

Public servants scramble to fill data deficit on Liberals' priorities

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EXCERPTS

If Prime Minister Justin Trudeau really is a data geek, he couldn't have been encouraged by what some federal departments had on hand.

Internal documents obtained by the Star suggest years of belt tightening has led to a data deficit in Ottawa, gaps that may "create challenges" in delivering on the Liberal government's priorities.

Early childhood learning and child care, expanding parental leave, increasing youth employment, and expanding training for apprentices and post-secondary students all figured prominently in the Liberals' election platform.

But as of November, the department responsible for making good on those promises was worried they didn't have enough concrete data to deliver.

"Spending on surveys has been reduced over the last several fiscal years and has been concentrated on priority areas to help manage financial pressures," read documents prepared for the senior public servant at Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

The Liberals have made "evidence-based decision-making" a watchword for their early days in office, and senior staff in the Prime Minister's Office are known for their attachment to data-driven strategy.

A spokesperson for Families, Children and Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said the issue is government-wide, not isolated in their department.

"This is an issue that all ministers are facing right now. We do know that there are gaps in the data the government owns," Mathieu Filion told the Star in an email.

"There are many discussions on the matter with different minister's offices as to see what will be done to acquire more data."

According to the November documents, Statistics Canada was largely preoccupied with the restoration of the long-form census, but had identified a number priority files.

Along with ESDC, StatsCan was looking to revive "longitudinal surveys" to fill in gaps. Longitudinal surveys are more expensive and time consuming than other methods of collecting data, but the documents suggest they can give greater insight into "the dynamics of life events" and have a greater payoff when continued over a number of years.

StatsCan's wish list includes greater labour market information (specifically aboriginal participation, unpaid internships, temporary foreign workers, and worker mobility), better information on children's physical and mental health development, and more data on Canada's aging population and the resulting effect on the economy and the health-care system.

The agency says the digital economy remains largely in the dark, as well.

"The use of digital technologies is an important and growing phenomenon and stakeholders are increasingly demanding statistical products to address questions on the topic," the documents read.

"While the agency has been doing some feasibility work on Internet use by children, the incidence of cybercrime amongst Canadian businesses, and has developed some questions for the inclusion in various surveys, there remain important data gaps."

ESDC is also interested in learning more about Canadians' "computer literacy" and use of the Internet.

Ready or not with the data to back policy, the Liberals have begun moving ahead on a number of files ESDC identified. On Monday, Employment Minister MaryAnn Mihychuk detailed new projects funded through the federal government aimed at improving job skills of 700 youth and 400 people with disabilities.

In February, Trudeau committed to spending an additional \$113 million over three years on the Canada Summer Jobs program, which subsidizes wages for Canadians aged 15 to 30. In 2015-16, the program cost \$106 million and created more than 34,000 summer jobs.

The government has also changed Canada's child-care benefits, combining four separate benefits into a single monthly payment. That change has been the costliest so far, projected to have a \$22.4 billion price tag over five years.

The Liberal's first budget also committed to spending \$500 million in 2017-18 on a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework, to be designed with input from the provinces, territories, and indigenous communities.

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