

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS  
PARTICULARLY AFFECTING THE CSO

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I congratulate the Officers of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society in responding so quickly to my suggestion to have this Symposium. It is timely to have discussion in the Society on the statistical component of information needs in this country. In particular, how these needs can best be identified and how structures and resources can best be developed to meet, efficiently, any needs not yet covered by the availability of existing statistics.

In this context there are two documents "on the table" - one with recommendations from NESC, the second containing proposals by government. I welcome them both and would like at the outset to express my appreciation of the considerable effort by the various authors in their preparation. Naturally this does not mean that I accept all the points as put forward in either document.

The recent NESC publication "Information for Policy" gives the detailed report of the consultant with many recommendations by him, prefaced by NESC's own comments and its recommendations concerning priority issues. These recommendations include a number about structures and procedures and also about specific needs as seen by the author. It also treats, to a certain extent, with resource implications. In this respect it gives a picture of substantial improvement with "minimal" additional resource requirements - a picture which frankly is quite misleading and to which I must return later.

The very recent government publication "A New Institutional Structure for the Central Statistics Office" makes specific proposals about structures and certain procedures. The publication (pl 3483), which for brevity I refer to subsequently as the Proposals, has really three separate parts, which in chronological order, rather than sequence of presentation, are

- the Report to the Taoiseach of the Statistical Council set up last year (Appendix I),
- the CSO comments on that Report (Appendix II), abbreviated to fit an allotted space, hence not covering all points of agreement or difference,
- the actual Proposals, with background - these are my "point of departure"

These Proposals identify (par 23) four key features of the CSO's new structure. I wish to concentrate on two of them - those relating to the scope of CSO activities as being particularly relevant to our subject tonight. They are -

- (a) A National Statistics Board with the essential function of guiding the strategic direction of the CSO. The Board will be charged with establishing priorities in responding to the demand for official statistics.
- (b) New powers of co-ordination in respect of all official statistics.

The two others relate more to internal CSO matters which are not as relevant

- (c) Aspects of managerial as well as professional functions.
- (d) Greater freedom in allocation and deployment of resources.

My comments deal mainly with three major implications - multi-annual plans, co-ordination and resources. I take this approach because the CSO has to face the actual

implementation What could be described as the culmination for the Statistical Council and this NESC activity is in effect a starting point for CSO

### MULTI-ANNUAL PLANS

As I interpret the Proposals (par 29 and 40), the Board will at the outset, with the advice of senior management in CSO, undertake the preparation of a multi-annual plan covering priorities, time-tables for achieving them and a recommendation for government approval concerning the resources of staff, equipment and finance which should be made available to the CSO When the recommendation has been considered by government, a firm five-year expenditure programme will be set by government for the CSO - with no possibility of a *volume* increase beyond any originally covered by the programme The procedure would be repeated at regular five-year intervals Subject to certain modifications, this would be a most welcome innovation by contrast with the annual approach to which we have been constrained

The first immediate task, then, is the preparation of the first multi-year plan There will have to be detailed consideration of requirements for all purposes for which it is considered that official statistics should be provided The starting point will be the expressed wants of every sector whether described in terms of changes to existing statistical series or of new items

I use the word *wants* designedly The Board will have to translate these into *needs* and seem adequate justifications and explanations of intended use by proponents of changes or of additions They will need to obtain or provide answers to many questions, such as

- What is required?
- Who requires it?
- Why? When? How often?
- Who will provide it? From what source?
- What does it cost to obtain? Is it worth it?
- Who pays for it? (A specific department?)/EEC?

What is its priority rating?

To relate to the title of this symposium - there will have to be a conscious decision as to whether a narrow approach "Policy" or the wider one "Policy and Research" is to be taken. In addition, what about commercial needs and those of the general public? What are the relative weightings to be given to these various user groups? The CSO has always tried to take full account of the broader approach and would certainly hope that this policy will not be changed fundamentally, although the question of charges for services rendered will have to be carefully considered.

Another aspect of "official statistics" is meeting EEC requirements. There is an EEC multi-year statistical programme which is very heavy and, to a substantial extent, statutory in nature. The assessment of needs and priorities must encompass these requirements and wrestle with what may be conflict between different statistical requirements at the national and Commission levels.

Input for the preparation of a multi-year plan will be needed on as comprehensive a basis as possible. The CSO will resume next month a series of user seminars covering different subject matter areas. These should provide one type of useful source of information for the comprehensive reassessment of statistical needs and priorities.

There was a detailed assessment made over a decade ago and published in the 1974 Report of the Committee on Statistical Requirements and Priorities. A summary of the final chapter of that report, which set out recommendations and overall priorities is given in Appendix 6 of the NESC report with a brief account of subsequent action. In the context of user contacts the suggestion of the Statistical Council to have users groups/liason groups is welcome. In their developments it will be important to bring in the supplier dimension as well.

In the body of the NESC report there are many specific recommendations which must also be included in the final assessment. They reflect the consultant's views on the basis of the study, which he carried out with specific terms of reference. Here I must sound a note of caution.

The existence of these recommendations in such a conveniently presented format in that well written report may convey an impression of comprehensiveness and of an authoritative status on content and priority which, I believe, was not intended but which can be misleading. They are not the result of a detailed in-depth survey of all sectors of the type which is necessary for the preparation of a multi-year programme - nor is it anywhere claimed by the author that they are

In saying this I do not wish to imply that he is not justified in raising the topics for consideration - far from it. But there are many instances where his recommendations need to be considered more fully before all the statistical implications become clear and final recommendations made and there are gaps in coverage too

For example - one recommendation is that, at the earliest opportunity, the Census of Population should be moved to a *de jure* (usually resident) basis from the traditional *de facto* (where present on Census night) basis but to maintain continuity the data on the latter basis should be retained, at least for some time. The relevant paragraph (4.29) deals only with some of the advantages of such a change but there are disadvantages too

There will be a Census next April - it will be on the same basis as heretofore - why? One use of the Census total, perhaps the best known, is derivation of intercensal net migration. If we change we get an incorrect figure - so why not collect data on both bases simultaneously - each household and institution accounting both for all those present on Census night (with usual address given) and for all those usual residents absent on Census night? We see scope for untold confusion using both bases with conflicting population figures circulating

However, without a reliable continuing system for measuring migration flows we would be severely criticised, justly, if we were to change from the existing method. A change in basis at any future time must be preceded by adequate pilot studies held in census-type conditions

I use this one example of what might appear to be a

simple recommendation to illustrate the point concerning statistical implications

Similarly, concerning lack of comprehensiveness of subject matter areas in the report, I refer to just one example, agriculture, but there are many more. Agriculture receives scant mention (paragraph 4.57) with no advertence to the hazardous state of the once flourishing small area data on livestock numbers and on cropping patterns, etc. Any assessment of allocation of limited resources must face up to this deteriorating situation in the early part of any multi-year plan. This will be an area where assessment of needs of macro-data and micro-data users and policy makers and research workers and EEC bodies will present an interesting exercise in priority setting.

In the context of users' needs publications must be considered. In both the Report of the Statistical Council and the NESC report, detailed suggestions have been made concerning publications. As we are now reviewing our publication programme I take this opportunity to invite from every user suggestions and views concerning CSO publications and concerning the comments thereon included in the two reports. Considered comments in writing will be particularly welcome in the CSO.

#### CO-ORDINATION

The second implication of the Proposals I wish to refer to is co-ordination. The idea of co-ordination comes up in all the documents which I have mentioned. Clarification on what is envisaged and of what can be reasonably feasible in this regard is required and calls for discussion just as much as the first topic - the multi-year plan.

The CSO's view of the essential features of a central statistical agency is given in Appendix II of the Proposals. It includes the item - "effective power and means to co-ordinate all official statistics and to ensure that the potential of administrative records is adequately assessed and realised as fully as possible". So we are for co-ordination, *given effective power and means*.

As regards power - the Proposals in paragraphs 36 to 38 (reproduced in Appendix A), state that statutory authority will be given to the CSO to have access to administrative records in other government departments for the purpose just stated. Legislation will also provide that the CSO shall be informed of any new collecting and processing of statistical data envisaged by any public body and that the CSO may require information on any such existing activity.

