

Wrong move on census ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The Conservative government has quietly told Statistics Canada to stop requiring people to complete the detailed "long form" census questionnaire that will come to their door in 2011. (Completion of the short form will still be mandatory.)

Bowing to paranoia in its bedrock Conservative constituency - itself an echo of anti-government rumblings by American Republicans who are stonewalling the current U.S. census - the federal government is betraying Canadian tradition.

Tony Clement, the cabinet minister who oversees StatsCan, argues that the change will "reasonably limit what many Canadians felt was an intrusion of their personal privacy," according to a spokesperson. No data were offered by Clement's office on how many Canadians actually considered the long form questionnaire an unwarranted "intrusion?"

For decades, StatsCan has selected one-fifth of all residents for the long form questionnaire, which poses queries about vital issues such as migration, ethnicity, work, education, housing, income, child care and family life. The identities of the respondents were, of course, kept confidential. But the cumulative data allowed StatsCan to paint a much more in-depth picture of the country than a mere population count. Government policy-makers, academic researchers, journalists and businesses all relied on the unbiased data - unbiased in the sense that people were selected by a random process for the questions so as to weed out any survey bias.

Henceforth, StatsCan will have to rely on volunteers to answer its more detailed questions. To be sure, Canadians can be a cooperative lot, but statisticians know that people who volunteer are not necessarily representative of the population as a whole. Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, and the poor are also less likely to fill in the long form. "Those are the kind of data that will be threatened," Ivan Fellegi, former chief statistician of Canada, told The Canadian Press.

"To come out with something (voluntary) that has uncertain quality, and certainly for some groups it will be unpublishable quality, is not something that I can understand," he added.

StatsCan used to have a well-deserved global reputation for both accuracy and analysis. But the Conservative government is shackling the agency. The government's latest move to curtail the census is just another example of ideology trumping common sense.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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