
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. George Osborne MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury, 1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
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13 September 2011

Dear Chancellor

PRE-RELEASE ACCESS TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS

I was disappointed to read your letter of 30 July to Bernard Jenkin, in which you responded to my request for your reflections on the pre-release access arrangements, following the Treasury's unauthorised release of market-sensitive statistics to around 400 people on 16 May.

The Statistics Authority believes that the current arrangements for pre-release access are highly damaging to public trust in official statistics. Pre-release access encourages the belief - held by five out of six people in recent polls - that Ministers and their advisers manipulate official statistics. It increases the likelihood of unauthorised disclosure and dishonesty. It is inconsistent with best international practice, the UN and EU Codes on Statistics, with the recommendations of the Treasury Select Committee, and with your own party's stated policy before the last General Election.

I do not accept the argument in your letter that, because the public expect Ministers to be briefed at the time statistics are published, 24 hours' notice is needed, as the present rules allow. That expectation could, and should, be changed, in the interests of improving trust in official statistics. It has already been changed in a number of countries, including the USA, which operate to much tighter rules than you are defending.

I appreciate that it would be inconvenient for Special Advisers and others to lose the 24-hour period in which they can develop a line to take on forthcoming statistics. One of your colleagues told me that the advice of Special Advisers on this point had been influential at the time of the Ministerial discussion of my request to which you refer: I found that disappointing, but unsurprising.

I very much hope that, on reflection, you and your colleagues will reconsider your position on this important matter.

I am copying this letter to those to whom you copied yours: to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Secretary of State for Business, Sir Gus O'Donnell, the Governor of the Bank of England, Sir Nicholas Macpherson, the President of the Royal Statistical Society; and to Bernard Jenkin.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB