

Australian Official Statistics, 1822-1945: From Blue Books to White Papers

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The *Blue Book* System

The mainstream of official statistics in Australia began in 1822 with the initiation of the annual system of reporting by *Blue Books* to the British Colonial Office in London. In that year, the Governors of the two British colonies in Australia - New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, later Tasmania - received a circular from Lord Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, asking that they provide, in response to printed *pro formas* prepared for the purpose, a range of information relevant to their respective administrations.

In his memorandum, Lord Bathurst said that he had

had occasion to remark that a want of a regular form of transmission of detailed information respecting the financial resources of His Majesty's Colonies, and the several branches of their expenditure, is a deficiency which creates much inconvenience to the public Service.

The circulars and the accompanying forms were sent to the governors of all British colonies around the globe. As the Secretary's memorandum made clear, the information was sought for the convenience of the administration, and covered those matters that were seen as necessary for that purpose. There does not seem to have been any recognition at this time that information might be of interest to a wider readership, either in the colony concerned or in Britain.

The origin of the term 'Blue Book' appears to lie simply in the colour of the report cover. At the bottom of each page was printed "This book and the Duplicate of it must be returned to the Colonial Office". But, from the beginning, another copy was made and retained by the Governor. Then, in response to representations from colonial legislatures, the Colonial Office agreed that it was proper that a copy be made available to these bodies. Of course, each copy had to be laboriously filled out in hand-writing.

The changing size and composition of the *Blue Books* of the Australian colonies between 1822 and 1855 reflected the increasing size and complexity of their government and economies, the changing nature of the British interest in the colonies, and the production of statistics in response to local developments as well as British needs.

In the case of New South Wales, for example, the first *Blue Book* of 1822 contained 154 pages. It expanded to 218 pages in 1830, 410 in 1840 and 803 in 1850. The coverage was extended to include trade, currency, vital statistics, gaols and prisoners, education, agriculture, manufactures, mines and fisheries, grants of land and so on.

From 1841 onwards, "Printed returns" were added to the document, providing comparable data for the preceding ten or twenty years.

Although the *Blue Book* tables were rudimentary and no analyses or explanations were provided, the effect of the system was to establish that in each colony there was an office holder - typically with the title "Registrar General - who was responsible for the collection and collation of information. This was the first step towards a centralised statistical system.

When the Australian colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia obtained self-government in 1855-56, they no longer had the obligation and discipline of producing statistics to meet the requirements of the British colonial office. Now it was entirely for each of the colonies themselves to decide how the central corpus of the statistical system that had been progressively developed during the *Blue Book* era should be adapted and developed.

A Nation of Statisticians

Inevitably there were significant differences in the responses of the several Australian colonies. However, the consensus of scholars has been that the result was outstanding. In 1988 historian Colin Forster concluded a review of the development of Australian official statistics during the colonial period with the judgement that:

It is not simply local pride and hyperbole that have judged the official statistics of the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century to be of the highest international quality, both in content and presentation. What may be thought surprising is to find such an achievement in colonies remote from the mainstream of statistical development, recently settled and having just obtained self-government.

It would be a mistake to represent this achievement as the outcome of a structured process in which the executive government of each colony considered the nature of the statistical system that would best serve its needs, and then proposed to the respective colonial Parliaments the legislative arrangements that would enable this system to be implemented.

Forster concluded that the most important factor in the successful development of official statistics in the Australian colonies during the second half of the nineteenth century was "the discovery in this small community of three remarkable statisticians" - W.H. Archer and H.H. Hayter in Victoria and Sir Timothy Coghlan in New South Wales. He quoted the verdict of economist Heinz Arndt that Coghlan had "made New South Wales for a time the country with the best official statistics in the world", and of economic historian Noel Butlin that "Few, if any, countries in the world can claim to possess official statistics comparable to those of Australia during the years 1861-1939".

Other scholars have echoed these judgments. In a study published in 1990 of the history of Australian economic thought, economists Peter Groenewegen and Bruce McFarlane entitled one of the chapters "A nation of statisticians". They devoted separate sections of the chapter to several of the able and vigorous colonial official statisticians, including Robert Mackenzie Johnston in Tasmania in addition to Archer, Hayter and Coghlan in Victoria and New South Wales.

Official Statistics in the Commonwealth of Australia 1901-1945

In 1890 the Government Statistician of New South Wales, Timothy Coghlan, published the first of a new series of *Year Books* covering all of the Australasian Colonies, and entitled *A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia*. After six of the colonies were joined in the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, two more *Year Books* in this series were issued under the title of *A Statistical Account of Australia and New Zealand*. Forster judged the last of the series, a volume of over 1000 pages, as "a monument to his work: a mass of statistical information, coherently ordered and arranged, and always accompanied by authoritative discussion and interpretation.

