

Open Letter to Industry Minister Tony Clement – Part 2 of 3

A letter on the matters of privacy, security and civic duty

Dear Mr. Clement,

I hope that you had a pleasant week-end. I promised to write to you again. And here I am. I want to talk to you today about the matters of the census, about confidentiality and the requirement to fill out the long census questionnaire. If I am not mistaken you have suggested that you have received countless letters and emails, and twitters I would imagine, complaining about the census, its intrusiveness and the obligation to answer the long census questionnaire all of which prompted you to act quickly and without consultation.

These are legitimate matters to be raised and discussed openly. But I am afraid that this sudden groundswell of public anger that beset you in June did not give you the opportunity to make your case. Moreover, you have probably not had the opportunity to respond to all the complaints that you received prior to the decision announced on June 30th. At the risk of being presumptuous, please allow me to suggest a manner of response.

Firstly, if I may, if I were the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada I would probably remind these countless Canadians that it is unlikely that they will be required to fill out the long questionnaire more than three times in their lifetime. The odds are almost zero. I have had the opportunity to participate in the long form census only once; and I am 57 years of age. I hope to get another opportunity. But life has taught me that I am unlucky with lottery tickets and censuses. I hold no grudge. I know that both are determined by various random processes.

While lottery winners are determined entirely at random, or at least I like to think so, the census uses random in a structure fashion as I am sure you know: sometimes stratified sampling, sometimes another form of structured sampling. The process remains random to the extent that the starting point of the actual sampling process is determined by random or random is introduced at a predetermine moment of the sampling process. But there is method to the madness: only sampling methods that are recognized by the scientific community are used to ensure that the sample population will be able to provide the data that you and other Ministers will want their departments to have in order to carry through on their mandates.

To go simply with a general random sampling would cost me and other taxpayers much too much money for the effort. And politicians would probably be accused of wasting tax dollars. So the nice people at Statistics Canada, who are much more versed in matters of methodology than I am, find the most cost efficient and scientifically acceptable way to collect data. And every Canadian benefits from their expertise.

In fact, it is because a general random sampling is unthinkable that we have or should I say "had" a duty to fill out the so-called short and long census questionnaires. To allow people to choose whether to fill out the questionnaire weakens the probability of success of a structured sampling method. If Statistics Canada is counting on x number of Canadians of Ukrainian origin in Gatineau to fill out the questionnaire in order to compare data with other cities and Canadians of other ethnicity, and if I decide not to fill out the questionnaire because it interferes with the hockey game on TV, then... Houston we have a problem.

By the way, you are learning a lot about me in my open letters to you. To complete the picture, please allow me to confide that my house in Gatineau has three bedrooms. Apparently, this information is meaningful to many individuals who have complained about the intrusiveness of the census. You have set the record straight by stating that you do not consider it meaningful. I am relieved that I have not herewith initiated a relationship of a level of intimacy that I did not intend. I am married. I intend here only to illustrate that my house has always had three bedrooms. You probably did not know this fact. The census did register this fact when I filled out the form, though quite frankly I don't remember this specific question. You did not know because of the *Statistics Act*.

Again, I feel a bit uncomfortable writing to you about something that I am sure you know. But there may be another person tuning into this site that may not know the following: the *Statistics Act* does have penalties for persons who do not fill out their census questionnaires. But it has more severe penalties for employees of *Statistics Canada* who in any way divulge information or make it possible for a person to have access to private information. And *Statistics Canada* is, forgive the expression, a little paranoid about confidentiality: have you ever tried to get into the buildings? The hardware of the data systems is very much protected and separate, probably as protected as what could boast your colleague the Minister of Defense for his department. And if you want to get into any kind of serious trouble at Statistics Canada, just leave a print out lying around. Quite frankly finding *my* three rooms in the census data would be like finding a particular grain of salt on a beach. Good luck.

But, you know what? Even if you could find my three rooms, like you, I don't care. It is my civic duty to provide Statistics Canada with the information, which then is depersonalized and lost in a sea of data. There are clients of Statistics Canada who have requested the information, maybe a department, maybe the city maybe a bed making company through your other department Industry Canada. Statistics Canada deemed it possible and appropriate to collect the information under the cover of the strictest confidentiality in the country.

And, the bottom line is that it is my civic duty to fill out the form as long as I am obligated to do so. It is a bit like paying taxes. It's my duty. If a large enough number of Canadians complains about paying taxes I am sure that the response

of your government or any government would not be to make tax paying voluntary? To be frank, I hope not. I believe in civic duty. I believe in the census and taxes. If I have the opportunity to choose to not pay taxes, you may not have the money you need to govern this wonderful country of ours.

I can't imagine any way of getting around the matter of a compulsory census. But is the threat of jail for not filling out the census really necessary? I would answer probably not. Is a fine necessary? My answer is yes, just as Canadians pay a penalty if they don't fill out their tax returns or don't pay their taxes. Can a census not be "intrusive"? If the word intrusive here means "to ask question about a person and the person's family", the answer is obviously no. Can Statistics Canada guarantee the confidentiality of information collected through the census so that no one will ever know that my house has three rooms (sorry, Statistics Canada, the cat is out of the bag)? The answer is definitely yes.

At the risk of repeating what I said earlier, the matters that you and others have raised are legitimate issues to be discussed and explored. But I truly believe that it is in the interest of all Canadians that these matters be discussed openly.

For the association members that I represent and who work at Statistics Canada, serving their Minister is paramount. This is what public service employees do. However, they cannot carry out their duty if the census becomes a sample survey, that is to say voluntary. So, as you can see, we have a serious dilemma.

Got 'a go now. Tomorrow, let's talk about a matter I raised in the first letter: honour and integrity.

Thanks again for reading the letter.

Claude Danik
Executive Director
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