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STATISTICS FOR DECISION - MAKING?

The Prime Minister of Britain "announces 'fundamental changes' in industrial statistics"

The work of making official statistics speedier, more reliable and more comprehensive has been given authoritative backing by the creation of a standing Ministerial Committee, chaired by Mr. Edmund Dell, Minister of State, and the Board of Trade, announced Mr. Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, in a speech to the International Statistical Institute on 10th September. The Prime Minister also announced that there would be 'a fundamental change from the traditional system of industrial statistics. We have at present, he said, 'a mixture of short period inquiries differing from industry to industry, from the very good to the non-existent. Some of these inquiries are sponsored privately, some by Government, others jointly, and they are rarely wholly compatible, either with each other, or with the Census of Production which has been held by the Board of Trade at approximately five-yearly intervals since 1907 and is, as in most other countries, the main source of industry statistics.'

'We are about to replace this time-honoured but increasingly inadequate system,' continued the Prime Minister, 'with a more comprehensive scheme of quarterly reporting of production which will be supplemented by annual inquiries into such matters as purchases, fixed capital formation and stock building, thus creating what amounts to an annual Census of Production, with a strong quarterly element; and where there is need for them, monthly inquiries will also be included in the system. One important result of this will be a much improved Index of Industrial Production.'

'We have set up — as part of the Board of Trade but closely linked with the Central Statistical Office — a new Business Statistics Office which has the task of integrating the various streams of industrial statistics into the new system. The structure of this new system has evolved through discussions between Government statisticians and representatives of industry and also through the evidence given to the Estimates Committee.'

'Under the new arrangements the Government Statistical Service and industry are working more and more as partners. Each industrial sector is being fully consulted about the form the new inquiry should take to ensure that the statistics will be of the greatest possible use while being obtained at the least possible cost and inconvenience to industry and commerce as well as to the Government. The development of this service to users outside the Government is now one of our greatest priorities.'

'The new system of industrial statistics will get the best of both centralization and decentralization. We shall achieve in the Business Statistics Office a centralized collection, storage and retrieval of data. But at the same time the analysis and interpretation of that data will be in the hands of statisticians in the various policy departments.'

Earlier the Prime Minister had said that Government statisticians in this country were deployed throughout virtually all departments and this had the advantage of enabling them to play their full part in the process of policy formulation, but at the same time they constituted unified statistical service working together as a corps with a professional identity under the leadership of Professor Claus Moster. The growth in the number of Government statisticians would continue but it would most certainly be accompanied by a greater statistical knowledge and understanding among those in the Government Service who were not professional statisticians.

Referring to the Fulton Report, the Prime Minister said: 'Indeed I am modestly glad that Lord Fulton's historic report embodied a thought I had frequently expressed when thinking about reorganization of the Government machine, that literacy is no longer enough, that everyone concerned in the administrative process, whether in central Government, local Government or industry, needs to be numerate as well.'

'The major reforms now proceeding in the civil service, post-Fulton, not only provided great opportunities for statisticians; it

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laid on them the responsibility of ensuring that the training in statistics of managers and administrators was right and soundly used. 'Within Government departments we can be confident that the advice of statisticians will be sought more often by administrators and that statisticians themselves will become to an even greater extent members of policy teams', said Mr. Wilson. 'For increasingly in Government, as in industry, statistical advice is indispensable for the decisions which have to be taken. And in our reforms the ending of past demarcations, the equality of opportunity enabling each to get to the top administrative jobs, means that we do not think of statisticians just as back room boys if some of their work has to be in the back room, we still want them to have the same chance to use the front door as everyone else.'

Speaking of the work of speeding the provision of early and accurate information, the Prime Minister said: 'We are now using these techniques in this country to calculate the series of preliminary estimates of consumers' expenditure which we have recently

started to publish. And we have found that we can issue worth-while preliminary estimates one month after the end of the quarter, instead of waiting until the end of the following quarter for more comprehensive information. Altogether to improve the speed of statistics is now one of our top priorities in Government statistics.'

Perhaps the most significant and well-known line of attack today in improving the statistical information for decision taking is through the growing use of computers... With processing powers 100 or even 1,000 times greater than those in use only a few years ago computers enable us much more readily to process, store and disseminate information. Moreover, the modern computer systems also enable us to make further analysis of the data that has been stored in the form of data banks which you have discussed at one of your meetings. Unlike financial banks these are as yet incapable of issuing overdrafts, but I am sure that, armed with your latest techniques, nothing is beyond you.'