

# Flying blind\*

BY MARGRIT EICHLER

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Imagine you are flying a plane carrying millions of passengers over unfamiliar terrain. Now imagine making the decision, mid-flight, to disable and destroy the instruments that tell you where you are, where you are headed, and allow you to coordinate with others sharing your airspace. It's completely irrational, but that is exactly what the Conservative government did when it abolished Canada's mandatory long-form census in 2010.

The long-form census once provided us with an essential view of the lay of the land in terms of our country's social, economic, and health status. It was, indisputably, a critical tool for governance—indicating successes and failures through comparison with decades of consistent data collection. The information collected was used extensively by all levels of government, civil society, the private sector, and academics to make policies, establish new programs or businesses, and direct critical research. Without the long-form census, we are flying blind.

The government axed the census against the concerted advice of organizations from the left, the right, the middle and those who would not place themselves anywhere on such a continuum, but who simply need reliable data to do their work. Cities from coast to coast to coast objected, as did Chambers of Commerce, professional organizations, health professionals, churches, academics, two former Chief Statisticians of Statistics Canada and two former Clerks of the Privy Council—hundreds of organizations in total, all to no avail.

Yet, in the face of massive resistance, the government pressed ahead.

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Today, the consequences of abolishing the mandatory census and replacing it with a voluntary survey are as grim as were predicted. They range from bad to disastrous.

For example, it is bad that the responses to the voluntary survey in 1,813 subdivisions were so low that they had to be dropped from the data. It is bad that 21% of millionaires did not even participate in the survey. It is bad that some Aboriginal communities are entirely missing. Overall, the response rate dropped from 93.5% for the mandatory census to 68.6% for the voluntary one. The very rich and the poor and marginalized, including Aboriginals, people with disabilities, recent immigrants, people with low levels of education or with difficulties expressing themselves in one of the official languages are the ones who tend not to participate in voluntary surveys. This is bad.

But it is disastrous that we no longer

have a current touchstone against which all other surveys can be compared. One of the most important, if rarely commented upon, functions of the mandatory census was that it was used to correct sampling errors in other surveys. For instance, if someone does a survey on traffic patterns, the researcher could, in the past, compare who responded to their survey with the census to see that each group was fairly represented—and if not, they would adjust the data. However, the voluntary survey is so unreliable that Statistics Canada used the 2006 census to adjust the 2011 survey. This becomes more and more ridiculous the further from 2006 we move.

So why would the government get rid of the best way of finding out what is going on in the country?

One hypothesis is that eliminating the census would save money. However, the voluntary household survey cost Canadians \$22 million more than the regular census had cost. In other words, the government spent a total of \$652 million on the 2011 voluntary survey, collecting crappy data that do not provide an adequate picture of Canada. Indeed, the most accurate picture we have of Canada is from the last mandatory census in 2006. We do not have an overview of what changes have occurred since.

Another hypothesis suggests that the government wanted to protect our privacy. However, it is Bill C-51—the so-called Anti-terrorism Act—that will truly invade our privacy. With the passing of Bill C-51, we will not know if or when we are under special surveillance. At least with the census we knew what questions we answered—and in any case, the voluntary survey asked the same questions the census would have asked—so this explanation does not hold water, either.

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In November 2013, the group Our Right to Know organized an event held at the University of Toronto, to publicize federal cuts to science research in Canada. In this tableau, we see the Ontario government providing a cash infusion to resuscitate the Experimental Lakes Area, portrayed by Dr. Diane Orihel, who is rising up from her stretcher. Photo by Dawn Bazely.

large, interdisciplinary collaborations are required for funding.

5. Such communication would help Canada catch up with the UK and US, which are ahead in the area of encouraging the public understanding of science.
6. Communication helps position research that may have significant implications for scientific, medical, and environmental safety and security, policy, knowledge, and the future of the planet where people can find it. These implications may only be followed up if there is public knowledge of it and the publicly generated will to do so.

A March 2011 national public opinion poll carried out for Research Amer!ca found that only 34 percent of Amer-

icans can name a living scientist. While there are few comparable data for Canada, the Expert Panel on the State of Canada's Science Culture found in their 2014 survey that Canadians express high support for basic science research. Clearly, one means of building support for STEM subjects in Canada may be for civil society, including scientists, to connect the dots better between research and science policy by engaging with Canadian *cultural creatives* from all parts of the political spectrum. If scientists want to build support for basic research and evidence-based policy, Ray and Anderson (2000) argue that it could be a very good thing to link with a group that shares 2 of their 18 characteristics and values: being "strongly aware of the problems of the whole planet (global warming, destruction of rainforests, overpopulation, lack of ecological sustainability, exploitation of people in poorer countries)" and wanting "politics and government spending to put more emphasis on children's education and well-being, on rebuilding our neighborhoods and communities, and on creating an ecologically sustainable future." 

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However, the most likely answer is that they want us to be ignorant, and, perhaps even more troubling, they want to fly blind. Why? Because eliminating the census allows the government to gloss over a great number of issues—if we don't know about a problem, we can pretend that it does not exist.

For instance, Canada is becoming increasingly polarized into the rich and the poor, as the middle class shrinks. That, however, is not the image we get from the voluntary survey (since the rich and the poor disproportionately failed to answer)—therefore we need not worry about it.

This hypothesis falls in line with a number of other actions by the Harper government, such as the abolition of the ocean pollutants and contaminants program. We no longer have a federal agency that informs us whether the fish we eat are safe or not, but since we don't know, there cannot be a problem.

Or the abolition of the small (7 people!) smokestack team that used to travel the country measuring cancer-causing emissions and working with enforcement officers and industry to crack down on toxic pollution. Now that we don't have this small team any longer, we can ignore the problem.

Or the muzzling of scientists who can no longer speak freely with the media, the public, or even among themselves. Reporting on climate change dropped by 80% within one year following the introduction of this policy. But if we're not hearing about climate change, it must not be a problem.

It seems that our government likes to fly blind. The problem is, we are all sitting in the same plane. Once instruments have been as thoroughly destroyed as they have been by this government, it is not a simple matter to re-install them. And the crash will affect us all. 