

In defence of the census

There would be something the matter if the people of this country did not grumble a little about the census and if they failed to demand the assurances to which they are entitled—and go on demanding until they received them. In an operation like the census, which involves recording a fair amount of personal information and spending a very large amount of public money—£11m.—people ought to demand the firmest possible assurances that the information they give will not be misused and, also, that it will be used for specific, practical purposes.

The issue of confidentiality, which has rightly attracted so much attention over the past few days, has three quite distinct aspects. First is the apprehension that, in some way or other, the information people put on record might be used against them by the Government or "the authorities". On this, the Government (both the present and the last, like every previous administration) have guaranteed that information about individual people or families will in no circumstances be released to any authority, or any person, outside the census organization itself. That guarantee stands, absolute. But what, the critics ask, about some hypothetical malevolent Government in the future? There is little information asked for in the census which *could* be used against people by the Government, central or local, and much of what there is will soon—*from the individual point of view*—be out of date.

There is a fear, too, that the advent of the computer has in some way increased the supposed danger. This is not so. Since no names or addresses are fed into the computer, its use (for the third time) means no more than greater speed and efficiency in processing. Identified individual data remain, as always, in the paper records and even if this year's census were, as has been suggested, a "step in the

direction of the police state"—which of course it is not—it would be not the first step but the seven-teenth.

Second is the fear of gossip by the enumerators. It is, I hope, by now widely known that they are required to give a legally binding undertaking not to disclose any information derived from census returns, with heavy penalties for any breach. It is perhaps less widely known that there has been little or no difficulty in recruiting enumerators, with the result that it has been possible to pick and choose for the job responsible people with whom one can sympathize if they are inclined to resent what has too often been said about them. And, in any case, if the enumerator is known to the householder and if the householder really minds the enumerator's seeing the form, it may be sent direct to the district Census Officer. (But how many people, one wonders, *really* mind? Not too many, it must be hoped, because this procedure is bound to push up the cost and slow down the speed of producing the statistical output.)

A third apprehension is that census data about identified or identifiable people will be sold to "commercial undertakings". Here again an absolute guarantee has been given that no information about identified people or households will be released.

Identifiable, then? Nothing will be released but statistical tabulations which will give the *general* characteristics of the population of given areas and it is difficult to see that there is any valid objection to releasing data which will show, for example, where there are pools of potential labour—economically inactive women, perhaps, who might be attracted into employment in a shop or a factory—or pools of potential customers of a particular type (age-group, economic status). But the statisticians planning the census have gone to a very great deal of trouble to make

sure—by establishing thresholds (in terms of numbers of households) beneath which even the statistics released are very restricted indeed that these anonymous statistics cannot disclose, even in small areas, information about identifiable people.

It has been suggested that by running computer tapes of census statistics against name-and-address tapes derived from the electoral registers or elsewhere it would be possible to detect information about identifiable individuals. But we are satisfied that there is no way in which statistical aggregates can be run against individual listings in such a way as to produce data about individual people. Nevertheless, to make assurance even more sure, we are taking up an offer to discuss the whole problem with independent computer experts.

The best guarantee of the relevance and importance of the topics covered by the census is the fact that they were debated and approved by both Houses of Parliament. On a second occasion the actual wording of the questions was submitted to Parliament and lay for 40 days unchallenged.

In an article of tolerable compass it is hardly possible to discuss in enough detail the reasons why each of these 29 main questions (two more than in 1961) are being asked or to do more than illustrate those reasons by examples. Clearest, perhaps are the basic demographic questions at the beginning of section B—age, sex, marital condition and relation to head of household—which are essential bench-marks for the production of annual population estimates and which, in combination with B.23 and B.24 (dates of marriage and of births of children within marriage), will provide valuable new data for the annual population projections produced by the Government Actuary in consultation with ourselves.

The estimates of current local

which Exchequer grants to local authorities are calculated and it is hardly necessary to point out, nor possible to exaggerate, the importance, for capital investment (houses, schools, higher education, hospitals) and for the development of social services and industry, of making the population projections as reliable as the knowledge of present and past facts can make them.

Clear again are the reasons for seeking the housing data in Section A. How would it be possible, without knowledge of the facts on the quantity, quality and variety of tenure of the existing housing stock, and of the density at which it is occupied, to develop a coherent housing policy at either national or local level?

Next on the form come the questions, B.9 and 10, directed to identifying the immigrant communities. Here one is on delicate ground because they probably have some feeling of insecurity, apprehension about the official census. I cannot do better than quote two successive Chairmen of the Community Relations Commission itself. "I believe that the collation of statistics by the census will enable us to understand the immigrants in our midst—their standards of housing, the work they do, and the education of their children. With this knowledge we can remedy wrongs, for we shall at least be equipped with the facts." And, a few days ago, "It would be particularly sad if immigrants were to look on the census as a threat to their security. It is the very reverse. The truth set forth in facts and figures is our chief weapon and I urge them to use it". Could anyone be more emphatic?

Questions B.11 and 12—address one year and five years ago—are designed to display the patterns of migration within the country. The

census showed that 10 per cent of the population moved house every year and 30 per cent every five years. And it is only a basis of present facts that can make possible intelligent forecasts of future population movements—not merely population as a whole but particular sectors of it, like the labour force, children, the old—which are obviously essential for planning in the widest sense.

Information on journey to work is clearly indispensable for traffic planning. Indeed other travel data—to school, to shop, for recreation—would have been of much value but would have overloaded the form and were (with a mass of other suggested topics) rejected.

This leaves two topics, education and occupation, which are in some ways rather closely connected. "A" levels, substituted for the question in earlier censuses on terminal education age, shows the numbers of people educated at sixth form level and the following question provides a vitally important measure of the stock of manpower and womanpower with higher qualifications of all kinds. The section on occupation will yield data on the size, nature and exact location (both now and as a basis for forecasting) of the labour force, male and female, an essential ingredient in economic planning, whether by the Government or by industry itself. And read in conjunction with the education data it will give a picture of the deployment of qualified people in different occupations and industries and some measure of the extent to which the educational system is meeting the needs of employment.

By way of summary, perhaps I may quote a remark made to me a day or two ago by a taxi-driver: "Don't know what the fuss is all about—it's for our own good, isn't it?"