



1885 - 2020

ISI turns 135 on 24 June 2020

1885 – 1887: From the Creation of the ISI to its 1st Session in Rome

*This is the third of a series of articles dedicated to the 135th anniversary of the ISI
By Jean-Louis Bodin, former ISI President (1999-2001)*

My first article posted in January this year described how ISI was created on 24 June 1885, during the Jubilee meeting of the Statistical Society of London. My second article, posted in March, reminded that this creation was the result of a long history of statistical international cooperation initiated in 1851.

The decisions taken on 24 June 1885 were based on a report proposing possible organization for the future ISI prepared by Prof Franz von Neumann-Spallart, member of the Imperial Statistical Commission of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and professor of statistics at the University of Vienna, Austria. These decisions mainly concerned the objectives and the structure of the proposed ISI, after the failure of the 9th International Statistical Congress in 1876 as reported in my second article.

The crux of the discussion was whether the ISI would be an official, semi-official, or fully independent institution. The organization proposed by von Neumann-Spallart and the decisions taken during the London meeting were somewhat ambiguous: he was in favour of “*a free association diverted of any official character, but which would endeavour to establish a base for the uniformity of official statistics*”. This ambiguity had also been the main reason of the breakdown of the International Statistical Congresses. In fact, it remained until the creation of an Independent Statistical Commission within the League of Nations in October 1920.

This ambiguity was reflected in the provisional statutes adopted in London in June 1885; in particular Article I, setting the objectives of the ISI, was aimed at what we call today ‘official statistics’ and it was decided (Articles III and IV of the provisional statutes) that the membership would be composed of 81 members “chosen among persons ... who have distinguished themselves in the domain of administrative and scientific statistics, such as the heads of official statistical bureaux ...” and a maximum of 81 associates. It was unclear whether or not the 81 members were official representatives of governments.

The discussions during the constituent meeting in London in June 1885 between the partisans of an official institution and those of a completely independent association were in fact extremely tense, so that they ultimately resulted in a proposed “synthetic” resolution by a



former secretary of the Statistical Society of London, Dr Mouat. This resolution stipulated that the “meeting accepts in principle the proposal for an international statistical association ... but is of opinion that such an association should be dissociated from the limitation of its members” and that “a special International Organizing Committee to work out the provisional details be appointed by this meeting”. This Committee was also in charge of preparing in Rome the 1st ISI Session, the previous name of our WSCs. The Session was supposed to be held in September 1886, but a cholera epidemic forced to postpone it to 12-16 April 1887 – quite a similarity to the current health situation!



*The First Session of the International Statistical Institute
Rome, 12-16 April 1887*

(Standing, left to right): Kummer (Switzerland), Milliet (Switzerland), Favero (Italy), Scharling (Denmark), Inama-Sternegg (Austria), Wagner (Germany), Pantaleoni (Italy), Bertillon (France), Ferraris (Italy), Craigie (England), Ibañez (Spain), Cheysson (France), Mouat (England), Meltzl (Hungary), Laspeyres (Germany), Palgrave (England), Hasse (Germany), Lexis (Germany), Liegeard (France), Sombart (Austria), De-Foville (France), Schoener, Raseri (Italy), Vacher (France), Da Fions, Körösi (Hungary), Geertruyen, Mühlhng.
(Seated, left to right): Loua (France), Levi (England), Gad (Denmark), Troïnitsky (Russia), Jung Scilling (Russia), Brock (Norway), Engel (Germany), Bateman (England), Martin (England), Neumann-Spallart (Austria), Rawson (England), Levasseur (France), Bodio (Italy), Keleti (Hungary), Mayr (Germany), Yvernès (France), Dodge (U.S.A.), Wirth (Austria).

Source: J.W. Nixon: *A History of the International Statistical Institute 1885-1960*

The provisional bureau of the newly created ISI met in Cologne, Germany, in May 1886 to endorse the work done by the organizing committee for preparing this 1st ISI session. After some hesitation, the revision of the provisional statutes adopted in London was put on the



agenda; a scientific programme was prepared with some issues still relevant today (household expenditures, comparison of 1890 population censuses, social and economic situations between countries, public debts, labour statistics, ...). During the session, several amendments to the provisional statutes were adopted to re-affirm that ISI will be an independent association and some kind of academy. The terms of the officers appointed in London had been renewed for two years until the 2nd session. It was finally decided to organize this 2nd session in Paris during the Universal Exhibition, the Centenary of the French Revolution and.... the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower!