

Manufactured ignorance: Harper, the census, social inequality

THE LONG-FORM CENSUS: AN UNLIKELY TARGET

If we are to believe our intrepid prime minister, Stephen Harper, and his resolute sidekick, Tony Clement, the long-form census was terminated in the spring of 2010 for the noblest of reasons. The minority Conservative government simply could not condone a mandatory census, which not only threatened ordinary Canadians with fines and jail time for non-compliance but also intruded far too deeply into their private affairs. Why should Canadians be forced to tell government about the number of toilets in their house? To what end? As Industry Minister Clement further explained, “the government of Canada was the heavy. We were the ones who were coercing Canadians ... on behalf of the private sector, other governments and the provinces.”

The Harper government stuck to this unlikely story despite mounting evidence that its case against the long-form census had little grounding in reality and in the face of mounting opposition from an uncommonly broad spectrum of detractors. Over several decades, only a handful of Canadians had ever complained about the alleged intrusiveness of the long form, and, in recent memory, only one person had been charged for non-compliance. Moreover, Canada’s chief statistician resigned his position, lest anyone conclude that the government’s proposed alternative, a voluntary household survey, was a reliable substitute for the long-form census.

The government effectively conceded to this fact when, threatened by a court challenge from francophone Canadians, it abruptly placed a language skills question on the mandatory short form. Apart from this minor concession, however, the Harper government has rebuffed myriad pleas from almost 300 groups, representing virtually every sector of Canadian society, subnational govern-

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ments, and prominent policy think tanks, to keep the long form.

IGNORANCE: BAD PUBLIC POLICY

Canadians are rightly baffled about the Harper government’s seemingly inexplicable determination to kill the long-form census. Why would any government prefer to govern with unreliable and inadequate data relating to the changing needs and complexion of Canadian society? What would motivate a minority government to turn its back on an uncharacteristically broad coalition of business, governmental, research, and civil society organizations, which is adamant that the scrapping of the long form is a bad idea and bad public policy? The answer to these questions appears to be as unfortunate as it is cynical—a bad idea with respect to good governance might be a good idea with respect to partisan politics and, in particular, the silencing of those who would make equality-based claims in Canadian politics.

The census is a necessary mechanism both to measure our collective prog-

ress toward the goal of citizenship equality and to hold our governments accountable for systemic and unacceptable social inequalities. The census enables citizens, civil society organizations, and governments alike to track critical indicators of citizen well-being and social justice across time—among them, disparities among the rich and poor, the differently abled, Aboriginals and other Canadians, men and women, recent immigrants and native-born Canadians, and visible and non-visible minorities. As the 2006 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) Equity Data Report explains, “The Census is the best source for demographic, social and economic views of Canadians. Also, it is the only reliable data source for women, Aboriginal peoples, and members of visible minorities at the detail we require.”

While census data are a necessary ingredient for good social policy, they also have a critical role in breaking down barriers to full citizenship for Canada’s most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Advances toward citizenship equality have been premised on the capacity of equality-seeking groups to make their case by demonstrating, not the least through reliable census data, that they have been systemically denied full inclusion in Canadian society, and to demand ameliorative action from their government.

The cancellation of the 2011 PALS (Participation and Activity Limitation Survey)—a post-censal survey that collects detailed information on the nature and severity of barriers that confront people with disabilities—also demonstrates that the Harper government is neither interested in identifying these barriers nor empowering disabled Canadians to seek redress. Without knowledge of their shared plight, vulnerable groups are individualized and left alone to struggle with problems that are too often labelled as personal failings. From

a strictly partisan and ideological perspective, then, the termination of the long-form census does make sense if the primary goals are to immobilize equality-seeking groups and conceal growing social inequalities. Prime Minister Harper, an economist by trade, knows this.

GENDER EQUITY AND THE HARPER AGENDA

Harper's determined refusal to bend to public pressure on the census issue is intimately bound up with his government's broader and sustained assault on the very idea of social equity and citizenship equality. The Conservative government has not concealed its disdain for equality seeking as an aspiration for political activism and policy making. Harper's anti-equity campaign initially targeted the gender equity agenda, which was launched by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women 40 years ago. Since 2006, Canadians have been told in one way or another that gender equality has been achieved: to quote Bev Oda, the first in a revolving door of Harper's Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, "this government does fundamentally believe that all women are equal."

Thus, the word equality was purged from the Status of Women mandate and website, its Independent Policy Program was abruptly terminated, and most of its regional offices were closed. Over 100 women's programs were eliminated, as was the Court Challenges Program, which provided funding for all disadvantaged groups to challenge discrimination in federal legislation. Next on the agenda was the defunding of the broad network of equity-seeking groups that have advanced equality claims in Canada.

DEFUNDING NGOS

In the last five years, Canada's equity infrastructure has been quietly and systematically razed. The list of front-line organizations that have been felled or severely debilitated by the budgetary axe is as stunning as it is reprehensible—among them are the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, National Association of Women and the

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Law, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation, Conseil d'intervention pour l'accès des femmes au travail, MATCH International, International Planned Parenthood Federation, KAIROS, Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, and many more organizations that have advanced the claims of the vulnerable and disadvantaged for decades.

