Finance Minute on Report 192— The Collection and Dissemination of Statistics THE SENATE

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Joint Committee of Public Accounts

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THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

JOINT COMMITTER OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

207TH REPORT

PINANCE MINUTE ON THE COMMITTEE'S 192ND REPORT
DISCUSSION PAPER ON THE COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION OF
STATISTICS

Australian Government Publishing Service CANBERRA 1983

Commonwealth of Australia 1983

JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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DUTIES OF THE COUNTTEE

Section 8.(1) of the Public Accounts Committee Act 1951 reads as follows:

Subject to sub-section (2), the duties of the Committee are:

- (a) to examine the accounts of the receipts and expenditure of the Commonwealth including the financial statements transmitted to the Auditor-General under sub-section (4) of section 50 of the Audit Act 1901;
- (aa) to examine the financial affairs of authorities of the Commonwealth to which this Act applies and of intergovernmental bodies to which this Act applies;
- (ab) to examine all reports of the Auditor-General (including reports of the results of efficiency audits) copies of which have been laid before the Houses of the Parliament:
- (b) to report to both Houses of the Parliament, with such comment as it thinks fit, any items or matters in those accounts; statements and reports, or any circumstances connected with them, to which the Committee is of the opinion that the attention of the Parliament should be directed;
- (c) to report to both Houses of the Parliament any alteration which the Committee thinks desirable in the form of the public accounts or in the method of keeping them, or in the mode of receipt, control, issue or payment of public moneys; and
- (d) to inquire into any question in connexion with the public accounts which is referred to it by either. House of the Parliament, and to report to that House upon that question,

and include such other duties as are assigned to the Committee by Joint Standing Orders approved by both Houses of the Parliament.

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PREFACE

Arrangements to ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to comments contained in the Committee's Reports have been in operation since 1952 although they have been reviewed periodically. These were known as Treasury Minute arrangements.

Following the creation of the Department of Finance on T December 1976 it was agreed that the arrangements should continue as before but should be known as the Department of Finance Minute.

As they now stand the procedures are:

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- The Report of the Committee is tabled by the Chairman in the House of Representatives and by a Member of the Committee in the Senate. Motions are moved in both Houses of the Parliament that the Report be printed as a Parliamentary Paper.
- 2. The Chairman of the Committee thereafter forwards a copy of the Report to the responsible Minister and to the Minister for Finance with a request that he give the Report his consideration and inform the Chairman of the action taken to deal with the Committee's conclusions.
- 3. The reply received, in the form of a Department of Finance Minute, is then examined by the Committee and, together with the conclusions of the Report to which it relates, is submitted as soon as possible as a Report to the Parliament.
- 4. Should the Committee find during its examination of a Department of Finance Minute that certain recommendations are not fully dealt with or are subject to a further Minute, it holds an exploratory discussion with officers of the Department of Finance prior to the submission of the Minute to the Parliament.
- In reporting a Minute to the Parliament, the Committee, except in special cases does not usually make any comment other than to note recommendations not fully dealt with or subject to a further Minute.

- When the Committee next examines the Department concerned the Department of Finance Minute is considered by the Committee if applicable.
- 7. The Department of Finance furnishes the Committee with a half-yearly report on outstanding Himtes, indicating the progress made in dealing with the Committee's comments.

In accordance with the procedures outlined above, this report documents the Department of Finance Minute which was submitted in response to the Committee's 192nd Report. This response was approved by the previous Government on 22 November 1982.

For and on behalf of the Committee

Benarer G. Georges

N.J. Talberg

M.J. Talberg Secretary

Joint Committee of Public Accounts

Parliament House

Canberra ACT

8 September 1983

CHAPPRE 1

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Committee's 192nd Report, which was a discussion paper on the collection and dissemination of statistics, was tabled in Parliament on 10 November: 1981. A summary of that report appears in Chapter 2. The recommendations together with the Department of Finance Minute appear in Chapter 3.
- 1.2 The Committee notes that the Australian Statistics Advisory Council has considered the 192nd Report and has supported many of the recommendations, particularly those relating to the cooperation between Commonwealth agencies on the collection of statistics, the establishment of a central statistical register and the possibility of charging users for some collections.
- 1.3 Although it has some reservations, the Committee is generally satisfied with the response to the 192nd Report and is pleased to note that some of its recommendations have been accepted.
- 1.4 The main policy revisions effected as a result of the Committee's recommendations are as follows:
 - introduction of new measures designed to strengthen the coordination role of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS):
 - amendment of the Census and Statistics Act to allow maximum utilisation of available data;
 - introduction of charges for a much higher proportion of ABS publications.
- 1.5 However, the Committee considers that the possibility of making better use of taxation data (Recommendations 4, 5 and 6) should be explored further. A follow-up report on progress in this area is requested.
- 1.6 The Committee is also concerned about the adequacy of the response to Recommendation 11. Further information is requested about the progress of the Working Group on Financial Statistics.
- 1.7 The third area of concern is the response to Recommendation 13 on the establishment of an interdepartmental Committee (IDC). This recommendation appears to have been misinterpreted. The Committee anticipated that the function of an IDC would be fundamentally different from that of the existing

Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC). The IDC would help to coordinate the collections and respond to needs of departments and authorities. This mechanism should complement and strengthen the new coordination measures being introduced in response to Recommendation 12. The ASAC's advisory role appears to be much broader than this. The Committee requests a further response on this matter.

CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY OF THE COMMITTEE'S 192ND REPORT

- 2.1 The Committee is aware that timely and accurate statistics are an essential requirement for both public and private sector management. If comprehensive and relevant statistics are not available then it is possible for government policies and programs formulated on the basis of incomplete information to be directed away from the areas of greatest need. Consequently the Committee considered that it was important to produce a discussion paper on the issues associated with the collection and use of statistics.
- 2.2 The Report discussed a number of factors relating to the collection and dissemination of statistics by the Commonwealth Government, and made sugggestions aimed at effecting improvements in the quality of statistics. It also took into account economies that could be achieved in carrying out the task, which, in turn, could have the added advantage of freeing resources for the collection of needed, but as yet unavailable, information.
- 2.3 The Report pointed out that accurate statistical information is required for monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of policies and programs across the full range of governmental activities. Similarly, comprehensive and up-to-date statistics are also required for advice on new policies.
- 2.4 The Report examined the fact that even though the benefits that can flow from statistical information are great, so also are the costs of obtaining them. By any measure the quantity of official statistics now collected is immense. Subject groups range over demography, education, health, welfare, national accounts, employment and prices, all industry groups, transportation and communication. The 1981-82 Budget appropriations for the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) total about \$111 million, of which \$76 million was for salaries of Bureau staff. The Confederation of Australian Industry claims that the cost of complying with Federal and State government regulations in regard to the provision of statistical information was \$3700 million in 1978-79. Although the ABS has attempted to reduce the burden of statistical collections, the Committee believes that additional steps should be taken for further reductions in this area.
- 2.5 The Committee recommended:
 - the strengthening of the power of the ABS to coordinate statistical information;
 - the establishment by the ABS of a central statistical register;
 - the appropriate use of taxation data;

- that consistency be encouraged in standard data concepts, definitions and classifications;
- that the Census and Statistics Act be amended to allow for maximum utilimation of materistics;
- that overseas initiatives to reduce the paper burden imposed by governments on citizens be examined;
- the possibility of charging users for some statistical publications; and
- that an interdepartmental committee be established to advise governments on urgent matters relating to statistical programs and priorities.

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CHAPTER 3

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE MINUTE

3.1 In this chapter each of the Committee's recommendations is reproduced in turn and is followed by the response; as provided in the Department of Finance Minute. These responses were approved by the Government on 22 November 1982.

RECOMMENDATION 1

1.mar (1.1)

The coordinating powers of the Australian Bureau of Statistics be clarified and strengthened, if necessary by amending legislation.

