by such measures as limiting the detailed information collected, reducing the degree of checking and validation and cutting back on databases. The justification, repeatedly stressed in the report, was that the primary function of a Government Statistical Service was to provide Government with the statistics it needed for its own decision making and that all else, including publication, was very secondary. Some of the recommendations will illustrate this theme.

Recommendation 8 there is no more reason for Government to act as universal provider in the statistical field than in any other

Recommendation 17 Information should not be collected primarily for publication [but] because Government needs it for its own business

Information of value to business should be charged for commercially

The Rayner report regarded even those statistics required

for Government business somewhat ungenerously

Recommendation 10 [Ministers and senior civil servants should probe] any cases where they are given more information than they need [and stop] collecting too many statistics

Of course, the recommendations of the Rayner report did not go uncontested. At the Royal Statistical Society meeting on the report (see Hoinville and Smith, 1982) both the underlying theme of ultra primacy of Government requirements and the cost-cutting measures were heavily criticised. It was said that information represents power in a modern society and that easy access to it is a cornerstone of a democratic society. One particular criticism was made by a former head of the UK Service, Claus Moser, who believed that cutting back on data checking would inevitably lead to serious errors.

I mention the Rayner report, not because I think we need to justify not doing as the British do, but to show that other approaches than ours are not only conceivable, but have actually happened. I found it very heartening that all involved in Council discussions were convinced of the value of statistics to Government, business and the public at large.

4 POINTS FROM THE COUNCIL'S REPORT

Semi-State or Civil Service?

I suppose that to many people the most evident discrepancy between the Council's recommendations and the proposal in the Government Paper is that the former envisaged the Central Statistics Office becoming a State-sponsored body outside the Civil Service. The latter sees the Office continuing within the Civil Service though with "a special position". Throughout its discussion the Council did recognise the need for a relatively close relationship between a Statistics Office and Government. The Government must be able to have their statistical requirements met, while the Office needs sufficient

influence to ensure co-operation from the public sector. However, the Council felt that such a close relationship need not be incompatible with status as a State-sponsored body.

The Council's arguments for a semi-State agency were motivated by the need for greater independence from the rigidities and constraints inherent in the present situation. The Government Paper clearly envisages that this independence can be made feasible within the Civil Service context and would be compatible with the general direction of Government policy on public service reform. I must admit that the Council did not try to assess the potential flexibility and resourcefulness of a reformed Civil Service - our brief concerned statistics and the Statistics Office, and we considered the Civil Service as it currently is. Statistical services in other countries are usually part of the Civil Service. However, these statistical offices often appear to have a considerable degree of autonomy (supported in many instances by the existence of consultative councils) and they often have a much greater degree of operational flexibility than exists in the Irish Central Statistics Office. This may be a reflection of the fact that the public service as a whole is much more flexible in other countries. Perhaps in a reformed environment the Irish Office can have similar flexibility. Certainly the measures proposed in the Government Paper - Board, User Groups, etc - would also have been essential features of the Council's envisaged semi-State body.

Graduate Disciplines in the CSO

The Council remarked that, besides the need for graduates with competence in mathematics or statistics, there is also a need in the CSO for persons with economic and social science backgrounds. The fact that this does not appear explicitly in the main text of the Government Paper need not, I suppose, be taken as a rejection of the view. It could be regarded as just an aspect of personal policy, too specific to merit direct mention, that could perhaps be taken up later by a National Statistics Board. But I would like to enlarge on the Council's thinking on this matter because the issues involved need airing.

The Council felt that the inclusion of economic and social staff would contribute to a broader and more comprehensive view of statistical requirements and uses. There could be special advantages if some of the staff already possessed experience in their respective fields and the Council did mention possible secondment arrangements in the context of new institutional structures. However, it is probably more useful here to talk in terms of the typical "statistician", using that term to denote graduate staff of the Office irrespective of disciplinary qualifications. In Ireland, unlike the European countries (except the UK), the graduate staff are mainly from a pure mathematics or mathematical statistics background. Qualifications in these fields are academically very impressive and no doubt some posts in the Office, though not many, actually require the methodological techniques *exclusive* to these fields.

