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2011 Census

Questions by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[Translation]

INDUSTRY

2011 CENSUS

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. The second annual report on the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice, prepared by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board, was released last week. One of the recommendations indicates that statistics laws must guarantee that statistical services can develop, produce and disseminate statistics independently and transparently. The report gives the example of Canada and its rejection of the mandatory long-form census to highlight the importance of the professional independence of statistical authorities.

Through this report, the international community is publicly deploring our management of statistics. How do you plan to restore Canada's reputation in this area, and what is your response to this report?

• (1420)

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I read the report with great interest and the government is not changing its position on the long-form census.

Senator Tardif: That is unfortunate because the report clearly states that statistics agencies should be able to operate without any government interference. Your minority government has chosen to ignore Statistics Canada, experts, professionals, provinces, organizations and municipalities by moving forward with its heavily criticized decision to scrap the mandatory nature of the long-form census. How can the government keep justifying this irrational measure?

The international community has noticed. Our reputation is now tarnished in yet another area. What is this government prepared to do if the findings of our National Household Survey prove to be what most are predicting: incomparable to previous years, tainted with non-response bias and significant lower response rates?

Senator LeBreton: The most important part of the honourable senator's question was one of the smallest words in the English

language, "if," because she is assuming that Canadians will not fill out the voluntary household survey. I have indicated before that the survey has the same number of questions and will be more widely distributed.

We have every reason to believe that Canadians will fill out the voluntary long-form household survey, and that the information provided by the survey will be as valuable to all of the people who access the information as was the previous form. It is really a misnomer to say it was a mandatory long-form census. Mandatory is mandatory, like the short-form census which every Canadian is compelled to fill in. A long form sent to 20 per cent of Canadian households can hardly be described as mandatory, although that was the name given it.

We believe that the National Household Survey, with the same questions sent to a wider distribution of people, who will fill it out and return it without the threat of fines or harassment, will provide the information that is sought. I would caution Senator Tardif not to assume that if this or that does not happen someone will be upset. I think we should wait and give Canadians credit and trust that they will fill out the form as it is sent to them.

Senator Tardif: I am not assuming anything. This is a report put forward by the relative council of the European Parliament.

I have a third question on the census issue.

Senator Tkachuk: Oh, oh!

Senator Tardif: Would the honourable senator like to ask a question when our roles are reversed, perhaps?

Senator Mercer: They will be soon.

Senator Tardif: I have a third question on the census issue. Will the results of the new long-form survey be treated exactly like the old one? That is, will they be sent to Library and Archives Canada for permanent storage and safekeeping with the public allowed access after 92 years?

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, I will take the question as notice. Many jurisdictions in the world, including the United States and Great Britain, are getting out of the census business completely. There were recent changes as a result of Senator Milne's efforts in the Senate. I will get an answer on that specific point from the Minister of Industry, who is responsible for StatsCan.