

Harper's double standard on privacy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A private member's bill that in part asks for the return of the long-form census goes to a vote in the House of Commons Wednesday. It's likely to be defeated, and so as Canadians, we will have to be content with the federal government making policy decisions without independent information from a credible source. For that, we should be outraged.

Despite good advice, the Harper government did away with the long-form census in 2010 and replaced it with a voluntary national household survey (NHS). The reason? Well, then-industry minister Tony Clement suggested it was because of privacy concerns -- Canadians had expressed worry about providing private information and being threatened with jail time for failing to fill out the census forms.

Certainly a survey done by the Privacy Commissioner of Canada (note the irony) released last week suggests half of the Canadians surveyed said they don't understand what governments and businesses do with the information they collect. When the decision was made in 2010 to get rid of the mandatory census, many Canadians were under the erroneous impression their individual private information was provided to Statistics Canada. More than anything, this suggests the federal government should have hunkered down and explained this to Canadians. But it did not. Instead, it moved without consultation and killed the long-form census. Chief statistician Munir Sheikh resigned over it with a public rebuke of the Harper government's insistence the NHS would provide the same level of information.

It is interesting to note last week's survey also found 78 per cent of Canadians said they are concerned about how personal information found online may be used in the context of government surveillance, and 57 per cent said they were uncomfortable with the government being able to access information from telecommunications companies without a warrant. These concerns are part and parcel of an erosion of Canadian's privacy brought to you by the Harper government.

So on one hand, the Conservatives limit the ability of a government agency to provide excellent data for public-policy formation on the grounds of privacy. On the other, the Conservatives are exploiting Canadians' fears about terrorist attacks in light of the Ottawa shootings last October to give more power to other government organizations such as CSIS and the police that strip us of our privacy. More irony.

But this is why you should care. Policy analysts, city planners, academics, journalists, researchers and business groups all rely on information provided by Statistics Canada. The Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Council of Canadians and Democracy Watch are but a few of the organizations that want the long-form census returned. They, like other Canadians, say the voluntary replacement does not provide as rigorous methodology or longitudinal analysis as the long form did. In other words, the information could be suspect. In 2006 when the last long-form census was conducted, 94 per cent of households completed the survey, while the average NHS response rate was 68.9 per cent, and there are concerns those who did respond are not representative of the Canadian population.

That's why Liberal MP Ted Hsu has made a bill calling for the return of the long-form census his personal campaign, tabling the private member's bill in November, despite the odds it will never become law. The NDP is also on board. But the Conservatives will use their majority to defeat it.

Mr. Hsu says the Conservatives are really happy when they are left alone -- something they value more than evidence-based policy, and who can blame them? After all, if you cut off the supply of information, you can't be criticized for failing to act. If you can say you're saving money by doing so, you may even get re-elected.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: demographics ^[4]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/02/harpers-double-standard-privacy> [2]
<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/editorials/harpers-double-standard-on-privacy-290503101.html> [3]
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