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OttawaWatch 284: Long form and big society

By Lloyd Mackey

The discussion over the long form census data eventually dissipated as the statistical scientists prevailed.

But the whole emergence of “STEM” thinking in society – particularly in the higher education field – has created quite a seismic shift in the less “scientific” of political science. I have had close opportunity in retirement to be exposed to STEM – science, technology, engineering, mathematics – in my voluntary role as a chaplaincy support person for the Multifaith Centre at Simon Fraser University’s Surrey campus.

Without getting into too much detail today, I would note that as some of the “big questions” that have been posed by people of both faith and superstition get answered by STEM. Not all but some. And, of course, new questions emerge, as people of both science and faith try to probe the extent of the universe on one hand and the depths of the oceans on the other.

Three of several dozen organizations whose leaders or researchers have spoken out in defence of the mandatory long form census are the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the United Church of Canada and the Canadian Jewish Congress.

All three make the point that they are reliant on census data to assist them in planning and program development that benefits each of their particular constituencies.

In a sense, they help to make the common point that both sides in this current dustup are trying, in their own separate ways, to emphasize.

That point is the need for dependable data. Industry minister Tony Clement maintains that the government wants that kind of data and is asking Statistics Canada if there is a way to get that data on a voluntary, rather than an intrusive, basis. StatsCan has categorically stated it cannot be done.

A clear cut explanation as to why not has not yet been made public. I would submit that it probably relates to the potential for “skewing” that comes, arguably, from a survey that is less than totally random. Professional statisticians maintain that if a survey is not mandatory, some people will not respond and their data will not be included in the survey results.

That, from this perspective, leaves some unanswered questions. I want to leave them unanswered in today’s OttawaWatch, but encourage readers to keep following the discussion.

Even as I write this, I am watching the census debate at the House of Commons industry, science and technology standing committee, which is interviewing witnesses dealing with the question. By the time readers see this, we will either have something sorted out or the discussion will continue. It will need resolving one way or another, in order for the long form to be a part of the 2011 census.

One facet for which I am watching, is a clear definition of the possibility of what Clement refers to as advocacy, rather than coercion, for achieving long form census results that are as close to unskewed as possibly. And I am also wondering how StatsCan can maintain that a long form the agency is permitting 160,000 people not to fill out without penalty is a genuinely mandatory instrument.

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I would like to shift to a topic that I have touched on recently – the emergence of the “big society” concept in British politics – and what it might have to say both to governance and the role of faith-based groups in Canada.

For this, I would refer *OttawaWatch* readers to two online Christian newspapers – *Christian Today* (not to be confused with *Christianity Today*) and *Christian Post*. The first has British roots, the second, American.

Both of them have been covering the emergence of the “big society” concept. They have especially watched it since it became, first of all, a part of the British Tory election campaign and, more latterly has formed a part of the public policy approach of the new Tory/Lib Dem coalition government.

The “big society” concept, simply defined, is the approach that comes out of centre-right political thinking, that organizations – both profit and non-profit – be able to contribute positively to the reduction or elimination of poverty or oppression. The contrasting concept is the “big state”, where the public sector controls or governs that contributory process.

The intriguing point that has emerged in the *CP* and *CT* stories has been a fairly strong positive response from Christian leaders. In a quote by *CT*, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, for example, offered “two-and-a-half cheers” to the “big society” concept, suggesting that it might prove to be a “watershed” for the nations.

Williams suggested the initiative “recognizes that good society is not simply one with lots of convincing and impressive rules and programs, but a society where people feel confident that they all have something to give, that it will be receive and they will be able to receive from one another in the ‘gift exchange.’”

Williams noted, further that “at the heart of it all is the conviction that for a society to change, people need to change. Society will change, not by lots of individuals becoming

nicer but by people recognizing more and more deeply how much they depend on each other and how much they are impoverished by the poverty of their neighbour.”

Some future *Ottawa Watch* pieces will attempt to cite Canadian examples of the kind of thinking that is going into the “big society” concept.

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