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The inconvenient truth in Mr. Sheikh's resignation

Norman Spector

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Ivan Fellegi [told the Canadian Press](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/municipal-social-planners-caught-off-guard-by-census-slash-97514599.html) [http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/municipal-social-planners-caught-off-guard-by-census-slash-97514599.html] that he would have quit if the government of the day had tried to axe the long census form when he was serving as chief statistician of Canada. In the case of my ex-colleague, that may be true. But Mr. Fellegi made that statement three weeks ago. And the fact of the matter is that his successor, Munir Sheikh, did not choose to resign when the Harper government took the dumb decision to axe the long census form against his recommendation. Nor did he resign when the decision - and the depth of its stupidity - became a matter of public discussion. He resigned yesterday.

In truth, deputy ministerial resignations in Ottawa are rare to non-existent - especially in the case of policy differences with ministers, which are frequent. Or even, as we saw during the sponsorship scandal, over the kind of political interference that leads to wrong-doing. The pay, perks and pension benefits are just too good. Not to speak of the car and driver.

The real reason for Mr. Sheikh's resignation can be found at the end of [this letter to the editor](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/letters-to-the-editor/july-17-letters-to-the-editor/article1643014/?cmpid=rss1), [http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/letters-to-the-editor/july-17-letters-to-the-editor/article1643014/?cmpid=rss1] published by the Globe and Mail on Saturday, which raised a question that was being asked with increased frequency in the past few days:

Canada by the numbers

Industry Minister Tony Clement claims that Statistics Canada has told him that moving from the mandatory long-form census to a voluntary survey would not create problems (Refusing To Reverse Their Census Decision, Tories Find A New Way To Go Populist - July 16). Ivan Fellegi, who was the chief statistician for 23 years, has explained why that is not true and suggested that the people inside Statistics Canada must actually be very unhappy with this decision. Where is the current chief statistician in all of this?

Decades ago, we established that the Bank of Canada needs to operate at arm's-length from political interference. The same should be true of the national statistical agency. If statistical collection changes with the ideological whims of the government, the very basis of government decision-making, transparency and trust is shattered.

We need a chief statistician who is willing to stand up for Statistics Canada as an independent institution. Where is Munir Sheikh?

David Green, economics department, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

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