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THE STATE OF SATISFACTION:

Canada and the Long-form Census

by

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In the summer of 2010, the Canadian Conservative government announced that the mandatory long-form census would be replaced by a voluntary census called the National Household Survey, beginning in May 2011. Although the press briefly reported on the objections that many stakeholders had to this decision, most Canadians, enjoying their summer, failed to see why they should care about this admittedly prosaic-sounding change to a government survey. But the change certainly did not seem so insignificant to those who proclaimed it to be “the worst policy decision of the past decade in Canada,” (2010) such as Montreal-based doctor Gilles Paradis. Using information policy scholar Sandra Braman's multiple definitions of information, we will examine why, at the very least, the long-form census issue is a significant one for not only individual Canadians, but Canada itself as an ongoing national experiment. And using feminist scholar Nancy Fraser's policy framework of need interpretation, we will examine how even a well-intentioned assertion of privacy rights can have unexpectedly negative consequences for a citizenry. Finally, we will consider the potential consequences of the Canadian state's growing tendency to prioritize the “administration of need satisfaction” over “the politics of need interpretation.” (p. 177, 1989)

Braman urges us to always start our analysis of a proposed policy “in light of its impact as a constitutive force” (p. 21, 2006) in society. Conservatives, granted, do not openly disagree that information has “an enormous power in constructing our social – and ultimately, therefore, material – reality.” (p. 20) Their primary reason for abolishing the mandatory requirement of the long-form census has been privacy. Industry Minister

Tony Clement has said, “we believe the new form that will be used in 2011 will reasonably limit what Canadians felt was an intrusion of their privacy.” (Proudfoot, 2010) The Conservatives claim that the quality of gathered information will not be compromised with a voluntary long-form census. Senate Leader Marjory LeBreton, for instance, has said, “there's still going to be a long-form. The only difference is, this is voluntary. Canadians, I believe and we believe, will be very happy to fill in the long-forms.” (Jarry-Shore, 2010) Conservatives generally feel, then, that the positive impact of information as a constitutive force in society will be preserved, but now with the added benefit of increased privacy for those who wish to assert that right.

On the other side of the argument, an almost overwhelming number of stakeholders from various fields have claimed that many Canadians, actually, will not be so “happy” to fill in the voluntary long-form, and their refusal to do so will have a highly negative impact on information as a constitutive force in society. That is, governments, NGOs, and other organizations will now have less reliable data to determine which areas of the country are most in need of social services. Practically all areas of policy planning in society will be detrimentally affected with a voluntary long-form, these stakeholders claim. (“The long”, 2010) Schools boards, they say, will now have a harder time predicting future enrolment, thereby harming their ability to plan staffing requirements and special needs programs. Transit authorities, allegedly, will now have a harder time assessing changes in the behaviour of commuters, thereby harming their ability to plan more efficient routes. *(ibid.)*

The mandatory long-form census was only sent to one in five Canadian households, (Roman, 2010) but usually received a 95% response rate. (McKie, 2010) This new voluntary long-form will be sent to more households – one in three – and Clement has claimed that this larger sample size will make up for any losses in the response rate. (Wherry, 2010) But in a July 2010 letter sent to the minister, the University of Toronto School of Public Policy and Governance, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Toronto Board of Trade and many other institutions claimed that "without similar compliance resources and requirements, it will not be possible to achieve reasonable data results with the voluntary form." (Yalnizyan, 2010) Their claim is that a voluntary long-form will generate too much "non-response bias," thereby jeopardizing the overall quality of the data. If non-response were simply random, then there would not necessarily be a problem because responders would still be fairly representative, but Green & Milligan explain that "there is strong evidence that [voluntary] survey non-response is non-random. That is, certain groups systematically are less likely to respond." (p. 385, 2010) The consequence of this, they explain, is that "there will be biases—the sample produced from the survey will not be representative of the Canadian population." (p. 384) The coercion that privacy advocates and libertarians rail against, then, may actually serve the public good by insisting that people divulge information about themselves so that they can, potentially, be helped.

The Conservatives like to regularly call into question the veracity of the mandatory long-form data by citing the example of 21,000 Canadians declaring

themselves Jedi Knights in the 2001 census. (O'Malley, 2010) But, as unfortunate as this practical joke may be, Veall notes that 21,000 actually constitutes “less than 0.1 percent” of respondents. (p. 398, 2010) It is reasonable to suggest, then, that such a small percentage of misrepresentation might not negate the entire value of the data gleaned from the other 99.9% of respondents. Veall also notes that it is unclear how the voluntary long-form will in any way solve the problem of mass misrepresentation. *(ibid.)* Indeed, following Braman's conception of information as a resource, many organizations feel that they must have the data from the mandatory long-form “in order to function.” (p. 12) Director Carol Timmings of Toronto Public Health, for example, has expressed concern that “her department would never have been able to target the most vulnerable people in the city during the H1N1 pandemic without [the mandatory long-form] census data.” (Jarry-Shore)

Braman notes that the subject of information policy fully appears with the “transformation of the bureaucratic welfare state into the informational state.” (p. 1) Canada, with its numerous social insurance programs, has traditionally been known as a welfare state. It has been suggested, however, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper believes “addressing social and economic inequality should be left to individual initiative and private charity. That's why he's decided simply to stop gathering the numbers that provide an accurate socio-economic profile of Canadian society.” (Murdoch, 2010) This ostensibly minor move to change the long-form census from mandatory to voluntary, then, may actually be interpreted as a significant step away from Canada's traditional

identity as a welfare state and toward a new vision of Canada as a “small government country.” Far from being merely a “K1A issue,” as Tony Clement has claimed, referring to Parliament Hill's postal code, (Chase & Howlett, 2010) it seems that this policy decision actually calls into question the very nature of Canada's identity and should, therefore, be of concern to all Canadians.