Response

- 3.2 The coordination functions of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) are specified in paragraph 6(i)(c) of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975 as follows:
 - (a) The functions of the Bureau are ... to ensure coordination of the operations of official bodies in the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics and related information, with particular regard to.
 - the avoidance of duplication in the collection by official bodies of information for statistical purposes;
 - (ii) the attainment of compatibility between, and the integration of, statistics compiled by official bodies; and
 - (iii) the maximum possible utilization, for statistical purposes, of information, and means of collection of information, available to official bodies.

The additional coordination measures now suggested (see Recommendation 12) do not require amending legislation.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Bureau of Statistics examine the establishment of a central register of statistical information similar to the "Federal Information Locator System" introduced in the US "Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980".

Response

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3.3 The US Federal Information Locator System had two main purposes:

- (a) a register of data collections conducted by federal government agencies, intended to provide a basis for the elimination of duplication and general control over collections; and
- (b) a classified directory of data items collected.
- 3.4 A prototype system was established in 1981. Initial versions of both the register of data collections and the classified directory of data items were drawn up, and proved useful. However, work on the US Federal Information Locator System has now ceased. It is relevant to note that because Australia, unlike the United States, has a centralised statistical system, the ABS already has facilities which serve a good deal of the two purposes of the US system. However, this conclusion, and hence the comments which follow, relate to the first aspect, namely a register for use in the control over collections.
- 3.5 The ABS has developed a catalogue of statistical data collections conducted by Commonwealth departments and authorities. This catalogue was initially developed in respect of collections undertaken during the three years to December 31 1978 and, subsequently, in respect of collections undertaken in 1979-80. The catalogue was distributed widely to Commonwealth departments and authorities (and also, through State statistical coordination machinery, to State agencies)
- 3.6 The catalogue is considered comprehensive with respect to identification of collections undertaken, but is still inadequate in respect of certain information about the collections if it is to serve as a central register. The additional coordination measures how decided on (see Conclusion 12) will provide the necessary information for upgrading the catalogue for the purpose of coordination and control of collections.
- 3.7 Regarding the second purpose of the US system, it might be noted that the ABS Catalogue of Publications serves much of the intended purpose of the US system as a directory of main items on which information is collected by the ABS.

RECOMMENDATION: 3

All agencies be required to consult this register and obtain Bureau approval before embarking on any statistical collection above a level of complexity or size defined by the Bureau.

Response

3.8 Under the proposed arrangements for increased coordination in response to Conclusion 12, all agencies will be required to consult the catalogue and the Bureau, with a view to avoiding duplication in the collection of data.

RECOMMENDATION 4.

The Income Tax Assessment Act be amended to allow taxation data of businesses, including identifying information, to be made available to the Bureau of Statistics.

Résponse

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- 3.9 Access by the ABS, for purely statistical purposes, to information from the income tax records of identified individual businesses potentially offers advantages in terms of reducing the number of requests for information sent to small businesses by the ABS and of the ABS making better use of the aggregate business statistics now compiled from income tax returns.
- 3.10 The ABS and the Australian Taxation Office (Taxation Office) have recognised this potential, and it is hoped that it will be possible to undertake some pilot testing in the near future see Conclusion 5. The results of such tests would be taken into account by the Government in its further consideration of whether the Income Tax Assessment Act should be amended along the lines indicated by the Committee. Investigating whether these potential advantages can be realised in the Australian situation, at an acceptable cost in resources, requires a substantial and continuing research and development effort by skilled staff.
- 3.11 A statistical system which encompassed access to taxation data of identified businesses as a fundamental element would be substantially different from the present system Designing such a system and working through the implications for the ABS and the Taxation Office in terms of manpower, finances and impact on other systems, would take time and is still at an early stage.
- 3.12 A new system would have to meet certain fundamental conditions to be acceptable and worthwhile.
 - (a) It would have to result in statistical output of acceptable quality (in terms of range of data, degree of detail and timeliness) for the several uses currently met by direct ABS collections from businesses.
 - (b) It would have to result in a significant reduction in respondent burden.
 - (c) It would have to be implemented within the tight resources constraints facing the ABS and the Taxation Office.

