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2011 Census

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Monday, September 27, 2010

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

INDUSTRY

2011 CENSUS

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, in June, the government announced that, for the first time in 35 years, filling out the long-form census will no longer be mandatory, but voluntary. More than 350 groups, including provincial and municipal governments, have since spoken out against the government's measure because of the disastrous consequences it will have for provincial governments, towns and municipalities, community agencies, businesses and service agencies that use census data to develop policies, distribute resources and provide services.

This is one of many examples of the government making ideological decisions to the detriment of established fact. Where does this aversion to information come from?

My question is the following: why is this government willing to ignore all these groups and all these people who are speaking out against the voluntary nature of the long-form census and how does the government justify this ill-conceived measure?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): I did notice that several individuals also supported the government's position on the long-form census, such as a professor emeritus the University of Ottawa. Of course, anybody who supported the government did not appear on Evan Solomon's show or the various other talk shows.

I answered Senator Tardif's question before we adjourned for the summer. Our government has retained the mandatory short-form census and added three questions with regard to language.

With regard to the voluntary long-form census, we still have a voluntary long form. The only difference between what was done before and what is done now is that before, the long form was mandatory. We do not believe that Canadians should be subjected to threats of fines or even jail terms for refusing to divulge personal and private information that they find intrusive. The only difference between the previous government and this government on the long-form census, which we are calling the National Household Survey — it will have a larger distribution and will go to more households — is that we are asking Canadians to fill out the form, not demanding that they fill it out.

[Translation]

Senator Tardif: Honourable senators, even Mr. Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of Canada, expressed his concern last week about abolishing the mandatory nature of the long form

census. He warned that his institution would no longer be able to rely on Statistics Canada data to support his economic analyses and he added that this change would have negative repercussions on their capacity to study, manage and guide the Canadian economy.

How can the leader's government ignore the comments and concerns of someone who has irrefutable knowledge on the matter and who plays such an important role in Canadian society?

[English]

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, the Minister of Industry did speak to the Governor of the Bank of Canada. The Governor of the Bank of Canada appeared before the editorial board of *The Globe and Mail* and made comments and expressed concerns, which he has every right to do. I simply wish to report that the Minister of Industry has spoken to the Governor of the Bank of Canada.

The Minister is confident that they can find a way to work together to ensure that the concerns of the Governor of the Bank of Canada are met.

Again, I want to make it clear that Statistics Canada does outstanding work. Hardly a day goes by that we do not rely on information from Statistics Canada. A significant portion of the material that we rely on from Statistics Canada is gathered from Canadians on a voluntary basis.

Why is the Honourable Senator Tardif saying that if people volunteer the information it is less valid than if they are forced to give the information? The household survey will be sent out, and people are jumping to conclusions.

I believe — and the government believes — that Canadians, when they are not threatened by fines or jail terms to fill out the long form household survey, will do so willingly. The data will be every bit as good, if not better, because it will have a wider distribution and same number of questions — exactly the same questions — but a wider distribution than the former mandatory long form.

On the whole issue of information gathering, what the honourable senator is saying is that if all this information on which we rely — whether it is a political party, a business or financial institutions contracting with public opinion companies and public research companies to gather all this information — is gathered on a volunteer basis, it is therefore invalid. That is a specious and ridiculous argument.