One of the responsibilities of the Board given in paragraph 29 of the Proposals reads - "developing ways of ensuring and co-ordinating the needed flow of information from government departments, State bodies and firms, etc, in the private sector to CSO while minimising the burden of compliance to the extent possible". This brings in the additional aspect of response burden but seems to relate to co-ordination of flows to the CSO only.

The NESC report goes into some detail on what co-ordination of statistics outside the CSO should cover. Appendix B reproduces the relevant paragraphs 8.31 - 8.46 indicating a number of objectives which, as the consultant sees it, would be embraced in the main functions of the co-ordinating role. They are quite extensive but are summarised in paragraph 9.24 as follows - "to maximise output from public resources, achieve quality control and compatibility between data sets, avoid unnecessary duplication, use the capability for data transmission via computers, and encourage public sector bodies to consider the statistical possibilities of administrative records and to consult on this with the CSO. The functions of the CSO should be widened to include this co-ordination".

While I do not have time to dwell on the detailed paragraphs, I must highlight practical considerations which must also be recognised -

- 1 Resource implications exist not only for the CSO but also for public sector bodies with suitable but undeveloped administrative records
- 2 Related difficulties of statistically motivating such bodies to a commitment stage

- 3 Special nature of client relationships, enjoyed by State agencies, inhibits pooling of statistics
- 4 For co-ordination, as elsewhere, priorities will have to be settled within the multi-annual plan and five-year expenditure programme
- 5 Whatever role as co-ordinator the CSO takes on, it is essential that it continues to be a statistical agency only and that it does not become associated in the public mind with any department or agency or semi-State body which is concerned with administration of schemes or programmes affecting persons or business concerns in their individual capacity. There cannot be any development which involves transfer of such individual data from the CSO or via the CSO to administrative agencies

I am quite surprised that the summary in Table 1 of the NESC report (see Appendix C) includes at (ii) the task of "establishing guidelines on data protection" as part of co-ordination activities for the CSO. This is a very wide field indeed in which the implications for statistical purposes, although relevant, are not the dominating consideration.

Besides "co-ordination", the terms "official" and "statistics" will also need clarification for non-CSO statistics. Is "statistics" to include all ongoing management measurements *per se* related to administration of specific schemes or systems, be they general or sectoral, related to social or economic aspects, etc? Or does it cover only those which can be adapted to reasonable conformity with measurable economic or social concepts to indicate levels or trends?

Does "official" cover all local and regional authorities besides the types of bodies listed in NESC paragraph 8.43 (see Appendix B)? Should it cover research institutes funded by the State?

I leave this intriguing question to move to my third topic - resources



## RESOURCES

Earlier on I referred to the NESC report's approach to resources - John Blackwell will, I know, not be surprised to hear me developing the point

The general impression is given in the relevant part of the consultant's report and more particularly in the Council's comment thereon, that a very substantial improvement can be achieved with little additional resources - less than 1 per cent in relation to the CSO's Budget (£60,000) Table 1 (see Appendix C) highlights the position. The frequent use of the word "minimal" creates, unjustifiably, the idea of negligible requirements. One needs to be a careful and thorough reader to assess the difference between the Council's recommendations and those dealt with by the consultant. Even in the detailed report, however, I am concerned that the resources implications are not fully appreciated.

My main concern is to dispel the impression of substantial improvements for negligible resource inputs. Of course, additional outputs in the form of extra cross-tabulations from, for example, the Labour Force Survey, would not call for sizeable resources. The position is otherwise for projects such as the improvement of the National Accounts estimation on the expenditure side, basic overhaul of agricultural enumerations implicit in their computerisation, the wide powers of co-ordination to be given to the CSO, and many others.

As you will have seen from Table 1 in the Appendix, the consultant's estimated costs amount to one unit of staff for the CSO to co-ordinate all public statistics, etc. In paragraph 8.77 of the report the consultant speaks of "a senior staff person with possibly an additional person, especially at the outset when the volume of work would be greatest". The need to clarify what "co-ordination" means was developed earlier. Whatever may be the precise parameters within which the CSO will be working in that respect we cannot see how any real continuing co-ordination can be furnished on the resource basis stated. It might be

possible for a first year to have one senior person surveying the field, as it were, with a view to a plan of campaign. However, the actual implementations on a continuing basis of co-ordination would need a permanent division of its own with a number of people working full-time. I cannot at this stage say what the size of that should be. This will depend on the precise terms of reference.

The last entry in Table 1 speaks of "improved data on households by adaptation of the Household Budget Survey". But at present there is no Household Budget Survey at all and such a Survey must be in existence before one speaks of adapting it. In paragraph 8.80 of the report the consultant does refer to "an annual small scale Household Budget Survey (£200,000 a year)". The first requirement however is a full scale Household Budget Survey which will cost many times this sum. This will have to be covered in the early part of the first plan.

In the same table the word "minimal" is used to describe the estimated costs of each of a number of recommendations and the sum of all the "minimal" entries seems to be zero.

It is not my objective to itemise all the reservations which relate to this cost aspect - and there are many - but to illustrate the grounds on which the CSO disagrees with the general impression given in several places of the possibilities of substantial increases in outputs with "minimal" additions to resource inputs.

The government Proposals do not deal with resources, these will be a matter for the Board. But in the context of preparing the resource recommendations for the first multi-year plan (which must provide for ongoing activities as well as developments) the Board is instructed to take into account the relevant Statistical Council and NESC reports and an unpublished DPS Management Services report on the CSO.

The Statistical Council did not consider the "right" level of resources that ought to be absorbed by a statistical service - it was not asked to do this.

In fairness to the NESC report it indicated that "it was not intended that the study should provide detailed costings which an O & M study might include, partly because of the prior existence of such a study of the CSO by the Department of the Public Service"

The Management Services Unit of the DPS did consider, and at great length too, the manpower resources needed for the ongoing activity of the CSO (they did not have the task of questioning the need for each of these activities) The result of their Survey which is not published showed in no uncertain terms that the CSO was appreciably understaffed for the activities it had in hands This study was completed in 1983 We got nothing from it Since then we have been subject to the same rules of embargoes, etc , as all other civil service offices In the Proposals, paragraph 40 indicates that the CSO will not be relieved from such measures

Some of you may feel that I am overstressing this matter of resources We in the CSO have reason to speak about it frequently We feel we have a just cause

We are not blind to the fact that there are general resource problems in the Public Service - we are not naive enough to think that the CSO should get priority over everybody else But are we really unreasonable?

Certainly, we cannot take on additional tasks until we have enough resources to deal with them adequately as well as supporting, maintaining and renewing existing ongoing activities - unless of course the in-depth assessment identified some substantial ones as no longer necessary - any candidates, please?

We have identified our priorities for more resources They are given in the very last paragraph of the government publication in our comments on the Statistical Council Report

#### *CONCLUSION*

You may be surprised that I have not devoted my time to

setting out the CSO's views on the specific statistical needs for Policy and Research. It is not because I am not aware of many needs but because I feel other aspects should be brought to the fore at this initial stage. The objective is to get everyone involved or interested thinking about the realities of implementation.

The discussion this evening will, I hope, bring to light views on "burning needs" both as regards data and co-ordination. The preparation work for the multi-annual plan will give a further opportunity for doing so, either in conjunction with the seminars that I mentioned already or through other contacts.

What are the CSO's views on the Government Proposals I have covered? We welcome the proposal to have a multi-year programme with project priorities settled, leading to a firm five-year expenditure programme to be set by government. We would, however, be extremely disappointed, indeed finally disillusioned, if all the work which is about to be undertaken leads to a programme which in the event is not executed. Need I say that we would much prefer to have a government budgetary commitment for a five-year period rather than the more uncertain expenditure programme.

The associated factor of the Proposals that no volume increase can be envisaged after a five-year programme has been set by Government needs reconsideration in the context of accounting procedures. These are such that even if a new project could be funded from outside (for example some EEC Survey) it would add to our total pay costs and to our *gross* expenditure even though our *net* expenditure would not be altered. The restrictions should therefore be operated in terms of a net expenditure basis, to cater for the possibility of some external financing.

