

Why Canada should reinstate long-form census ^[1]

Opinion

Author: Bede Scharper, Stephen

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EXCERPTS

This week, Parliament will vote on reinstating the long-form census.

(I know, one can hear the collective yawn wafting over the morning coffee - Census? What's the big deal? So what if it doesn't come back?)

While not the snazziest of subjects, the long-form census debate is a critical one, speaking to the heartland both of Canada's self-understanding and its vitality as a nation.

In 2010, against the advice of the chief statistician and other experts, the Conservative government quashed the long-form census.

Arguing that the mandatory census was an example of government intrusion, the Conservative majority replaced the 2011 mandatory long-form census with a voluntary National Household Survey.

The long-form census was the demographic backbone for government, business, social services and academic research across the country. Data collected from the census, which enjoyed an approximate 98 per cent return rate, was used to make key municipal, provincial and federal decisions.

Where are social services most needed? Where would business investment be most profitable? What parts of the country have highest unemployment? Where is income disparity greatest? How are aboriginal communities and new immigrants faring compared to other sectors of society?

These are but a few of the questions the long-form census helped answer, providing a social scientific lamp illuminating often unreported but critical social and economic data, especially in remote and marginalized areas of the country.

For Ted Hsu, Liberal MP for Kingston and the Islands, who sponsored Bill C-626 as a private member's bill, the mandatory long-form census is critical to restore.

As Hsu notes, not only was it cheaper to manage but its data was far richer and more reliable, and also provided continuity from year to year. The National Household Survey costs approximately \$22 million more to administer (including adjustment for inflation), has a much lower rate of return - approximately 65 per cent - and cannot be compared with decades of previous census data.

In a recent conversation, Hsu noted that this year marks the 350th anniversary of the first Canadian census, conducted by an enterprising Jean Talon (1626-1694) who braved the elements going door to door in New France to collect his data. (But it was all worth it: his name presently adorns Statistics Canada Building 5 in Ottawa.)

The long-form census, which includes detailed data about employment, education and income, is the heir to Talon's early quest to understand the composition of the Canadian mosaic.

Cheaper, 98 per cent return rate, better data and better continuity. As Hsu wryly notes, "We now pay more to get worse data." With all its benefits and advantages, why was the long-form census scrapped?

For Margrit Eichler, president of Scientists for the Right to Know, the answer is simple: politics. In her view, the current government prefers policy that is driven more by ideology than by evidence - social, scientific or otherwise. For her, the strategy is a "brilliant" one, for the killing of the long-form census negatively impacts all social scientific research in the country.

As Eichler observes, the National Household Survey has very scant returns from the top and bottom rungs of the economic ladder. With mainly mid-income respondents, the survey creates a façade that Canada is a thriving middle-class society when in fact it is experiencing a widening chasm between the affluent and the impoverished.

Such a conclusion was recently detailed by University of Toronto social scientist David Hulchanski, who last week provided data, reported in these pages, showing a disturbing trend of a shrinking middle class in Toronto over the past four decades, leading him to term Canada's

largest urban centre as a "divided" city.

The household survey, with its limited and skewed data, reveals no such picture.

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