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## An independent mind has always characterized Sheikh

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Munir Sheikh navigated his career as a public servant through eight prime ministers over the course of nearly four decades. A string of successively more senior positions led him to oversee a \$100-billion tax-reduction policy and help craft the 2005 budget. One former colleague described him as the best economist in the federal government.

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In the end though, it was a questionnaire that toppled the 62-year-old.

It's a stunning turn for a man who dedicated his working life to public service. Dr. Sheikh's Wednesday night resignation as Statistics Canada's chief statistician over the census is all the more remarkable because of its rarity. In a world where loyalty is king, bureaucrats of his standing do not tend to quit over differences of opinion.

He did. In doing so, he displayed qualities that have emerged through his 38-year career: stubbornness and independence of mind.

Indeed, debate was an intrinsic part of the daily fare at the Sheikh household in Pakistan, where the 10 siblings would tussle over economics, society, politics and culture.

That intellectual wrestling left the family's second-youngest son, Munir, well prepared for the rigours of public service. It also honed his skills as an independent thinker, willing, to a point of stubbornness, to defend his arguments.

"He is a very strong individual and he holds his ground. If he believes he's right, he's right," says his brother, Shamim Sheikh, a University of Toronto civil engineering professor. "Debate within the family environment is part of our fabric."

Independence is at the core of extraordinary developments in Ottawa, which saw Dr. Sheikh resign from one of the world's most respected statistical agencies. In doing so, he stood up for what economists, professors, city planners and historians have said for weeks: One cannot substitute the mandatory long-form census for a voluntary one.

The resignation came a day after Industry Minister Tony Clement said the agency is not independent and reports directly to a minister. Statistics Canada has long prided itself on its independence, and Dr. Sheikh himself has said on the agency's website that it works "neutrally and objectively, without interference or influence from any groups or individuals."

While the resignation has won Dr. Sheikh praise for the courage of his convictions, in the end, many are saying he was left with little choice.

"He was put in such a hard place - either stand up and defend the government, in which case he'd lose all credibility as a chief statistician ... or the alternative" to leave, said David Green, economics professor at the University of British Columbia.

On June 16, 2008, he became the country's tenth chief statistician of Canada, replacing the popular Ivan Fellegi, who had held the post for 22 years. In interviews since the appointment, Dr. Sheikh said he wanted to bolster research on labour markets and productivity.

In the two years of his tenure at Statscan, when the world was collapsing into recession, he became known for his razor-sharp mind and forthright criticisms. As budgets got squeezed, the man who describes himself as frugal forced departments to set clearer priorities. He tilted the agency's emphasis towards economics, and away from the social surveys that his predecessor had favoured. And he told staff to stop the flowery language and fancy headlines in reports and stick to the facts.

The shift didn't always make him popular. But stressed staff, who won't speak on the record due to fears of losing their jobs, say many are now mourning his departure.

Dr. Sheikh himself is not commenting. His brother says he was noticeably brighter Thursday, after weeks of worry and preoccupation.

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Beyond the agency, opinions flowed freely. "I think it's a tragedy he's resigned," said Don McLeish, president of the Statistical Society of Canada. "I think it was the only way he could say anything."

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