The plan would also have to contain within it some flexibility, particularly in the context of *ad hoc* surveys, to enable the CSO to respond to unforeseen requirements emerging during the period and considered by the Board as urgent in nature.

We also welcome the proposal to give the CSO an active and effective co-ordinating role with, of course, sufficient

power and means to execute this within a realistic context

In conclusion I want to make it quite clear that the CSO welcomes all developments that can assist in strengthening and improving the statistical information system for Policy and Research provided confidentiality and integrity are not weakened. I must emphasise that we do have a substantial statistical information system in existence for Policy and Research, a system in which many developments have occurred over recent years. As Director of the CSO I am aware of the considerable efforts of so many of the staff, under extreme difficulties and criticism, to keep going the many series we compile. I wish, in this forum, to place on record my appreciation of their successful efforts over so many years.

## APPENDIX A

### EXTRACT FROM "A NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE FOR THE CENTRAL STATISTICS OFFICE"(P1 3483)

#### CO-ORDINATION OF STATISTICS

36 Already there are important links between the Central Statistics Office and other Government departments generating a flow of statistical material to the Office. In order to allow a strengthening of these links, statutory authority will be given to the Office to give it access (subject to considerations of national security) to administrative records available in other Government departments for the purposes of assessing the potential of these records as a source of needed statistical information and, where appropriate, developing these sources in conjunction with the department concerned with, in all cases, adequate safeguards of confidentiality. The Office will have the central role for co-ordination of official statistics.

37 To give the Central Statistics Office clear powers to co-ordinate statistics, legislation will provide that

- (a) if any public body contemplates, either directly or indirectly, collecting and processing statistical data or introducing a data base the Central Statistics Office shall be informed with a view to co-ordination,
- (b) from the public bodies which collect and process statistical data or use data bases at the time when the Act enters into force, the Central Statistics Office may require information on their statistical activities with a view to co-ordination. It is envisaged that this programme would be completed within three years,
- (c) the Statistics Board will, subject to the final

authority of the Taoiseach, be the arbiter in any conflicts which may arise between public bodies in matters of statistical co-ordination

38 Each public body will nominate a Statistical Liaison Officer at senior level who will be responsible for co-ordination with CSO as far as that body is concerned

## APPENDIX B

### EXTRACT FROM "INFORMATION FOR POLICY" - NESC REPORT

#### Co-ordination of Statistics Outside the Central Statistics Office

8 31 Although Ireland has a centralised statistics office, statistics are now being collected and distributed by a wide variety of public bodies. No explicit co-ordination of this output of statistics occurs. Nor is there any indication of the amount of resources which go into this activity. To some extent, the growth in non-CSO sources has been in response to perceived deficiencies in the existing body of information. In part, it has occurred as a by-product of filling internal planning needs and the need for co-ordination. In part also, it has occurred as a by-product of implementing administrative schemes. The building cost index would be an example here.

8 32 The need for co-ordination of the collection of statistics outside CSO has already been pointed out in Chapter 5. A co-ordinating role is needed in relation to all aspects of these statistics. The main functions of the co-ordinating role would embrace a number of objectives.

8 33 First, there is the need to ensure quality control, that is some minimum set of standards which would be universally applicable and to guarantee compatibility between individual data sets (for example, on codes). The greater the degree of standardisation used for classifications and definitions, the less would be the likely burden on respondents as they found that their records were in conformity with all requirements.

8 34 Second, there is need to avoid unnecessary duplication. In particular, the potential for rationalisation of the data-gathering activities of State agencies should be examined. This would lead to enhanced possibilities for data analysis, as it might be possible to cross-tabulate data across the headings contained in individual surveys. There are two ways in which this might occur through the institution of an "umbrella" or omnibus survey, or through the linking of records. The latter would be much more difficult to achieve. To move towards an "umbrella" survey would be the most fruitful route. This would occur in relation to household data, and here is linked to the need for a general household survey (Chapter 4). An "umbrella" survey could also occur in relation to industrial data from firms. Here, there would be the need to overcome a resistance on the part of firms reluctant to deal with any central data-gatherer or unwilling to permit sharing of data.

8 35 Third, it is important to ensure that statistics which are of importance to policy-makers but which are of little or no importance to the collecting agency are produced. This may at times require that such a subordinate objective be given explicitly to the agency concerned.

8 36 Fourth, to consider the use of statistics collected by State agencies, other than the CSO, as means of verification, as sampling frames or as registers for the purposes of coding.

8 37 Fifth, to fulfil some "gatekeeping" functions in respect of the increasing volume of surveys of Irish firms being carried out by agencies in the public sector.

8 38 Sixth, to use the enhanced capability for data transmission via computers within the public sector. This reflects the increasing computerisation of public sector records. There is need to ensure mutual compatibility in such matters as the use of codes. Also in computer-to-computer operations, certain standards would have to be set and maintained.

8 39 Seventh, to encourage public sector bodies to consider the statistical possibilities of administrative records and



to consult on this with bodies such as the CSO This would be especially important at a time when new computer facilities were being installed

8 40 There are many examples of the valuable work which could be done through the co-ordinator There is the achievement of standardisation of information in reports and accounts of State-sponsored bodies and a common reporting standard for certain public bodies (Chapter 4)

8 41 Another example is in the area of balance of payments and the activities of transnational companies Currently, four bodies collect information which would be of interest from the viewpoint of a policy analyst the IDA on the disbursement of industrial grants, the CSO on industrial production, the Revenue Commissioners on the taxation of corporate income and the Central Bank through exchange control regulations (O'Leary, 1984) There is a *prima facie* case for some co-ordination of this information collection The co-ordinator could seek rationalisation and the greatest efficiency in the evolution of data banks - which is needed as can be seen from Chapter 7 The co-ordinator should encourage the most effective use of administrative records The potential for this is evident from Chapter 6

8 42 Minimum standards should be set in relation to data which are collected as a by-product of Government contracts, including their deposit at a central location

8 43 In summary, as far as the relations between CSO and other bodies are concerned, the key organisational issues relate to co-ordination of activities and compatibility of data sets This is in the light of the increasing fragmentation of outlets which has been occurring The principal bodies which are involved, outside the CSO, are

- AnCO,
- Central Bank of Ireland,
- Departments of Education, Energy, the Environment, Finance, Health, Industry, Trade, Commerce and Tourism, Labour, the Public Service and Social Welfare,
- Higher Education Authority,
- Industrial Development Authority,

- Institute for Industrial Research and Standards.
- National Board for Science and Technology.
- National Manpower Service,
- Revenue Commissioners

8 44 It is recommended that in order to achieve some degree of coherence, responsibility for encouraging co-ordination among non-CSO producers within the public sector should be assigned. There are a number of ways in which this desired co-ordination could occur. One would be a central office with responsibility for all public statistics. Another would be a co-ordinator of non-CSO statistics, together with effective liaison between that co-ordinator and CSO. The co-ordinator could be in a Government department, outside the departmental system, or could work through an interdepartmental committee.

8 45 In order to avoid a proliferation of both bodies, of controls and to achieve cost-effectiveness, it is recommended that the functions of the CSO should be widened to include the co-ordination of all public statistics which are gathered outside CSO. This should be written into the functions of CSO, in order to give the Office the desired degree of leverage in its dealings with Departments and agencies.

8 46 Ideally, the co-operation required to secure co-ordination would be forthcoming voluntarily. If after a short period of time it became evident that such was not the case, there would be need to use some coercive power or financial leverage in order to achieve the desired level of coherence.