Under the Constitution of the new nation, the Commonwealth Parliament was given a concurrent power to make laws with respect to census and statistics. The *Census and Statistics Act 1905* effectively established Australia's national statistical office exactly 100 years ago. As a result, the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics assumed responsibility for several major official statistical functions, including overseas trade statistics and the periodic census of population and housing.

Other important statistical functions continued to be carried out in the statistical offices of the former colonies - now designated as States. The Tasmanian statistical office became part of the Commonwealth Bureau in 1923, and those of the other States were integrated into the national office in the 1950s.

The "nation of statisticians" maintained its national and international reputation and influence in the first half of the twentieth century. This was in part because of the calibre of the three Commonwealth Statisticians who took charge of the national office for virtually the entire period - Sir George Knibbs, Charles Wickens and Dr. (later Sir) Roland Wilson, who was later to serve a record term as Secretary to the Australian Treasury.

It was also in part because of the ability and influence of several of the State statisticians, notably L.F. Giblin of Tasmania in the 1920s and James Brigden and Colin Clark who were successive occupants of the position of Government Statistician of Queensland in the 1930s and 1940s.

The influence of these figures extended beyond official statistics. Giblin, Wickens and Brigden were leaders in the establishment of the Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand in 1924, and active contributors to its journal *The Economic Record* during the succeeding years. They were among the five authors of an internationally influential quasi-official report on *The Australian Tariff* in 1930. And Giblin and Brigden together with their protege, Roland Wilson, were to play prominent roles in official statistics, research and/or policy coordination in the 1930s and 1940s.

Estimates of National Income and Expenditure

Special mention must be made of the role of Australian official statisticians in the history of the development of estimates of national income and expenditure.

In 1958 Paul Studenski, Professor of Economics at the University of New York, identified estimates of the national income of New South Wales that were published in 1886 as the first in the world to be published as official estimates. They were not emulated in any other country until nearly 40 years later, when similar estimates were

published in 1925 in Canada and Russia. According to Studenski, Coghlan's work in the late 19th century "was far in advance of any prepared up to that time, anywhere, and blazed new trails for future national income statisticians and analysts to follow".

In a monograph published in 2003, Emeritus Professor Angus Maddison wrote that:

Australia has a distinguished record of national income measurement. It was the first country with official estimates. They were started in 1886 by Timothy Coghlan ..., government statistician of New South Wales... In 1938, Colin Clark... and John Crawford... published estimates of income and product for the 1920s and 30s, annual estimates of real income for 1914-39, and rough estimates of productivity for some years back to 1886.

In his Colin Clark Memorial Lecture at the University of Queensland in the same year, Angus Maddison said of Clark's *Conditions of Economic Progress*, published in 1940 when Clark was Government Statistician of Queensland:

It was the first study to present comparable estimates of levels of real income across countries. These were linked to inter-temporal measures of GNP in real terms of the type he had previously produced. This created a framework for comparative analysis of performance in space and time which revolutionised the possibilities for comparative economic history, and analysis of problems of growth and development.

In his official capacity, Clark initiated new statistical surveys and made innovative use of existing collections to expand the range of Queensland's economic and social statistics, including estimates of its national income and expenditure in the late 1930s. At the national level, annual estimates of national income and expenditure, compiled within the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics but issued as government "white papers", were issued from 1945 onwards.

Ironically, the detailed annual national income and expenditure statistics of the United Kingdom, published by the Office of National Statistics, are now presented in an annual publication formally styled the "Blue Book". The wheel has turned full circle.

REFERENCES

The paper draws extensively, without specific attribution, on Colin Forster and Cameron Hazlehurst (1988), *Australian Statisticians and the Development of Official Statistics*, published by the ABS as a monograph and in *Year Book Australia 1988*. For the references therein to H W Arndt and N G Butlin, see n. 229, p. 40. See also Peter Groenewegen and Bruce McFarlane (1990), *A History of Australian Economic Thought*, esp. pps. 92-117; Paul Studenski (1958), *The Income of Nations*, p. 131, 136; Angus Maddison (2003), *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, p. 72; and Angus Maddison (2003), "Quantifying and interpreting world development: macromasurement before and after Colin Clark", *Australian Economic History Review*, March 2004. See also the article on Australian official statistics by C.C.Heyde in the Bicentennial Issue (Vol.30A, C.C. Heyde and E.Seneta, Eds.) of the *Australian Journal of Statistics*, 1988.

