

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Appointment of Chairman of the UK Statistics Authority](#), HC 941

Tuesday 24 January 2017

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Members present: Kelvin Hopkins (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Paul Flynn; Dr Dan Poulter; Mr Andrew Turner.

In the absence of the Chair, Kelvin Hopkins was called to the Chair.

Questions 1-43

Witness

[I](#): Sir David Norgrove

Examination of Witness

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this preappointment hearing. Apologies for the delay but, as you could hear, the previous session was very interesting and went on rather longer than we expected. Would you like to identify yourself for the record?

Sir David Norgrove: My name is David Norgrove and I am here for a preappointment hearing for chair of the UK Statistics Authority.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I have a few questions to start off with and I hopefully will not be too long. How will you make sure that you and the UKSA non-execs are demonstrably independent from the executive?

Sir David Norgrove: I think the proof of the pudding is in the eating, isn't it? It is a matter of when issues arise where there is a failure or there is a question about the performance of ONS that the non-executives and I in particular hold them to account appropriately, working with the regulator.

Q3 **Chair:** Alternatively, will you be an outward-facing cheerleader for



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statistics?

Sir David Norgrove: Absolutely. I would not want to do this job if I did not believe in the importance and the role of statistics in—I do not want to put it too grandly—the functioning of our democracy.

Q4 **Chair:** Yes. I have to say my own concern in the past has been that UKSA should also in a sense hold Government to account because Governments can occasionally misbehave with statistics, and it is very important to be aware of that. One of your predecessors, Michael Scholar, had a tense relationship, I think, with the then Government. How will you work with this Committee, PACAC, to deliver better statistics and what quarterly updates will you give us?

Sir David Norgrove: I would give whatever updates the Committee would find helpful. Parliament, and through it this Committee, is the ultimate protector of the independence of the statistics authority, so it is very important that the chair and the authority have a good working relationship with this Committee. I would be very much in the hands of the Committee in what would best serve its interests.

Q5 **Chair:** Yes, indeed. There are one or two examples of quarterly updates so far and no doubt you will be familiar with those. Another concern of mine in particular is how statistics can be made more accessible and better used.

Sir David Norgrove: I am glad to see that the website of ONS and the authority now is much better than it was, but this is not something where you can stand still. There is a requirement for continuing investment and development of the website but, more than that, it is about how the data are presented so that they are comprehensible. I have noticed over the last year or so, following the Bean report, that ONS has been much more upfront in explaining the statistics and how they fit into an overall picture. I would certainly want to encourage that.

Q6 **Chair:** Successive Governments have been very keen, and I certainly am, to improve the level of mathematics among the population in general so we can all understand statistics a bit better and will not have the wool pulled over our eyes. My final question is quite an important one, I think. Have you had an opportunity to read the many reports produced by our predecessor committee, PASC, the Public Administration Select Committee, and last year's Bean review?

Sir David Norgrove: Yes, I have certainly read the Bean review. I do not know whether I have read all of the PASC reports, but I have certainly read a number of them.

Q7 **Chair:** How do you intend to take forward the recommendations of the Bean review and those of PASC, particularly the tension in a sense over the two roles that the chair has, which is governing the ONS but at the same time holding it to account and regulating it as well?



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Sir David Norgrove: I think the Bean review has been incorporated substantially into the strategy and the business plan. The business plan, of course, needs to be updated annually and it would be a matter of checking that the work that was set in train after the Bean review is being carried through effectively.

I think that independence and showing the independence of the regulatory arm goes back to your very first question. It is a matter of demonstrating the strength of the support for the regulatory function and making sure that if there is a conflict, the regulatory function always takes precedence.

Q8 **Chair:** Like you, I studied economics, and indeed statistics. Are you happy with statistics, having been an economist in Government service, of course, as well?

Sir David Norgrove: I cannot claim to be a professional statistician, but then neither Michael Scholar nor Andrew Dilnot were or are. But I have been a user of statistics throughout my life and have taken a close interest in them.