## APPENDIX C

### EXTRACT FROM "INFORMATION FOR POLICY" - NESC REPORT

**Table 1**

**The Council's recommendations and estimated costs<sup>1</sup>**  
(the full list of the consultant's recommendations is provided)

	Recommendations	Consultant's estimated costs
<b>A</b> <i>Organisation &amp; Coordination</i>	(i) a formalised system of allocation of resources to statistical information involving preparation by the CSO of detailed work programmes including priorities and budgetary data	0.5 staff in CSO
	(ii) CSO to coordinate all public statistics including establishing guidelines on data protection and standardising data in all public bodies	1.0 staff in CSO
	(iii) CSO to appoint a publications editor, with tasks to include production of index to statistics collected and publication of series by subject	1.0 staff in CSO
	(iv) development of statistical user's seminars and linking CSO statistics to the policy process	minimal
	(v) more flexible organisation within the CSO	minimal
<b>B</b> <i>Administrative Records</i>	(i) improved data on employment and incomes by non-CSO bodies particularly the Revenue Commissioners with the possibility of developing an earnings survey in the longer run	£43 000 unit initially in Revenue and £6 000 p.a. thereafter
	(ii) each department to itemise unpublished materials	minimal
<b>C</b> <i>Improved Information</i>	(i) improvements in national accounts and balance of payments data	at minimal cost via specified improvements over 2-3 years
	(ii) improved data on firms via linking CSO and Companies Office data	minimal
	(iii) improved data on households by adaptation of the Household Budget Survey and exploration of the use of other existing surveys	minimal

*Notes* 1 The costs were estimated by the consultant following discussion with the relevant bodies. The bodies concerned do not necessarily agree with these recommendations.

## DISCUSSION

*S Cromien* I enjoyed these papers very much. There are so many interesting points in them that it is difficult to know which to comment upon. As an official of the Department of Finance I suppose I can be expected to comment first on the question of resources. In the course of my official duties I spend much of my time advising Ministers that public expenditure must be cut back sharply because both taxation and borrowing are too high. I find myself then turning to the specific areas in which I am personally interested such as the provision of adequate economic statistics on which policy decisions have to be based - including the decision to cut back expenditure - and discovering that everything that I would like to see done would cost extra money!

My personal dilemma is an illustration at micro-level of the dilemma of the Government when priorities have to be resolved. Giving something priority means preferring it over something else. It is difficult to persuade the community that where many vital services have to be cut back the improvement of statistics needs increased resources. Having said this, it is heartening that the Government White Paper recognised the importance of statistics to the extent of providing that a five-year expenditure programme will be set. Because of the constraints it is unfortunately not possible to go as far as Mr Linehan would like in providing a five-year Government budgetary commitment. I would not like to have a guarantee that *any* service (other, of course, than debt service) will be assured of a particular amount of resources over the next five years, given the difficulties of the Exchequer!

I note Mr Linehan's comment that he does not agree that a very substantial improvement can be achieved with little additional resources. I hope, however, there will be some and that the new National Statistics Board will apply themselves to seeking it. I hope that they will have the courage to say that certain statistics are not worth the cost of collection (and I note the wry wording of Mr Linehan's appeal for recommendations on this). Every set of statistics collected, like every Government service

provided, has its apologists and defenders but in a reallocation of resources something has to give. For example, while I appreciate that there are statutory requirements for much of the information that is prepared for the EEC, are all the other statistics required by the EEC and provided by the CSO really worth the cost in our circumstances?

I was rather struck by some of the quotations from the Rayner Committee report which Professor Conniffe includes in his paper as an example of a much less sympathetic line which might have been taken here to a reorganisation of the CSO. One of these makes the brusque statement that "there is no more reason for government to act as universal provider in the statistical field than in any other". This approach would not be acceptable here but it does raise an interesting question of principle about the extent to which the State can be expected to provide services of this nature without charging a commercial price for them. Rayner goes on to recommend that information of value to business should be charged for commercially. I hope the new Statistics Board will look into the feasibility of this.

Mr Blackwell makes some valuable comments about using economists along with mathematicians in the CSO and Professor Conniffe seems to favour them in some cases instead of mathematicians. This question will presumably be considered by the new Board. I would personally favour the use of more economists. I note that the British CSO publications often contain analyses by staff members. Mr Blackwell also suggests mobility between the CSO and other Government offices and I would certainly support this too. Professor Conniffe was concerned that the CSO was being retained within the Civil Service rather than being set up as a State-sponsored body, as the Statistical Council has recommended. I must say that I can see advantages in keeping the office within the Civil Service framework, not least because of the access which this provides to Government departments which will be the providers of important information which it will require.

In conclusion, I should like to congratulate the three speakers again for their very stimulating papers.

*John Fitzgerald* This symposium must be welcomed as a timely opportunity to review the many studies which have been undertaken in this area. So often in the past such studies have just been shelved but in this case, before the ink is dry on them, there are signs that things are improving. Anyone using CSO statistics must be aware of the developments that are taking place in a number of different areas. In the field of industrial statistics the improvements are obvious. In other areas such as the National Accounts, while improvements are less obvious to outsiders, as a major user I must record my increasing confidence in the data now being produced. Generally, I feel that the CSO are showing a sense of purpose which may have been lacking in the late 1970s. There still remain some areas which have been touched on by other speakers where one must express certain unhappiness. However, in the area of Statistics for Policy and Research the major problems in the future lie outside the CSO in the wider Public Service, especially in the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Welfare. A common thread running through many of the problems of collection and dissemination of data for Policy and Research is the failure to exploit the opportunities provided by computerisation. I want to consider this question in so far as it affects the CSO, accounting in the wider Government sector, and the Revenue and Social Welfare systems.

#### *Computerisation - CSO*

In the case of the CSO the potential of computerisation has implications for three areas: collection, processing and dissemination of data.

(a) *Collection* The method and range of data to be collected should be reconsidered in the light of the movement to computer-based accounting by the industrial, financial and distribution sectors. One obvious possibility would be for the CSO to modify the existing software used by reporting bodies for accounting purposes to provide the information that the CSO itself requires. An alternative would be for the CSO to develop or have developed, software capable of handling all firms' accounting and management information requirements as well as all the CSO's present

and future data requirements. This software could then be sold to users. A further option would be for the CSO to set out software standards to be adopted by all developers of software in Ireland which would cover the provision of the data the CSO requires.

While some firms, whether in the industrial or services sector, might oppose such a strategy it is likely that many would be quite happy to adopt such a practice involving, as it would, considerable labour cost savings in the preparation of data for the CSO.

In designing such software, or software standards, consideration should also be given to the likelihood that, within the next few years, the most efficient method of collecting the data, from the point of view of the CSO and the firm, would be to transmit it from the reporting body on a magnetic tape or disk or, preferably, directly to the CSO's computer over the telephone. This, together with the integration of the data preparation into the normal computerised accounting system of the firm or reporting unit, could result in delays in reporting being cut from months to milliseconds. Any danger to the security of the firm's data could be guarded by suitable programming and/or safeguards in the machinery actually used. The implementation of such a comprehensive system of data preparation and collection, if done directly by the CSO rather than merely by the establishment of software standards, would obviously require a field force who could help tailor existing software to the firm's (reporting body's) own requirements and to those of the CSO. However, some of the cost could possibly be recovered by charging for a service which would, obviously, have some value to the firms themselves.

*(b) Processing* The CSO should move more rapidly to a system where all data, from the time it first arrives in the CSO, is handled on the computer. Anyone who is in any way numerate, which is true of all the staff in the CSO, can acclimatise to working on a computer, with suitable software, in a matter of days. The objective should be that each person handling data in the CSO has his/her own terminal and data are entered and manipulated through that medium rather than with pen and paper. Too often computers are regarded as troublesome or difficult. This is

particularly the case where terminals or microcomputers are not easily available to users. Experience in the Department of Finance with a range of staff of different grades, with no data processing backgrounds, indicates that it is only when a terminal is placed on the individual's desk that the sense of fright which computers engender is overcome. However, this experience indicates that once the equipment is made available all problems are overcome in days. Thus, while it may seem wasteful to an outsider to allocate a terminal or micro per desk, in practice it is the most efficient way to bring about change. If the cost of a micro or terminal, which amounts to a once off payment of between £2,000 and £4,000 per head, is compared to the ongoing cost of even a junior head of staff, the cost of such an approach is seen in its proper perspective. Given the very considerable increase in productivity which computerisation allows, I feel that the payback period for such an approach would be short. An intermediate approach based on limited access to micros or terminals would, in my view, give the worst of all worlds. If my opinions evoke a sense of disbelief in my audience, I suggest that pilot schemes be tried using both approaches. To my knowledge, no such experiments have yet been carried out.