However, other qualities are important too. These include an interest in data collection and analysis as distinct from mathematics, an appreciation of why certain statistics are collected and of who might want to use them - in general, a bent towards application. Of course, a mathematician may have this bent and deficiencies of knowledge of society or the economy - which he will have - are perhaps easily remedied by training courses. He may indeed make a better Office statistician than an economics or social science graduate, even though, for example, the economist will have graduated knowing what national accounts are and what they are used for, which the mathematician will not. But to assume he would be bound to be better would seem to attach an almost mystical significance to mathematics.

Actually, I doubt the relevance of the content of a mathematics degree course to a career in official statistics. I have used the word "mathematics" not "statistics" because I believe a statistics degree *ought* to be very relevant through being focused on data collection and interpretation rather than on mathematics - on induction rather than deduction. However, statistics degree courses can be quite unapplied and concerned only with the mathematics of statistics. Statistical techniques are a means to an end - how to study and improve our economic and social lot - and directing attention to this end can help ensure the relevance of the techniques. It could also

prevent the statistician from becoming just a backroom boy - 'little more than a data merchant, unable to look beyond the figures to the policy importance'

The quotation here is from Moser (1980) who was bemoaning the replacement of the statistician by the economist in the role of policy adviser in the UK - a change he blamed on the increasing abstraction of mathematical and statistical training. In his paper Moser had little enthusiasm for the concept of a statistician as someone producing numbers, however great his "integrity" in so doing. Instead he stressed wider roles including a willingness to interpret the policy implications. He also believed that statisticians studying the plausibility of figures was the best guarantee of error detection. But "interpreting" and "studying plausibility" imply knowledge of the subject areas of the economy and society. Familiar ideas came up later in his paper, the need to explicitly distinguish between applied and mathematical statistics and if special efforts should be made to recruit staff with economic or social backgrounds.

It is interesting to note that Malinvaud (1977), when delivering the 10th Geary Lecture here at the ESRI, considered it undesirable that statisticians (and econometricians) be "well trained in skills but not sufficiently sensitive to the environment in which they will be used". He felt that a statistical office should contain staff with a mix of backgrounds and that the individual statistician needs 'a serious intellectual culture in at least one of the social sciences'. He believed that an Office so staffed, and indulging in some economic and sociological analysis, would be more likely than others to deploy its resources optimally - "they have a good chance of knowing the changing priorities of public demands, both directly because they themselves are users of their own statistics, and indirectly, because they keep in touch with the broader community of economists and sociologists".

R and D Section

The Council recommended an ongoing Research and Development section to facilitate adaptation to change and

methodological innovation, and although it is not explicitly mentioned in the Government Paper I would hope it comes about. There are many methodological issues relating both to survey design and analysis that deserve investigation. For example, the Council considered the problem of poor response from industry and mentioned approaches such as strengthening field staff and updating fines, etc. The devices of sampling and imputation were rather vaguely described as having "scope", but the reality is that some methodological research is needed to assess the potential of such techniques. Innovations in methodology have come from the Irish Statistics Office before - many associated with Roy Geary - so such a section would seem particularly appropriate.

The idea is sometimes expressed that methodological innovation is the function of relevant university departments, or that new and useful methodology can always be imported from abroad. Of course, links between an R and D section and a university department ought to be fostered if there is a department with a relevant orientation. Mathematics and statistics departments could well lack the interest in application - and this is probably a great understatement. During the discussion on Moser's paper, which I mentioned earlier, the remark was made that "the gap between the academic statistician and the applied one seems to be approaching infinity". But whatever about co-operation, the Office needs its own R and D section.

Other Matters

I do not want to continue in detail about issues that are treated somewhat differently in the Council's report and in the Government Paper. Some are just matters of emphasis or specific detail. For example, both place importance on giving greater recognition to managerial and administrative functions, but the recommendation about an Assistant Chief Executive for administration, data processing and publications, made in section 14 of the Council's report, becomes less organisationally specific in section 35 of the Government Paper. The Council made fairly detailed comments in relation to format and content of publications, and while these are not reproduced in the Government Paper, they are

referred to in section 43 and are not perceived as a difficulty in the CSO comments on the Council's report I would like to say here that it seems to me that some definite improvements in CSO publications have already begun to occur Again, in regard to computerisation/data processing, the level of detail of the Council's report may not have been felt appropriate to the Government Paper, which, however, need not imply that the issues lack importance

Let me finish by repeating that the Council are pleased that so much of their views were reflected in the Government Paper I hope that this Symposium will provide a significant component in the process of public comment that the publication of the Government Paper initiated

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