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- (d) It could not be allowed to compromise the Taxation Office's taxation processing systems; or prejudice compliance through any adverse effect on taxpayers' confidence in the privacy of their financial and other affairs.
- 3.13 The United States and Canadian Government statistical agencies have access to identified income tax data and have been helpful in assisting the Australian investigators. But national taxation and statistical systems differ to such an extent that systems cannot simply be transferred from one country to another. It is relevant to note that the Canadian statistical agency has had access to tax data of identified incorporated businesses for over 15 years and of unincorporated businesses for over 10 years, but has only recently reached the stage of beginning to make substantial use of the information, with considerable development work remaining. This long gestation period has been due to the complexity of the methodological and logistical problems inherent in the use of tax data of identified businesses for statistical purposes.
- 3.14. It should be noted that the Income Tax Assessment Act authorises the Taxation Office to provide the ABS with names and addresses of employers and has recently been amended to include the number of persons employed. The information is used as a source for updating the ABS register of business see paragraph 2.17 of the Committee's Report.
- 3.15 Both proposals relate to making information available to the ABS; there are no reverse flows of identifiable information from ABS to the Taxation Office see paragraph 2.41 of the Committee's Report.

RECOMMENDATION 5

A pilot study using tax data on identified small businesses in a restricted sample (to run concurrently with the present system of data collection) should be set up to highlight the advantages and problems involved and to test the suitability of taxation data as a basis for compilation of economic statistics.

Response

- 3.16 A pilot study is seen as essential in order to establish the suitability and viability of a system of using taxation data as a basis for compilation of economic statistics, judged in terms of the fundamental conditions which have to be met, as set out in the comments on Recommendation 4.
- 3.17 The pilot study would involve the following three basic elements:

- an attempt (using name and address) to match a limited number of identified taxpayer businesses with corresponding business units as recorded on the ABS's central register of businesses, and vice wersay.
 - investigation of the reasons for unmatched and partly matched cases, and their statistical significance;
 - for matched businesses, comparison of some tax-based data items with values for equivalent data items reported by these businesses in ABS collections.
- 3.18 The ABS Officers involved in the investigation would need access to identified income tax data. Unless ABS personnel can obtain direct experience with actual identified tax data, there would be severe limitations on the assessment that would be possible. Consideration is being given to the design of a pilot study which could be carried out within the constraints of the secrecy provisions of the Income Tax Assessment Act.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Additional socio-economic information be collected in conjunction with annual tax returns.

Response

- 3.19 It is not clear from the Committee's Report in what way the collection of additional socio-economic information in conjunction with annual tax returns would be a substitute for collections by other organisations.
- 3.20 In any case, any move to collect through tax returns additional socio-economic information not required for tax purposes would need to take into consideration that tax returns already contain a great deal of detailed information required for tax purposes; to request further particulars might well overload them and prove counter-productive in terms of the quality of the response for taxation assessment purposes.
- 3.21 From paragraphs 2.14 and 2.15 of its Report, it appears that the Committee does not have in mind such information being made available outside the Taxation Office in identifiable form.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Bureau should encourage consistency in standard data concepts, definitions and classifications of data collected and statistics produced.

Response

- 3.22 The development and application of standard data concepts, definitions, and classifications are inherent activities of an official statistical agency. For many years the ABS has been, and continues to be, engaged in the development of these standards, and in their application both within and outside the ABS.
- 3.23 The ABS continually seeks to extend the application of its standards to other organisations through ongoing contact by its officers, officers outposted to other departments, statistical coordination committees and working groups, etc.
- 3.24 The additional coordination measures now decided on see Conclusion 12 will be a significant aid in continuing this process.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Census and Statistics Act be amended to allow for maximum utilisation of the data available, as recommended in the Crisp Report.

