

Chapter IX.

History as Prologue: The Continuing Mission

The mission of the Bureau of Labor Statistics since its founding 100 years ago has been to collect information on economic and social conditions and, in the words of Carroll Wright, the first Commissioner, through "fearless publication of the results," to let the people assess the facts and act on them. It was the belief of its founders that dissemination of the facts would lead to improvement of the life of the people.

On the occasion of the Bureau's centennial, Janet L. Norwood, the tenth Commissioner, summed up the Bureau's past—and continuing—role: "The Bureau stands for—

- Commitment to objectivity and fairness in all of its data gathering and interpretive and analytical work;
- Insistence on candor at all times;
- Protection of confidentiality;
- Pursuit of improvements;
- Willingness to change; and
- Maintenance of consistency in the highest standards of performance."

These principles, Norwood stressed, must be steadfastly applied in monitoring "our programs to ensure that they remain accurate, objective, and relevant. We must modernize our statistical techniques because a statistical agency that does not constantly move ahead in the use of new techniques quickly moves backward."

As an institution, the Bureau has evolved from the original and sole labor agency in the Federal Government, with a broad factfinding scope, to one among many specialized labor agencies. Serving as a quasi-Department of Labor during its first two decades, it was called upon to study and report on issues such as the violent strikes and lockouts of the period and the harsh conditions of employment for women and children. Today, the Bureau is a general-purpose statistical agency, gathering, analyzing, and distributing information broadly applicable to labor economics and labor conditions.

While the focus and perspectives of Bureau studies have changed over the years, most areas of investigation have remained germane—the course of wages and prices, the state of industrial relations, problems of unemployment and the effects of technological and demographic change, and safety and health conditions in the workplace. Some areas of study, such as child labor, have been rendered unnecessary by legislation. In others, newer, specialized agencies have taken over the work the Bureau began.

The Bureau's role has been to provide data and analyses that contribute to the development of policy without crossing the line into policy formulation, but the line is a fine one. Certainly Neill and Lubin, through their personal relations, advised Presidents and Secretaries on specifics of labor and economic policy. And at times the Bureau has found itself in the midst of controversy, its findings and objectivity challenged by one set of partisans or another. Wright's wage and price studies were attacked as products of political manipulation, and, during World War II, labor unions challenged the cost-of-living index because of their dissatisfaction with the government's wage stabilization policies.

Professional integrity is essential to a government agency which provides information for public and private policy needs, and the Bureau's institutional probity has been a constant concern of the Commissioners and their staffs. Over the years, the Bureau's objectivity has been affirmed and reaffirmed upon review of its work by congressional committees, Presidential commissions, and professional

associations of economists and statisticians. All noted areas needing improvement, but none found reason to question the independence and integrity of the Bureau.

For the first half-century of its existence, the Bureau's appropriations changed only when special funding was provided for particular programs, such as the woman and child study of 1907-09, and development of a cost-of-living index during World War I. The emergency demands of the depression of the 1930's and the accompanying social legislation also led Congress to increase appropriations to expand and improve the Bureau's statistics. And, similarly, World War II needs generated increased resources and programs.

After the war, the climate was vastly different. Government policy concerns required data produced on a frequent and regular basis. The Employment Act of 1946, which established the congressional Joint Economic Committee and the Council of Economic Advisers, epitomized the new conditions. As government social and economic policies developed and expanded, legislation frequently incorporated Bureau statistics as escalators or other administrative devices. There was now a regular demand for new and improved statistics, with support for resources to make them available. While increases in resources have not always been forthcoming, and programs have been cut on occasion to make room for new and expanded series, the postwar trend has been one of provision of funds for such expansion and improvements.

Bureau programs have changed to meet changing conditions. Ongoing statistical series such as the Consumer Price Index have been adjusted periodically to assure that concepts and coverage reflect altered societal patterns. Along with regular planned revisions, the Bureau has made interim revisions, as in the case of the treatment of the homeownership component in the CPI. New series, including the Employment Cost Index and the multifactor productivity indexes, have been developed.

Meeting these vastly increased requirements has been made possible through the development of sophisticated statistical techniques of sampling and the computerization of statistical operations. Bureau personnel now include mathematical statisticians, computer programmers, and computer systems analysts as well as economists and clerical staff.

In addition, close coordination with other Federal agencies and with the States, evolving from Wright's early efforts, has improved the quality of the data and efficiency in collection and processing.

Bureau respondents generally have given their full cooperation because of the assurance of confidentiality for reported information, a guarantee which has been assiduously enforced. In its communication with the public, the Bureau has emphasized frankness regarding limitations of the data and the provision of detailed information on concepts and methods. There has been a constant striving to improve the timeliness, regularity, and accuracy of the data and their public presentation.

While well established, the principles have needed regular reiteration, particularly during unsettled times. There have been many occasions when the messenger has been buffeted by the storms of rapid economic and social change. This has been especially true when the Bureau's data have been used in implementing and monitoring policy, as in the wartime use of its cost-of-living index for wage stabilization. On other occasions, Bureau staff efforts to explain technical limitations have collided with policymakers' unqualified use of the data. In such circumstances, the Bureau has been sustained by the widespread recognition that its nonpartisanship and objectivity must be assured and protected. Congress, successive Secretaries of Labor, the Bureau's labor and business advisory groups, the professional associations, and the press have supported the independence and impartiality of statistical research in government agencies.

The roots of this independence and professionalism are deep and strong. The tradition of impartiality has been underwritten by both Democratic and Republican administrations over the century of the Bureau's existence, during which Commissioners have been selected for their technical competence without regard to partisan considerations.

The Bureau faces great challenges in the years ahead as the phenomena it measures grow in complexity in the dynamic economy of the United States. It will require openness to new methods and techniques and adherence to the standards already set to carry out its mission during the next century.