The story of the 2011 Canadian Census and its lessons

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Introduction and background

- The history of the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics
  - Trying to help "transition countries"…
- The Statistics Act: law versus tradition
  - Law: Statistics Canada a department
  - Under a Minister
  - Minister's deputy: Chief Statistician
  - Tradition: all relevant decisions made by CS (within budget established by government)
  - Explicit exception: census *questions*

Introduction and background

- 1971 Census: separates long from short form
- Long form: 1:5 households (most of the content)
- Short form: all households (basic demographic data only)
- Cabinet decides content
- Statistics Canada decides everything else
  - Based on wide ranging consultations

Recent events

- Summer of 2010: Cabinet decides to make the long form "voluntary"
- Bias:
  - lower levels of education and income
  - Aboriginal persons
  - Recent immigrants
  - the elderly living alone, and so on
- Pernicious nature of bias

Impact on users of census data

- Huge range of users and uses:
  - Democratic accountability
  - Cities: transportation, schools, immigrant assistance centers
  - Business: location decisions; construction
  - Charitable organisations
  - Forecasting occupational demand
- Huge risk for all users:
  - Unknown quality
  - Comparability with earlier censuses

Manner of making the decision and public reaction

- Zero consultation with users, experts, provinces
- Against strong, unambiguous advice from Statistics Canada
- Statistical Society of Canada, American Statistical Association, French statisticians
- Public!!!!
- Armine Yalnizyan
- Jeffrey Simpson

Manner of making the decision and public reaction

- Minister's defence:
  - Initially: privacy
  - But:
    - Three formal complaints in ten years…
    - Diminishing handful of letters
  - Increasingly hides behind good name of Statistics Canada
  - Muzzling of Statistics Canada
  - "They think they are independent…"
  - Chief Statistician resigns

Importance of trust in official statistics

- Why did CS resign?
- Not because of the census decision as such (although I would have resigned)
- Role as protector of public confidence in official statistics
- If public believed that Statistics Canada supported the statistical monstrosity, it would have undermined confidence…

Importance of trust in official statistics

- Why is public confidence so fundamental?
  - Democratic accountability
    - Cannot function if government can influence findings (whether in reality or appearance)
  - "Honest information brokers" (billions of $)
    - Indexing labour contracts, pensions
    - Extended unemployment benefits
    - Federal-Provincial transfers (huge amounts)
    - Foreign investors
- Can't verify data; must trust provider

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

- Trust brings me back to UN Principles: its basic motivation
- Preamble: basic importance of official statistics for "any society that seeks to understand itself and to respect the rights of its members"
- Ten principles, not all discussed here
- First: general statement about impartiality

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

- Second: "To retain trust in official statistics, the *statistical agencies* need to decide *according to strictly professional considerations*, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage, and dissemination of statistical data. "

- Clear message, clearly violated

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

- Third: "To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the *statistical agencies* are to present information according to scientific standards on the *sources, methods and procedures* of the statistics."
- Fourth: "The statistical agencies are *entitled to comment* on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics."
- Both of these were violated by minister's muzzling of Statistics Canada

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

- Canada, as member of UN, approved these principles – should be bound by them

- Of course, Minister probably did not even know about them

- Whether he did, he clearly violated decades of **essential** tradition

Lessons

- Opposition parties united in support of the compulsory long form. WHY?
- Huge public support
- Lesson 1: importance of such support
  - high quality of the past information
  - openness about our work (including mistakes)
  - high profile of analytic output
- Prerequisite for successful amendment (needs united opposition)

Lessons

- Had the government known…
- Yet, in the end it stuck to its position
- "Blinked" once: when threatened by *law*
- So lesson 2: effective safeguards should be *legal*
- Lesson 3: if it can happen in Canada, it can happen anywhere

Options for legal safeguards

- Status as "parliamentary agent"
  - Unambiguous freedom from government interference
  - But: other Parliamentary agents…
  - Distance from departments: relevance
- Crown corporation (independent board)
  - Same problem: "distance" from departments
  - Legal protection of confidentiality!!
- Current model, **_with strengthened guarantees_**

Two concrete proposals

- First suggestion: embed in amended Statistics Act Principles 2-4 of Fundamental Principles
- But: this makes Chief Statistician (President) even more critical
  - He can overrule others in agency
  - Public face of official statistics
  - Principal defender of its non-political integrity
- Existing safeguard: fixed term
  - Politically less dependent on government
  - But: past history…

Two concrete proposals

- Second suggestion: appointment process for Chief Statistician (President)
  - Panel of eminent persons to search
    - President of the National Academy of Sciences
    - President of the national statistical association
    - Retired heads of the National Bank
  - Chief Statistician must be willing to put his or her job on the line should the need arise
    - might not prevent the government from interfering, but at least assures this cannot happen quietly
    - Ultimate safeguard in a democracy

- Good luck to you all