In addition to the defunding of NGOs, the Harper government also has taken direct aim at the promise of equity. Shortly after the 2006 federal election, for example, it decided not to abide by the recommendations of the Pay Equity Working Group. Subsequently, it resisted reclassification of positions that promised to reduce gender disparities in income and status in the federal public service. The Harper government also aspires to deny public sector workers access to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) to resolve pay equity claims. In July 2010, it launched an internal review of the *Public Service Employment Act*, months prior to a scheduled parliamentary review.

This internal review was apparently triggered by a single complainant who claimed she was denied employment because a position was reserved for qualified applicants from one of the four equity groups designated in the Act. The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights has twice reported (2007, 2010) that the federal civil service is failing to meet its equity objectives. Minister Jason Kenney, however, has wrongly implied on several occasions that employment equity policies are in conflict with civil service merit principles. In early 2010, moreover, the Harper government

closed CHRC offices in Vancouver, Toronto, and Halifax. These three offices, located in cities that host the vast majority of racialized people and recent immigrants to Canada, accounted for three-quarters of all signed complaints to the commission in 2008.

BENCHMARKING OTTAWA'S PERFORMANCE

There are many reasons why the Harper government does not want us to know how Canadians, in all their variety, have fared through the recent recession and under Conservative stewardship. The 2006 census, conducted in comparatively good economic times, revealed a number of disturbing trends that speak directly to the social equity issues—a growing income gap between rich and poor Canadians, the stagnation of the working wage, stubbornly high levels of child poverty, growing income disparities between racialized and non-racialized Canadians as well as Aboriginal and other Canadians, and ongoing pressures on Canadian families to meet their child-care needs, to name a few examples.

To be clear, the Harper government continues to rely upon, indeed flaunt, Statistics Canada data to demonstrate its sound economic management, especially in comparison with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The cancellation of the long-form census, in contrast, promises to conceal Canada's deteriorating position on many different social indices. We already know that Canada fell from 7th place in 2004 to 25th place in 2009 on the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. In 2010, the OECD reported that Canada

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does things in Ottawa. While Ford pretends to want to run Toronto in executive style like long-time conservative mayor Hazel McCallion's Mississauga, his brother Doug fantasizes about the Chicago model of strong mayoral politics.


HARDBALL POLITICS: PLAYING FOR KEEPS

In true Harperian style, the big and potentially most controversial files, such as the subway extension instead of the light-rail-oriented Transit City plan or the proposal to privatize garbage collection, are handled on a short leash directly by the Ford brothers. In addition, reminiscent of how the Ottawa press corps has dealt with the prime minister, many pundits have played the role of embedded journalists in a war against all things Miller and all things progressive. With Sue-Ann Levy of the Toronto Sun leading the charge, other influential writers like Royson James have all but abdicated their fourth-estate prerogative of critical interrogation of power.

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Harper has played high-stakes poker throughout most of his two terms as minority leader of Canada. He may soon be able to see a payoff when he carries the Conservative standard down Yonge Street. Yet, things may all turn out differently.


The Harper-Hudak-Ford triumvirate may be just a Conservative pipe dream. We could, instead, end up with another and perhaps weaker Harper majority, a failed run to conquer Queen's Park by Hudak, and a lame-duck Mayor Ford who might stumble over a botched transit

proposal, intentional union-busting privatization plans, and make-rich programs for his friends in private business. Harper could lose his gamble for the urban voter and drag his provincial and municipal counterparts down with him. The fate of this scenario is highly dependent on whether the Liberals will (re)articulate an urban vision that moves beyond narrow anti-tax sentiments to address Canada's urban crisis, and whether a fickle electorate will buy into a more progressive urbanity than that symbolized by the politics of Ford and Harper. 

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urban seats, where they have been honing their appeal to ethnic voters. Or the Liberals may eventually begin to regain some of the support they have bled to the NDP or the Greens. However, all this

is for the future. As long as the Bloc Québécois can successfully mobilize Quebec nationalist support, minority Parliaments will remain the norm in our multinational federation. Canadians who

are centre or left-of-centre in their inclinations will, for the time being, have to continue to rely on the Bloc to shield them from the full impact of a potential majority Conservative government. 

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ranked 27th out of 30 OECD countries with respect to gender pay gaps. Similarly, Canada has plunged from 4th to 9th place among 14 comparable OECD countries on the UN Human Development Index. Canada now ranks dead last among 25 OECD countries with respect to early child care and development. This year, moreover, the UN Human Rights Council urged Ottawa to address the growing disparities between

minority groups and their mainstream counterparts in education, employment, income, housing, and political participation.

There is little doubt that the strategists in the Prime Minister's Office had already suspected that the 2011 long-form census would reveal to all Canadians and the world an increasingly frayed and inequitable social fabric. Canadians have a right to know whether social

disparities are growing and among which groups. Like the proverbial three monkeys that can neither see, hear, nor say evil, the cancellation of the long-form census is a cynical partisan ploy that seeks to entrench a climate of indifference to social inequalities and to effective social policies to combat them. This is a manufactured ignorance in the making, which, if met with silence and without solidarity, diminishes us all. 