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Chair

Mr. David Sweet

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Order.

Bonjour à tous. Welcome to the 61st meeting of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology.

We have three esteemed guests with us today: Wayne Smith, chief statistician with Statistics Canada, Ian McKinnon, from the National Statistics Council, and Ivan B. Fellegi, former chief statistician.

We also have with us the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, who is going to begin with opening remarks on her bill, Bill C-568.

I take it you're filling in for another member as well?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Yes, for Mr. Garneau.

The Chair: We'll begin with your opening remarks, Madam Bennett, and then we'll go to our witnesses. Everybody has been advised that they have five minutes for their remarks.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks very much.

I will pare my remarks in that we have such excellent witnesses that it doesn't seem appropriate for me to be quoting them as they're here in the room.

I think we know that it's been very clear that the replacement of the mandatory long-form census with the national household survey will produce usable and useful data that will meet the needs of many users, as we have seen in the Statistics Canada documents. It will not, however, provide the level of quality that would have been achieved through the mandatory long-form census.

I'm pleased to present this bill that would enshrine the taking of the mandatory long-form census every five years as well as remove the possibility of prison penalties for any of the violations.

We believe there has been some misinformation about the long-form census being added on, when indeed there was only a long-form census before 1971, and at that time they decided to make a short-form census. But before that, all of the information was collected from all of the citizens. In fact, it was the testimony of chief statistician Munir Sheikh that the Conservative Party had misrepresented his advice. I'll quote from Munir Sheikh's statement. He was at the industry committee this past summer. He said:

I want to take this opportunity to comment on a technical statistical issue which has become the subject of media discussion...the question of whether a voluntary survey can become a substitute for a mandatory census.

It can not.

As a physician and former minister of state for public health, I also take great advice from people like Dr. David Mowat, the previous deputy chief public health officer for Canada, who stated that the problem with a voluntary census, with trying to elicit this detailed information from a voluntary rather than mandatory census, is that we know, from all of our experiences with a voluntary census and from the experiences of other countries, that certain categories of people will not respond proportionately to a voluntary census survey. In particular, we know that those least willing to provide information voluntarily would be those who tend to belong to socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

We can debate why this is so, but the reality is this: if we go to a voluntary census, the groups whose health and living conditions are most in jeopardy will be the most under-represented in the data.

You will hear from the witnesses, but someone who is not here is Mel Cappe, who stated that for the last 35 years people have been filling out this long-form census in one form or the other, as we have been doing for over 130 years. Now, from 2011 forward, we will not have a data point. This means that all those who filled out the form in the last 35 years did so for naught, because we will not have the next point on the series.

There has never been a case in the history of Statistics Canada where someone's personal census data has been released. All that is released is the aggregation by the census track, so they add them up. Statistics Canada has an unblemished record of keeping to themselves, privately, all of the returns of the census.

In her testimony this summer, Elisapee Sheutiapik, in her response to the questions about how intrusive or coercive the census is, explained that in the north there is a partnership with Statistics Canada, with the well-trained people who can speak Inuktitut, and that the people then willingly fill out the form because it is only by filling out the form that they can find the disparities present, where the average of 12 or 14 people live in one house.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, all the groups have come to the defence of the long-form census, including the very body set up to advise Statistics Canada. I would like also, with your support, to table some of the very interesting aggregations of the federally legislated census requirements of the 2006 long-form census, compared to the proposed national household survey, as prepared by datalibre.ca and Tracey Lauriault. I'm happy to provide that.

•(1535)

In closing, I just want to say that this bill actually speaks to the fact that we want taxpayers' dollars spent wisely. Group after group, all users of the data, all cities and provinces, feel that without the navigation system of a census, we will not know whether taxpayers' dollars are paying for programs that are actually making things better or worse. Turning off the navigation system allows ideologically based governments to just do what they want, and they will not be accountable for the complete waste of money for programs that are not based on the facts.

As we heard at the Assembly of First Nations meeting this summer, the census is the "count" in accountability.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Bennett.

Now we'll move to Mr. Smith, who is the chief statistician at Statistics Canada.

Please proceed, sir, for five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Smith (Chief Statistician, Statistics Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting Statistics Canada to appear before the committee today.

There are really three points I'd like to make before the committee.

First, whatever is the ultimate will of Parliament with respect to private member's bill C-568, we have reached a point of no return for the 2011 census and national household survey. It is logistically impossible for us to change course now. As you know, the Constitution Act and the Statistics Act require Statistics Canada to conduct a census of population in 2011.

Significant work has been undertaken to integrate collection and other operations for the census and national household survey in order to minimize the survey's cost. The questionnaires required for collection are printed, and introductory letters will return from print in mid-March. The complex computer systems needed to capture and process data have been completed, tested, and locked down.

Recruitment of the large workforce needed to carry out the extensive field operations of the census and national household survey is well under way, having begun in January. Early enumeration for the census and national household survey began in northern and remote communities on February 1. Early enumeration is necessary in these areas, since a portion of the population migrates to hunting and fishing grounds as soon as winter ends, making it impossible for us to complete their enumeration after that time. We are now well into the implementation phase of early enumeration.

The second point I want to emphasize to the committee is how critical it is that we gain the support of Canadians for the completion of the census and national household survey so that communities, businesses, organizations, and governments will have the data they need for decision-making.

Our efforts are focused on encouraging households to complete the census and national household survey, and we are counting on all levels of government, businesses, members of Parliament, and various organizations to support the census and national household

survey by encouraging the people they employ, serve, and represent to respond.

I want to be clear that the success of both the census and the national household survey depends essentially on the participation of Canadians. In early enumeration, we have enjoyed excellent collaboration from Canadians in remote areas. We hope this will continue in southern Canada. The most recent data that I have indicates that we have an 85% response rate on the national household survey and a 99% response rate on the census in the north—so far.

Third and last, I want to inform the committee that Statistics Canada has in place mitigation strategies to address potential risks to data quality for the national household survey. We have not conducted a voluntary survey of this magnitude before, and we will not definitively know about data quality until the survey is over. However, if we can achieve strong and uniform participation rates across the country and in all segments of society, the national household survey can provide data that will meet the needs of many data users—data that will be "useful and usable", as I first said some time ago.

To mitigate risks, we have, for example, increased the sample rate to one in three households. This will help reduce sampling error for smaller regions and populations. Data on response patterns from the 2006 census and information generated during data collection in 2011 will be used to guide our field follow-up efforts to minimize non-response bias.

Where possible, 2011 census data and other sources of data available to Statistics Canada will be used as auxiliary information in the national household survey estimation procedures to partially offset some of the remaining biases.

I want to assure the committee that Statistics Canada is applying all of its expertise to make the national household survey a success, as is done for all of our survey programs, but I cannot say often enough how important it is that we achieve broad support for completing the census and the national household survey. Success is very much now in the hands of Canadians and Canadian institutions.

Thank you.

•(1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

We'll now go to Mr. Fellegi, please, for five minutes.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi (Former Chief Statistician of Canada, Statistics Canada, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My position is well known, but I would like to reiterate it briefly. First, the census is enormously important, and the national household survey, whatever its name, is part of the census.

Why is it so important? Because many of the most significant national issues can only be assessed by it: from the progress of aboriginal people in catching up in education or living standards, to the impact on different groups of people of the 2008-09 financial crisis, the living standards of the elderly, the position of minority languages, the economic integration of recent immigrants, and so on, this is part of our regular national stock-taking. Indeed, some would say it is a critical part of the democratic accountability of governments at all levels.

Second, it is my professional assessment and that of the Statistical Society of Canada, as well as of the American Statistical Association and the French professional statisticians, that a voluntary national stock-taking could be deeply flawed. This cannot be proven scientifically. Indeed, it is conceivable, though hardly credible, that all those who choose not to respond to the survey are exactly like those who choose to respond.

However, in a practice extending over 50 years, I have never seen a study investigating the characteristics of non-respondents that would have concluded they are like the respondents on all the wide range of variables that are collected by the national household survey. I'm certain that the reason my professional colleagues in Canada, the United States, and France have felt compelled to write about our voluntary census is that they have not seen examples of such incredibly fortuitous behaviour either.

My third reason for being here is that most questions of interest are intrinsically relative, that is, they relate to the evolution of different groups over the medium and the long term. Indeed, my earlier examples are all of this character. Whether the aboriginal groups are catching up, whether recent immigrants are doing better or worse than earlier arrivals, whether the situation of minority languages has improved or deteriorated relative to 2006 or 2001, and so on.

If people behave differently as a result of the long-form census being voluntary rather than compulsory, then all these comparisons will be rendered potentially invalid. Since most variables change relatively slowly over time, the impact doesn't even have to be huge for us to be unable to differentiate between real change and illusions created by creeping biases.

Fourth, I'm here because I want to underline once more the fundamental difference between bias and sampling error. If we had a proper random sample and enumerated successfully most of those selected, our error due to having enumerated fewer than 100% of the population can be estimated. By contrast, it is exceedingly rare that bias can be estimated. The significantly lower response rate we can be pretty sure will be present, but we would normally have no idea even of its direction, let alone its magnitude.

That is why I referred to biases as "pernicious" when I testified last time. And that is why increasing the sample size from one in five to one in three solves the minor problem, but leaves the elephant in the room unaddressed.

My last point is to underline that nothing I've said is a criticism of Statistics Canada. I'm convinced they will do everything in their power to have as successful a survey as possible under the circumstances.

They will probably do better than almost anyone could have done under the circumstances, but we cannot expect miracles. They have an incredibly difficult task in front of them, not only to collect the best possible data, but subsequently to provide usable guidance to their hundreds of thousands of users about which data are likely to be relatively safe and which should carry the equivalent of what chemical companies label with crossbones.

With all my heart, I wish for them and for our users that my forebodings should all miraculously turn out to have been utterly wrong.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fellegi.

Now we'll go on to our last witness, Mr. McKinnon, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ian McKinnon (Chair, National Statistics Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Ian McKinnon. I chair the National Statistics Council.

The council is the body of volunteer external advisers from across Canada appointed to advise on matters affecting Canada's statistical system. Since the announcement that the 2011 census would contain only the basic questions from the so-called short form census, later supplemented with the addition of questions on language, and that the voluntary national household survey would replace the long-form census, the council has continued to express its concern over the effect of these changes on the Canadian statistical system.

What's at risk?

First, the voluntary national household survey will suffer from self-selection bias, a flaw that cannot be corrected for without having solid benchmark data that the census in its entirety has traditionally provided for the Canadian statistical system. The changes will also likely result in Statistics Canada's not being able to publish as robust or as detailed small-area data for neighbourhoods, towns, or rural areas. Much of the analytic work done by municipalities, private firms, health agencies, and highway and transportation planners, for example, will be affected.

Our second concern is the potential loss of vital benchmark information. The mandatory long form meant that Statistics Canada has had an accurate benchmark for the demographics of populations who are difficult to reach or who are less likely to complete a voluntary survey. This, in turn, means that sampling and weighting strategies for subsequent voluntary surveys can compensate for the bias from differential response rates and produce more reliable information.

The importance of having census benchmarks available is readily apparent when one considers some of the populations who we know are more difficult to reach: young people making the school-to-work transition, urban aboriginal populations, the very affluent, and new immigrants are just some of the examples.

What, then, is to be done?

It is, as my colleagues have said already, far too late to change the manner in which the 2011 census will be conducted. Statistics Canada and everyone involved with the census will work extraordinarily hard to ensure that the information will be collected in a manner that is as useful as possible under the constraints imposed by having to use a voluntary survey to collect the long-form data. I would encourage all Canadians to support StatsCan by completing the census and the national household survey.

On the other hand, the underlying issues remain. Canada's statistical system will not be able to provide the detail and quality of data that users have had access to in the past. This issue will become larger over time as it becomes less useful to use the 2006 census results as a benchmark for subsequent surveys and extrapolations.

Looking to the future, having much of what has traditionally been census data collected in 2011 through a voluntary survey will create a significant discontinuity or break in the century-long census data series. Paradoxically, this actually makes it more appealing to re-examine the ways in which Canada should collect its fundamental information about its population.

If we draw back and look at what other advanced industrial democracies have done or are doing, there are two families of approaches. On one side, we have mandatory censuses, and on the other, we have population registers linked to extensive administrative databases. In addition, other countries trying various approaches have conducted large experiments, but no approach has emerged that provides high-quality data without either a mandatory survey or very extensive data linkage.

Given this situation, the Canadian statistical system would benefit from two things: first, a thorough evaluation covering costs, as well as issues like privacy and intrusiveness, and looking at data quality of all the ways to gather census-like information; second, a mechanism that will allow for the continued collection of the robust and detailed data that Canadians need while this broader evaluation and debate can take place.

Given the importance of this task, I thank you for your attention to this topic and for the work you do.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McKinnon.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Now we move on to our questions in rotation.

We'll go with the Liberal Party and Mr. McTeague for seven minutes.

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Witnesses, thank you.

Thanks to my colleague, Carolyn Bennett, for driving this through Parliament. The will of Parliament is very different from the wishes of the government. For obvious reasons, the questions reflect very seriously the concern we have that the definition of who we are as a country is very much going to be skewed.

Mr. Smith, you find yourself in the unenviable task and position of having to.... I'm looking at a national household survey data quality report—which I pulled off this morning—indicating that it contains all the questions that StatsCan contemplated for inclusion in the 2011 long census form. NHS is therefore identical in content to what would have been collected in the 2011 long-form census.

In your view, why would we not simply continue with what we have and simply change the word “mandatory”? How difficult would that be? I appreciate the fact that some are saying we can't unscramble eggs, or whatever definition you want to put in there, but the reality is to simply change the top page and leave the census as it is, but in a mandatory form, particularly the long-form census. What would be the difficulty?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I think you have to imagine the scale of the operation. The census questionnaires began printing in August 2010—I think it was actually August 9. We are printing huge numbers of forms. We've started the assembly of those forms. We've built systems that have to be tested for high volumes and then locked down in order to support the Internet response, and also the—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Do they actually say “voluntary” on them? In the main frame of those questions, is it indicated that they have to be voluntary versus mandatory?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Well, we now have two completely separate operations. On the census form, it says that it is mandatory. On the national household survey and the accompanying letter, it says that it is voluntary.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Can you change that letter, sir, to say “mandatory”?

Mr. Wayne Smith: We could have maybe at the beginning of this month, but at this point, it is no longer possible. We simply don't have the time to make it happen by—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Okay. We only have a few minutes given to us here and I may want to share my time with my colleague, Mr. Rota.

You also state that the question of data quality...and I think this is coming from your own department, admittedly. The statement reads here.... Was it doomed to fail or an attempt to make a silk purse out of a pig's ear by saying the following? It states:

In its initial planning, Statistics Canada assumed a response rate for a mandatory 2011 Census long-form of 94%, identical to that achieved for the 2006 Census.

Statistics Canada has assumed a response rate of 50% for the voluntary National Household Survey.

Short of the miracle that I think Mr. Fellegi has referred to, is it fair to say that what you're going to wind up with, at \$30 million, is nothing less, sir, than a colossal waste of public funds, time, and reliability in terms of accuracy of information down the road?

Mr. Wayne Smith: On the contrary, we can in fact succeed. The national household survey will produce data that will meet many users' needs. On the effect of the declining response rate, there are really two aspects to what you need to take into consideration. One is that if there were no compensating change in the size of the sample, the sampling error would increase, and that would degrade the quality of the data, strictly from an accuracy point of view.

The sample size has actually been increased to compensate for that, so—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Assuming, of course, that you have people responding—

Mr. Wayne Smith: At a response rate around 60%, it would basically be a wash between the two.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Sixty per cent might be the best...?

Mr. Wayne Smith: If we were to achieve a 60% response rate, basically we would have the same size of responding samples, on average, across the country, that we would have had from the—

Hon. Dan McTeague: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...anticipate to fix the bias with a bigger sample. Is that what you're suggesting?

Mr. Wayne Smith: No. I said there were two factors, Mr. Chair.

The first factor, as I said, was the impact of a declining response rate. The first consideration is the impact on the accuracy of the data through sampling error. I said we've taken measures to correct that. The second issue is the issue of response bias. We've heard a great deal about that. The reality is that you cannot say, concretely and absolutely, that the decline in the response rate will result in a problematic degree of non-response bias. You can't scientifically say that.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Except, sir, with all due respect, your own department is saying that it expects a response rate of 50%.

Mr. Fellegi, may we have your opinion on this?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: As I said earlier, it's conceivable that if everybody behaves under a voluntary survey exactly as they would under a compulsory survey, we would have comparable results.

I haven't seen any such event in my 50 years of practice, and neither, I presume, have the associations who have taken the position of writing to the minister about it.

•(1555)

Hon. Dan McTeague: The short seconds I have left, Mr. Chair, I would like to give to Mr. Rota.

Thank you.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): I'll take a very quick one.

Mr. Fellegi, you mentioned 50 years of practice. Did you ever recommend a voluntary census to the government? Or while you were at StatsCan, was that discussed? Over the last number of years, did it come up as something that maybe any government should look at?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Not while I was there as chief statistician.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Where would this have come from?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I wasn't there, so I cannot say.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Mr. McKinnon, maybe you'd like to take a shot at either one of those questions.

I'm curious about where the suggestion would have come from.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: In answer to the first half, I'm not aware of StatsCan's having suggested or designed anything like this in the past. Anything else would be pure speculation.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Was the council consulted at all on something like this?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: No. The statistics council learned of this at the same time the general public did.

Mr. Anthony Rota: So basically this has come out of nowhere. Now, I'm kind of trying to rush through here.

How much time is there?

The Chair: Less than a minute.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Very good.

One of the areas... I'll ask Mr. Smith because I know he's in a precarious situation.

it can't be easy for you, Mr. Smith, I can understand that, but security is something that comes up as a concern over and over again from the minister. Could you explain how information is collected and then put into databases? I understand that it doesn't stay with an individual; it's divided and it stays safe. Is that correct?

Mr. Wayne Smith: There are multiple channels that will be used to collect the data from the 2011 census or the national household survey. One will be Internet response. People will respond directly over the Internet to Statistics Canada. That's probably the single most secure method of response because there are no intervening hands. The second method is for someone to respond through a paper questionnaire.

Mr. Anthony Rota: The storage in a database is what we were looking at.

The Chair: Mr. Rota, I'm sorry. I actually was allowing the witness to go over the time just to finish his answer, but we're way over.

Monsieur Bouchard, pour sept minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. My first question is for the chief statistician, Mr. Smith.

In your statement, you said that you do not know if the data collected will high quality data. However, I understand that you are taking the necessary steps to collect high quality data.

First, do you believe that the data you will collect through the census will be scientifically based? Second, does the new methodology used have a better or worse scientific basis than the one used in the last census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: The methodology used for the national household survey is exactly the same as the one used in all voluntary surveys. It is a fully scientific methodology.

Further, as I said earlier, it would not be realistic to expect that the data will be of the same quality as the data we would have collected with a mandatory questionnaire. However...

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Are you referring to a mandatory questionnaire such as the one used before the current census? In the last census, it was a mandatory questionnaire.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Yes, in the last census, it was mandatory. It would not be realistic to expect data of the same quality. However, it would be wrong to say that this data will be of an unacceptable quality and will be unusable.

Mr. Robert Bouchard: So, the quality of the data will be lower than that of the data collected with the previous method.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Yes, it will potentially be of a slightly lower quality.