Q9 **Paul Flynn:** Do you think there is a particular current challenge to the trust that people have in statistics? We have fact checkers. We have Full Fact. We have facts and we have alternative facts, as we discovered this weekend, which seems to be falsehood as the alternative to facts. Do you think you will have a role in trying to increase the public's trust in the independent work of the UK Statistics Authority?

Sir David Norgrove: Absolutely. I think it is very important that the authority demonstrates its independence from Government and from pressure groups and presents statistics in as objective a way as possible and then safeguards them as the Act requires. In terms of the lack of trust in data, I think that goes to the way in which public institutions generally are not trusted. The UKSA can play its part in that, but generally it is about improving trust in public institutions. The two are very closely tangled together.

Q10 **Paul Flynn:** Part of the joy of this job is that you will have an office looking over the beautiful green fields of Newport. Do you expect to spend a long time there and do you support what it said in the Bean report about the success of the location to Newport?

Sir David Norgrove: I certainly intend to visit Newport regularly and I think the new data campus there will be a great draw. That could be a very creative way of thinking about the future of UK statistics.

Q11 **Paul Flynn:** What do you think your past experience gives you to be successful in this role?

Sir David Norgrove: As I said, I have worked with statistics of all kinds, both social and economic, throughout my career. I have dealt with a huge range of very difficult people, from Denis Healey to Mrs Thatcher to



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Michael Gove. I have worked with French trades unions. I do not think Philip Green would give me a glowing reference. I think I have a number of qualifications from that point of view. I have run very large organisations and been involved in change management programmes, so I think I have a range of relevant experience.

- Q12 **Paul Flynn:** I think the experience with the first politician you mentioned was probably rather more enjoyable than working with the second one. How familiar are you with the reports of UKSA and the business plan? What do you expect to improve in your first years in office?

Sir David Norgrove: I do not want to make definitive statements about that. I have enough experience to know that what you think from the outside often looks quite different when you are on the inside and can talk to the customers and to the producers. The business plan, it seems to me, is pretty comprehensive. In some respects, it could be made more numerical with more targets. A lot of the targets are now coming to the end of their useful life. I think we have a lot to learn about the use of administrative data and there are tremendous opportunities in that to produce more joined-up Government in a way because we can focus data more around people than around the institutions.

- Q13 **Paul Flynn:** I have seen the salaries that are paid in my constituency and I get the impression that they are very low compared with perhaps what they should be. Will you see the role of UKSA to make sure that the workers are treated decently with proper salaries that are worthy of the work that they do?

Sir David Norgrove: I chaired the Low Pay Commission for the last eight years, so I certainly care about the position of the low paid and I would take a close interest in that issue.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful to you.

- Q14 **Ronnie Cowan:** On the back of your answer to Mr Flynn there, you were talking about alternative facts and post-truth politics and the doublespeak that we seem to be awash with now. You expressed the importance of statistics and accurate, reliable statistics that people can hang their hats on and maybe even hang their careers on. I am little bit concerned that you want to reduce the number of working hours in this job from two and a half days down to two days.

Sir David Norgrove: As I made clear from the beginning of the application, I did not want to be committed upfront to doing two and a half days a week. This is going to be my main job. I will have only one other role, which is about two days a month. As I have shown in every other job I have done, the time the job takes will be the time the job takes. I chaired a review, for example, of the family justice system a few years ago. I was told that that would take a day a month. I thought that was probably an understatement. I did not expect it to take five to six days a week, but that is what it took and that is the time I gave it. The job will take the time it takes.



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Q15 **Ronnie Cowan:** I am a little bit confused by that then and why you want to reduce it from two and a half days to two days.

Sir David Norgrove: It was more a matter of the contractual commitment than the actual understanding of the amount of time that it would take.

Q16 **Ronnie Cowan:** Right, so you only want to be contracted to do two days?

Sir David Norgrove: I did not want to be paid for more than I was actually taking.

Q17 **Ronnie Cowan:** You are showing generosity?

Sir David Norgrove: I do not want to sound an angel in this, but I am at a stage in my career with enough understanding of these kinds of roles that I certainly would not want to take a risk with the amount of time.

Ronnie Cowan: Okay, that is fine.

Q18 **Mr Turner:** The role of chair is a high profile one. When have you criticised the Government before?

