

## *Martha Hall Findlay Blog, July 2010*

### **“WE WILL BECOME INVISIBLE”**

I am, with this letter, asking everyone to speak out against the Harper government’s decision to scrap the long-form census form. Write to the PM, to Minister Clement, to your MP (yes, me too). Call in to talk radio shows. Join facebook protests. Write letters to the editors of your local papers. We need Canadians to say “no” to this decision.

This is not a partisan request—indeed, upset about this has come from across the political spectrum. But we need voices to be raised. Only through engagement can we effect change.

There are many, many reasons why this is a bad decision—fundamentally it’s because one can’t govern from ignorance. But the title of this piece reflects one of the most worrying aspects—that making the census voluntary will render many Canadians “invisible”. The comment first came to my office from a representative of the Korean Canadian community, recognizing the concern for the community, and exhorting others to take action. It is a comment that has now been repeated many times, by many people, from all political persuasions. Making the census voluntary will disproportionately affect Canadians from already under-represented groups such as new immigrants, the poor, the less-educated, those with disabilities, aboriginals and people from certain ethno-racial groups. Many of these people will, for various reasons, be far less likely to fill out a form voluntarily—and if the forms aren’t filled out, they will, in effect, become invisible. Those who are most vulnerable will become invisible to the very people whose job is to make decisions affecting them.

Provinces, municipalities, businesses, doctors, nurses, social workers, chambers of commerce, think tanks (from across the ideological spectrum), teachers—people and organizations from all across Canada, and from every political persuasion, have come out strongly against this decision. Even the head of Statistics Canada has resigned, saying that the proposed voluntary replacement will not work. There are few issues that have engendered such unanimous condemnation.

As an elected politician, I know that to make good decisions for Canada, we need basic information about Canadians, such as income, ethnicity, work, age, language, education, disabilities and the like. The information gathered is kept completely confidential on a personal basis, but is invaluable as a whole. Without that information, how can we possibly develop and provide for effective and efficient taxation, social programs, infrastructure building, education, health care, old age security, affordable housing, immigrant assistance? Governments, charities, businesses and community organizations—we all rely on the census information to do our jobs the best we can. How can we possibly run this country effectively without the facts?

Supporting this decision (made without any public consultation or notice) are a few ultra-conservatives, including Prime Minister Harper, reflecting an ideological, far right, “keep the state away from me” way of thinking. But contrary to claims by some in the Harper government, very, very few people ever complained about the “intrusion” of the mandatory census—Statistics Canada reported no such negative response, and Canada’s Privacy Commissioner reported only 3 complaints in 10 years (!), none of which were upheld.

In 2003 the Republican administration in the US tried making the census voluntary, but it was a disaster. Bad enough that the number of respondents dropped significantly, but the number dropped disproportionately far more among groups such as blacks, Hispanics, immigrant communities and American Indians. Because of the imbalance, the information became of little use, and the whole system became more expensive. The US wisely, quickly, returned to a mandatory census system.

By far the majority of Canadians believe in peace, order and good government, and good government requires facts and knowledge of the people—ALL of the people—to whom, and for whom, that government is responsible. I encourage you to help us persuade the Harper government to rethink this bad decision.