
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AA

12 May 2010

Dear Prime Minister

I offer you my very warm congratulations on becoming Prime Minister of our country.

Thank you very much for your letter of 17 February, in reply to mine to you of 29 January (copies attached).

I am writing now to set out some of the specific actions which the Statistics Authority believes would much improve the trustworthiness of UK official statistics. I would much welcome an early opportunity to discuss these proposals with you.

First, the independence of statistical work in government Departments. This was much strengthened by the 2007 Act, but needs to be strengthened further, so that statistical publications, decisions and actions are clearly seen by the public to be objective, impartial, and uninhibited by political pressures. This is, in our view, an important part of the agenda for re-establishing the public's trust in politics and Parliament, and the credibility of Ministerial statements based on statistical data urgently requires it; as does the international reputation of the statistical service. Greater independence could be achieved in a number of ways. We suggest that your government, as a practical matter, should immediately act to give greater weight to the role of Departmental Heads of Profession for Statistics reporting to the National Statistician as their manager on professional matters. We recommend that you should, in the coming days, write to your colleagues in charge of Departments, requiring them to seek the National Statistician's agreement before making decisions about the performance, grading, placement and numbers of Departmental statistical staff. This need not be bureaucratic or cumbersome. It is simply a matter of the government recognising explicitly the professional leadership role of the National Statistician, and thus taking statistics out of the political arena.

Second, we recommend that the Statistics Authority be given a powerful role in decisions about spending on statistics in Departments. This could be done in a number of ways. Our suggestion is that you require departmental and Treasury Ministers to *consult* the Statistics Authority ahead of any significant changes to statistical expenditure plans or statistical outputs. The Authority's statutory functions, in relation to the scope and coherence of official statistics, can only be properly exercised if it has the knowledge of what is being planned in Departments, and is given the opportunity to register with Ministers its views, including its views on the value for money of different statistical series, before action is taken.

Third, we recommend that the formal arrangements for pre-release access to official statistics should follow the proposals in the Authority's report on this subject published on 18 March 2010, bringing the 24-hour time limit down to no more than 3 hours, introducing a 1

hour voluntary restraint on political announcements relating to statistical releases, and giving the Authority in future the task of determining pre-release access arrangements. Under the 2007 legislation, these arrangements are in the gift of Ministers. Now is a good time to reform them, and, by so doing, to show the public that you are minimising the opportunities for leaks and spin, and thus greatly raising the credibility of Ministerial statements that rest on statistics.

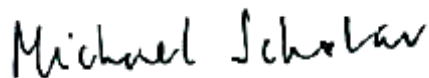
Finally, the Cabinet Secretary's existing guidance on statistical practice requires all officials and advisors, not only government statisticians, to observe the Code of Practice for Official Statistics; to consult professional statisticians when preparing publications; not to quote selectively from unpublished datasets; and to raise any concerns with their departmental Head of Profession, or the National Statistician. We think it essential that you lend your support to that guidance, and incorporate the main elements of it in your general guidance issued to all Ministers.

All these actions could be taken without new legislation, and by immediate executive action on your part. I very much hope that you will decide to take these actions in the coming days, to set the tone for your administration in relation to statistics.

I am copying this letter to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and to the Secretary of the Cabinet. I will be writing to the incoming Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, and the Devolved Administrations in similar terms in due course.

I look forward to meeting you, and wish you all good fortune in what lies ahead.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB