

**Speech by Sir Michael Scholar to the Government Statistical Service
Assistant Statistician/Statistical Officer conference, 8 December 2009**

Encouraging Innovation and Building Relationships

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today.

It is now two years since I last spoke to this gathering, and I can see that there are lots of new faces among you. Then, I had only recently been appointed as Chair of the Statistics Authority, the Statistics Act was not due to come into force for another few months, and I was very much at the beginning of a new journey in the world of official statistics.

I was struck by one of Jil Matheson's first slides which set out her overall vision for the GSS – “to be a self-confident group producing high quality statistics, analysis and advice that are widely-used by decision-makers”. For me, this sums up what the GSS should be all about – confidence, working together, quality, a user-focus, with your work contributing directly to the making of informed decisions.

But who exactly are these decision-makers? I am reminded of a conversation I had recently with someone who I used to work with quite closely. He said that he remained of the view that the fundamental point of official statistics was that they are collected for the benefit of government, not for anyone else.

Of course, he was completely out of date. He was living in the world of the 1980s, the world of Lord Rayner's “Doctrine” which sought to cut official statistics down to size so they were to be collected only if they were useful to those who paid for them: - in other words, government departments.

That world was swept away in the 1990s – and its demise was signed, sealed and delivered in the 2007 Statistics Act. It is the guiding principle of the Statistics Act that we must ensure that official statistics are collected and published to serve the public good. In the Authority we are following a very broad interpretation of what “public good” means. Our primary task must be to find out who the users, actual and potential, of official statistics are, and what use they could or should make of them. I am not convinced that everyone working in official statistics has fully accepted this new world. In the view of the Statistics Authority, what you should all do – in your work as statisticians – is to keep a constant eye on the users and the uses of the very many important statistics that you and your teams produce.

I know from personal experience that this can be quite difficult at times. As some of you may know, before I retired from the Civil Service, I held a number of posts in Whitehall, including five years as Permanent Secretary at the then DTI. Even at that time it was a large department with a large statistical team. When you are working in an environment like that, working very closely with lots of other civil servants in your own department and in others, with press officers, special advisers, writing submissions for your Ministers, and so on, it is very easy to forget the world outside government. But, in statistics, there is a very important world out there – lots of different communities of users of statistics – academics, the media, Parliament, and of course the general public.

They watch very closely what the Statistical Service produces, and it is vitally important not to forget them. Ensuring the Statistical Service operates in the public

good – in the widest of senses – is what the legislation, and we in the Authority, are all about.

That is a big and daunting task. But we are making headway. The Code of Practice, which we published almost a year ago, puts user requirements centre-stage. Each of the statutory Assessment reports that we have so far published – there are now 27 of them – contains observations about how well producers of individual sets of statistics are doing in terms of identifying, documenting and meeting user needs. We will also very soon publish a wide-ranging report on what we think further needs to be done to strengthen the voice of users across what we call the “statistical value chain” – from planning what statistics need to be collected, through to how they should best be produced and disseminated, and how they should be communicated – and the underlying messages from them – to the outside world.

The Statistical Service must keep uppermost in its mind that many readers of statistical releases are not expert users – they quite often dip-in and dip-out of them trying to find what they hope to find. I think it is important to keep a constant eye on the language being used in statistical products, and to make sure that you communicate what the statistics show, and what they don't, in as clear a way as you can so that it is accessible to as wide an audience as possible. We know that statistical communication often involves words and tables, but as we have seen from some of Jil's examples earlier, it is also possible to think innovatively and creatively, and take advantage of developments in technology.

By retaining a user-focus in all of your work, thinking about what users need and want, thinking yourself into their shoes, speaking to them and asking them, building relationships with them, and trying to innovate on their behalf, the statistical products on which they rely will continue to grow and develop, and remain of lasting and real value.

So being more user-focused is one challenge. But in our short life so far the Authority has faced, and continues to face, another large challenge. Under the terms of the Statistics Act the Authority is, at the same time, in a leadership role in respect of the 7,000 members of the Government Statistical Service, and also part of the opposition, a critic and a regulator of the GSS. The National Statistician is, of course, the Head of the GSS. She is also the Authority's Chief Executive, and all Authority and ONS employees are civil servants like you. So while part of the Authority is there to lead the GSS professionally, another part of us – a separate and distinct part – is also an independent regulator of official statistics – a “watchdog” if you like – reporting not to Ministers but directly to Parliament. To combine these two roles is difficult, but never more difficult than when we are regulating part of ourselves.

I venture to claim that we have so far performed this Indian rope trick with some success. The Authority has had to innovate and work it out as we go along, using the legislation as our guide. The most difficult moment came in the Spring, when Karen Dunnell, Jil's predecessor as National Statistician, together with the ONS, were the objects of a blistering media attack about a release on migration and the migrant workforce. This attack was part political and part statistical or professional. We responded with an immediate public expression of support, repelling the political attack. Then we followed up with some considered and constructive criticisms of the Statistical Release itself. Of course we didn't please everybody, but I am glad to record that the ONS, and the then National Statistician, publicly accepted our criticisms and, I believe, won admiration for the openness of their approach.

