
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

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Dear Jeremy and Bob

I am writing to you on my last day as Chair of the UK Statistics Authority to let you know about some growing worries I have had about the way the Government Statistical Service has developed in recent times. I write as an observer over the past four years of the work of government statisticians, not as one of their number, or as a spokesman for them.

As you know, the Government Statistical Service embraces the statistical work of around two hundred government organisations, across the four Administrations. The modern processes of public administration produce vast and increasing amounts of data, and it falls to the statistical service to distil them, to maintain their integrity, and to maximise their value for decision-taking and for a sound understanding of social and economic developments. The Statistical Service does so with a quiet efficiency that has much impressed me and the other non-executive members of the Statistics Authority.

The overall numbers of specialist statistical staff increased substantially from the early 1990s until the onset of the present cuts in Departmental expenditure. They were driven in part by growing demand, and in part by a change in the primary recruitment route, from a central fast-stream assistant statistician competition to the local recruitment of the statistical officer grade. Assistant statisticians were much sought-after, but increasingly hard to recruit in the face of competition from the City and elsewhere, so this change was a pragmatic response. The number of assistant statisticians has, in consequence, fallen to just over 100, about one-half of their number in 1996. At the same time, a much larger number of statistical officers have either been appointed or have made the transition from other civil service disciplines.

At the middle management level there has been a small increase in numbers at Grade 7 and a substantial increase at Grade 6. However, in many areas of statistical work there is no statistician more senior than Grade 6. The numbers at the first level of the Senior Civil Service have fallen substantially since the 1970s. And numbers of the most senior statistical managers at Grade 3 and above have fallen very sharply - down from some 25 in the 1970s to 8 now, all but two of whom are employed by ONS or the Statistics Authority.

The statistician group has, thus, evolved into a larger but much flatter pyramid: the individual statistician who is seeking promotion beyond Grade 6 must either leave statistical work or compete for a small number of opportunities. In practice, quite a few of the most able statisticians have moved into the Senior Civil Service outside the field of statistics.

However, where these changes to structure leave us is that there are few senior civil servants in government departments with the expertise and authority to represent confidently the values and insights of the statistical service, to Ministers, their special advisers, and senior officials. I accept that this is a choice that those departments have every right to make, and that they have done so after due consideration. But, I suspect that this process has evolved incrementally, and not in that sense, deliberately. I believe that it has been damaging to the fabric of government, and I doubt whether it is what Parliament and the public expect. Bodies including the Royal Statistical Society and various parliamentary committees have in recent times raised questions about the senior level capacity of the Statistical Service.

Departmental statisticians advise on some of the most influential data there is, relating to the formulation of policy, resource allocation, and the work and performance of the government. This is both sensitive and complex ground. Just how sensitive and complex this is, is something I have seen at first hand as Chair of the Authority. Your predecessor's guidance to government departments in 2009 about good statistical practice has had the desirable, but demanding, effect of involving departmental heads of profession for statistics in giving a much wider range of advice; and it has had the effect, from time to time, of pitting the head of profession, often quite junior in the department, against senior officials, and Ministers and special advisers. That is a tough assignment.

I imagine that the situation I describe is worrying to you as it is to me. It will, perhaps, particularly concern you when, as part of your succession planning, you look around for a successor to Jil Matheson in some years' time. The field will thin because there are so few senior posts for statisticians.

A while ago I wrote to the Prime Minister proposing that the National Statistician should be given a leading role, as happened, as a matter of course, in the time of Claus Moser, Harold Wilson and Ted Heath, in decisions about the work and staffing of statistical offices in government. This proposal was rejected by the current Minister for the Cabinet Office on the ground that departments already get the statistical advice they need. I question that, and have invited the Minister to consider the matter further. Advising Ministers and those that advise them as to what statistics do and do not, mean for policy resources and performance, and making sure that this is properly reflected in government statements, is vital work that requires not just technical knowledge, but confidence, commitment and the practical authority which comes with seniority.

In conclusion, may I say how much I have been helped over the past four years by the support of senior official colleagues in departments? I thank you for this, and hope that you, and they, will see this letter as a constructive contribution to an important debate.

All good wishes to you both.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Scholar".

Sir Michael Scholar KCB