

Information must be Canada's bedrock

Opposite the editorial page, *Globe and Mail*

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

When the next census takes place in 2011, it will mark 345 years since [Jean Talon](#) personally surveyed the 3,215 colonists of New France. Since then, the story of Canada's census has been much like that of Canadians themselves – a story of change, of new responses to evolving conditions and of transformation to meet the demands of new times.

From 1710 to 1760, a major focus of the census was on the number of household armaments, such as muskets and swords. The 1931 census gauged the extent and severity of unemployment so that its causes could be analyzed and policy responses prepared. The 1941 census was the first that linked the urban poor with the development of urban planning. It was also critical to new federal-provincial fiscal arrangements such as equalization payments, and transfers for health care and postsecondary education. Without the benefits of census data, we could not have paved the way to the modern, progressive society that Canada is today.

The census has not been carved in stone or immutable to change. But changes have historically been made with a view toward strengthening the census, not weakening it. Which is why a new plan by the federal government to make the long-form Canada census voluntary has drawn – I would argue quite rightly – a hailstorm of criticism.

Research experts and statisticians have stated that the information gleaned from a voluntary census would not be valid, reliable or comparable to previous data and would be significantly biased. The bias would stem from a likely lower response rate from society's most disadvantaged – families with low incomes, new immigrants, aboriginal Canadians.

Policy shapers and government decision makers have underscored that the absence of reliable data will make it harder to set priorities and allocate government spending and develop, monitor and evaluate policy changes. The United Way of Toronto has said that it will lose its most reliable tool for

understanding neighbourhoods, weakening its ability to target root causes. Marketers and business are wondering how they will tailor their products and services to specific communities. More than a few Canadians have noted the irony of a country reducing its information flow in the midst of an information age.

Let's consider the gap in our knowledge that might have existed if the last long-form census in 2006 had been voluntary. How would we have known with unimpeachable certainty that the top 20 per cent of Canadian families earned 10 times more than the bottom 20 per cent? That for every dollar earned by a native-born Canadian, a recent immigrant male earned just 63 cents and female 56 cents? That 20 per cent fewer farmers worked at home on a family farm, or that the numbers of commuters rose by more than 9 per cent?

Census data are more than just a compendium of numbers. They enable us to view the changing face of our country and those who live in it. They allow us to prepare for the future by understanding the past and present.

In July, 2009, I had the privilege of launching the [Canadian Index of Wellbeing \(CIW\)](#). The CIW is part of a global movement to measure changes in the quality of life of a society by monitoring a wide variety of economic, social, health and environmental indicators. The CIW, along with organizations that track quality of life at the community level, uses many sources of data. But we must be able to continue accessing the data that is uniquely available through the Canada census if we are to improve the lives of all Canadians.

I'm aware that in a technological era an increasing number of people are concerned about privacy issues. So they should be. But they should also know that Statistics Canada has long had a worldwide reputation, not only for the quality of its data but for its protection of citizen privacy. Identifying information is never disclosed and is kept strictly confidential. As for those who argue that the census is "invasive and coercive," I would say that it is less so than an income tax return, airline security check, passport or mortgage application. Surely we aren't planning on making any of those voluntary – are we?

Information must be the bedrock on which we build public policy in areas that matter to Canadians. Trying to get a snapshot of our country with inaccurate and unreliable data is like using a camera without enough pixels. The blurrier the picture gets, the harder it becomes to recognize the face of our nation.

Roy Romanow is chair of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing's advisory board and a former premier of Saskatchewan.

[Read the article at The Globe and Mail website.](#)

Roy J. Romanow