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Calls grow for arm's-length Statscan

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The resignation of Statistics Canada's chief over the Harper government's decision to scrap the mandatory long-form census is fuelling concern about the agency's ability to keep producing independent and high-quality analysis.

The Conservatives are sticking to their plan to make a lengthy household census survey optional despite the July 21 departure of chief statistician Munir Sheikh, a veteran civil servant who as he quit released a statement rejecting this voluntary approach.

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Even as they defend their right to tell Statistics Canada what to do, the Tories are being forced to address a growing perception that the unit - which Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney calls the "pre-eminent statistical agency in the world" - is at risk of decline.

University of British Columbia economist John Helliwell, a member of a board appointed by Ottawa to advise Statistics Canada, predicts that a discredited process for gathering data, combined with the ensuing impact on the morale and reputation of the agency, will make it hard to attract a top-calibre replacement for Dr. Sheikh.

"The morale and reputation of Statistics Canada and the international reputation ... of the current government will all be tarnished," said Prof. Helliwell, who sits on National Council on Statistics.

"Under such a cloud it will be difficult to maintain high quality leadership for Statistics Canada."

Another fear is the Harper government may be poised to start designating other Statscan surveys as optional, further undermining the agency's ability to assemble a rich picture of Canada. The Tories have scrapped the compulsory long-form census traditionally sent to one-fifth of households in the name of protecting Canadians' privacy.

Stephen Gordon, a Laval University economist, said the elimination of the mandatory long form sets a "disquieting precedent" that he worries could be followed by more rollbacks.

"There's the labour force survey, which is also mandatory. Is that next on the list? All of the things they have said about the census you could say about the labour force survey."

Mr. Carney, meanwhile, said the central bank will watch to see what effect planned changes to the 2011 census will have on the quality of Statscan data.

"We will have to evaluate in the fullness of time, along with Statistics Canada, the impact that any proposed change would have on the reliability and the quality of that data," the bank governor told reporters.

Calls are growing for Ottawa to place Statscan beyond the reach of political influence. Its current status, as Industry Minister Tony Clement reaffirmed this week, means agency staff are not independent. "Sometimes, some of them like to think they are - but that doesn't make it so," Mr. Clement told The Globe Tuesday. "They report to a minister."

Former chief statistician Ivan Fellegi said it's "well worth exploring" whether to make Statscan independent while UBC economist David Green proposes transforming it into an arms-length agency similar to the Office of the Auditor-General.

"We need to trust that our statistics are not being manipulated somehow. If a government can direct the statistical agency to gather data in a different way, then that raises the spectre that we've lost that objectivity," Prof. Green said.

Opposition parties are planning to call Dr. Sheikh and Mr. Clement before a Commons committee scheduled to start hearings Tuesday on the census controversy.

Mr. Clement told the CBC that he still believes Statistics Canada can reap "high-quality" results from the revised household survey, which will now rely on voluntary responses from Canadians.

The Alberta and B.C. governments are taking a wait-and-see approach to the planned census changes.

Ed Stelmach said in a statement that he's aware of concerns about the changes and expressed his desire Ottawa could still reap accurate information from the census.

"I understand concerns about eliminating punitive measures related to long form of census are being raised," the Alberta Premier said in the statement. "Alberta, like other jurisdictions and organizations, does require statistically reliable data and we hope that the federal government is able to provide that data moving forward using a voluntary approach."

B.C.'s Mr. Campbell would not say whether he supported the proposed changes to the census - only saying it's Ottawa's job to handle the matter. But he nevertheless expressed sympathy for Canadians' beefs about the invasiveness of such surveys.

"It's a federal responsibility and their job is to carry out the census in the best way they can while they protect people's privacy and they are assured they can get the best results they can," Mr. Campbell said.

The B.C. Premier said he understands citizen concerns about privacy and the intrusiveness of the mandatory long-form census and feels the federal government is doing its best to balance that unease with its need for data.

"[Citizens] have concerns about protection of privacy. They have concerns I think about intrusion into people's lives and I haven't heard anyone say they have lots of time in their life, so it's one of the things I think every government has got to be aware of."

With reports from Tavia Grant, Jeremy Torobin, Josh Wingrove and Rebecca Lindell

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