Sir David Norgrove: In public? That is an interesting question. I have certainly criticised the Government from the point of view of pensions when I was chair of the Pensions Regulator. I have made statements about the retirement age. In terms of the Low Pay Commission, we have made a number of recommendations that were quite difficult for the Government to handle.

Q19 **Mr Turner:** If you were asked which was the worst misuse of statistics by those in favour of our remaining in the common market and those who wanted us to leave, what would you say?

Sir David Norgrove: The £350 million for the NHS was clearly an egregious misuse of statistics, and Andrew Dilnot made that clear in his letter. In terms of the Remain campaign, it was not a misuse of statistics but I thought the Treasury's assessment of the immediate impact of a decision to leave was an overstatement.

Q20 **Mr Turner:** What is your view on the prerelease of statistics and the increasing demand for early sight of statistics?

Sir David Norgrove: I do not follow the justification. In other countries, even in the United States, the President, as I understand it, has only half an hour's notice of important data. This country stands out as unusual in terms of the number and the timing of prerelease. I find it difficult to follow the justification.

Q21 **Mr Turner:** You would reduce the time of prerelease?

Sir David Norgrove: It is not in the gift of the UK Statistics Authority to do that, but I would certainly press for shorter time and fewer people.



Q22 **Chair:** This is the Committee that obviously relates to UKSA and relates with the chair. How do you see your relationship with PACAC for the future?

Sir David Norgrove: I hope it would be a close one. As I said earlier on, Parliament is the ultimate guarantor of the independence of the UK Statistics Authority and this Committee is its representative. In the last resort, were there to be a major problem over misuse of statistics, which whoever it was was refusing to correct, this would be the place to come and I would hope to have a relationship with the Chair and the Committee that would allow me to handle that appropriately.

Q23 **Chair:** You would like support from PACAC in those circumstances?

Sir David Norgrove: Absolutely.

Q24 **Chair:** Are there any other ways in which you think that PACAC could support you and your work?

Sir David Norgrove: To take the views of PACAC on the needs for data, the weaknesses of data, I think the inquiries that PACAC and its predecessor PASC have carried out on the use of data and the availability of data have shone some light in some worthwhile corners. I would hope that the Committee would carry on those kinds of inquiries.

Q25 **Dr Poulter:** How confident do you feel that you will be able to ensure the independence of the role of the UK Statistics Authority?

Sir David Norgrove: Ultimately, I think it is the most important role for the chair of the authority, which is to be the leader of safeguarding of statistics, in the words of the statutory objective of the authority. I would see that as my No.1 priority.

Q26 **Dr Poulter:** A key part of that role is going to be your relationship with the National Statistician. How would you see that? How do you look at that relationship?

Sir David Norgrove: I would say it was both the National Statistician and the regulator, the office that Ed Humpherson now occupies. They are equally important, although the regulator is smaller than the ONS, of course. One of the main roles of any chair is to ensure that they have the right chief executive, so ensuring that the National Statistician is fulfilling his role properly is critical. I would have regular meetings with him and aim to get below the surface and understand what is really happening as well as helping him to lead the organisation. As I say, I think it is just as important to maintain that kind of relationship with the regulator.

Q27 **Dr Poulter:** Just looking at that issue of independence, how do you see the role of UKSA in terms of the devolved Administrations?

Sir David Norgrove: It is important to have a relationship with those devolved Administrations and with the chief statisticians within the nations. I would hope to have such a relationship. No doubt it would not be quite as close because they are not responsible for national statistics



in the same way, but I would certainly aim to have a relationship with them and understand the issues they face and have the kind of relationship with them that would give them confidence to come to me if they were running into problems with the Administrations in their areas.

- Q28 **Dr Poulter:** Just exploring that slightly, you mentioned earlier in the context of the EU referendum debate your concern over the £350 million figure for the NHS and that that was very likely to be a misuse of statistics in your view. It is conceivable there could be another Scottish independence referendum at some point and I am sure during any referendum there could be arguments and debates about statistics—North Sea oil revenues, perhaps. How would you deal with those tensions that are inevitably going to come up where you might have the Scottish Government arguing with the UK Government and using different statistics?

Sir David Norgrove: The UKSA is a national organisation and I would hope and believe that I would behave in the same way that my predecessors behaved, using appropriately the hierarchy of responses, from a private word in the ear at the level of the regulator through to a public letter from the chair.

- Q29 **Dr Poulter:** If during the process of a referendum or a point of tension between, say, the UK Government and a devolved Administration, let's say the Scottish Parliament, there were statistics being used in a way that misrepresented the basis for their collection or were being used in a way that potentially could be misleading to the public, would you be prepared to speak out in that case?

Sir David Norgrove: Yes, no question.

- Q30 **Dr Poulter:** Quite openly and publicly?

Sir David Norgrove: Absolutely.

- Q31 **Dr Poulter:** Just one more question before I pass back to the Chair. You have touched on this already. How do you intend to manage the tension between the oversight of the production of statistics and that regulatory role? More than that, do you believe that the Office for Statistics Regulation can be independent if it shares office space with other parts of the UKSA?

Sir David Norgrove: This is a question that I read PASC's report on and have given some thought to. My sense is that there is an appropriate level of distance between the regulator and ONS. I have read some of the correspondence between them and I am not sure that the physical separation would reduce the risk of regulatory capture. That is a risk however things are physically arranged. The main protection there is the quality of the people, their integrity and the way they perform their roles. If anything, given the degree of scrutiny on this point, my sense is that it could even be a positive thing that the pressure is on the regulator to show his independence from ONS, but the ultimate guarantor is the



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behaviour of the chair and the board. I am absolutely clear in my own mind that whenever there is a tension there, the regulatory side has to take precedence.

Q32 Chair: There is something of a proliferation of bodies and names in the area of statistics—UKSA, the board, ONS, and so on—and these can be somewhat confusing. Would it be possible for you to review and report to us on how to make the whole structure of statistics clearer, particularly for public use?

Sir David Norgrove: I would be happy to do that. In terms of branding—and I know that there has been some discussion of the term “national statistics”, for example—I have worked with branding commercially in the past. My own sense is that changing names is often less effective than allowing a name that is well established or becoming established to develop its own personality in the public’s mind. The change of names can often have a substantial cost.

Q33 Dr Poulter: I wanted to pick on another topic or real life example of Government use of statistics. One that is fairly live certainly in my memory was the discussion about the junior doctors contract and the Government using the argument that effectively, paraphrasing, junior doctors not working at weekends was leading to potentially greater patient deaths. What sort of role would you see, when an argument was related to industrial action, a very high profile dispute, in providing advice or guidance to the Government on cautioning it about what data is used?

Sir David Norgrove: I hope I would have the kind of relationship and respect from the users of that data that they would think very carefully in the first place before misusing data, that they would be worried about a public rebuke or a public correction of what they had said. I cannot claim to be an expert on that particular example, but my reading of the correspondence was that the words that were used on both sides were very careful but that ultimately we did not have a resolution of the underlying statistical issue, which was the question of whether people who go to hospital at the weekend are sicker than people who go during the week.

Q34 Dr Poulter: Indeed. You would see a role in privately or, if necessary, publicly cautioning the Government potentially against the use of statements that were not caveated perhaps in the way that you have made?

Sir David Norgrove: Yes.

Q35 Mr Turner: Do you think the average person would take any notice of your public criticism of both sides of the referendum or would they support the side that they were inclined to support anyway?

Sir David Norgrove: I think I am probably more on the second than the first. In a lot of the debate about the referendum people had very strongly held positions. Had the figure been corrected to the right figure



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and that had got into the public consciousness, I am not sure that it would have made much difference to the result.

Q36 **Mr Turner:** How do you do your job?

Sir David Norgrove: It is very important to make sure that the right figure is there, but you cannot expect to change the world or change people's opinions necessarily even if the numbers are correct.

Q37 **Chair:** Following on from this about the public profile of UKSA, to date UKSA has largely remained below the public radar—on rare occasions not—seeking to resolve problems behind closed doors. How will you and your fellow non-execs be more vocal in supporting good data and its accurate use?