Response

3.25 Since the Committee's Report was completed, the <u>Census and Statistics Act 1905</u> has been amended to provide for the release of information along the lines recommended in the Crisp Report. While safeguarding confidentiality, authority for the Statistician to release certain information will be contained in a Ministerial determination, which will be tabled in the Parliament and be subject to disallowance.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Administrative or legislative action be taken to ensure that data collected by all Government agencies is published where practicable and/or made available to other users.

Response

- 3.26 The ABS is required to publish and disseminate the results of the compilation and analysis of the statistical information collected under the Census and Statistics Act. This is subject to maintaining the confidentiality of the information supplied. It is ABS policy to disseminate statistics to the maximum extent and as quickly as possible. Various media are used, including printed publications, microform, computer printout and computer tapes.
- 3.27 From information provided to the ABS by agencies concerned it would appear that, subject to confidentiality restrictions, the results of their statistical collections are already being disseminated, either voluntarily or to comply with legislative requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Serious consideration be given to examining. Canadian and US initiatives aimed at reducing the paper burden imposed by governments with a view to taking similar substantive measures in Australia.

Response

- 3.28 Regarding the paper burden generated by statistical collections, one of the major concerns of the ABS, and other Commonwealth collecting agencies, is to maintain a balance between meeting the statistical needs of government, business and other sectors of the community and keeping within reasonable limits the reporting burden imposed on those who supply the basic data. The measures taken by the ABS to achieve this, described in a special article 'Minimising Reporting Burden' which appeared in the 1960-61 ABS Annual Report, are outlined below.
- 3.29 Each proposal to the ABS for a new collection and all existing collections are subject to careful examination in the ABS forward planning process to determine whether:
 - . the user need for the data justifies the collection:
 - . the frequency sought is justified, having regard to the variability of the data and the use to be made of them:
 - data suitable for users' needs are not already available from some other sources;
 - the required data cannot be obtained by arranging access to information within an administrative system;

- the required data cannot be produced with less respondent burden by modifying an existing collection rather than instituting a new collection; and
- the new data requirements of the users do not reflect a shift in overall needs or priorities such that an existing data collection can be eliminated or reduced in size.
- 3.30 With statistical collections from persons and households, respondent burden is minimized by:
 - limiting the number of questions asked in the population census and devoting a lot of effort to formulating questions so that they can be readily understood and easily answered; and
 - seeking other data by interviews with very small samples of households, by rotating samples so that the effort involved is widely spread and by taking trouble over the wording and sequencing of questions.
- 3.31 With statistical collections from businesses the problem takes different forms because businesses vary so much in size and other characteristics. But similar efforts are made to limit, to the maximum extent possible, the number of businesses to which questionnaires are addressed by:
 - using sampling techniques rather than compléte coverage;
 - using size cut-offs, or other coverage restrictions, in order to exclude from collections those businesses which in total do not have a significant effect on the important statistical aggregates produced by the collections, or which can be adequately accounted for in some other way:
 - using short forms to avoid asking smaller businesses to provide all the detail needed from larger businesses;
 - . using forms tailored specifically to the known activities of each individual business, thus reducing the size of forms by eliminating items not relevant to that business, and
 - restricting editing and query action in proportion to the potential effects of reporting errors on the important statistical aggregates produced by the collections.

3.32 The Canadian and US initiatives aimed at reducing the paper burden imposed by governments have been examined and the appropriate action has been taken by the Government - see, for example, the press release issued by the Minister for Industry and Commerce on 20 May 1981.

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Working Group on financial statistics be urged to complete its review by the end of 1981.

Response

3.33 The Working Group is pushing ahead as fast as the resources available to it permit.

RECOMMENDATION 12

A joint examination of the nature and scope of statistical collections by the Bureau and other Governmental agencies be undertaken by a panel comprising officers of the Bureau and external users and experts with a view to strengthening the coordinating role of the Bureau in the authorisation and review of data collections.

