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Recent Official Statistical Publications

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Recent Official Statistical Publications

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IN the autumn of 1919 a petition was presented to His Majesty's Government, signed by the president and a number of members of the Royal Statistical Society, by representatives of other societies and of local authorities and others, asking for a public enquiry into the existing methods of the collection and presentation of public statistics. The petition was referred to a committee consisting of ten officials (in most cases the chiefs of the statistical sections of Government Departments), whose report to the Cabinet was published in June (*Report on the Collection and Presentation of Official Statistics*, 1921, price 1s.). This document is extremely interesting from many points of view, not only to statisticians but to all interested in official procedure and in departmentalism in practice. The officials evidently considered that the petition was an attack on them and did not recognize that it was a criticism of the system under which it was their misfortune to find their efforts frustrated, and most of the pages of their report are devoted to showing that they have carried out their statutory duties. They meet the statements in the petition that "it is generally recognized . . . that official statistics, as at present collected and published, are inadequate in arrangement and scope for the purposes they should serve," and that there is "urgent need of a re-organization of the present system of official statistics as the foundation of a proper system of civil intelligence," by saying that the proposition that the Government has responsibility with regard to statistics covering the whole life and activities of the community has never been accepted in this country and no provision is therefore made by the national machinery of administration to discharge such an obligation. It is, of course, precisely the want of this acceptance and this provision that is at the root of the various serious defects of the public statistics of the United Kingdom which the petitioners desired should be investigated.

The report proceeds to show, by reference to the findings of a former official committee in 1877, that the establishment of a Central Statistical Office is impracticable, and finally recommends the setting up of a permanent Consultative Committee of statistical officers for the purpose of ensuring more effective co-operation and co-ordination between the different departments. This Committee has now in fact been organized with Sir Alfred Watson, the Govern-

ment actuary, as chairman. If the recommendations are followed, it is "empowered to initiate discussion upon any question affecting official statistics, and at its discretion to consult any person or organization whose advice and opinion it is desired to take." No person, however, has any "right of direct approach to the Committee, but should, as heretofore, submit their views to the Government Department concerned." We may add that, as heretofore, the Department concerned is under no obligation to pay any attention to their views nor to admit that it is concerned, nor need it bring these views to the attention of the Committee; and if the person who has views is unable to find any Department that is concerned he has no right to do anything in the matter. Nor has the Committee any power to report to Parliament; it is to submit an annual report of its proceedings to the Cabinet Secretariat for circulation to the Departments interested. If, as may well be sometimes the case, the Department is not interested, it need apparently take no action in the matter. At any rate the inquisitive public is carefully warned off the official preserve and must continue to be satisfied with such information as the Departments functioning behind closed doors choose to give them. Nevertheless the formation of this consultative committee is a definite step forward; there will be live men on it who strongly desire the improvement of statistics and will have an official status from which they will derive official power.

We can learn something of the possibilities of properly organized public statistics and also of the chaotic state of information on many of the most pressing world problems of the day from, on the one hand, the *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1920, and the *New Zealand Official Year Book*, 1920, and on the other hand, from *Labour Overseas*, published quarterly by the Ministry of Labour,¹ and from the *International Labour Review*, issued monthly by the International Labour Office, Geneva.² New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa have apparently accepted the responsibility of the Government with regard to the publication of information, and especially in New Zealand the range of statistics includes the great majority of subjects (with the exception of incomes) about which statisticians have been able to devise measurements. We notice that there is no material for computing marriage and birth-rates corrected for the varying distribution of the age, sex and marriage constitution of the populations, nor has the problem of allowing for modification of diet in the construction of cost of living index-numbers been tackled, nor is any measurement given of the quantity or volume as distinct from the value of external trade; otherwise the best and most modern methods appear generally to be used. The Australian volume is unneces-

¹ Vol. I, No. 4, January to March, 1921, is the most recent to hand.

² Vol. I, Nos. 1, 2 and 3, and Vol. II, No. 1, all of this year, have been published.

sarily large and diffuse ; it contains 1,182 large octavo pages and serious attention might well be given to the elimination of all material that is not essential and informative. In South Africa a *Quarterly Abstract of Union Statistics* is published, and No. 6, April, 1921, contains information for 1920 and in some cases for the first three months of 1921. *The Canadian Year Book* for 1920 has not yet been received. The statistics of production are in all cases more complete than those available for the United Kingdom, not only in regard to agriculture and land, where we have statistics of wool, timber and dairy produce, but also for manufactures ; the main features of the solitary Census of Production of the United Kingdom of 1907 are reproduced annually in New Zealand, and less completely in the other countries.