(c) *Dissemination* The question of the implications of computerisation for the dissemination of data have already been dealt with. Suffice it to say that I welcome the establishment of the CSO's computerised databank.

#### *Computerisation - Government Accounts*

(a) *Introduction* Over the past decade major developments have taken place in the use of computers in the public service. They are used to regulate the payment of wages, salaries and social welfare benefits and to run the collection of tax and social insurance contributions. In carrying out these tasks a vast range of information is collected and stored in computer files in different parts of the Public Service.

The way in which computers have been introduced has mirrored existing accounting practices. No consideration has been given to whether these accounting practices were



adequate or satisfactory or whether the introduction of computers could allow new developments or improvements. In fact, because of the specific design of the computer system actually introduced, the new accounting and management systems are frequently less flexible than the old ones and it is more rather than less difficult to implement administrative changes. This decreased flexibility is not inherent in the introduction of computers. Rather it is a function of the kind of computer programs developed for use in the public sector. If sufficiently flexible programs are introduced initially, it should facilitate administrative changes and alterations in accounting practices in the future.

The advent of computers and the promise that they hold out for increased flexibility in accounting should have long ago led to a major review of Government accounting practices. It is certainly urgent that something be done at this late stage to carry out such a review.

*(b) Computerisation and Government Expenditure* In considering the design of suitable accounting and computer systems for the public sector it is useful to consider the tax and social welfare system separately from the rest of Government sector accounts. In the case of the rest of the Government accounts there are at least three different sets of accounts being prepared at different levels of the administration: the estimates/appropriation accounts, the accounts for expenditure by program or scheme, and the National Accounts classification data. Given the haphazard way in which these accounts have been developed, the preparation of the three different sets causes serious strain for many departments and public bodies. What is needed is to go back and redesign the building blocks of the system. The design should take into account the requirements of the different systems of accounts and the basic accounts should be kept at a sufficiently detailed level to allow the building blocks to be put together to form any of the desired sets of accounts. In carrying out this work it might prove possible to redesign the accounts primarily used for controlling expenditure - the estimates - in such a way that they fitted in with the other accounting requirements, thus eliminating at least one set of parallel accounts.

The development of such an integrated system would mean that for individual departments or public bodies they would only have to work with one set of accounts made up of the basic building blocks of the system. A computer program can then be used to aggregate the building blocks and produce a comprehensive set of accounts on any basis at any level of aggregation. Providing that the basic building blocks are kept on computer files, the cost of producing these accounts will be tiny and their preparation on a quarterly, monthly, or even weekly basis will be extremely easy. To some extent this approach has been adopted in the Civil Service but major problems remain with the rest of the public sector.

By introducing such a system throughout the public sector it will make the accounts produced by the different bodies much more intelligible and useful and will help in providing integrated accounts for the public sector. At present, because of a mismatch between the accounting practices of semi-State bodies, local authorities and the central Government, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to produce accurate accounts for the public sector as a whole.

One problem which is faced by both economists outside the Civil Service and officials working in Public Expenditure Division in the Department of Finance is that of divining what is happening on an intra-year basis in the area of public expenditure. With a properly computerised system of accounts it should be possible to produce accurate monthly returns of employment and expenditure, classified under any system. In contrast, the present system merely provides information on disbursements by the central Exchequer to departments or outside bodies.

The actual reporting of the accounts to the Department of Finance/CSO could also be cut to seconds from the present period of days or weeks by preparing the accounts on a computer and then either transferring the desired information to another file on the same computer, if the CCS computer is used, or transferring it over the telephone from one computer to another. The polling by telephone line of outside computers by the computer of the central accounting body can even be done automatically. Thus delays in reporting can be cut to a fraction of those experienced

today It is ironic that such transfer of data from one computer to another already exists in the Civil Service Wages and salary payments are transferred on tape from the CCS computer to the commercial banks Data on tax payments are transferred in this form to the Revenue Commissioners Yet this medium is not yet used to provide up-to-date data for management information or accounting control purposes to either the Department of Finance or the CSO

### *Computerisation - Social Welfare and Revenue Commissioners*

The single biggest area of computerisation in the Public Service is the Revenue and Social Welfare system However, it is the area where the potential of computerisation has been least exploited Even today the Revenue and Social Welfare systems are treated as two separate systems in spite of the fact that they both deal with many of the same members of the public and are both intimately related to the State's activity in redistributing income Present policy in the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Welfare involves setting up different taxes and benefits on different computers using different computer systems This makes any integration of the tax/social welfare system all the more difficult This poses a major problem for Governments Implementation of Government decisions to tax social welfare payments has foundered on this rock in the past Major obstacles to other such changes, for example, the proposed child benefit scheme, must be posed by this failure to integrate systems All the discussion among economists today points to the need to treat the two systems as a whole whereas the computerisation of the two as separate entities is making such a policy more and more difficult to implement It seems absurd that computerisation should be used to make policy reform more rather than less difficult

The proper way of computerising the tax/social welfare system is to have one computer file for each person on which all relevant information is kept The introduction of a single tax/social welfare number per person was a first step in the right direction Care should be taken to ensure that all information of relevance to the different departments involved is stored on the computer The design of the

computer file itself should facilitate rapid access to subsets of these data required for different purposes

There would be numerous advantages to such an integrated system

- (a) It would allow the introduction of an integrated tax and social welfare system. Social Welfare benefits could, if desired, be taxed in a similar manner to all other forms of income. The integrated system would allow the introduction of a negative income tax system or some other method of dealing with those who are on low pay.
- (b) It would allow the decentralisation of the administration. For example, one operator with a computer terminal linked by telephone to the central computer could be sited in every post office in the country. With suitably designed computer programs, which prompted the operator with relevant questions, the system would enable one person to handle immediately most queries on the Social Welfare and tax codes. This should simultaneously reduce the volume of administration drastically and produce a much better service to the public.
- (c) Different computer programs could be applied to the same files to produce details of the distribution of income cross-classified by family structure, region, occupation and age. This information would be of very considerable value to economists and administrators in understanding the effects of the current tax and Social Welfare codes on the distribution of income, in designing changes in the system and in forecasting tax revenue and expenditure in future years.
- (d) By processing the tax/Social Welfare files, detailed information on numbers employed and earnings by sector, region or occupation could be produced at two- or three-monthly intervals (depending on the reporting periods of employers). This would provide vital information on what is happening in the economy at large. (See Blackwell, 1985, for further

details )

- (e) By extending the integrated system to include other taxes and activities of the State, additional information could be gleaned of considerable value to economists and administrators. In addition, it would help reduce avoidance and evasion of tax. In this regard it is very worrying to read that the Revenue Commissioners have not got a monitoring system to distinguish payment made by vocational groups as they felt that this was merely statistical analysis (*The Irish Times*, 6-11-1985). I can think of a wide range of checks which could be made using properly formatted files of data on the tax and welfare systems which could throw up extremely useful data on areas or individuals where evasion is rife or where potential revenue is being lost. These checks could only be carried out using computerised data, they would be cheap to implement once such data are available, and they would constitute a lot more than "mere" statistical analysis. A good example of what can be done in this regard is the paper by Buckley (1985) on the Disability Benefit Scheme.

#### *Computerisation - Conclusion*

The first task to be attempted within the Public Sector is to determine what information is being collected and what information is required for the purpose of controlling expenditure and revenue, providing adequate management information and satisfactory information on the economic activity of the public and private sectors. Having established the information needs, guidelines need to be set down for the accounts to be introduced. The second of these tasks could possibly best be undertaken by the CSO. Once one has a detailed shopping list of the data one would like to see the next step is to develop guidelines for all new software systems developed or implemented after a certain date. The cost of altering existing systems is very high but it is frequently cheap or free to implement new standards at the design stage. From the point of view of systems analysts, the availability of detailed guidelines on the type of information required from new systems will make

their life easier. There will be a natural tendency to implement as many of these "frills" as possible, especially if it can be done at little extra cost to them. Once started, this process will result in a gradual implementation of the new standards as existing systems are replaced or altered over time for other administrative reasons.

