

Speech given by Sir Michael Scholar at the UK Statistics Authority Launch
on 31 March 2008

This is an important moment for British statistics. Today will certainly take its place as one of the foremost dates in the history of British Statistics, as they are set out in your welcome pack this evening. And I am very pleased that we have been able to include in that pack a message from the Prime Minister, speeding us on our way.

We have come a long way, and a great deal of work, persuasion, argument and action has been needed to bring us to where we are today. Very many of you in this room know much more about this than I do, because you did the work, you extracted the commitments, you drafted the Bill, you debated it, you improved it, and you helped set up the new arrangements which we are launching this evening. It would be impossible to name all of you, and invidious to name some of you, but I thank you, all of you, for your work, and for your achievement.

And it is an achievement, an important achievement. The UK Statistics Authority comes into being tomorrow, an independent statutory body, supported by all parties in both Houses of Parliament, and in all the devolved administrations, with powers and with the obligation to promote, to improve and to safeguard official statistics across the UK. I give you this promise, on behalf of myself and all my colleagues on the Authority, that we will do our utmost to achieve this objective, in the hope that, with time and hard work, we will make some serious progress in rebuilding public trust in UK official statistics.

We begin with a head start. The outgoing Statistics Commission, which recommended its own abolition and its replacement with a statutory UK Statistics body, laid very solid foundations for our work, and we will ensure that the wisdom and experience of the Commission informs our work from the very start.

Our task is to rebuild public trust in UK official statistics. We need as an Authority to reflect on why the current level of trust in official statistics is so low in the UK. This is a real conundrum. My discussions, with a range of people, over the past months, have convinced me that we have a highly professional, first-rate, Government Statistical Service in this country, with a high international reputation. I believe, too, that, in the main, the processes whereby our official statistics are produced are, certainly in recent decades, free from impropriety. But the public mistrusts our figures, and the uses which are made of them. It will be the Authority's task to identify and neutralise the sources of this mistrust, and at the same time systematically to improve the quality, intelligibility, and accessibility of UK statistics, so that government statisticians fully deserve the higher level of public trust which I hope we are going to achieve.

We will set about this task in a serious and, I hope, an authoritative way. We will be systematic and rigorous in our assessments of the whole wide range of official statistics, we will be attentive to the needs and wishes of users of statistics, inside and outside government and officialdom, we will be transparent in our manner of operation, and we will be firm in our dealings with government. We will not be led into over-frequent response to every misuse of official statistics, but we will not hesitate to counter firmly any pronouncements whose effect is to undermine the integrity of our statistics or of our statisticians. We will measure our success in the improvements made in official statistics and in public trust, not in confrontation and column inches.

We will do our best, but our success will inevitably be limited if we do not have your support, in Parliament, in the media, and in all the institutions which you represent. I ask you for that support.