

Stand up for good government, MPs*

Section 91 of Canada's Constitution states, "It shall be lawful for the Queen, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate and House of Commons, to make laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada."

If there is one overriding shared value among Canadians, it is a desire for good government. This does not mean we are indifferent to the Americans' concern for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It does mean we are prepared to incur certain obligations to enable good government. Among them is a willingness to accept mandatory participation in a census able to generate reliable information about Canadian social conditions. Information provided is confidential, and this confidentiality has never been violated.

For many decades, the census generated detailed information by way of a "long form" that a random 20 per cent of households are required to complete. The average family can expect to complete the form twice in a lifetime. In June, with no

prior consultation, the government substituted a voluntary National Household Survey. As former chief statistician Munir Sheikh said at the time of his resignation, the data arising from the proposed voluntary survey will not be reliable.

Good government means different things to Canadians across the country.

It means the New Brunswick government must deliver high-quality school programs in two languages across Canada's only officially bilingual province. Premier Shawn Graham has repeatedly said the census information is necessary for evaluating these programs.

It means the Quebec government must evaluate the location of new community health centres based on reliable information about location of particular populations. Premier Jean Charest has eloquently defended the value of the Canadian census, while the Parti Québécois has argued that cancellation of the mandatory long form is proof that Canadian federalism cannot work.

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It means the Ontario government must evaluate provincial programs to help new immigrants. Premier Dalton McGuinty's immigration minister has written to Prime Minister Stephen Harper about the importance of detailed census information in designing such programs.

It means the Winnipeg school board must use census data to assess the education levels of aboriginals relative to their non-aboriginal neighbours. Premier Greg Selinger has repeatedly stated the high priority his government attaches to aboriginal education.

When the premiers gathered in Winnipeg last week, Mr. Selinger attempted to broker agreement among his colleagues on a public statement in favour of preserving the census long form. As many as seven of the premiers wanted to make such a statement, but the three westernmost provinces balked, insisting that the census is a matter for Ottawa alone to decide.

With the exception of Quebec (with its Institut de la statistique), no province can assemble the data that, in past censuses, has been efficiently gathered by Statistics Canada. It is not only the provinces that need the long form. Business organizations, non-profits, municipal governments and ethnic and religious groups across the country have stated their need for such data.

In discussing the government's decision to scrap the long form, Industry Minister Tony Clement acknowledged that the users of census data have obtained "good quality data." But, he added, "the government of Canada was the heavy. We were the ones who were coercing Canadians on behalf of these private businesses ... or other governments and provinces."

Which raises the question: What do our elected representatives in the House of Commons believe? Is the census long form an undue infringement on individual liberty, as Mr. Clement says? Or, as most of the premiers and many others have stated, is it crucial for realizing "good government"?

This is an occasion for MPs to stand up and be counted. We call for the three opposition leaders to agree on the text of a resolution in defence of census integrity and preservation of the mandatory long form, and to state publicly their intent to move it upon reopening of the House of Commons. In the spirit of democracy and non-partisanship, the vote should be open, unconstrained by party whips. Parliamentary endorsement of the integrity of the census would be a powerful affirmation of a core Canadian value.

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