Response

- 3.34 The ABS and each department/authority concerned will prepare joint reports on the statistical collections currently undertaken by the department or by agencies within each Minister's portfolio responsibilities. These collections should include all those undertaken by departmental or agency staff, those undertaken by consultants under contract to departments or agencies and those undertaken with departmental or agency involvement where the majority of the funding is provided by the Commonwealth. Further, joint reports should be prepared for all new statistical collections or substantial changes to ongoing collections prior to the collections commencing or the changes being implemented.
- 3.35 Each report will establish the number of persons or businesses to whom questionnaires are sent, the nature of the information sought, the cost of the collections, whether measures could be suggested to improve the efficiency with which the collection is undertaken and its effectivenes, the uses to which the resulting figures are put and whether the reliability of the figures is appropriate for those purposes. It will include recommendations aimed at improving the relatability of these figures to statistics from other sources. The report will also explore whether there is information already available from other sources that would serve the department's need or whether changes to other collections might enable them to serve the department's

needs. Further, the report will explore whether it is possible to achieve a reduction in the amount of information collected or in the resources used in collections.

- 3.36 The ABS will inform the Minister Assisting the Treasurer of the outcome of these reports and, in the event of disagreement between the ABS and a department, the Minister Assisting will consider raising the matter with the responsible Minister.
- 3.37 In order to reduce the task to manageable proportions, reports will only be prepared for statistical collections from 500 or more households and from 10 or more businesses or organisations (excluding government agencies). Reports are not required where departments and agencies are collecting indicator/policy/administrative information only. It is not the intent of this proposal to hinder departments and Ministers in collecting such information.
- 3.38 These limits and exclusions are, to some extent, arbitrary. They have been set with the objective of bringing the larger collections within the ambit of this coordination function, so that the maximum impact can be had on duplication, paper burden etc, without insisting that the procedures need to be followed in every instance, which could prove cumbersome and result in unacceptable delays in collecting data. They may, of course, need to be altered after negotiation between each department/agency and the ABS, and in the light of experience.
- 3.39 Statistical information also becomes available as a by-product of administrative processes such as the assessment of income tax returns or the payment of social security benefits. While the availability of by-product statistics is relevant to what information is sought by direct statistical collections, it is not proposed that the reviews recommended in the submission should cover the statistics produced as a secondary aspect of an administrative process.
- 3.40 It is emphasised that, where a new collection must commence at short notice, the ABS would be expected to undertake investigations as a matter of high priority.
- 3.41 How quickly it will be possible to complete reports will depend on the availability of suitable staff with the necessary experience.

RECOMMENDATION 13

An inter-departmental committee, similar to the Standing Committee on Statistical Collections advocated in the Crisp Report, be established to advise on urgent and important matters relating to statistical programs and priorities.

Response

- 3.42 Setting up another body to advise on statistical. Programs and priorities appears unnecessary.
- 3.43 The Australian Statistics Advisory Council on which, amongst other members, are representatives of Commonwealth Government departments, was set up to advise the Statistician and the Minister on:
 - (a) the improvement, extension and coordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;
 - (b) annual and longer term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services; and
 - (c) any other matters relating generally to those statistical services.

(Section 18, Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975)

- 3.44 The Council has been in operation for some time and has proved to be very effective; its activities are outlined in the Council's Annual Reports to Parliament.
- 3.45 On more day-to-day matters, normal processes of interdepartmental consultation and exchange of views, plus the outposting of ABS officers to certain departments, are adequate to ensure that the Statistician and Permanent Heads of relevant departments are mutually aware of intentions and views on statistical programs and priorities. In the event of disagreement, the normal processes of advice to Ministers can be availed of.

RECOMMENDATION: 14

Charging for Bureau statistical publications be introduced where possible.

Response

3.46 With effect from 1 January 1983, the Bureau will charge for a much higher proportion of its publications.

RECOMMENDATION 15

The charging procedures used by Statistics Canada be carefully studied by the Bureau with a view to adopting a similar policy in Amstralia.

Response

3.47 ABS's charging policy has recently been revised, and has taken into account the experience of Statistics Canada.