

Open Letter to Industry Minister Tony Clement – Part 1 of 3

A letter on the matters of methodological issues such as the difference between a census and a survey.

My name is Claude Danik. I am CAPE's Executive Director. Today I write to you as a Canadian concerned with what has happened at Statistics Canada.

My background and formal education are in the social sciences: I have a bachelor degree in social sciences, a master's degree in sociology and a doctoral degree in social and political thought. In a previous career, I taught sociology at the University of Ottawa, including courses on methodology and on the nature of scientific thought. I have been privileged because I am a *Canadian* social scientist who is interested first and foremost in Canadians and Canadian society, and I have had at my disposal the vast compendium of data collected by Statistics Canada including its census data.

My interest has been directed by academic research. However, in the many years since I first stepped on a university campus way back in 1973, I have met many Canadians for whom social research fed directly into decisions by governments at all levels, research institutions, private concerns including small companies and large corporations. I have worked with Canadians serving Canadians with the use of data produced by Statistics Canada.

Though I write now to all those who visit CAPE's web site, I write more specifically to Tony Clement, Minister of Industry responsible for Statistics Canada. The following is an open letter to Mr. Clement.

Dear Mr. Clement;

I have noted that the press is giving you a hard time, depicting you as a dishonest and manipulative person, deceitful, devious and untrustworthy. I will return to this matter in the near future: it is important that we set the record straight on honour and integrity.

I want to talk to you today about methodology. I know that you may find the following paragraphs boring. You may even have heard or read something similar somewhere not so long ago. But please stay tuned. I know that you will because I know that an Honorable Member of Parliament will always want to listen to what a Canadian has to say. So, let's talk census.

Going out and collecting data is not the first step of a census, or for that matter any endeavour that purports to be based in science. And please keep in mind that when we speak of data collection by an entity like Statistics Canada, the measure of whether it is carrying out its mandate well is that it is collecting data in such a way that the scientific community is satisfied that the data is ok. As a

Minister of the government of Canada, I am sure that you would not want it any other way. You want other departments of the federal public service, provincial governments, municipal governments, research institutions and private companies to use scientifically produced information, not opinions or ideas that would not stand up to the scrutiny of scientific review.

You want what scientists call reliable data, because scientists don't use the expression "objective data". It sounds too definitive and opens up debates in the philosophy of science with quotes flying all over the place from the likes of Hume and Kant. It can get ugly and we certainly don't want to go there. But in common parlance and since we can talk frankly to each other you can substitute reliable with objective in order to delineate more clearly the difference between the kind of data that is collected by Statistics Canada from polls or opinion surveys. The census isn't about opinion, or ideology for that matter. It is a collection of data that is as objective as data can be.

So, what is the first step of a census? We all know that the first step is obviously preparing the questions. But Mr. Clement did you know that a lot of trouble and thought and discussion, scientifically framed discussion go into the preparation of the census questions? The questionnaire must avoid at all costs leading the respondents to any of the proposed answers in the questionnaire. The words must be chosen carefully, the number of choices must be reviewed for multiple choice questions, the order of questions and many other matters, that may appear mundane to most people but are exciting to methodologists, must be considered. Why? In order to produce data that is not tainted by the unavoidable biases of the people who will ask Statistics Canada to ask questions and by the biases of those human beings that are Statistics Canada's staff. We all have biases, Mr. Clement. The purpose of scientific methodology is to expose the biases of the researcher and to marginalize the biases in such a way that they will not affect the "objectivity" or reliability of the data.

In fact methodologists have devised methods to estimate the confidence of data, by considering many, many factors that will affect how respondents answer census questions. Here is an example that may surprise you. Did you know that simply by transforming the census into a voluntary survey and by telling Canadians that they are not required to complete their census questionnaires that you have introduced a bias into the data collection process? You may have been told as much by the people at Statistics Canada. In fact, I am sure that you have. By telling people that they are not required to fill out the questionnaires you have changed the nature of the population that you are surveying.

I am using the word "population" here in the statistical sense of the word. What I mean is that you are no longer addressing the questionnaires to a population that is defined as "the Canadian population". You are addressing your questionnaire to a statistical population defined as "those Canadians that wish to respond to the questionnaire". You are not only eliminating those Canadians that object to what

you call the intrusiveness of the census and decide not to respond. But you are also eliminating all those Canadians who after a hard day at work will look at the questionnaire envelope and throw it out because they have “better” things to do.

In order to address this problem can we not simply increase the sample? Let's send the questionnaire to more people: this will compensate for those who refuse or neglect to answer the questionnaire. No. unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. With a bigger sample, you will get more responses, maybe as many as with a census where citizens are required to answer the questionnaire. But this does not change the fundamental problem that you are surveying a population that is defined differently. Canadians will no longer have the data they need to do their work for Canadians. It will only have data about Canadians who enjoy filling out survey questionnaires or who don't mind making the time to do so.

For whom are you making public policy, Mr. Clement? For whom is the city of Calgary planning its roads and social programs? For whom are market analysts charting trends? With your voluntary survey, it will be for those who volunteer to fill out surveys, no one else... not Canadians, only survey-answering-Canadians. This is the fundamental and irreconcilable difference between a census for which it is a civic duty, like paying taxes, to fill out; and a poll, a voluntary survey that you can ignore. In fact, by deciding without a public debate to replace the census with a voluntary survey even persons who would normally fill out the questionnaire will think twice before carrying out their civic duty. Why should I go to the trouble of participating in a data collection process that does not respect methodological principles that ensure that the data is ok? Why Mr. Clement?

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,

Claude Danik
Executive Director
Canadian Association of Professional Employees.