Mr. Robert Bouchard: All right.

Mr. Fellegi, I was struck by your statement that we cannot expect miracles. I understand that, according to you, we cannot expect miracles from Statistics Canada with the methodology that will be used. However, if Bill C-568 was passed, do you believe that the next census of 2011 would be more or less scientifically based?

• (1600)

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: It's axiomatic in my mind that it would result in better data if this act is passed for the next census. I agree entirely with Mr. Smith that for 2011 it is too late for this bill. It's gone too far for it to be reversible. But there is 2016, there is 2021, there is 2026, and all the censuses in the future. They certainly would be better. I'm convinced of that as a professional.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: You say that we cannot expect miracles. So, according to you, will the census be of a lower quality than the 2006 census? If we were to compare both, the one in 2006 and the one in 2011, do you expect the quality of the 2001 census to be lower or equal? I would like to know your thinking on this.

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I think everybody agrees that it will be inferior. That was the view of my immediate successor, Munir Sheikh, and Mr. Smith just also said it won't result in comparable data. It won't result in the same quality. So we all agree that it won't.

In my mind, the main problem is not that it's going to be useless for all purposes. I think Mr. Smith is entirely right that it will be usable for a whole variety of purposes, but we won't know which ones it should be used for and which ones it shouldn't, at least not consistently, because bias is intrinsically unknowable. We can get some indications by comparing to other data and so on, but intrinsically we won't even know the response rates of the various different groups affected.

We will have an overall response rate, but we won't know what proportion of aboriginals, what proportion of low-income people, what proportion of visible minorities, and what proportion of recent immigrants did or did not respond, let alone how well the ones who responded represent the ones who didn't respond.

So there is going to be, one, a deterioration and, two, a great deal of uncertainty. While the data will be usable for a whole variety of purposes, we won't be certain for which ones they are usable and for which ones they are not.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Mr. McKinnon, I hope I will quote you correctly. You said that, with the new methodology, we will lose our

benchmarks. If Bill C-568 is passed, do you think we will have better benchmarks? Will we be able to collect data providing us with better benchmarks than what would be collected with the 2011 census, because of the changes that have been brought about?

[English]

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Again, with the caveat that I agree entirely with the other witnesses that the 2011 census is too far advanced operationally to change now, if this bill were to become law, then we would have a situation whereby the capacity to have benchmarks across a wide array of variables would be restored to what we have known over the past 100 years with high-quality census data, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: I will put my question to Mr. Fellegi and Mr. McKinnon.

Let me go straight to the point: can you tell us briefly why, according to you, the chief statistician, Mr. Sheikh, resigned? You probably know him. Can you tell us the main reason why he resigned?

• (1605)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bouchard, we're quite a way over your time, so if you want to hold that question and have it answered in another round or something, you can do that.

But now we'll go on to Mr. Wallace for seven minutes.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our guests for coming today to discuss this issue.

Mr. Smith, I want to follow up a little on your opening statements about how it's going in the north. You've been out in the field, I guess you'd call it, for the last number of weeks. Did you say you have about an 85% return rate thus far?

Mr. Wayne Smith: In the north, we fly people in. Essentially, we go door to door; we actually do the enumeration. The interviewer does the interviewing. Also, instead of doing a sample of one in three, we actually go to every household.

Mr. Mike Wallace: You do every household?

Mr. Wayne Smith: So ultimately in the north we'll enumerate about 22,000 households in remote areas. So far, we're getting cooperation from 85% of the households.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Based on that methodology before, in the last census, what kind of return rate did you get?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I don't know it offhand, but it would have been slightly higher than that.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Slightly higher than that, so just for my education—I don't know if I'm right or not—if the item from StatsCan carries penalties, that helps define what a census is, because there are penalties for not doing it. Anything else is a survey, because there are no penalties for not doing it. Is that basically the difference?

Mr. Wayne Smith: No. The census necessarily is mandatory under the law. Under the Statistics Act, any other survey can be declared voluntary. It's mandatory by default; it can be declared voluntary.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Something that is mandatory normally carries penalties with it, though, under the law. Is that correct?

Mr. Wayne Smith: That's true.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Our removing the penalties, which is basically what we've done, forces it to be voluntary, then, in a sense.

Mr. Wayne Smith: The census of population itself remains mandatory, and people who refuse to participate would be subject to penalties. The national household survey has now been declared voluntary under the Statistics Act, so there would be no penalties for refusal.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Okay. I appreciate that.

Now, what is StatsCanada doing to promote the filling out of both the census and the national household survey? Are you doing anything different in terms of promotion in terms of the national survey?

Mr. Wayne Smith: We're doing what we always do. The most important thing, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, is broad-based support. A few weeks ago, we began a national outreach campaign. We're going out to municipalities, businesses, and various organizations, and to the media as well, asking for their support in the promotion of the census. Our experience suggests that it has much more impact when another person says "this is important" than when Statistics Canada says it.

So far in our campaign, we're getting very good support across the country. We've had a provincial government make a public commitment to spend \$500,000 on advertising. We've had various kinds of commitments from various organizations across the country. It's going quite well.

Mr. Mike Wallace: I think you said to a previous speaker that a 60% return rate would be a wash. But for argument's sake, let's say that the rest of Canada follows what the north is doing and that we have an 85% return rate. That would be more data for StatsCanada than you would have had in the past, would it not, because we've increased the number of surveys that we put out there?

Mr. Wayne Smith: The responding sample would increase, which would mean that the sampling error would actually be less in the national household survey than we saw in the 2006 census. It wouldn't remove the risk of non-response bias—

Mr. Mike Wallace: Right.

Mr. Wayne Smith: —but it would certainly reduce it. The general view is that the higher the response rate, the less the risk of non-response bias. But I just want to repeat that the non-response bias is a risk, not a certainty.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Right.

Has StatsCan been able to do anything...are there any processes or anything to mitigate the non-response bias that may or may not occur?

Mr. Wayne Smith: We're doing quite a few things. One of the things we're doing is...

First of all, in reality, in the national household survey there will be very little non-response, because we have the responses from the 2011 census itself, so we have a certain amount of data for all of the households that are sampled for the national household survey. That, right there, is a major leg-up compared with what you might have in another non-response situation.

We're going to be focusing our efforts on follow-up across the country in trying to get a very uniform response rate. We're going to sub-sample non-respondents and focus on certain areas in order to get the highest possible response rates for those individuals. We're also going to be directing samples towards areas in which we have known low response rates from previous censuses.

Once we get the data to Statistics Canada, we'll be using all of the auxiliary information that we have from other sources, such as, for example, income tax records, to help us identify any potential problems and correct for them.

Without getting into all the technicalities of it, there is quite a large amount that we can do to mitigate against possible bias in the data. We cannot eliminate it completely, but we can certainly improve it.

• (1610)

Mr. Mike Wallace: I appreciate that.

I'm assuming you'll be filling out the national household survey yourself. Will you be filling it out if you get it at your house?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Only if I'm sampled.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Wayne Smith: But one in three people in this room will be. I can guarantee you that pretty much.

Mr. Mike Wallace: For us, as members of Parliament... I think I have a responsibility in terms of educating my own riding and trying to encourage them to fill out the survey.

When will it hit the doors of individuals? What is the length of time that people have to respond in and so on? What's the process from here?

Mr. Wayne Smith: As I mentioned, in the north we have already started. In the south, at the beginning of May we will start mailing out to Canadians, asking them to participate in the census itself. Initially some people will be invited to respond by Internet. Others will receive questionnaires. Some people will receive visits at the door.

By the beginning of June, actually, we should have a good idea of where we're going to have problems and where people aren't responding. We'll then go out and start knocking on doors to chase down the households from which we haven't yet had a response for the census.

The people who are in the national household survey in the north are already being enumerated. If they are being invited to respond via the Internet for the census, they'll also be allowed to complete the national household survey at the same time. So as early as May, they'll be responding. Everybody else will have the questionnaire mailed to them in June. By the beginning of July, we will start doing follow-up at the doorstep, and by mid-August we expect to be out of the field.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith and Mr. Wallace.

I think it's a very good idea to make sure that 308 representatives of the people of Canada have an opportunity to promote the census and the national household survey as well.

Now we'll have Mr. Masse, for seven minutes.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

How much is the total cost of the census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Mr. Chair, the total cost of the census is \$660 million, of which \$15 million is in a contingency fund that may not be spent if we don't need it.

Mr. Brian Masse: And how much was the last census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I don't have that number here. It was slightly below that, but of the same approximate magnitude.

Mr. Brian Masse: How much of purchasing of the census took place over the last year...since the last census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I'm sorry. I missed the first part of the question.

Mr. Brian Masse: How many purchases of the census or census material took place from the last census until this one right now? If you don't have that, maybe we can have that figure tabled. I'm just curious to see what revenue—

Mr. Wayne Smith: You can certainly have that tabled. I think our goal was \$10 million of sales of various types—custom tabulations and various products. I think we've overachieved it, but I'm not absolutely certain of the number, so I'll make sure we get back to you.

Mr. Brian Masse: I think it's much more than that, so I'd like to see the.... Maybe we can get a full revenue stream of what the last census took in by way of purchases and usage.

With regard to the door-to-door door-knocking that's going on, I was actually part of the complete count in 2000 in the city of Windsor. I was in charge of it as a city councillor in the community. What percentage of Canada will get a knock on the door through this census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Well, ultimately it depends on the response rate. For the census, we will go to every door that doesn't respond.... If we have the response rate we anticipate, we may be going to 40% to 45% of the households. If the initial mail-back response...it could be higher, depending on whether the response rate is below what our expectations are. It could be lower if a higher proportion of Canadians send back their questionnaires without any follow-up from us. We really won't know until we get there.

Mr. Brian Masse: Your number of 85% worries me, because you're going very much to secure, secluded communities with a big

publicity campaign and doing door-to-door enumeration, which is different.

I just want to ask, is the national farm survey still going to be mandatory?

•(1615)

Mr. Wayne Smith: Well, the national farm survey always has been, but I think you mean the census of agriculture.

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes. I'm sorry, the census of agriculture. And the short-term census is going to be mandatory...?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Well, there's only one census of the population, and it is mandatory.

Mr. Brian Masse: There's one census; you're right. Where is the logic in that? If this is a better process.... Which would you prefer? Would you prefer to have them all voluntary or all non-voluntary?

Mr. Wayne Smith: In this case, that isn't ultimately my call.

Mr. Brian Masse: I'm asking you as a scientist, a statistician.

Mr. Wayne Smith: I don't think we should burden the Canadian population more than is needed to get the data for the purposes for which it's intended, so I think we have to look at each case on its merits.

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes. It's an interesting philosophy, though. If it made sense to do this, we'd do it for everything; if not, then obviously this is a weaker case, and the national survey won't stand the test that the census will.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Parliament addressed that issue in 1981 when it decided to introduce into the Statistics Act the notion of a voluntary survey. It used not to exist; all surveys used to be mandatory. In 1981 Parliament said there is data that we think we need, but not enough to force people to respond. That potential was introduced into the act, and over the subsequent years, most surveys.... Most household surveys in Statistics Canada are now voluntary.

Mr. Brian Masse: But those are surveys. There's a big difference, because they're backed by the census.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Well, the census is a survey as well.

Mr. Brian Masse: And this is why the United States actually went back to mandatory.

I'd like to ask our other two witnesses this question. There has been a notation that we're going to have a ratio of one to three rather than one to five, but the problem there is the quality of the data, not the volume. I still see some vulnerabilities there.

Also, what are your thoughts about the fact that with the national survey some people—I think—will pick and choose, will cherry-pick it? There will be some questions they are willing to answer and others that they will not be, and I think that's going to require an interesting response in terms of how we statistically deal with that, because it certainly will skew the overall numbers.

But also, even if people pick common things, will that even be statistically meaningful if they're cherry-picking through the national survey? I really think that is what the end result will be. People will fill it out, or a certain amount of it, but they'll get the questions to which they can't be bothered or don't want to actually divulge answers.... That's my concern in this.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Well, of course we are speculating. One of my main concerns initially about this development was that it wasn't tested and it wasn't discussed. It was just implemented. It required Statistics Canada to implement something. It has never happened in my experience, not in Canada or in any of the developed countries that I know about, that a major change of methodology would have been introduced without testing, without public discussion, and without some very explicit deliberation.

So at this point, since it wasn't tested, we are speculating. My guess would be—but it's a guess, a speculation—that complete non-response would be a bigger problem than a partial response. Once people cross the threshold of deciding to respond, they'll probably respond to most of the questions. That's my guess. But it hasn't been tested, and therefore it's not better than a guess.

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. McKinnon.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Some of this discussion goes to one of the central issues, which is that it is possible to test these things if you organize in advance, and the Americans did this under a very similar circumstance with the American community survey, which is mandatory and is in many ways their analogue to our long-form census.

Somewhat counterintuitively, because had you asked me to guess, I would have agreed with you that what is called “item non-response” would be higher under a voluntary circumstance. They found that not to be the case. “Item non-response” was at about the same level whether it was mandatory or voluntary.

On the other hand, it was also that multi-year and I suppose extremely expensive and detailed research that the U.S. Census Bureau did that showed that non-response bias was a very significant problem. They concluded that, no matter how much effort they put into a voluntary census, it couldn't meet their quality standards because of the non-response bias.

In some ways, to me the lesson is that what is really important when you're about to engage in a major change like this is to do the necessary testing and research in advance before you make your decisions.

Mr. Brian Masse: You're probably right.

The Chair: That is pretty well seven minutes right on the button with Mr. McKinnon's answer, Mr. Masse.

Now we'll move on to our second round of five minutes.

Mr. Rota, for five minutes.

• (1620)

Mr. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to continue from where we started off with Mr. Smith about the data. It wasn't about the storing of the paper data. It was the storing of the electronic data once it gets into the system. It doesn't

stay intact with the owner. The data is strictly that: it's data. It's not assigned.

The concern the minister brought up was that someone would hack in and get to know everything about the individuals who filled out the form. Is that correct?

Mr. Wayne Smith: We have to retain the records intact, ultimately, so we do have them, and they're in our electronic system. We normally do not store the identifying information with the data itself. We don't need to, but the information is there, and while we're in the process of collecting the information there is always some risk, because we're moving data around the country. You can't say it's riskless, but it is very secure.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Has there ever been any break-in or any concern that way? There is always a concern, but has there ever been an event where someone got in—

Mr. Wayne Smith: No. I'm not aware of any incident of the data being compromised.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Very good. I'll just base this on some questions that came earlier, just to clarify.

As it stands right now, Canada doesn't have a general census. That's correct. We just have a survey.

Mr. Wayne Smith: No. We have a general census.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Is that the short form?

Mr. Wayne Smith: There is only one census. It is the 2011 census. It has 10 questions and it is a census under the terms of the Statistics Act. There is a census.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Is it a survey or is it a census? How do you explain the difference between the two?

Mr. Wayne Smith: A census by definition usually means a 100% count. Normally, anything involving sampling would not be considered a census in the normal parlance. The provisions in the Statistics Act for a census are quite distinct from those for a survey. A census is automatically mandatory. The questions are determined by the Governor in Council.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Then by definition we don't have a census: we have a survey.

Mr. Wayne Smith: No, we have a census. It is a genuine census. It is going to 100% of the population. It has 10 questions. That will allow us to generate a variety of estimates.

In addition to that, we also have a voluntary survey called the national household survey, which is voluntary, and it asks a series of additional questions—65 in total.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Mr. McKinnon, would you like to comment on that?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: That's exactly my understanding. A census, in normal statistical jargon as we use it in Canada, means you are contacting everyone, whether it is compulsory or not. What we call our 2011 census, going back to the 1851 census, has happened to be compulsory but they're also universal. What used to be called the short form will be the 2011 census.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Until now, between 1971 and 2006 we had a more complex form of census-taking. Until 1971 everybody got the long form. There was only one census and that was the long form. In 1971 we said the long-form information could be collected from a large sample, one in five, but a sample. Therefore, four in five would get the short form, and one in five would get the long form. The two together were the census.

That's the way it was in 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, etc., until 2006. In 2011 it will be just a short form. That is now called the census. What used to be part of the census, the long form, is now designated as the national household survey, because that's the only way it can be made voluntary. The object was to make it voluntary and the only legal way to make it voluntary was to separate it from the census and call it a survey.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Again, I keep looking at this, and what I'm hearing is, yes, we still have a census. Part of it is a survey; it's been changed, modified.

As for the number of people it does reach, Mr. Smith, you're talking about 85% in the north. A lot of effort has gone on up there. What numbers are you looking at in the rest of Canada?

• (1625)

Mr. Wayne Smith: I did not offer the northern experience as a predictor of what would happen in southern Canada. Our planning assumption remains 50% for Canada as a whole. We're hopeful that we'll do substantially better, but—

Mr. Anthony Rota: That includes the 85%—

Mr. Wayne Smith: —the planning assumption is still 50%. So far, things are going well.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith and Mr. Rota.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Lake for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

I'm glad to hear you clear up some of the confusion in the Liberal Party. Maybe they'll change their vote when the next vote comes around now that they know a census is still happening, but I won't hold my breath for that.

If I could, I'm going to start with Mr. McKinnon.

Do you believe that Canadians should be filling out the census and the national household survey?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: I would strongly encourage people to fill out the national household survey. I believe they have an obligation to fill out the census.

Mr. Mike Lake: So if you get one, a national household survey, you'll fill it out?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Yes, I would.

Mr. Mike Lake: Can you tell me what your organization is doing to ensure that the national household survey and the census are successful?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: We have traditionally worked with Statistics Canada in the development of the questions, starting years before the

survey begins. We have at times had ad hoc working groups that have supported Statistics Canada, particularly in things like advising on media or issues that arise in the census.

The advice we give tends to be more in terms of what end users need. That would be the core of our advice, as well as providing, where it's appropriate, supplemental technical advice to the deep expertise that StatsCan already possesses.

Mr. Mike Lake: Most of those sound as if they've already happened at this point. Is there anything in terms of the promotion where you'd be in touch with many other statistical experts across the country? Are you playing any role in terms of promotion?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Not an active one now.

Mr. Mike Lake: For example, I was thinking that in your position you'd get asked to do some public relations interviews on the radio and things, and you would be willing to do that if asked, I imagine, across the country.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: As the census day approaches and as the results come out, occasionally members of the council who have particular areas of expertise aligned with particular topic areas in the census historically have made themselves available or have been asked by StatsCan to make themselves available to the press. We tend to be eager to take on that role.

Mr. Mike Lake: That's perfect.

Dr. Fellegi, I'm going to ask you the same questions. I think I know the answer, but first, do you believe Canadians should fill out the census and the national household survey?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Absolutely.

Mr. Mike Lake: And you'll fill it out if you get it, obviously?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Absolutely.

Mr. Mike Lake: As I imagine everybody in this room would.

What are you doing? I'm a little confused as to your role. You're the former chief statistician of Canada. Do you still have a role to play? What is your role as it relates to driving the success of this?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I don't have a formal role at all.

Mr. Mike Lake: You don't? Okay. You do have an office, though...

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I have an office on an emeritus basis—

Mr. Mike Lake: Okay.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: —unpaid and unremunerated, and I make myself available to advise on technical issues—non-management, non-directional, just purely technical issues—to anybody who wants to pick my brains since I have—

Mr. Mike Lake: You have lots of experience.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: —50-some years of experience.

Mr. Mike Lake: Fair enough; is there anything specific you're doing to ensure the success of the national household survey or the census?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I think Statistics Canada at this point is doing everything that in my view it can reasonably do to make the census as successful as possible under the circumstances.

Mr. Mike Lake: Do I have less than a minute left, Mr. Chair?

I'm going to go back to Mr. Smith, if I could.

Maybe you could elaborate in terms of the national household survey what steps for follow-up are involved in the process?

Mr. Wayne Smith: There will be an initial mailing. We will be doing follow-ups as well. Ultimately, if don't get a response from the household, we will be taking a sample of non-respondents and going to the door hoping to speak to the respondent. If possible, we might interview them at the door. We will return multiple times until we actually succeed in speaking to the respondent. If the respondent is there and initially refuses to complete the NHS, we will go back one more time in an effort to persuade them. If at that point they refuse again, we will stop any follow-up efforts.

We're hoping through this technique that we will be able, if you will, for what I might describe as a core sample, to push the response rates to a very high level, which will help us deal with some of the issues of response bias.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith and Mr. Lake.

Now we'll go to the Bloc.

Monsieur Cardin, vous avez cinq minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, gentlemen, and welcome.

Let me say first that I sympathize with you about what I call the mess created by the Harper government, not the government of Canada. There is no other word for it.

During the debate on the census—it was extensively debated and we heard witnesses about it—the Conservatives stated that it would be pointless to impose a mandatory long-form census where fines, and even jail terms, might be inflicted to single-parent mothers. However, we know very well that the short-form census is also mandatory and that people might also be jailed if they refused to answer. So, their explanation does not hold water. Otherwise, they would have made the same decision for the short-form census by making it voluntary and withdrawing the penalties.

Previously, the short-form census was sent to 80% of households, and the long-form one, to 20%. Now, the voluntary long-form census will be sent to 30% of households. To what percentage of households will the short-form census be sent? I missed the figures you gave in your statement.

Mr. Wayne Smith: The census questionnaire, which we call the short-form census, will be sent to 100% of the population.

Mr. Serge Cardin: Will it be mandatory?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Yes, it will be mandatory and will be sent to 100% of the population. Actually, to be more precise, it will be sent to 100% of households.

Mr. Serge Cardin: The short-form census will be sent to 100% of households and, on top of that, the voluntary census will be sent to 30% of the population, will it not?

Mr. Wayne Smith: About one third of households will receive the national household survey, composed of 65 questions. Answering

that survey will be voluntary. It will include 65 questions and will be received by one household out of three, not by 100% of the households.

Mr. Serge Cardin: This means that you will hit 100% of households once, and that it will be optional for 30% of households.

Some witnesses of the conservative persuasion appeared before the committee. They were quite shocked by the compulsory nature of the long-form census and wanted it to disappear. However, when questioned, we realized that none had ever received it. They even said quite clearly that they would not fill it. This means that those people will not respond to the voluntary questionnaire. They said it was an infringement of their privacy, on top of many other reasons.

How much does it cost to encourage Canadians to fill the voluntary questionnaire? Since people will not be forced to fill it, they might be less tempted to do so. You will therefore have to spend some money to inform Canadians and to encourage them to fill the questionnaire if you want to collect useful data.

Mr. Wayne Smith: I do not agree with you. Statistics Canada has been doing voluntary surveys for many years and we regularly get response rates of 75% to 85%. Canadians do cooperate with us.

We recently surveyed Canadians to see how much cooperation we could expect from them and 85% said that they would probably respond to a survey from Statistics Canada if asked to do so.

So, I do not believe one can say there will automatically be a problem with the response rate. The results will depend somewhat on the sociopolitical context at the time of the survey. However, it is quite possible that Canadians will cooperate with us and that we will get a good response rate even with the voluntary survey.

• (1635)

Mr. Serge Cardin: What could be the effects of the changes made to the census on the international reputation of Canada relating to our ability to collect reliable data?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I was recently in New York City and had the opportunity to speak to some colleagues. I found that what happened in Canada was extremely misunderstood. I had the opportunity to explain exactly what had happened. Of course, none of my colleagues endorsed the idea of doing a census on a voluntary basis. However, they got a better understanding of what had happened. They understood that everything happened in compliance with Canadian legislation and that the inherent roles of government and of Statistics Canada had been respected. Now, they are anxious to know the results of our 2011 experience. So, I cannot say that this will really have a negative effect on the reputation of Statistics Canada, after having explained clearly what really happened.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith and Mr. Cardin.

Mr. G n reux, you have the floor for 5 minutes.

Mr. Bernard G n reux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivi re-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Fellegi, I would like you to explain why, in the census, the answers provided by some Canadians might be less good to a voluntary questionnaire than to a mandatory questionnaire? You said earlier that you will have to guess the results of the census since you have never seen such a situation in your 50 years of experience.

Let us suppose that, as a Canadian and a Quebecker, I receive the voluntary census and decide to respond. The answers I will provide will not be any different than those I would provide to a mandatory questionnaire, I believe. Do you really think the answers provided in the next census will be different than those provided in the previous mandatory census?

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I didn't say that those who respond to the voluntary survey will give poorer responses. What I was saying is that the overall result is very likely to be worse.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Why?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Because fewer people will have responded, and the ones who will have responded will not necessarily be representative of those who didn't respond. It's well known in the survey literature that certain groups of people—underprivileged mostly, but also people with very high incomes—are much less likely to respond in a voluntary survey than in a compulsory survey.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: But how do you know that fewer people will respond?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Because that's the experience everywhere, and Statistics Canada's own planning assumption is a substantial—perhaps overstated, but substantial—deterioration of response rate. The historical response rate to the long form was 94%. The current planning assumption of Statistics Canada is 50%. That's a huge deterioration of response rate. Even if they exceed it and they get 70%, that's still a huge deterioration of response rate from 94%.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Allow me to interrupt but Mr. Smith wants to add something.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Smith: I guess I need to disagree with my colleague in terms of what the literature actually shows. One of the leading experts on non-response is also the head of the U.S. Census Bureau and therefore my colleague. He's also a member of Statistics Canada's advisory committee on statistical methods. Recently, he wrote an excellent paper on the whole topic of non-response, which I would invite members to consult.

He said a number of very important things that I think are very relevant to this debate. He said that non-response can but need not induce non-response bias in survey estimates. He said the non-response rate of a survey alone is not a very good indicator of the magnitude of the bias. He said the risk of non-response bias, not non-response bias itself, is reduced with decreasing non-response rates. He said that ultimately there is very little empirical support for the notion that low response rate surveys de facto produce estimates with high non-response bias.

I just want to come back to the point that we cannot predict what the outcome will be before we start.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: That is what I wanted to say. Furthermore, we have raised the number of potential respondents to 30%, if not 35%. Previously, 20% of households were obliged to respond. So, since the number of potential respondents is higher, do you not think that the potential risk that you foresee will be minimized? If not, why not?

• (1640)

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Because the fact that we increase the sample size is not going to make those who don't want to respond want to respond, and they are not representative of the rest of the population. The fact that we are increasing the sample size just gets probably more middle-income, white, third-generation Canadians into the sample, as opposed to high-income or low-income people, aboriginals, and new immigrants.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Since the risk is real in relation to groups such as the First Nations and people living in an urban environment, that is to say groups that might not respond, has Statistics Canada taken any special steps to try and get the highest number of respondents possible within those groups for the next voluntary census? Naturally, you know that those groups tend not to respond.

Mr. Wayne Smith: There will be several parts to my answer.

As I said, we looked at the study mentioned a while ago and that we put on our website. We tried to determine which groups might be less likely to respond. We determined where they are in order to focus our efforts there. Also, there are all the steps I have mentioned that could be taken to compensate for non-response situations.

Here is another important point. We have never assessed, for most of the variables, the degree of response bias in 2006. So, we do not know the standards which have been established, nor the problems existing in those communities.

Finally, about the reasons why those groups are underrepresented, I have strictly no evidence that they are more likely not to respond. Even though it is commonly held opinion, I have no evidence that they refuse to respond. So, the fact that the survey is voluntary will not really have any effect on the level of representation.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci*, Mr. Smith and Monsieur Généreux.

Mr. Smith, in your earlier answer, you mentioned a publication regarding response bias. Who was the author of that, just for the clerk's...?

Mr. Wayne Smith: The author was Robert M. Groves. I have another copy of the article, which I can leave with the clerk if you wish.

The Chair: That would be great. Thank you.

I don't know what the source of the feedback we're hearing is, but anyway, we'll move on to Mr. Masse now for five minutes.

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is the whole point, though, that we don't know, so really what we have is a \$685-million crapshoot, because we don't know, if we can't nail down exactly what the reliability is going to be, how valuable the data will be or if it is even going to stand the test of time.

I'd like to ask the panel members to put aside for the moment the national survey versus the veracity of a real census. How important is it for the stability of this data for other types of research? I think that's one of the things that gets lost the usage of the material coming out and how it can actually be used for other scientific research.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Let me start with that, Mr. Masse.

The census underpins all of Canadian social data. It is the benchmark that we use to adjust and weight any subsequent surveys that are done. It is absolutely fundamental. For example, knowing our unemployment rate accurately depends on drawing a good sample for the labour force survey and knowing that the responses there reflect the general population. For that, you need a benchmark, and having a benchmark that is relatively current is extraordinarily important.

It also is almost our only source for micro-area data. Any question that requires accuracy at a very small level of geography, or among very small groups of people, even if they're widely dispersed, requires the kind of volume that only a census can generate.

It's not efficient to use it for everything. That's why survey programs were introduced, but it does underpin, and that's why in fact the current deliberations are so very important.

• (1645)

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I can only add that there has been an enormous range of concerns expressed, from banks to institutes of public policy, think tanks, health organizations, religious organizations, and I don't know how many of the major cities of the country. Something like 50 officials have taken a position on this issue. The list is long and encompasses almost every kind of user.

The census is the single most widely used... It's not just for research, but for decision-making, for evidence by businesses that want to locate outlets or to locate plants. They need to know what their potential labour force is or what their client groups are, and that's by small area, typically.

It's an enormously widely used information source. That's why I agree with Mr. Smith that the only thing we can know is that the risk of bias will increase substantially. We can't say that it will be biased, but without testing, it shouldn't have been sprung, given the wide use of the data in this country.

Mr. Brian Masse: That's a normal practice for just about everything. If you build an airplane, you test it before you put the passengers on it; you don't just send them up.

We also have another private member's bill, one that I've tabled, that would make the chief statistician independent from politics. Whether we have a voluntary or non-voluntary census or national

household survey, would that bill be a benefit for creating more scientific and basically structured consistency to ensure that our data management is reliable?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Well, I have maintained and recommended that the fundamental principles of official statistics that were adopted by the United Nations should be basically incorporated in the Statistics Act. That would make decisions of methodology independent of political interference.

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. McKinnon, do you have any comments on that?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: I have nothing to add to what Mr. Fellegi said.

Mr. Wayne Smith: It would be highly inappropriate for me to comment on that one.

Mr. Brian Masse: I thought maybe one of the notes you got forwarded to you might have said yes. I was hoping.

No, I'm trying to look for more scientific answers than anything else.

The Chair: Mr. Masse, I'm sorry, but you've run out of time again.

Mr. Brian Masse: That's fine. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Now we go on to Mr. Lake for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Lake: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm curious to ask a possibly technical question. Maybe you can help me out with this. There was some discussion about bias earlier, and I just want to clarify. Was it the case that 94% filled out the long-form census in 2006?

Mr. Wayne Smith: It was 97.3%.

Mr. Mike Lake: Okay.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Oh, I'm sorry; you said the long-form census. I take it back. It was 94%; you're right.

Mr. Mike Lake: Okay.

That, I would imagine, breaks into two groups of people. There are people who fill it out, and there's a certain segment of those people who will fill out the national household survey. Then there's a certain segment of people who only fill it out because it's mandatory. That would be a pretty accurate and obvious statement, isn't that right?

So the people who want to fill it out—who fill it out because of a sense of duty or responsibility, the same people who will fill out the national household survey—will, I assume, fill it out accurately for sure. I mean, they're filling it out from a sense of duty and responsibility, so they'll fill it out accurately.

There was some testimony about inaccuracy the last time we had committee hearings, and I've heard it from several people as I've spoken to them about this issue since then. It indicates that among those in that second group—who fill it out only because they are forced to fill it out and are threatened with fines or jail time—while there would be a certain number who would fill it out accurately, there would also be another component who would, either intentionally or because they just want to get it over with, fill it out inaccurately. We've heard testimony to that effect, and I think Darrell Bricker referred to this, actually, in his testimony before the committee.

That would strike you as pretty true, would it not—that there would be a certain segment of people who, when forced to fill it out, might fill it out inaccurately only because it is mandatory?

• (1650)

Mr. Wayne Smith: My reaction, Mr. Chair, would be that I haven't seen any study that would confirm or deny that in a categorical way.

Mr. Mike Lake: Right. It's more of a common sense question, I suppose.

Mr. Wayne Smith: It has some intuitive appeal as an argument, but I don't have any evidence to support it.

Mr. Mike Lake: Okay, but just to clarify—because this is my technical question—that example that I used would involve bias, would it not? That's not a sampling difference; it's bias. It's bias that would only occur among those people who are forced to fill it out, that marginal group over and above the people who fill it out automatically. It would be a bias that would only occur in a mandatory long-form census and wouldn't necessarily occur in a voluntary national household survey.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I would say that in my experience—and again, I don't have any rigorous studies of it, but I went out a lot of times observing enumerations—I wouldn't say that the categories of people that you identified are the only categories.

Mr. Mike Lake: Of course they're not.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I think there is a large category in between those who, if told it's compulsory, it's important—

Mr. Mike Lake: I mentioned that group.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi:—and they have to do it, will do so. It's not a sense of duty, but if I'm told it's compulsory, therefore I'll do it, and I might as well do it well, rather than badly; I won't try to skew the results.

Mr. Mike Lake: Absolutely.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: But there will be some who will.

Mr. Mike Lake: Yes, and I've talked to some of those people. Some people have actually written about it, subsequent to the decision. I would imagine the 22,000 Jedi Knights would fit into that category; the people who filled that in as their religion probably fit into that category.

I wouldn't think that we have 22,000 Jedi Knights in the room. Beyond Mr. McTeague, I'm not sure there would be anybody else in the room here.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Dan McTeague: It's now 40,000, but I'm with you, Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake: I want to move on, if I may.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Mike Lake: Will I have another round coming up after?

The Chair: That depends on how.... Yes, I think there's one more.

Mr. Mike Lake: I won't have time to get into my question in the minute left, so I'll forgo my minute and move on. I'll ask it in the next round.

The Chair: All right, Mr. Lake; that's very magnanimous of you.

Now we go on to Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Well, I know Mr. Lake and company would like to have the force with them, but the reality is that in an environment where there is no compulsory nature—an election—we're lucky to push to a 65% to 70% turnout. There's a parallel there.

There is perhaps a question that ought to have been asked at the beginning. I can't, of course, ask this question of you, Mr. Smith, so I will ask you not to respond, and I think you'll see why.

Mr. Fellegi and Mr. McKinnon, do you support Bill C-568?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Yes, I do.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Given that this is something that the Statistics Council as a group hasn't had a chance to discuss, I really can't respond.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Mr. McKinnon, would you get back to this committee in a very timely fashion with the position of your group? Can we expect that you would canvass their opinion as soon as possible?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: I will canvass their opinion.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you, Mr. McKinnon.

I will turn this over to Dr. Bennett.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McTeague.

Go ahead, Madam Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you.

As you know, hundreds of groups who use the data have demonstrated their concern about this, and we think this bill is a first step in trying to get back on track and also make sure that once embedded in this Statistics Act, no other government could go about this without bringing it to the House of Commons. We take this pretty seriously, and we also take pretty seriously that this decision was made as a purely political one, not based on science.

There are bodies to advise governments on science that can give good advice, such as the National Statistics Council of Canada. The way the whole system is set up, the committee looking at endangered species tells the environment minister what's endangered or not, and then the minister gets to decide that he can't list this potato beetle because it would destroy the economy of P.E.I., but it's quite clear it's a political-economic decision and isn't pretending to be a science decision.

I believe in enshrining this in the Statistics Act as something that has tremendous support and evidence supporting how this is better data, without bias, that can be linked to previous data points. I would very much like to hear what the National Statistics Council feels about that. While you're at it, if you wouldn't mind, ask them what they think of Mr. Masse's bill as well, in that I think we do want advice on how we could go forward.

That being said, should this bill pass? Including Mr. Smith, what could we do to make this 2011 experience not as much of a dog's breakfast as it is right now? If this came into law, is there a way of following up with the people who didn't fill out the form? Somehow it's not only me at my dining room table deciding whether I want to fill it out or not; it's also the reminders and the coaxing that is the obligation of a government when it is mandatory.

I would like to know how you think we could go forward, and is there something between now and 2016 that could be done to repair the damage? As well, if this bill should become law, how would that improve the situation?

• (1655)

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I would say the most important thing at this point is for everybody to be supportive of the national household survey. The census is compulsory. The short version that we have will proceed. I am certainly ready to do whatever I can; if members of Parliament can do whatever they can to encourage their electors to fill out the national household survey, Statistics Canada will do—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: But is it not true that increasing the sample size cannot fix bias?

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: No.

The Chair: That's the end of that five minutes.

We'll go to Mr. Lake for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Lake: My question is for Ms. Bennett, as the mover of the bill. My round of questioning will focus on asking her a few questions and taking a look at the bill.

First, I'm going to go back to your opening statement. You referred to the long-form census in 1971. You said that only the long-form census existed prior to 1971. Can you tell me the difference between the 1966 long-form census and the 1971 long-form census?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No, you've misunderstood. After 1971 was the first time there was a short-form census.

Mr. Mike Lake: Okay, right.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There was only a long-form census before that.

Mr. Mike Lake: Yes, so can you tell me the difference between the long-form census that only existed in 1966 and the long-form census as it existed in 1971?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The long-form census was long, and the short-form census was short.

Mr. Mike Lake: No. That's not what I'm asking. You said that only the long-form census existed prior to 1971. Am incorrect that you said that?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Meaning there was not a short-form census—

Mr. Mike Lake: Perfect. Thank you.

There was a census in 1966 that you say was a long-form census, and then there was a long-form and a short-form census in 1971.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's correct.

Mr. Mike Lake: What I'm asking is this: what was the difference between the census you say was a long form in 1966, and the long-form census in 1971?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Maybe Mr. Fellegi would tell us.

Mr. Mike Lake: No. It's your bill. I'm asking you. I'm curious if you can tell me what the difference is.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The bill doesn't address that, Mike, and I think that if you really want to know that information, Mr. Fellegi's right here.

Mr. Mike Lake: I have it right here too. I can answer the question, because I have a—

A voice: I don't think a rhetorical question—

Mr. Mike Lake: No, I wanted to hear if the—

The Chair: Order. I don't think I've disallowed a rhetorical question before.

Mr. Mike Lake: In fairness, I'm asking a question in reference to a statement she made in her opening statement.

The long-form census I have here looks to me to be close to 20 pages and has at least 40 questions. The census that she says was a long form in 1966 is two pages long.

• (1700)

Mr. Brian Masse: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps we could have that document tabled so that all members could have it.

The Chair: The member is in agreement, so Mr. Lake will table that document.

Mr. Mike Lake: If I'm not mistaken, I believe the censuses in 1971 and 1966 were both public documents, but we would have no problem tabling a copy of them.

The 1966 long-form census that we have here is two pages long. The back page—just for clarification, the second page—is for names five through ten, so it would only apply to families who had more than four members. It's a letter-size sheet. In 1996, if you have a family of four, you can fill out the entire census on the front page—what you referred to as the long-form census.

I would say that there was a substantial difference between the long-form census in 1971 and what Ms. Bennett referred to as the long-form census that only existed prior to 1966.

In terms of your bill, I want to ask questions—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: My understanding is that the short-form was also.... There were two questionnaires. There was the short form that was sent to two-thirds of the households of Canada. In that one, there were questions based on the population and nine questions on their housing situation.

Mr. Mike Lake: In which year was that?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It was 1971.

The long-form census was distributed to all of the population and had the same questions, plus 30 questions through the socio-economic situation and other questions.

Mr. Mike Lake: It's pretty clear that it's a substantially longer document than the 1966 document. I can table them for the committee to look at.

I notice that in the second clause of your bill you say:

(5) In this section, the term "long-form census questionnaire" refers to a census questionnaire that conforms substantially, in length and substantive scope, to the long-form census used to take the census in 1971...

Why did you choose 1971 and not the more recent long-form census of 2006, for example?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We could have done that. It was the first time there were two different forms, so it meant that it was up to the statisticians to decide what should be in the short form, in which they get 100% surveyed, and then what can be in the shorter form. The questions in the longer form, rather, as Mr. Fellegi quite clearly pointed out, are questions for which that sample size is accurate, whereas on the short form there are things you really need to survey 100%, because it's a head count. There's statistical evidence that a smaller survey of that long form, mandatory, can give you the information you need.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Bennett.

Monsieur Bouchard, *vous disposez de sept minutes.*

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Fellegi.

You are the former chief statistician of Canada. Had you still held that position in June 2010, when the minister decided to change the next census, would you have resigned?

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: Well, I would have certainly advised the minister strongly against it, and depending on what happened.... I mean, it's a speculative question. I prefer not to answer it, but at the time this happened, in the media I did say I would have resigned.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Mr. McKinnon, what would you have done?

[English]

Mr. Ian McKinnon: It is not a position I have ever been in, and it would be pure speculation for me to respond.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Mr. Fellegi, I believe you know Mr. Sheikh, the chief statistician who resigned in June 2010. From what I heard and read about you, I believe you know him very well. If, instead of presenting him with the decision he had made, the minister had presented him with Bill C-568, do you believe Mr. Sheikh would have resigned?

• (1705)

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I can't speak for Mr. Sheikh. I know him, but it would be unfair for me to be his spokesperson. I have answered every question very frankly in my own name, but I really don't want to answer on his behalf. It would be unfair of me.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Is your answer the same, Mr. McKinnon?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: The same.

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you very much.

Do I have some time left?

The Chair: Yes, sir, you still have 2 minutes.

Mr. Serge Cardin: You mentioned the impact of the data on municipalities and the loss of benchmarks, and you added that it would be impossible to go back and hold a census such as the one of 2006. However, some of you, or perhaps all of you, have said that if Bill C-568 is passed, it will be possible to recover some components and not to have the complete loss of benchmarks that we can expect with the new process.

If Bill C-568 is passed, there might still be delays but what would that entail? If it was passed quickly, would it still be impossible to readjust the 2011 census? Of course, there would probably be some financial losses or additional cost but could it be done?

[English]

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: I think at this point it's Mr. Smith who should answer, but I believe it would be close to impossible to have a short-term impact on this census, on 2011, in the time that's available.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: How impossible? Absolutely?

Mr. Wayne Smith: As I mentioned earlier, the Constitution Act and the Statistics Act require that a census be held in 2011. It has to be done. It cannot be postponed to 2012. Of course, if that were possible, everything would be possible, but such is not the case. The census absolutely has to be held in 2011. With the time remaining, it is now impossible for us to change directions. Even if we were to hold it later and to spend lots of money, it would still not be possible to change the census plan and the national household survey. Postponing the census and reintegrating it in the national household survey to make it compulsory would not be realistically possible in the time remaining. This is what we estimate, my team and I. It would really be impossible to do so in the time remaining, and to do what we are required to do under the Act.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith and Monsieur Cardin.

Now we'll go on to the Liberal party again for five minutes. Go ahead, Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you, Chair.

Let me begin with the issue of the so-called intrusive nature of the mandatory form.

Mr. Smith, if I were to fill that out under the former regime, with the former responsibility and penalties, say, for instance, with my religious affiliation, does the government know what religion I am after the fact?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Obviously, if we knew the answer, we wouldn't have to ask the question. We only know what you responded. We don't know—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Do you know Dan McTeague's religion, based on the former census?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I'm sorry?

A voice: It's Jedi.

Hon. Dan McTeague: It's Jedi; okay.

A voice: That's what he said.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Take that three seconds off, Mr. Chair. I need to recharge my.... What do they call that little thing?

A voice: A light sabre?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Dan McTeague: No.

Mike Wallace, I'm your father.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Dan McTeague: Under the former system, how intrusive was it for the government to know my religion or any other pertinent, private aspect of my life by filling out the long-form census?

• (1710)

Mr. Wayne Smith: Dr. Fellegi spoke quite eloquently on this at the International Statistical Institute. He said that any survey in which you compel responses is inherently privacy-intrusive. The question—and it's a question parliamentarians to some extent have to

answer—is whether the benefit is worth the intrusion. That decision, in the case of the census, lay with the Governor in Council, and they took that decision.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Stats Canada has always been very careful about lengthy consultations to ensure that any questions asked meet real demands out there. Last year's census consultation process.... The National Statistics Council is a minor part of that. They go out to ensure that there is need for those data and that there are not easier and less intrusive ways of getting it. What is in the census itself, long form or short form, is winnowed down and subject to a very high test of relevance and need.

Dr. Ivan Fellegi: And confidentiality.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Yes, and confidentiality.

Hon. Dan McTeague: I know; there's disaggregation here. I'm concerned about that.

I've read through what appears to be the proposed national household survey. Today being the 100th anniversary celebration of International Women's Day, I'm surprised to see.... Perhaps, Mr. Smith, you could explain to me why unpaid work of women was taken out of that form.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Unpaid work is an absolutely critical issue, something for which we knew we need solid data. The reason the unpaid work is not in the census is that the census is not the best place to obtain it.

We have a survey called a "time use survey". It allows us to probe into this issue of unpaid work, which is very complex. Unpaid work is not only performed by parents who are living at home with their children and not working; it's also performed by people who work. It's performed while people work at home. You really cannot properly assess it by asking a couple of questions on a census.

The census is very powerful for looking at issues that have a meaning and importance for small areas. An example would be knowing where there are pools of labour, a labour market with people who have the appropriate qualifications to support such and such a plan for such and such a kind of activity—the small area data—or where to put a denominational school. The unpaid work data does not have a great deal of validity or usefulness at a small area level, so the census is not the correct instrument.

The question itself is vitally important. We have a better instrument, we do measure it, and we measure it very well.

Hon. Dan McTeague: How long have you been using that instrument, sir?

Mr. Wayne Smith: The question on unpaid work will have been on the census for three cycles, if I'm correct.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Smith: The time use survey has been going on since the mid-eighties, at least.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: That's, in fact, a classic example of the real care Statistics Canada takes. It consulted over years. The dilemma was, of course, that the time use survey had the space to ask the 30 or 40 questions that you really need to ask in order to understand time use, and because of the nature of those questions and the need for them, that trade-off was made. That kind of agonizing is done for virtually every question, so that only the vital ones are on the census.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. Given the time warp I was put through, perhaps you could let me know if I still have a few seconds left at the end there, considering the intervention by the Conservatives.

The Chair: No, you're actually over.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I would do that for you.

Mr. Masse, you have five minutes.

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the things that has been noted is that Manitoba is putting \$500,000 towards advertising to assist in that, Mr. Smith. Do you believe that other provinces are going to need to do that to get the results that are necessary?

Mr. Wayne Smith: Historically, in every census we've had excellent support from provincial governments. They've supported us in all kinds of ways. They put up road signs on highways and they put links to our information on their websites. We've had a high level of support.

I'm not suggesting that the \$500,000 that Manitoba is proposing to put into advertising is exceptional or unusual in the pattern of censuses. We've always had that kind of support. I expect we will have it again. In fact, I have every indication already that we'll have it again. The Yukon has also made some specific commitments, and I expect that the other provinces will follow.

Normally they have done it in kind, and we would never quite know what the value of it was, but in this case they specifically made a commitment to \$500,000. It's not exceptional, and it's not unique to this census.

• (1715)

Mr. Brian Masse: The obvious motivation there is to increase the participation, though; that's the whole objective behind the increased dollars.

Mr. Wayne Smith: In previous censuses, that was still the motivation. In every census, the motivation of people who support us is to encourage people to participate in order to get the highest possible response rate and the best-quality data.

Mr. Brian Masse: At the end of the day, that was mandatory.

In a province like mine, Ontario, where I have a low response rate in Windsor West—that's why we were actually part of the complete count, one of three ridings that had door-to-door counting—what if they don't? The province is in massive debt right now. What if they don't advertise and we have a lower response rate, and then Manitoba has a higher response rate per capita? Won't that skew data?

Mr. Wayne Smith: The answer is, not necessarily. The response rate will be lower, the sampling area will be higher, the risk of non-response error we talked about earlier will be higher—which doesn't mean there will necessarily be non-response error—but beyond that —

Mr. Brian Masse: I have one of the most diverse ridings in North America, actually. It's third in Canada. We have a lot of language and other barrier issues, poverty issues, and we have a lot of newcomers, students who come and go, and so forth. Let's say, for example, that the Manitoba government is able to increase the response rate for Winnipeg versus that of Windsor. Wouldn't it skew the overall data, if we actually had a higher rate of response from one city versus the other?

Mr. Wayne Smith: That's something that's always the case. We don't have uniform response rates across the country; there's always variation.

Mr. Brian Masse: Well, no. In the past you had a mandatory census; you would actually go out and get those things, and you'd have a higher rate. You also knew specifically who didn't respond and where they lived.

Mr. Wayne Smith: We will know that in this one as well, quite easily, because we'll have the data from the census part of the exercise. We will know exactly who was supposed to respond in the NHS, and where they lived, and we'll have basic information about them.

Response rates vary across population groups and across the country. We had a tremendous problem, for example, in northern Alberta in 2006. That's par for the course. The issue is whether the data are usable, and that's—

Mr. Brian Masse: The problem is that you can't say either, and you're in charge of a \$670 million project. If every single province is now going to be measured in terms of throwing out different amounts of funds, whereas in the past we actually had the backstop of a mandatory census, if we're now going to have additional dollars disproportionately assigned for advertising across the board, won't that create some weaknesses in the system that didn't exist before?

Mr. Wayne Smith: First of all, there is a mandatory population count that will give us the head counts that are used for equalization payments and so on, so that's not really in question.

I repeat, these kinds of activities are not unique to 2011. They have been carried out before, and there were differential activities across the country. There are differential response rates across the country and within provinces for all kinds of good and bad reasons.

We make an effort to concentrate our efforts in areas where we have low response rates in order to get them up. Our goal is to have relatively uniform response rates across the country, but I cannot say whether the simple fact that Manitoba has advertised, and that this may have some beneficial impact on response rates in Manitoba, creates a problem in Ontario.

Mr. Brian Masse: But you can't say that it won't, either; that's the problem. There was no pilot project for this, which is really quite unusual.

Have you heard of a country moving to a national survey rather than a mandatory survey and not actually testing it? Can you name an example of a country that did that?

Mr. Wayne Smith: I'm not aware of any precedent for that, no.

The Chair: That will be it, Mr. Masse. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

Now we'll go to Mr. Lake for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Lake: I'm just going to come back to Ms. Bennett, if I could.

I still wasn't clear on why 1971 was chosen for that second clause, and why 2006 was not.

• (1720)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It really was just an example of the first time there was a short and a long form. If people would like to make an amendment to that, then I am more than willing. This is our best shot at coming forward and trying to explain the difference. Before 1971 there was only a long-form census; when the short form came in, it was in 1971.

One of the concerns I have is that maybe you should ask your minister.... On the Stats Canada website right now, where it says that they assumed a response rate of 50% for the voluntary national household survey, the conclusion says that—

Mr. Mike Lake: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. That wasn't the question I asked, and I have a few questions I want to ask.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It says “introduced”. It was just following up on Mr. Masse's.... It says:

... introduced relatively rapidly with limited testing.

Mr. Mike Lake: She's not answering my question.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It concludes, with reference to the effectiveness of their mitigation strategy, that:

It will not, however, provide a level of quality that would have been achieved through a mandatory long-form census

That's why we put the bill forward.

Mr. Mike Lake: Well, I'll leave my point of order now. I have questions I want to ask.

The clause that I'm referring to talks about the questionnaire conforming substantially in length and substantive scope to the long-form census used to take the census in 1971. In terms of differentiating between the 2006 census and the 1971 census, I would assume there was a specific reason that 1971 was chosen. I think there are some pitfalls when we talk about having substantively the same long-form census that we used in 1971. For example, in question 2, “Relationship to Head of Household”, there's a statement in the 1971 census that says the head of the household is the husband rather than the wife, the parent where there is one parent only with unmarried children, or any member of a group sharing a dwelling equally. In the substantive question in question 2, the head of the household has to be the husband rather than the wife. I think there are some pitfalls choosing the 1971 census as the one that we would use substantively.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Mike, I would like Mr. Fellegi's advice as to whether there should be an amendment to change it from 1971 to 2006 in the bill.

Mr. Mike Lake: In fairness, I'm asking you as the mover of the bill to explain your bill.

I'll move on to—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No, I'm actually asking you as a parliamentarian if you'd like to make an amendment to that.

Mr. Mike Lake: Well, we'll go clause by clause, I'm sure, at some time in the future here.

In your first clause of the bill, you talk about the distribution of the questionnaire...to at least 20% of all households or whatever percentage of households is determined to be necessary by the Chief Statistician to ensure an accurate statistical representation...

There's no mention of cost there. You've left it absolutely wide open. It's any percentage between 0% and 100%, at the discretion of the chief statistician, with absolutely no mention of cost. Is there a reason you didn't mention cost? Have you done a costing of the potential implications of that clause?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We know right now that the minister has announced that in order to do the greater survey, he is spending \$30 million more than what the mandatory survey would have cost, and we have already heard that doing the larger sample size does not fix the bias problem.

Mr. Mike Lake: So what you've just answered—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: What we're saying is that this bill will save the Government of Canada \$30 million.

Mr. Mike Lake: What you've just said is that the minister actually did some research on costs, but I don't believe that you have, unless you could table the research that you've done on the potential costs of your bill from 0% to 100%.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: What we're saying is that the minister is saying he's going to spend \$30 million more in order to get the larger sample size on the voluntary survey.

Mr. Mike Lake: Maybe I'm not being clear. I'm asking about your private members' bill and the research that you might have done in preparing the private members' bill.

We'll leave the tabling of those costs. You could table them at a future date, with the range from 0% to 100% of all households, because that's the range that applies, according to your bill here.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: You know what, Mike? This is about information that is the navigation system for our country, and we know that doing a larger voluntary survey is more costly and less accurate than doing a smaller mandatory survey.

Mr. Mike Lake: I have one last question. The final clause of your bill, clause 2, says that “...for every refusal or neglect, or false answer or deception” there's a fine not exceeding \$500. To clarify, someone—a new Canadian who doesn't want to tell the government what their religion is—would be subject to a fine up to \$500 because they don't want to tell the government what their religion is. What happens if they don't pay the fine? What does the law say, just to be clear, on what happens if someone decides that they don't want to pay the fine because fundamentally they don't believe they should have to tell the government what their religion is?

• (1725)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think, Mike, it would probably be the same as it is in the present law—imprisonment—and that has never happened.

We have laws, and there are penalties, and we do our best within that. It has been up to the cabinet always to determine what the penalties and what the questions are. Getting rid of the mandatory long-form census is our problem.

The Chair: That's the time, folks. Thank you.

We have about two minutes left.

Monsieur Bouchard, Monsieur Cardin, we have time for one more question.

No? Okay.

Then we have time for one more question from the Liberal Party.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Mr. McKinnon, there is a question that I think has all of us here somewhat perplexed. Your organization in several months is going to have to pick up the pieces and make an analysis of what has happened. I say “pick up the pieces” in terms of an assessment of how effective this is going to be.

Can you anticipate for us what effect this change will have in terms of real outcome and in terms of the reliability of the data? It's \$30 million later, and we have nothing to show for it.

Mr. Ian McKinnon: Mr. McTeague, you may be under some misapprehension about the National Statistics Council. We're an advisory body to the chief statistician. He may pose questions and ask for our advice on certain things, but the issues you're talking about are highly technical and detailed. They involve a great deal of work that will be done within StatsCan.

Hon. Dan McTeague: I appreciate that, Mr. McKinnon, but you are going to be in a position of giving advice based on what you perceive. You are experts in this field. The reliability of the information is going to be critical. The information you're going to give will be based on assumptions as to whether the data are going to be accurate or not, based on whether there is a mandatory form or not.

I'm simply asking if your group, as experts, will be in a position to assess, and how soon will that assessment take place?

Mr. Ian McKinnon: The assessment will be conducted by Statistics Canada. They may ask for our advice on some element of it, and the typical post-census work would begin as data collection ends, I assume.

I would actually have to turn that question over to the two gentlemen from Statistics Canada, who would know a bit better.

Mr. Wayne Smith: Statistics Canada will obviously validate all of the data from the 2011 census to the extent that we can, and we will publish the results of what we find. If we find data quality problems, we'll make them known. If we find a variable that in our view is so seriously defective as to be misleading, we will not proactively publish it. The data will remain available to the people who want to work with it, but we wouldn't proactively publish it. We don't expect that, but it could potentially happen. It has happened in the past.

In any case, as we go about the publishing, we will be carrying out quality assessments on the data and we will make that information available to the Canadian public.

Hon. Dan McTeague: If the utility of this turns out to be significantly lower than would be tolerable by any comparison to the past or to any other jurisdiction that has a similar mandatory aspect, I'm wondering whether you'll have a timeframe in which you'll be able to make an assessment, and what that timeframe will be, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Wayne Smith: The quality assessment program will be carried out over the next few years as we go forward. We are to some extent reworking it because of the changes to the census and the introduction of a voluntary national household survey. I don't have the specific dates here for when we'll publish, but we will publish—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you, Mr. Smith. I appreciate that this was a political decision imposed on what would otherwise have been within StatsCan. There is no sense in changing what has always worked; if it wasn't broken, why would you want to fix it?

I take it that you'll then have a period of time in which you're going to make an assessment, down the road, as to whether it has in fact worked, and that it may be several years. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Wayne Smith: On every census we conduct a quality assessment. We will be carrying out the same kind of quality assessment for the 2011 census and the national household survey, making the results available as quickly as we can and making the data available, again as quickly as we can.

Hon. Dan McTeague: The Conservatives are saved by the bell.

Thank you, Mr. Smith.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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