So while the Authority has a leadership role, and at times we are required to comment and criticise when things don't go quite right, we are also here to support you and the National Statistician in ensuring that the Statistical Service remains as one of the very best in the world. In fact, that is what statutory Assessment is all about. Of course, one of the key roles of Assessment is to take a decision on whether a statistical product should carry – or continue to carry – the National Statistics badge. But Assessment is a lot more besides. In each Assessment report, we take a view on how well the statistics being assessed are meeting the principles and practices in the Code of Practice, and offer some suggestions for further enhancement, as well as requirements on the department to do certain things for National Statistics status to be retained.

However, that is not where the story ends. Our role through Assessment is not just to lay down requirements or set out suggestions from 'on high' – it is to help ensure that official statistics are produced and disseminated for the public good. We want to support statisticians to help you to meet the exacting standards in the Code of Practice, and we are ready to offer advice or to lend a supporting hand if you call upon us to do so.

By the time that I retired from the Civil Service in 2001, there had been a squeeze on the analytical professions for several decades or more, to preserve, as it was argued, Departments' front-line capability. Nowhere had this squeeze been felt more acutely than in the Government Statistical Service.

Since I have been Chair of the Statistics Authority I have seen that this decline has been reversed, and that many Departments have taken significant action to rebuild their analytical capability. I believe that the Statistics Act, although it nowhere mentions the GSS explicitly, provides the opportunity to build further on this change. Statisticians need, in my view, to come out more into the daylight, to be more fully involved with the other professions in policy-making and in providing the analytical horse-power which Departments so much need; and statisticians also need to get themselves ready, through improved training and a changed view of their own role and capability, to explain and defend in public their numbers and their publications. I know that one of Jill's priorities is to continue to provide opportunities for you to enhance your skills and professional development, and influencing and communication skills play a very important part in that.

It has been good to see some Departments working with the Authority and the National Statistician supporting our initiative of holding statistical press briefing events to coincide with the publication of major statistical releases, separate from Ministers and departmental press offices. I believe this is a genuine example of innovation in the spirit of the legislation. But we need more Departments to come on board – so please do take that message back. Journalists greatly value these briefing events. More importantly, they need them in order to understand the statistics properly, and benefit from the explanations given by you – by independent professionals.

Second, data-sharing. This, too, is a long journey, from the days, not long ago, when Departments were often obliged by law to keep their data entirely to themselves, to the innovative possibilities and new opportunities created by the Statistics Act. Bringing together the huge volumes of data held by key Departments, so there is read-across, so that new connections and new inferences may be made, will allow us either to learn more from existing data about our society and economy, or to reduce the demands we make on respondents, and on our own expenditure on the processes behind the production of statistics; or even both at the same time. I believe

that this is the way forward for improving, for example, migration statistics, and also for future development of the Census.

So far, we have achieved data-sharing from the Schools Census, and also from the Migrant Worker Scan. Very recently, the process for bringing about data-sharing of higher education data got underway. So here, too, the GSS are playing its part in innovating and making progress, and I would like to pay tribute to the officials involved in those Departments concerned who have worked hard to bring these early successes about. You will not need me to tell you of the political difficulties ahead amidst the concerns about data loss and privacy. Therefore, embedded within this great opportunity, is also a challenge and an unknown.

Finally, the integrity of official statistics and public confidence in them. This, as you know, was the mainspring of the political motivation to have a Statistics Bill, and this is, in my view, the biggest prize offered by the Act. Our Code of Practice is very clear about, and very tough on, any attempt at political manipulation of official statistics. As such, it gives great responsibilities to the statistical Heads of Profession in Departments, and no doubt has given rise, and perhaps is still giving rise, to occasional tensions in some quarters within departments. But the Act and the Code have undoubtedly strengthened the position of statisticians in their departments, and I hope that in time the public - and the media - will come to see that is the case.

The Authority would, of course, like to see the position of statisticians further improved. I would, for example, like to see the pre-release regime further tightened, so that the public could be assured that politicians and their advisers have no opportunity to interfere with statistical publications in advance of their release, or otherwise seek to gain political advantage from early sight of statistical releases. This, too, will be the subject of one of our forthcoming Reports. So, while we look to see the professional standing of statisticians in their departments continue to improve, we also want to create as much of an independent professional space for statisticians as possible so that these reassurances for the public can be given.

In so many different ways, therefore, the new landscape created by the legislation gives the Statistical Service lots of opportunities to do things differently, to innovate and to build lasting relationships with all sorts of people, inside government and outside it. I have set out some of the opportunities as I see them today, but there will be many others. Like Jil, I encourage you to seize them with both hands.

Thank you very much indeed again for inviting me to speak to you today and I wish you well for the rest of your conference.