

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

A letter on the matters of honour and integrity

Good morning Mr. Clement,

I am afraid that I did not have the time to write this letter earlier. I know that you are appearing today before the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology of the House of Commons. I hope that you will have the opportunity to set the record straight and clear up some of the confusion around your decision to replace the mandatory census with a voluntary survey.

One matter that you may want to clear up is the contradictory reporting of your position on bedrooms. Yesterday my letter got personal when I spoke of my three bedrooms. But I only took a chance to share with you this information because you had recently set the record straight explaining that this matter was not meaningful to you. Now I read from an earlier report of an interview with you that it was written that the matter of rooms was important to you. I am confused. And I sincerely apologize if my candid remarks about my three bedrooms offended you.

I turn now to a matter that I identified in my first letter to you: honour and integrity. The press and many Canadians have not been kind to you lately. Your decision to put an end to the long form compulsory census has probably raised stronger reaction than anyone expected. I know that you have complained, and rightfully so may I add, about the very personal attacks against you and your character and your political party on internet forums and in letters to the editor of various Canadian newspapers. It is important to debate and discuss ideas, and not character. If people have concerns about you or even your party, you would certainly be entitled to cut such discussion short by telling them that they know what they can do if they are not happy with a politician.

But I think that it is important here to step back from the personal issues and ask the question why: why are people getting so upset? And from the looks of it not only members of special interest groups are getting upset.

If I may offer a hypothesis I would suggest that the strong emotions of many Canadians come from a fear that politics will now interfere in the technical decisions that they would argue do not belong to politicians. No one should challenge Mr. Clement that, as a Minister of the Crown, you do have the authority to approach your department and order your Deputy Minister or Chief Statistician to follow your political instructions. It is the Minister that gives political direction, period and no discussion. Deputy Ministers and Chief Statisticians are not paid to make political decisions. You and your colleagues in cabinet should continue to be very clear about this matter. As a Canadian citizen this is what I expect of you.

And I know that every public service employee that I have known over the past 16 years of service to public service employees would agree with me.

The problem I would speculate is that by telling your Chief Statistician *how* to follow your political directives, you are perceived as having crossed the line in the other direction. By telling the Chief Statistician that the issue of intrusiveness or perceived intrusiveness *must be addressed by* replacing the compulsory census with a voluntary survey, you are in fact telling one of the most esteemed and admired statisticians in the world *how to do* statistics. It would be like having your colleague responsible for Canada's effort in Afghanistan telling the Canadian military people there *how to fight the war*. It is certainly his and your government's decision whether we do fight the war. But, I think that you would agree that it would look a little foolish to our allies and to others if your colleague was perceived as interfering with the "how to" part.

Doctor Munir Sheikh's reaction to your action was to resign. You had made a decision that according to the evidence he was preparing to carry out. He was prepared to follow orders. However, his professional reputation as a man of science as well as the reputation of Statistics Canada and of its employees was on the line when you further suggested publicly that he and his organization agreed with the notion that a voluntary survey could replace a mandatory census. This, as you now know, is not possible. Mr. Sheikh did the honorable thing, both obeying his Minister and remaining true to science. His action epitomizes all that is Statistics Canada: integrity of data founded on the integrity of Statistics Canada employees.

In my life, I have been a student of history as much as a teacher of social sciences. When I am asked about institutions that are truly representative of what is Canadian, I give as an example not the transcontinental railroad, not the game of hockey (I know... I will burn in hell for writing this...). For me, there is no institution that represents Canada better than Statistics Canada. Here we have an institution, the best in the world at what it does and intransigent when it comes to producing and making available the best data possible.

You must have your fill by now of methodology. So I will not start explaining why multi source data compilation now carried out in other countries, a misguided trend these days, produces less reliable data. I will refrain from mentioning the unfortunate U.S. census error of moving to a voluntary survey only to find that the survey has become prohibitively expensive and produces questionable data. We have had enough methodology for the moment.

So I close my third and last letter to you, again with the question of honour and integrity reviewed in the context of the dilemma that I identified in closing my second letter to you. How do you, the Right Honourable Minister, address the dilemma of ensuring that Statistics Canada can serve its Minister while carrying out its mandate of producing reliable data?

This is just a suggestion,... but could it at all be possible to do the following: tell Statistics Canada to look into the matters of intrusiveness and of penalties for persons who would not fill out a mandatory census form; suspend your decision to replace the mandatory census with a voluntary survey until after the 2011 census, until after there has been an appropriate public debate to review the issue; ask the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology to look into the matter of the relationship of Chief Statistician to Minister?

You can do what you want with it, this is just my opinion...but I think that the above would be the right thing to do, and the honourable thing to do.

Thank you again for reading my letter. I wish you a painless resolution to the dilemma noted above and some time off at the cottage. By the way, that was pretty cool what you did in the river and what your wife did to rescue that swimmer.

Sincerely,

Ps: there is a wonderful Qs& As on the Statistics Canada web site that may be of interest to you and others. It talks to various issues including privacy and the people who use the census. Please see: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/ref/about-apropos/faq-eng.cfm>