
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Rt. Hon. Vince Cable MP
Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
LONDON
SW1H 0ET

4 February 2015

Dear Secretary of State

NET MIGRATION

Thank you for your letter dated 21 January regarding commentary in the Migration Statistics Quarterly Report produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

You will be aware that the statutory Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires producers of National Statistics *inter alia* to “prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the policy or operational context of official statistics.” ONS, like other producers of official statistics, continually reviews the commentary which is placed around its official statistics, to ensure they provide the most up-to-date and relevant context.

I have reviewed a number of different contextual sources over a period of time, of which I list some here. During oral evidence to the House of Commons Liaison Committee on 13 May 2014, the Prime Minister said:

“...Getting migration figures down is much harder work, because there are a lot of different elements to migration, but if I look at the situation over the decade prior to 2010, net migration was running at well over 200,000 every year—2 million across the decade—which is the difference between the number of people coming in and going out. My view is that that is much too high and I want to get it down to the tens of thousands, under 100,000, which it was in the 1980s. We were an open economy in the 1980s—a successful economy. I think it is perfectly feasible...The target remains; the commitment remains. I want net migration to be down to the tens of thousands. I think it is absolutely achievable.”¹

Successive Home Office business plans (2011-15, 2012-15 and 2013-15) have made the commitment to “set an annual limit on the number of non-EU economic migrants admitted to the UK.

¹ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/liaison-committee/evidence-from-the-prime-minister-13-may-2014/oral/9540.pdf> (Q3)

As a result of this and other policies we anticipate net migration will be in the tens of thousands in future".²

The House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee report on the UK Border Agency, published in November 2012, concluded:

"The latest quarterly figures show that the government is making progress in meeting its target to reduce immigration. Net migration in the year to December 2011 however still stood at 216,000 which is lower than the previous year, 252,000, but still a long way off from the government's target of a reduction from 'hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands'."³

A report of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee on *Migration Statistics*, published in July 2013, concluded:

"Net inward migration to the UK increased from an annual average of around 37,000 in the period 1991 to 1995 to an annual average of around 209,000 in the period 2006 to 2010. So while the Government's net migration target—to reduce net migration from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands—suggests a ten-fold reduction in net inward migration, in practice net inward migration only needs to be roughly halved in order for the Government to achieve its aim."⁴

I agree with the Director General of ONS, Glen Watson, as he set out in his reply to your earlier letter (attached), that the existence of a net migration 'target' had become part of the media and public discourse, and that the media and others tend to comment on net migration statistics in this context. I have also read with interest a note published by the House of Commons Library which discussed the history of the target and the subsequent reporting of it⁵.

I have therefore concluded that ONS statisticians reached a reasonable position given the context and evidence in the wider public discourse, and did so in compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

I am copying this to John Pullinger, Glen Watson and Ian Cope.

Yours sincerely



Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

²<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130109092234/http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/HO-Business-Plan1.pdf>; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/120032/business-plan-doc.pdf; <http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/business-plan/5/81>

³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmhaff/603/603.pdf> (paragraph 70)

⁴ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpublicadm/523/523.pdf> (paragraph 10)

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05829/immigration-and-asylum-policy-government-plans-and-progress-made>



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21 January 2015

Dear Sir Andrew,

You will be aware of recent correspondence between myself and Mr Glen Watson at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) regarding the inclusion of the following sentence in the Migration Statistics Quarterly Release (MSQR) published in August and November 2014:

'Additionally, migration statistics are used to monitor the impact of immigration policy, and performance against a stated target to reduce annual net migration to the UK to the tens of thousands by 2015.'

Between August 2013 and May 2014 inclusive, the MSQR referred explicitly to a “government” target to reduce “annual net migration to the tens of thousands by 2015”. My Department fed back to ONS officials that the net migration target was not government policy, and the wording was subsequently changed to that used in August and November. However, this revised wording retains mention of the net migration target being in the tens of thousands but fails to identify who it is that has stated the target. This ambiguity means that some readers may infer that it is a government target.

I wrote to Mr Watson to ask that this wording was removed, however, his reply to my letter contends that the “net migration target” has become part of the public discourse, and it is therefore legitimate to reference it. I must disagree strongly on this point. Whether or not it has become part of the public debate is irrelevant and to continue to state it as a government target does not in any way reflect the coalition agreement.

The public rightly expects all ONS releases to reflect the facts accurately, given its role as a trusted and respected institution. It is not for the ONS to comment on public discourse or political targets set by political parties, and continuing to use this incorrect wording will no doubt compromise its political neutrality and independence thus misleading the public.

I am therefore requesting that the ONS removes all references to this target from all of its future releases, to ensure that it conveys the correct and agreed government position.

I am copying this letter to John Pullinger, Glen Watson and Ian Cope.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Vince Cable', written in a cursive style.

VINCE CABLE

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills

The Rt Hon Vince Cable MP
Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
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8 December 2014

Dear Mr Cable

Thank you for your letter dated 27 November 2014 regarding the following sentence in the introduction of the November 2014 Migration Statistics Quarterly Release (MSQR):

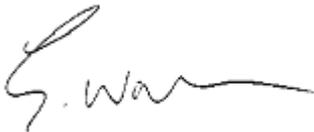
'Additionally, migration statistics are used to monitor the impact of immigration policy, and performance against a stated target to reduce annual net migration to the UK to the tens of thousands by 2015.'

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is governed by the independent UK Statistics Authority. ONS remains resolutely politically neutral; referencing a target that users and the media follow closely does not, in my opinion, impact on that neutrality.

A reference to the net migration target was first introduced in the August 2013 MSQR. Following feedback from your department, the reference to a government target was removed, and the current wording was introduced in the August 2014 MSQR. In October, after considering alternatives including a proposal from Home Office and BIS, we concluded that the current wording of the statement provides helpful context for users, and I see no sound statistical reason to change it. The net migration target has become part of the media and public discourse; the media and others tend to comment on the net migration statistics in this context. Senior managers within ONS therefore made the decision to leave the sentence as it is.

I am copying this letter to John Pullinger, the National Statistician, and to Sir Andrew Dilnot, the chair of the UK Statistics Authority.

Yours sincerely



Glen Watson
Director General for ONS



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Glen Watson
Director General - Office for National Statistics
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27 November 2014

Dear Mr Watson,

It has been brought to my attention that the quarterly migration statistics, published today by ONS contain a reference to a "stated target to reduce annual net migration to the tens of thousands by 2015".

I am sure you are aware that this is not Government policy. The coalition agreement states that the coalition commits to "introduce a cap on immigration" – it does not state the level of that cap. The wording you quote is a Conservative Party commitment which my party believes to be unrealistic and unachievable and hence has never agreed to it. It should therefore not be referenced in any official Government publication.

My officials have previously brought this oversight to the attention of ONS statisticians, and indeed revised wording was agreed, in collaboration with Home Office statisticians.

I understand that the revised wording which correctly represents agreed government policy was not included in today's quarterly migration statistics report. I would like to ask ONS urgently to re-consider its position, given its institutional obligation to political neutrality and given that the purpose of the change is to correct a factual error in a description of government policy.

VINCE CABLE

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills