



RNAO

Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers
autorisés de l'Ontario

Open Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper: Maintain the Long Form Census

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

July 20, 2010

Dear Prime Minister,

Ontario's registered nurses are profoundly concerned about the federal government's arbitrary decision to cancel the 2011 long form Census and replace it with a less reliable voluntary survey. This hasty decision was reportedly taken with little or no consultation with Statistics Canada¹ or with researchers, policy-makers, and community leaders that depend on this data from every level of government, civil society, and business to make evidence-informed decisions.² As it is irresponsible for this government to erode the integrity of a scientific understanding of Canadian society that is the "bedrock on which sound public policies—social, economic and fiscal—are built,"³ we demand an immediate reversal of this decision.

As the professional association for registered nurses who practise in all roles and sectors across the province, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) joins the Canadian Association for Business Economics,⁴ Canadian Association of University Teachers,⁵ the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives,⁶ the Canadian Council on Social Development,⁷ the Federation of Canadian Municipalities,⁸ the Statistical Society of Canada,⁹ and many others in being alarmed at the far-reaching consequences of eroding "Canada's only complete national database on education, income, employment, ethnicity, and language."¹⁰ The long form Census has a response rate of over 95% and provides "the only source of regular, highly detailed, systematic information on immigration, family and household structure, racialization, demography, and other vital information about Canadians" is in sharp contrast to the proposed voluntary survey that may be challenged as less valid due to the bias of self-selection.¹¹

Unwisely breaking the continuity of the long form Census, administered to a sample of one in five households since 1981, will destroy our ability to make meaningful comparisons over time,

even if a future government were to restore the long form Census. Of particular concern to Ontario's registered nurses is the impact these changes will have Canada's on most vulnerable community members as being able to address the social determinants of health is contingent on having reliable data that measures and helps us understand income, education, employment, immigration, and housing trends at the census tract or neighbourhood level. "When the census is voluntary, the marginalized become further marginalized, and the wealthy become more comfortably invisible; the disparities at the core of so many health and social problems become glossed over."¹²

Decimating evidence-based public policy is unwise at any time but is particularly disturbing in a context when "data is the core infrastructure of a 21st century economy."¹³ As the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has unequivocally stated, we need good data to best serve our communities—"to keep Canada strong, we need to know how the country is changing, where people live, work and raise their families. The census helps us do that."¹⁴

Cancelling the long form census will weaken Canada's democracy, Canada's economy, and the fabric of Canadian society by making us less informed and so less able to address Canada's most urgent challenges. The new plan for the voluntary questionnaire will actually cost more than the current mandatory long form while statisticians warn "the information is subject to substantial bias and likely of little use to policy makers."¹⁵ This is far too high a price to pay for a few anecdotal complaints that the long form is too intrusive, especially as the Office of the Privacy Commissioner has received only two complaints in 2006 and one in 2001 about any aspect of the Census.¹⁶ Instead, the federal government should be educating the public on our responsibilities, such as occasionally completing a Census form, as well as our privileges of living in Canada. Ontario's registered nurses demand that that long form Census be reinstated for the greater good of all.

Sincerely,



David McNeil, RN, BScN, MHA
President, RNAO



Doris Grinspun, RN, MSN, PhD, O.ONT.
Executive Director, RNAO

Copy to

Honourable Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Official Opposition
Honourable Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party
Honourable Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Industry
Munir Sheikh, Chief Statistician, Statistics Canada

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- ¹ McLeish, D., Abraham, B., Brewster, J., & Pantula, S. (2010). Letter to Minister Tony Clement. Ottawa: Statistical Society of Canada. July 9, 2010. http://www.ssc.ca/en/webfm_send/469
- ² Ditchburn, J. (2010). Former StatsCan head slams census decision by Tories. *Winnipeg Free Press*. July 1, 2010.
- ³ Picard, A. (2010). Ottawa should come to its census: Stop dogging StatsCan. *Globe and Mail*. July 7, 2010.
- ⁴ Alexander, C. & Jacobson, P. (2010). Letter to Minister Tony Clement. Ottawa: Canadian Association for Business Economics. July 1, 2010. <http://www.cabe.ca>
- ⁵ Stewart, P. & Turk, J. (2010). Letter to Prime Minister Harper. Ottawa: Canadian Association of University Teachers. July 2, 2010. <http://www.caut.ca/uploads/2010%2007%2002%20CAUT%20to%20Harper%20re%20Census.pdf>
- ⁶ Yalnizyan, A. (2010). Statistics Canada's Senseless Census Decision: Letter to Minister Tony Clement. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. June 30, 2010. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/statistics-canadas-senseless-census-decision>
- ⁷ Canadian Council on Social Development (2010). Keeping Canadians in the Dark. Ottawa: Author, July 13, 2010. http://ccsd.ca/keeping_canadians_in_the_dark.pdf
- ⁸ Cunningham, H. (2010). Letter to Minister Clement. Ottawa: Federation of Canadian Municipalities. July 8, 2010. <http://www.fcm.ca/CMFiles/TonyClementJuly81LZV-7142010-7223.pdf>
- ⁹ McLeish, D., Abraham, B., Brewster, J., & Pantula, S. (2010). Letter to Minister Tony Clement. Ottawa: Statistical Society of Canada. July 9, 2010. http://www.ssc.ca/en/webfm_send/469
- ¹⁰ Chase, S. (2010). Privacy commissioner not consulted on plan to scrap compulsory census. *Globe and Mail*, July 15, 2010.
- ¹¹ Stewart, P. & Turk, J. (2010). Letter to Prime Minister Harper. Ottawa: Canadian Association of University Teachers. July 2, 2010. <http://www.caut.ca/uploads/2010%2007%2002%20CAUT%20to%20Harper%20re%20Census.pdf>
- ¹² Picard, A. (2010). Ottawa should come to its census: Stop dogging StatsCan. *Globe and Mail*. July 7, 2010.
- ¹³ Eaves, D. (2010). Why you should care about the sudden demise of the mandatory long census form. *Globe and Mail*. July 6, 2010.
- ¹⁴ Cunningham, H. (2010). Letter to Minister Clement. Ottawa: Federation of Canadian Municipalities. July 8, 2010. <http://www.fcm.ca/CMFiles/TonyClementJuly81LZV-7142010-7223.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Thorne, S. (2010). Don't mess with census, statisticians tell Tories. *Globe and Mail*. July 9, 2010.
- ¹⁶ Chase, S. (2010). Privacy commissioner not consulted on plant to scrap compulsory census. *Globe and Mail*, July 14, 2010.