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OpEd

Cancelling the 2011 Census Long Form:

Libertarians Take Out the Wrong Target

July 13, 2010, Globe and Mail – William Robson

A battle is raging around Canada's 2011 census. Two weeks ago, the Canada Gazette published the questions all Canadian households must answer next May - the "short form". Absent from the announcement was the "long form" with more than 50 additional questions on subjects such as ethnic origin, disability, educational status, household work, income and housing, which one-fifth of households received in the past. A new voluntary National Household Survey is to replace the long form. The rationale for the change is to reduce the burden of compliance for Canadians, and lessen the government's intrusion into their personal lives.

Researchers - including many who work with the C.D. Howe Institute - have condemned the move. So has The Globe and Mail. On-line surveys are documenting the damage. Open letters and petitions are calling on the government to reverse the decision.

If you are one of the many Canadians who would like their governments to do less but do it better, this spectacle risks making you tear your hair. The state's role in our economy and society has grown prodigiously over the past century - not only radical libertarians worry about the resulting cost to prosperity and freedom. As governments' reach grows, however, so does the need for information with which citizens can hold them to account. In eliminating the census long form, the libertarians have taken out the wrong target.

The decision may yet be reversed - I hope it is - but the reaction from many opponents risks cementing the government's resolve. The partisans denouncing an authoritarian government have no credibility. Imagine that, rather than dropping the long form, the Harper Conservatives proposed mandatory questions on ethnicity, ability, time-use and dwellings for the first time. Every major city would be over-run with protesters.

Some opponents hurt their case more subtly. Too few acknowledge that mandatory information-gathering by governments is intrusive and burdensome - if it was not, all Statistics Canada inquiries could be mandatory. And too few acknowledge that compliance with the census is not universal - tens of thousands of aboriginals have not responded in the past - and not all answers supplied are accurate.

The ineptness of many opponents is all the more maddening because the case for the long form is still strong. Not just because the voluntary survey will provide a less reliable picture of how Canadians live and work. But because Statistics Canada's information - much of it based on the long form census - is an essential tool for Canadians seeking to ensure that the state's use of its now vast powers is effective and benign.

Take education. Most Canadian students receive instruction in public schools, and virtually all follow a curriculum, write tests, and accept certification mandated by governments. Census information is invaluable for judging how well these systems work. C.D. Howe Institute research on aboriginal education, and on how

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students at particular schools do compared to what neighbourhood characteristics would predict - key tools for parents and taxpayers to demand better performance - would be impossible.

Or immigration. Canada's economic and social success is intimately linked to the economic and social success of new arrivals. Alarmingly, the average experience of immigrants in the Canadian labour market is deteriorating. Long-form data brought this problem to light; other long-form information on education, language and country of origin can help us address it.

The state plays a huge role in Canadian healthcare: good information on personal and neighbourhood characteristics can help us know if we are healthier or sicker as a result. It redistributes income on a colossal scale: the long-form census can reveal much about the successes and failures of these programs. In all these areas, good information helps Canadians hold their governments to account.

Many critics of the decision to drop the census long form are talking past the people they need to persuade. Mandatory collection of such data is intrusive. The information it yields is imperfect. The question is whether we should put up with the costs and defects for the sake of the benefits - among the most vital of which is empowering Canadians with knowledge about how well, or poorly, they are governed.

For those who want governments to do less but do it better, good information is indispensable. If the census long form is gone for good, libertarians will have won the wrong fight.

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