If it is desired to proceed more rapidly along these lines, it is best done by means of pilot schemes. Horror stories abound of cases where welfare schemes broke down as new computerised payments mechanisms were implemented. Pilot schemes allow systems to be fully tested in circumstances where existing schemes continue in parallel, ensuring no discontinuity of service. It might well be useful to transfer a few hundred taxpayers/welfare recipients to a special scheme where a computerised integrated system is developed to cover all State payments or receipts. While such a system was being developed and tested, the existing systems, continuing in parallel, would ensure that the individuals involved did not suffer on account of teething problems.

## References

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*D C Murphy* I wish to comment briefly on the relatively large section in Denis Conniffe's paper dealing with graduate disciplines. There is clearly a role for economists and social scientists in the CSO and I have no conflict with him on this point so long as he accepts that they must have a quantitative aptitude. However, I feel he has

misrepresented the situation to some degree and has, even by virtue of the space he has devoted to this topic, exaggerated any possible concerns that there may be about the mathematical background of the majority of serving statisticians

The first point to scotch is the false impression that Denis Conniffe conveys that "economists" and "social scientists" are precluded from being appointed as statisticians in the CSO. This is simply not true. From the outset the regulations governing the appointment of statisticians have specified that candidates can be either

- (1) honours graduates in mathematics, mathematical physics and statistics, or
- (2) honours graduates in economics who have shown in their educational careers an aptitude for mathematics, or
- (3) honours graduates in any discipline who have
  - shown in their educational career a particular aptitude for mathematics, and also
  - have adequate experience in practical statistical work

Honours graduates in economics, social science and other disciplines can, therefore, be appointed so long as they have a quantitative bent. It is also relevant to mention here that there is always an economist on the interview board. No social scientist has, to my knowledge, ever been appointed to the grade but economists, admittedly few in number, have and there are a number serving at present. Indeed, I am an economics graduate myself although mathematics and statistics were my main disciplines. The fact of the matter is that economists simply do not appear to be attracted to the post of statistician. There are probably many reasons for this, but in my view this situation will not change very significantly unless the number of statisticians in the CSO is increased sufficiently to give scope for career subject-matter posts and for a wider analytical and interpretative role for the office. In this context I should add that the Council itself

was struck by the fact that in other countries the proportion of graduate staff was far higher than in Ireland, even in countries where the expenditure on the statistical service was not much above the Irish level

There is obviously great scope to employ economists, social scientists and other subject-matter specialists in the statistical services of large countries such as France, Italy, Germany, UK, etc. The UK, for example, employs over 400 professional statistical personnel scattered throughout all government ministries. The situation is completely different here in Ireland where there are currently only 23 statistician posts in the CSO. Because of this there is no scope for career specialisation in the CSO. Both management and staff favour systematic job rotation for training, experience, career development purposes, etc. At present, statisticians serve about 3-4 years in a particular area and are then transferred (generally to something quite different). This means that people appointed as statisticians must have the technical competence and ability to serve in any statistical area - from National Accounts (where economics would certainly be very advantageous) to, for example, index compilation, survey work, etc., necessitating technical statistical expertise. This is the only practical approach in the Office with such a small quota of professional staff.

Denis Conniffe quotes liberally from Sir Claus Moser's very interesting presidential address to the Royal Statistical Society in 1979 on "Statistics and Public Policy". However, the relevance of his comments to the Irish situation, particularly in relation to the type of statistician required, must be interpreted with caution because the UK statistical service has been specially organised on a decentralised basis to ensure that statisticians are close to their main users in policy departments and because he was commenting expressly in the context of his concern that, and I quote from the same address, "they do not reap all the advantages of this closeness". There is no doubt in my mind that Claus Moser would have slanted his comments differently in Irish circumstances.



I must make the point that CSO statisticians, and no doubt mathematicians here tonight, do not take too kindly to the inferences that they are deficient in their "knowledge of society or the economy" and are "not sufficiently sensitive to the environment" There is no evidence for such facile generalisations May I, for example, remind Professor Conniffe that 2 of the 4 directors of his Institute came from the CSO, that 2 of its current 5 professors travelled the same road and that, for example, CSO personnel contribute approximately 20 per cent of the papers presented to this Society There is no point dwelling on this Most people here tonight can judge for themselves from their dealings with CSO professional staff In this connection, people often tend to forget that Government services and the EEC are the CSO's two main customers and I can assure you that there is no danger at all of the CSO being out of touch with their changing requirements and priorities There is daily direct contact with the relevant Government departments and on the EEC front the EUROSTAT work programme for 1986, for example, distinguishes over 50 separate statistical working groups necessitating CSO attendance at over 80 meetings! The "interface" with other users may not be as good Rather than blaming the CSO completely for this, may I suggest that there is also an onus on them to articulate their requirements more effectively The CSO always maintains an open door policy to user representations and in general I think it can be said that we are always accommodating

At present, the main concern with graduate personnel in the CSO is not their mix of academic disciplines, but rather the persistent high rate at which they leave the Office once they have built up some experience and expertise For example, in the past 2-3 months the CSO has had to face up to the loss of 5 serving statisticians, this represents an immediate loss of over 20 per cent of the grade This looks bad, but the situation has been even worse - for example, of the 30 statisticians recruited in the period 1973-81 a total of 22 subsequently left the Office There may well be no remedy to this haemorrhage of expertise and the continued disruption which it causes One thing it does prove, however, is that work experience in the CSO is a very saleable commodity and this at least is some recognition of the calibre of people we have and the quality of work they

do Even some slight amelioration in this situation would significantly improve the performance capacity of the Office We also see the advantages of staff exchanges and secondments However, in the light of the disruption already resulting from the high rate of statistician departures, the short-term temporary nature (1-2 years at the most presumably) of any exchanges or secondments and the time that will inevitably be lost (from the CSO's perspective) with outsiders familiarising themselves with the details of a particular statistical area (i e , work practices, manuals, computer systems, etc ), such assignments must, in my view, be additional to serving statistician posts As John Blackwell says in the relevant section of his NESC report (paragraph 8 26, page 115) "both parties must gain from the exchange", not least the CSO'

Finally, may I endorse another statement that Sir Claus Moser made in the paper referred to by Professor Conniffe, namely that -

University departments should be encouraged to strengthen the applied side of their statistics courses as well as the statistical side of other applied specialisms

In this connection I must mention that on the basis of interview board experience in recent years I am concerned about the apparent lack of knowledge shown by current economic graduates of economic statistics produced by the CSO I have always considered that there is scope for greater contact between the CSO and local universities in this connection The Office would be very favourably disposed to having some of its staff participate in any courses or seminars on economic statistics, but this of course is a matter for the universities themselves to assess and pursue

*John P Flood* In his contribution Mr Blackwell has stated that "The Revenue Commissioners regard their main purpose as getting in money from the tax system and regard data provision as, at best, a subsidiary objective and at worst having no justification at all" This is altogether too sweeping a statement The primary purpose of the Revenue is, of course, to collect and administer the various taxes and

duties in its care, but it would be wrong to imply that in pursuing its main objective the Revenue has scant regard for the provision of statistical data. For example, on the inland revenue side of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners there is a statistics section which, among other things, analyses statistical material for the annual reports of the Revenue Commissioners, arranges for the provision of additional statistical material for these reports, estimates the impact on the revenue of budgetary and other proposals, and forecasts and monitors tax yields. The same section also services meetings of Working Party No 2 of the OECD Committee on Fiscal Affairs. This Working Party (and its sub-group on estimating methodology) deals with tax analysis and tax statistics on the international plane.

As an indication of the Revenue's desire to provide statistics of general interest I would point to the income distribution statistics in the annual reports of the Revenue Commissioners. In recent reports these statistics have been expanded to include income distribution material relating specifically to trades and professions. A further recent addition to the annual reports is a table of the cost in terms of revenue forgone of certain allowances and reliefs which are given under the income tax and corporation tax systems.

