

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### Census-taking in Australia has never followed accepted patterns



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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As you ponder the census fiasco, take a moment to remember Matthew Gregson, Australia's first statistician, whose story seems even more relevant today than when I recounted it five years ago. Transported for "feloniously embezzling Bills of Exchange and other Money", Gregson, on arriving in 1824, promptly found work in the Colonial Secretary's office, where his skills with numbers were desperately needed to compile the badly overdue Blue Book.

The Blue Book, an annual summary of the colony's situation demanded by the governor's masters in London, was a priority because the penal colony of New South Wales was controversial, with the proponents of "economical reform" denouncing its cost when high public debt meant "frugality and economy" were indispensable.

To appease the critics, the "Heads of a Plan" for the new colony promised that transportation would be "reciprocally beneficial" to the convicts "and to the state". The Blue Books, whose design had "been approved by the most rigid

economists”, served to ensure that goal was met.

But gathering the Blue Books’ statistics was no easy task. The annual population musters were haphazard, unruly and wildly unpopular. Lasting up to several weeks, they were intended to collect a wide variety of information; however, free settlers could not be compelled to attend and ever greater numbers simply refused to show up.

The colony thus shifted from musters to a census, beginning in 1828. Backed by legislation, the refusal to participate triggered a fine that, at today’s prices, could reach \$1500 — far more than most settlers’ annual income. With a district constable visiting each house to enforce compliance, the great Australian tradition of matching world-class suspicion of authority with world-class compulsion had gotten off to a flying start.

So too, however, had a stellar record in measuring the continent’s progress, with the advent of responsible government then giving the statistical urge renewed impetus.

As they became self-governing, the colonial governments could borrow in their own right; but to attract finance from the London markets, they had to reassure foreign lenders, who had no prospect of visiting the colonies, that conditions were not as chaotic as they feared.

Nowhere was that need greater than in Victoria, which combined a massive inflow of abrasive, acquisitive and assertive settlers with a political system that was always raw, often riotous and ultimately ruinous. Flush with revenues from the gold rush, it recruited an English actuary, WH Archer, who, from 1859, implemented a statistical system such that “England has nothing so complete, nor has any other country”, allowing him to chart the colony’s growth in a Statistical Register that recorded facts “with correctness and impartiality”.

Once Victoria had taken the lead, the other colonies were under pressure to follow, with Sir Hercules Robinson, the energetic governor of NSW who vigorously championed administrative reform, urging the colonies to share information and learn from each other’s experience.

Already in 1861, the census was co-ordinated between the colonies; beginning in 1873, the Victorian yearbook, drawing on the data that was becoming available, included a section on “Australian statistics”, which showcased

Victoria's outstanding performance.

Of course, matters in Australia Felix looked vastly different after the great Victorian crash of 1889, when poet George Willoughby, whose sensitivity outstripped his talent, bewailed: "Marvellous Melbourne's empty boast of pride/While its poverty is swelling like a mighty tide." By then, however, leadership of the continent's statistical effort was moving back to New South Wales, whose appointment in 1886 of TA Coghlan as "Government Statist" launched a new era.

Coghlan's statistical yearbook quickly set an international benchmark. But his pioneering work also highlighted a change in emphasis.

The Australian colonies had come to be seen, and to view themselves, as a bold social experiment. And sound data was regarded as essential to assessing that experiment's results, not only by overseas observers but by the plethora of royal commissions and public inquiries that characterised Deakinite reformism.

Federation only strengthened Deakinism's reforming zeitgeist, which reached its apogee with George Knibbs, the newly appointed commonwealth statistician. A passionate eugenicist who believed that "we are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can increase freely", he regarded the compulsory census as the crucial test of whether the "higher races" were thriving or instead succumbing, as many claimed, to contamination by "social parasites".

Knibbs's premises were those of his time. But his achievement, embodied in the 1300 pages of the 1911 Commonwealth Yearbook, was a stunning monument to the comprehensive collection of information. And its legacy of analysing and using statistics to administrative ends played an important part in AF Davies's famous assertion in 1958 that despite the "cherished image of ourselves as an ungovernable people", "the characteristic talent of Australians is for bureaucracy".

Davies, however, was no starry-eyed centralist. Alert to bureaucracy's dysfunctions, he warned of the "small country blues", with advancement within narrow cliques and "whole towns (Canberra, for example), where everyone is perhaps over-promoted." And the dangers grew as the bureaucracy expanded: in 1958 there were three members of the federal Senior Executive Service per 100,000 Australians; by last year, there were 11.

Now, as best one can tell, those risks have come home to roost, at high cost to our statistical system's reputation. Perhaps Gregson, who laboured under the threat of the lash, should have taught his successors as Australian Statistician — who can only be removed by an act of parliament — about accountability.

Then again, our swindler was always an innovator: on being pardoned in record time, he resigned, only to be lucratively reappointed as a contractor, thus blazing a trail hordes of public servants have since followed. He died, it seems, a happy man.