The main point to which we wish to call attention is that the Self-governing Dominions have recognized the importance of co-ordinating and publishing information which covers in a remarkable way the measurable "activities of the community," while in the United Kingdom the public statistics (though admirable in some respects) are unco-ordinated and irregular. A student would obtain much insight into the nature and method of presentation of statistics by comparing these Year Books with the Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom. The latter leaves Labour statistics to the Ministry of Labour, who seem now to be unable to issue an annual report, and compresses almost to the point of uselessness most statistics except those of revenue and foreign trade. The former do not give simply bare tables, but also explanatory and historical matter, so that they are intelligible to others than those who have already studied the more detailed original reports. All, however, fail in one very important respect. Everyone who uses statistics seriously is aware that the meanings to be attached to such words as exports, prices, wages, emigration, depend on a number of technical considerations of collection, method, compilation and administration ; it is quite exceptional to find these words or their translations used in precisely the same sense in different countries. Statistical tables are consequently of little value unless with them is given an adequate statement of the nature and scope of the investigations on which they depend, the methods by which the known difficulties in each field of enquiry have been overcome, the technique of the averages, and the precise meaning to be attached to all the terms. In the Statistical Abstract no information of this kind is given, but there are adequate references to the original reports. In the Year Books before us the definitive statements are inadequate, but it would need little alteration in form to improve and complete them. It should be added, however, that intensive studies must in any case be made from the special reports, on which all Year Books are based, and many of these give sufficiently explicit references.

Year Books are necessarily historical, and for current accounts

we must look elsewhere. In *Labour Overseas* are brought together items of information from a great number of countries relating to wages, prices, hours, labour organization and legislation. The main part of the publication is in the form of notes from various official and unofficial sources arranged under countries. These notes are suggestive and informing up to a point, but the statistics are so compressed and with such imperfect headings, and references to sources are so rare, that it is very difficult to make any use of them. No general conspectus can be obtained and the enquirer in any subject would be compelled to sort out details painfully for himself and in the end admit that the information is so sporadic as to be nearly useless. But no student of foreign labour movements can afford to neglect the sources of information here opened up. The reason for the unsatisfactory nature of *Labour Overseas* as a statistical handbook can be found by reference to *The International Labour Review*, in which some attempt is made to bring together the statistics of prices and of employment. It is evident that there is little that is common in method, definition or date of presentation in the Labour statistics of the different countries, and that there are few serious and successful efforts to make the information on a given subject in any one country complete and intelligible. *The International Labour Review* has the ambitious programme of "bringing together the statistical and other briefer scientific information regarding labour and industry from all nations." It contains some general articles, some detailed studies of particular movements and some statistical matter. Among the last named we find comparative statements of unemployment in many countries, with the caution "while these figures cannot be used as a measure of the total unemployment in a country, still less can they be used for comparing the volume of unemployment between two and more countries"; but it is held that they can be used for showing the increased stress of want of work, and the following figures are given :

				PERCENTAGE UNEMPLOYED.	
				Feb., 1920.	Jan. or Feb., 1921
Canada	..	..	..	4.3	13.1
Denmark	..	..	..	9.6	23.2
Norway	..	..	..	2.4	10.5
Sweden	..	..	..	7.5	20.8
Massachusetts	..	..	..	3.8	29.2 (Dec., 1920)
United Kingdom :					
Trade Union	..	..	..	1.6	8.5
Insurance	..	..	..	4.4	9.5

No doubt we can affirm that the position was more serious in 1921 than in 1920, but we cannot give any measurements that compare the condition in two countries, as may be seen from the ambiguity of the statements for the United Kingdom ; on one reckoning the percentage unemployed has increased 6.9 and is over fivefold, on

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the other the increase is 5·1 and the percentage has little more than doubled.

One of the important tasks of the International Labour Office is no doubt to interpret the existing figures emanating from various countries, so that a student at any rate will know what has been counted, and to sift out those which are complete and comparable from the others. The chaotic character of the Notes in *Labour Overseas* shows the necessity of these processes. Another task, needing infinite perseverance, is to persuade the countries to give adequate explanations of their methods, and to bring them to a common basis. Much progress in this direction has been made with regard to trade and to population statistics by the Institut International de Statistique, which is now publishing a series of very important volumes containing well documented comparable statistics for a very wide range of countries (e.g., *Annuaire International de Statistique*, 1920, VI, Van Stockum & Fils, La Haye, 6 francs) ; a great deal of improvement in the comparability of the statistics of the British Empire (outside the United Kingdom) may be expected to result from the conference last year of Imperial Statisticians, and the admirable Year Books already named may attain the final virtue of comparability ; something may be expected by those who are young and sanguine from the new official committee in this country. But there is a great risk of dissipation of the scanty funds and the labours of the small number of competent statisticians available for the task. We have the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome, the International Labour Office at Geneva and the Institut International de Statistique at The Hague, functioning independently ; the Ministry of Labour in London issues *Labour Overseas*, the Supreme Economic Council is responsible for a *Monthly Bulletin*, and many countries include international comparisons in their periodic issues. The frequent repetition of the same figures (such as the cost of living index-number of the *Labour Gazette*) tends to give them an appearance of completeness, relevance and accuracy, to which they have little title, and the whole mass of statistics may be dangerously misleading to those who have not the opportunity or ability to criticize them at their source.