The Revenue Commissioners are at all times prepared to consider suggestions for improving or expanding the statistics they provide. However, a lack of resources in Revenue imposes constraints on what can be provided. An illustration of these constraints is the fact that 852 unfillable vacancies have arisen in Revenue since the first staff embargo was imposed in July 1981.

*J J Sexton* At the outset I would like to mention that I welcome the Government proposals on the new institutional structures for the State statistical services. While I may have reservations about some of the details, generally speaking, the proposals represent a significant step forward, particularly in the matter of introducing arrangements for a wider degree of consultation in deciding on statistical content and priorities.

I do not propose to comment in any detail on the background or reasoning behind either the Government proposals or the Report of the Statistical Council, as this ground has been adequately covered by other speakers. I do wish, however, to refer to a number of specific but relevant issues which may not have been fully emphasised in either document.

Professor Conniffe has already referred to some areas where the Government proposals diverge from, or do not fully accommodate, particular suggestions made by the Statistical Council. As Professor Conniffe has said, the principal difference here relates to the position or status of the CSO in the overall public sphere. The Council expressed the view that the CSO should be reconstituted as a semi-State body, albeit a special one. It is important to emphasise the "special" attribute here, as what the Council had in mind was not necessarily a semi-State agency as perceived in the normal sense but a special entity obviously requiring legislation which would ensure its independence, objectivity, flexibility of operation, adequacy of links with the Government and, above all, continued access to statistical information from Government and other public sources.

Even though the current proposals envisage the CSO remaining inside the Civil Service, I accept that many of the above-mentioned objectives will be achieved. A number of them, for example, flexibility of operation and the ability to independently redeploy resources, are embodied in the Government White Paper on Civil Service Reform and therefore their implementation will depend on the vigour with which the Government pursues these wider objectives.

There is, however, to my mind, one notable exception and this relates to the question of staffing and recruitment. One aspect about which the Statistical Council was particularly concerned was that the CSO management had no say whatsoever in selecting new non-professional clerical and administrative staff (and it must be remembered that these form the vast majority of CSO personnel). These are allocated from general Civil Service recruitment and promotion panels in which no account is taken of the special requirements of the CSO - for example, with regard to

numerical aptitude This issue is referred to in the Government proposals in the form of a statement that "procedures will be established, in conjunction with the Civil Service Commissioners, to ensure that the CSO obtains staff with relevant abilities' Quite frankly, I doubt if much, if anything, will be achieved here Once a body is part of the Civil Service it is virtually impossible to make exceptions of this kind If such a proposal were seriously considered (and basically what we are considering here is the CSO creaming off the better applicants from Civil Service boards), it would meet with strenuous objections from other departments On the basis of my past experience, these departments would have little difficulty in convincing the powers that be that their requirements are more important than the compilation of statistics

I would now like to turn to the question of official statisticians operating in a broader environment where they may take greater account of, or be more attuned to, the subject matter with which they are dealing I am of the view that there has been a real problem here but the position should be improved both by the introduction of the National Statistical Board itself and, more particularly, through the proposed user and supplier liaison groups which will provide a forum within which statisticians and commercial and research users and suppliers of data can exchange views In my view, these groups, which should form part of the permanent CSO structures, should be set up without delay

This issue also relates to the question of broadening the intake of professional CSO staff to include greater numbers of economists and social scientists, and indeed, perhaps persons with other backgrounds I see merit in this, but certain practical aspects should be recognised In the first place the acquisition of staff at basic recruitment levels with disciplines other than mathematics or statistics will not necessarily bring about any broadening of perception Once new recruits are immersed in the detailed process of producing statistics there is always the likelihood that they will become pure "number crunchers" irrespective of their basic disciplines It was this consideration which led the Statistical Council to suggest that if professional staff with a broader range of disciplines are to be taken on, then it would be preferable

if some of these had some years' experience so that they would be able to apply their skills to better advantage. Indeed, I see advantages in having a two-way process here whereby statisticians could spend some time outside of the Government statistical service working in the administrative, policy or research areas. In my opinion what is important here is not only the background disciplines of the professional staff concerned but the structures within which they operate. Up to now these have left statisticians too isolated from developments in the economic and social fields. The new consultative arrangements, if fully implemented, should therefore be the important factor in achieving a situation where the available statistics take adequate account of ongoing social and economic developments.

We should not underestimate the importance of a sound mathematical background in selecting statisticians. It is true that the everyday work of a Government statistician does not involve the use of advanced mathematical techniques (except of course where the work is in the research and development areas). However, I contend that the basic training acquired in learning these techniques is vital, since it conveys a range of attributes which embrace confidence in dealing with data, the ability to conceptualise and a more logical and precise approach to the particular problems which the statistician has to face. I am not implying that such attributes can only be acquired through full-time degree courses in mathematical science - many disciplines which now entail the teaching of mathematics to a fairly high level, will obviously fulfil this requirement.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the role of the Government statistician in regard to policy and policy formulation. Certainly the statistician should be fully aware of the policy uses of the data produced and indeed if this awareness is enhanced, the statistical system is more likely to provide more in the way of policy-relevant information. However, there has to be a limit to this kind of relationship and in my view, Moser's opinions of the previous standing of statisticians in the UK Civil Service hierarchy as first-line policy advisers are something in the nature of a grand illusion. In the interests of objectivity

and integrity there has to be a dividing line here since, even though the statistician is primarily serving the government of the day, he also has a very definite responsibility to the community at large. Furthermore, given the extent to which institutions and issues tend to become politicised in this country, if such a relationship were to become too close, then the end result would not be statistics influencing policy but policy influencing statistics.

*A Funch* At the outset, Mr Chairman, I should like to say how relieved I am to find myself on this side of the house, having been succeeded as one of the Honorary Secretaries of the Society by Pat Cox. This, however, should not be taken to imply that I did not enjoy my three-year tenure as Honorary Secretary. On the contrary, I found it both challenging and stimulating to serve the Society under your Presidency and that of your predecessor, Professor Bob O'Connor.

As regards the subject matter of tonight's Symposium, I would like, as a statistician serving in the CSO, to make a few observations on the papers presented by the three speakers. Specifically, I will confine my attention to the possibility of research and development being carried out in the CSO as well as the five-year plan envisaged in the Government proposals.

My colleague, Donal Murphy, has highlighted earlier some of the difficulties encountered by the Office in the recruitment and retention of professional staff. The 70 per cent leakage rate of professional staff recruited between 1973 and 1981 bears stark testimony to the distinct lack of success enjoyed by the Office in retaining professionals. I firmly believe myself that one of the main reasons for this high leakage has been the absence of opportunities for professional staff to engage in research or analytical-type work. In the context of scarce professional resources, which has been the case in the CSO, particularly since our accession to the EEC, the emphasis of the Office has quite rightly been on discharging the primary functions of a statistical office - that of data provision. The research and analysis is normally carried out by those outside the Office while the compilers who are best equipped to assess

the strength and weaknesses of the data are confined almost exclusively to carrying out the basic compilation work

John Blackwell, in his paper, expresses the wish to bring "statisticians out from the back room which they have occupied for too long" I think I can safely reassure him that there are few amongst us who would willingly care to be cast in the mould of "closet statisticians" His claim that "data-providers have occupied a relatively humble low-key role in public administration, if it be true, is one that has not come about through choice I am sure that on a personal level he is aware of many data-providers who are neither humble nor see their role as being in any sense low-key

His suggestion for teamwork in the analysis of large data sets is, I believe, very meritorious and I can envisage an active role for statisticians in such teams - something akin to a scrum-half in a rugby team This recipe has already been tried and tested by the French and has been seen to work quite well In the INSEE's monthly publication, *Economie et Statistique*, statisticians and outside research workers have combined well in producing research articles of a high quality I can see no reason why this could not succeed equally well in Ireland

Denis Conniffe also reiterates the view of the Statistical Council that "the Office needs its own R & D section, although the role he envisages for it is the investigation of methodological issues - a role which, I feel, may be too restrictive The now famous DPS Management Services report on the CSO was also positive on the creation of an R & D unit and actually went so far as to quantify the necessary staff resources That report, which was two years in the making and took another year before it was released to staff interests, has since been ignored, largely no doubt because of its resource implications For this reason I am slightly suspicious that no mention of R & D was made in the Government proposals This matter will hopefully be redressed by the National Statistics Board in its recommendations for Government approval This brings me to my second point, the programming or planning exercise envisaged in the Government proposals



It is envisaged that the Board, on the advice of senior management in the CSO, will undertake this exercise at the outset and at regular five-year intervals thereafter. While this is a welcome development for a public service agency such as the CSO, nevertheless I share Mr Linehan's concern about the fixity of the plan during the course of the five-year term. If management control systems' theory is to be believed, and I confess to being a late convert myself, then programming can be seen to be but the first step in a multi-cycle management control process. The other steps consist of formulating budgets, operating and reporting and evaluation or feedback. The four phases taken together form a closed loop. For any of a number of reasons, plans may turn out to be sub-optimal. If so, there must be scope for the organisation in question to take corrective action which may entail some revisions to programmes. In this way planning will be seen as an ongoing dynamic process. It is to be hoped, Mr Chairman, that the Board will allow such flexibility.