Sir David Norgrove: I think there is a tension there, though, isn't there? If you are very public, if the UKSA and the chair of the UKSA in terms of his interventions are very frequent, they won't get the kind of attention that they need when there is something that seriously needs to be corrected. There is a balance to be struck there. There is a need to be upfront in being visible in promoting the good use of statistics but on the other hand to keep the powder dry for when it is really needed.

Q38 **Chair:** When it comes to Ministers and civil servants, would you see your role as persuading them to use data more boldly, more robustly in policymaking, especially good, robust data?

Sir David Norgrove: I think there is an issue there. Yes is the short answer, but there is clearly a question here about the role of the Government Statistical Service, which over the years appears to have been downgraded or had a less important role in government. I would certainly want to work with the National Statistician to try to raise the status and the role that is played by statisticians, and economists for that matter, in government. That goes, too, to the question of the extent of the devolution of statistics to Departments. We run a very devolved approach to statistics, which is gradually becoming more centralised as we get particular problems—for example, with crime statistics that PASC took a close interest in—and I would welcome over time a greater sense of discipline around Departments in the use of statistics as well as with the national statistics.

Q39 **Chair:** This Committee, and particularly our Chairman, has been very keen on promoting open data, setting aside the personal details. Will you campaign for more open data?

Sir David Norgrove: I very much welcome the Digital Economy Bill that is going through Parliament at the moment. I think it has passed this House. I think that gives, as I said, real opportunities in terms of greater use of data built around people rather than institutions.

Q40 **Chair:** At the end of your term of office, would you hope that statistics would look a bit different with more open data, better data, more timely



data and so on?

Sir David Norgrove: I would certainly feel I had failed if they did not.

Q41 **Chair:** I have one particular question of my own. I am very keen on the census, and there has been some suggestion that the census ought to be removed or abolished. I think long-term time series, historic ones like the census, are extremely valuable and extremely interesting as well. Would you commit to delivering a trusted and successful 2021 census?

Sir David Norgrove: That would be one of my criteria for success. I think I would also want to go with that, though, by laying the foundations for a census in 2031 that was not based so solely on a form. I cannot see how in the long run you can get away from having some questions asked through distribution of a survey, but by 2031, particularly given declining response rates to those kinds of form-based surveys, one would hope that we will have in place an ability to use administrative databases much more to deliver the data.

Q42 **Paul Flynn:** Can I follow up on that? Why do you think the national census is almost alone in taking this biblical view that you should ask everyone their opinions, whereas most surveys conclude on tiny percentages, certainly less than 1%, sometimes less than 0.01%, yet produce results that are indistinguishable and sometimes more reliable than the 100% census, which is never 100% anyway?

Sir David Norgrove: If you are going to get sample sizes that are large enough for answering questions at a very local level, you need to ask everybody. I had experience of that in setting up a system in Marks and Spencer for deciding where shops should be placed. If you are deciding where a shop should be placed, you need to know about the characteristics of the people in a very local area, and only the census provides that.

Q43 **Paul Flynn:** How would you account for the resistance to the census by certain groups who do not take part or people who want to call themselves Jedi Knights or people who take the line of seriousness of those who voted for Boaty McBoatface as the name of a boat? Don't you think it is an unscientific way now of measuring opinion when in all of the censuses people did it because they wanted to avoid paying the poll tax in one census and people deliberately stay out of it, so you are not getting 100%? A survey not taken every 10 years but taken annually of 0.001% of the population will give you a continuous view of public opinion and the disposition rather than this crude, mass, inaccurate 10-year census.

Sir David Norgrove: You are always going to have groups of people who take perverse views of these kinds of things and no survey is ever perfect. As I tried to explain, I think that having a baseline at regular intervals that takes stock of the nation at a very local level is important and will continue to be important, but it can be supplemented and produced through alternative methods as we look ahead.



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Chair: I think perhaps discussing the census could be an item for a future meeting, because there is even a range of views within this Committee, as you may have gathered. Anyway, that is the end of our questions. I want to thank you very much, Sir David, for coming today. Of course, our offices will be in contact with you very shortly. Thank you for attending.