



THE ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

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Sir Michael Scholar
UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
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28th August 2008

Dear Michael

I am writing to express the deep concern of the Royal Statistical Society at the incident last week when a Home Office ministerial press notice was given out at the UK Statistics Authority press briefing on population statistics. This action, in addition in being contrary to the spirit of the new legislation, succeeded in partially diverting some journalists' attention away from the comprehensive range of data being presented towards one specific issue.

We understand that the action was in breach of written guidance. However, while that is serious enough in itself, our concern is broader. In particular, we believe that the whole incident epitomises some of the bad practices that have helped to undermine public confidence in official statistics.

The release of such ministerial statements alongside statistical releases can focus attention on one aspect favourable to the government, distracting from other statistics and presenting an unbalanced view. At worst this can help to "bury" news perceived as unfavourable to the government.

In this case, the press notice itself was not clearly labelled as a ministerial or policy statement. At first glance, it could easily have been taken as a statistical release since the first three paragraphs made valid, but selective, points about immigration data. However, the notice then went on to comment favourably on government actions in removing people who "have no right to be" in the UK, made a statement on asylum applications which used a comparison between the first and second quarter of the year in what appears to be a series with a noticeable seasonal element, and included a ministerial comment which started "Britain's borders are stronger than ever".

Ministers and government departments have, of course, the right to comment on statistical data if they wish. But such statements should be clearly distinguished from statistical press releases, should not be misleading in the use made of statistics and, above all, should not seek to over emphasise points favourable to the government in a way which skews the media agenda. We believe that they should not normally be issued at the same time as the relevant statistical press release since this simply adds to confusion.

We consider it essential that the UK Statistics Authority sets out firm guidelines concerning government statements relating to statistics in the forthcoming Code of Practice and does whatever is in its power to ensure better practices in the future. The need for this was clearly underlined by the

most recent survey on confidence in official statistics which found, according to the ONS press release of March 17, 2008, that only 16% of respondents agreed with the statement “*the government uses figures honestly when talking about its policies*”. As one example, there is obviously a need to ensure that civil servants outside the ONS are fully aware of the new arrangements, which may require more positive action by the Authority than simply promulgating these guidelines.

We also believe that the Statistics Authority should review the way in which statistical press releases are written, including seeking the advice of appropriate journalists. Arguably the rather dull way in which the related statistical press release (Control of Immigration – Quarterly Statistical Summary) was presented meant that it could not easily compete for media interest with the more attractively written ministerial press notice. In addition we understand that around 20 statistical press notices were released on that day but not presented in a coherent or coordinated fashion, making it difficult for even the most diligent journalist to write a full analysis. Helpful analysis and presentation is particularly important when data relating to issues of public interest are involved.

Finally, this incident also shows why pre-release access to statistics, which the Statistics and Registration Service Act places outside the powers of the Statistics Authority, is undesirable and, if granted, should be limited to a few hours at most.

I am copying this letter, which we intend to publish in the next few days, to Karen Dunnell, Richard Alldritt and to Sir David Normington. We will, of course, be responding fully to your consultation on the draft Code of Practice in due course and are happy to assist in any other appropriate way in developing guidelines and practices.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. J. Hand', written in a cursive style.

Professor David J. Hand
President