

British business statistics: public sector ambivalence and private sector opportunity?

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The changing balance between micro- and macro-economic statistics

White Paper on Employment Policy 1944

'The Government are prepared to accept in future the responsibility for taking action at the earliest possible stage to arrest a threatened slump.' This was having noted the depression that followed the First World War. *'This involves a new approach and a new responsibility for the state.'* *'Many of the decisions . . . will depend on quick and accurate diagnosis.'* *'It is therefore vital for (the government) to obtain, more fully and much more quickly than they have in the past, exact quantitative information about current economic movements.'*



Jack Stafford, Director of Statistics Board of Trade, 1968

'it has become clear that industry is looking to the government to provide more up to date statistics in greater commodity detail.... to permit the analyses which industrial economists are increasingly wishful to make. The government's own requirements (reflect) the growing need to be informed about the developing structure of industry, the pattern of its activities, and markets, and its changing location. The Report from the Estimates Committee underlines the desirability of developing industrial statistics in these directions.'

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Laurie Berman, Director of Statistics, DTI, 1971

'I think it is fair to say that there have been no really spectacular developments in macro-economic statistics in recent years [he was talking about the previous five years]; (but) there has been a considerable improvement in micro-economic statistics and more are on the way'

Sir John Boreham, head of the GSS, 1983

'in the UK the GSS now concentrates heavily on serving government. This is a shift in emphasis since 1981; before that, serving society (which includes industry) received more weight; it still gets some weight but less than before 1981.'

Ray Ash, Director of the BSO, 1985

'The climate which favoured the expanded collection of official statistics began to change in the mid 1970's with rising concern about cost of public expenditure and complaints from small firms about the costs of providing statistical information. The change in the climate became more pronounced during the last five years with the government's policies of less intervention in industry and of cutting back the civil service.'



Open Data: the challenge to all data producers

The ONS approach to Open Data

- Publication of detailed local area and disaggregated statistics on the Neighbourhood Statistics and NOMIS web sites.
- Unrestricted access to anonymised census data sets which are available on request
- Access to anonymised social survey data sets to researchers, by registration with the ESRC Data Archive
- Access to identifiable but not identified business and social survey datasets to approved researchers on premises and with technology licensed by ONS, with disclosure checks provided on resulting outputs. Each request for access is considered by the ONS Microdata Release Panel.



Open Data can:

- increase custom for an organisation's main (paid-for, non-data) product or service
- ease information sharing within the organisation and with partners and customers
- help provide a wider audience for published information
- provide incentives for others to help maintain datasets, reducing the maintenance cost for the organisation
- encourage innovation around the organisation's data (eg new analysis techniques they can take advantage of)
- help third parties to develop skills and services which the organisation can contract rather than developing in house

What questions arise?:

- How can we encourage private sector data to be more widely available?
- How far are these developments common across Europe and does Eurostat have a role in facilitating them?
- As the focus moves to private sector data collection, is the government missing anything?
- What would the Estimates Committee make of this? Would they now see business needs for data as largely being met by businesses themselves?