In conclusion, I wish to say that I welcome the broad thrust of the Government proposals and look forward to their early implementation.

*M A Moran* One important question not asked by the Taoiseach and critical to any discussion of Statistics for Policy and Research is what use is being made of the existing statistics collected by the CSO? The assumption implicit in Professor Conniffe's summary of the views of the Statistical Council, that more statistics mean better policy, cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, statistics are often a substitute for policy as testified by the history of many reports commissioned by the Government over the years. To quote Florence Nightingale, "Reports are not self-executive". A further example, the investigation of the resource levels of the CSO by the Department of the Public Service, was given tonight by Mr Linehan.

There is an unfortunate and expensive tradition in this State of creating new institutions rather than improving the old. A Central Statistics Office operating as a semi-State body might become too distant from the Government and be less able to inform policy. It might also tend to duplicate the current activities of the ESRI. I would like to see each

major department of Government having its own small statistical units which would have very close links with policy formulation and would liaise in an informed way with the CSO I do not think that this can be achieved by the practice of secondment unless the latter is of quite considerable duration

I cannot end, however, without replying to Professor Conniffe's gratuitous remarks on mathematics graduates and departments of statistics He devoted a remarkable amount of space to this in a paper allegedly concerned with Statistics for Policy and Research While I entirely agree that a statistical office should contain staff with a mix of backgrounds, I see no need to denigrate the contributions of graduates in mathematics to achieve this Statistics can, moreover, be taken jointly with economics and other subjects so the distinctions he makes are artificial

However, he goes further to say that 'Statistics Departments could well lack the interest in applications - and this is probably an understatement' There are only two Departments of Statistics in this country Both, to my knowledge, exhibit an active interest in applications I, myself, read a paper to this Society on the points system with implications indeed for policy We have also been involved in dental manpower planning, again with policy implications and other practical projects too numerous to mention I do not know what motivated his remarks which only serve to undermine his overall statement

I believe that the staff of a Central Statistics Office must be capable of collecting, analysing and interpreting information in an objective way Many disciplines such as History, Law, etc, can develop such skills, but surely Statistics, with its particular concern with numerical data, should continue to have a special and essential relevance to the work of the CSO

*D Garvey* I find it very gratifying that such a large and distinguished audience have attended this evening to discuss the activities of mere "data providers who have occupied a relatively humble, low-key role in public administration" and who, according to another contribution, may not be very well rounded with a deficient knowledge of society Our

critics suggest that we may be too insulated or isolated from the real world of policy in which our users have to survive and it is suggested that a formal structure of user and supplier liaison groups may help to round us off more completely. First, I want to scotch the notion that the absence of *formal* user groups has left us in an insulated position. For my own part - having responsibility for employment, unemployment and population statistics - I find that a considerable proportion of my time is devoted to interpreting the statistics, reviewing pre-publication research articles and generally offering advice to colleagues in the Departments of the Taoiseach, Finance and Labour and also to a wide group of researchers, there are times when I feel like insulating myself by disconnecting my phone! Second, I want to say that I welcome very much the idea of establishing formal user groups particularly if they are serviced by fairly senior personnel from the various policy departments. These groups will have the effect of confronting users with the need to clearly articulate their data requirements in good time, something mentioned (for the first time?) in John Blackwell's paper.

I would like to move on to consider some aspects of the NESC report which deal with my particular work area quite comprehensively. One complaint which I have is that an uninformed reader might be given the impression that the CSO was unaware of the long list of policy variables itemised in the report. In fact, I am sure John Blackwell would be the first to agree that there is very little by way of innovation in his list and that he has discussed these ideas with me and others over recent years. Perhaps I could cite, as an example, his extensive discussion on the need for better family tabulations. In Volume 3 of the 1979 Census we published tables on family units in an 'experimental format' and we enlarged on these in the corresponding 1981 Census volume. During the discussion on a paper which I read to the Society in April 1983 I indicated that we proposed to expand on this type of analysis and the forthcoming second report on the 1983 and 1984 Labour Force Surveys will provide further information in this respect. Thus, considerable progress has been made in advance of any promptings from NESC, the Statistical Council or anyone else. A second quibble of mine would be the absence of indications of the severe difficulties which have to be overcome to measure

sufficiently accurately some of the variables listed

Take, for example, the discussion on analysing the gross flows from one status to another, now I agree with John Blackwell that transition, entry, exit and continuation rates are all very desirable policy variables - unfortunately they are almost impossible to measure in a meaningful way except by utilising expensive longitudinal studies. In the USA, gross flows have been tabulated from the Current Population Survey for over 30 years but because of inherent data problems, publication was actually suspended for over 20 years. In 1984 the labour force in the USA increased by 2.23 million while an analysis of the gross flows would have suggested a decline of 3.72 million - a discrepancy of almost 6 million! I shudder to think of the criticism to which we would be subjected if we published such contradictory figures here in Ireland.

I would like to conclude with the observation that our statistical system is improving all the time, indeed, it is probably quite a compliment that our statistical deficiencies are being instanced by reference to the very sophisticated and highly resourced systems which are in place in the USA and Canada. As Mr Linehan has pointed out very forcibly, we do not have similar resources in this country.

*C W Derek Peare* (Statistical Office of the European Communities, Luxembourg) The government proposals, together with the report and recommendations of the Statistical Council, have been read with considerable interest in Luxembourg.

I would welcome this document, particularly from our viewpoint, for the recognition of the Community as a user of official statistics even though we are seen as imposing additional burdens on a heavily laden service rather than as a source of additional resources. The document should also be welcomed as showing a positive approach to official statistics, something which has not always been apparent in similar reports produced in other countries.

Mr Linehan has drawn the attention of the meeting to the Commission's statistical programme. This is admittedly a

substantial document but it represents the information which is regarded as a minimum requirement by those involved in preparation and monitoring of Community policies. We are, however, very conscious of the burden which this places on all national statistical services and in particular of the fact that this load is proportionately greater for the statistical offices of the smaller Member States. Together with this awareness, we are very appreciative of all the CSO's efforts to meet our requirements.

I would like to touch briefly on two aspects, which seem to me to be matters of particular concern to us as users. Both of these have been mentioned by earlier speakers. The first relates to the five-year planning period, this appears to be a very welcome development but needs to incorporate a certain degree of flexibility. On a Community scale as well as from a national perspective, it is clear that developing policies will, at a minimum, lead to changes in statistical requirements and quite likely to increasing needs. Any rigid planning which did not permit modification to the statistical plan within a five-year period would be unduly restrictive in a world of changing needs.

The principle of gross budgeting is a second source of concern. As with national offices, EUROSTAT has very limited resources. However, if we interpret these proposals correctly, it appears that even were we in a position to offer financial support for particular priority projects, this support would not be permitted to form a net increase in the resources available to the CSO. This would undermine any attempt by the Community to contribute to the costs of additional urgent work.

These are two points which appear to be worthy of further consideration but otherwise I would reiterate my welcome for the proposals.

*Philip J Boland* I believe this symposium has been of considerable value to a great variety of individuals, and I, in particular, have benefited from the contributions of the three speakers. I would like to make a few rather diverse comments.