Fraser identifies two principal sets of institutions that depoliticize social discourses: the corporate and the domestic. (p. 168) The Canadian corporate world had, for a long time, effectively depoliticized questions of privacy relating to the mandatory long-form census. For most businesses, privacy concerns are cast as “impersonal market imperatives in contradistinction to political matters.” *(ibid.)* Providing businesses with mandatory long-form data, policy expert David Eaves claims, will “make them, and thus our economy, more efficient, productive and profitable.” (2010) The Conservatives, traditionally a very business-friendly party, (“Foreign”, 2010) likely did not intend to aggravate the corporate world. “Domestic institutions depoliticize certain matters by personalizing them,” Fraser writes. “They cast these as private-domestic matters or personal-familial matters.” (p. 168) Although the Conservative government is not exactly a domestic institution, we can see that its members have used domestic discourse in attempting to keep privacy issues depoliticized while changing the long-form census from mandatory to voluntary. They appealed to those individuals who felt that such questions as “what time do you leave for work in the morning?” represented “personal-familial matters,” *(ibid.)* unnecessary for the state to know about. But this

reprivatization discourse *(ibid.)* to shift state activities into the corporate world has backfired on the Conservatives, essentially "mobilizing social movements" against them and enabling the creation of a runaway need. (p. 172) Fraser defines runaway needs as "needs that have broken out of the discursive enclaves constructed in and around domestic and official economic institutions." (p. 169) In failing to "fully depoliticize" *(ibid.)* privacy rights, the Conservatives have given rise to a very atypical runaway need situation in that, curiously, citizens and interest groups are largely calling for the opposite of what one would expect with privacy as a runaway need – they say they need *less* of it, not more. (Proudfoot) These stakeholders need less privacy for the sake of more information. This informational need has, in turn, entered the realm of "the social," which Fraser calls "the site where successfully politicized runaway needs get translated into claims for government provision." (p. 170)

The social is the site where, as Fraser warns, "the politics of need interpretation devolves into the administration of need satisfaction." (p. 177) We can see indications of the Canadian political community moving away from the complex issue of need interpretation, in favour of the simpler need satisfaction discourse. In a July 2010 speech, Liberal MP Marc Garneau said, "[the long-form census decision] is ideological and it touches on the most vulnerable Canadians and the federal government's ability to *deliver progressive programs to help them*." (SketchyTony, 2010) But perhaps politicians should not be merely talking about *delivering* services to individuals in this kind of top-down fashion; perhaps, instead, they should be talking about *interpreting* these services

with the citizens they are meant to aid. The bigger issue may be how, with the census data, these communities are being interpreted in the first place. Fraser provides the vivid example of the governmentalization of women's shelters in the late 1970s, where the needs of women were “substantially reinterpreted” (p. 177) by bureaucrats, resulting in the administration of an overall less effective program. The women's original claims for social and economic independence, Fraser writes, gave way to a “narrower focus on the individual woman's problems of low self-esteem.” *(ibid.)* Although the governmental authority in charge of these women's shelters may have had benevolent intentions, the resulting program was less than satisfactory in addressing women's needs precisely because these women were not given enough power in the creation of the program meant to serve them. The line of communication between the government's interpretation of the women's needs and what the women actually felt they needed was never sufficiently opened. Instead, the government jumped rather hastily into discourse about administering its own interpretation of the women's needs, thus creating an ill-conceived program.

As Canadian politicians talk more and more about the importance of *delivering* and *administering* programs based on the mandatory long-form data, they seem to be entering similarly precarious territory where need interpretation is left behind as an afterthought. Perhaps the larger political concern should not be about privacy, then, but rather obscurity. The sheer opaqueness behind how census data are being interpreted in ostensibly benevolent ways by higher-ups in government and the corporate world is,

no doubt, a legitimate issue that would remain even with the continuation of a mandatory long-form census. It might be reasonable to suggest that a significant reason why so many Canadian citizens seem indifferent toward the long-form census issue is precisely because of this stifling obscurity. They are being told by many stakeholders that their cooperation in gathering census data is extremely important, and will be for the greater public good. But without a clear vision into how, exactly, that greater public good is being constructed, then perhaps they will opt not to care about census debates.

University of Toronto professor David Phillips has claimed that privacy is an inadequate policy frame for addressing the "process of becoming." (p. 313, 2009) He writes, "we [should] want to facilitate active engagement in the cocreation of the informational/geographic/social landscape. The question is not how to protect our privacy; it is how to be public, how to engage in public life, how to figure out one's situation, identity, and desires *in community*." *(ibid.)* If the political discourse were to shift more away from the paternalistic overtures of need satisfaction and toward the communitarian nature of need interpretation, then perhaps Canadian citizens would become a lot more motivated to engage in the long-form census debate.

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