

*Statistics Act***STATISTICS ACT**

AMENDMENT TO PERMIT PERSONS WHO OBJECT TO ANSWERING QUESTIONS TO DO SO WITHOUT PENALTY, ETC.

**Miss Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands)** moved that Bill C-213, to amend the Statistics Act, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs.

● (1700)

She said: Mr. Speaker, the purpose of Bill C-213 is to remove from the Statistics Act the penalty provisions contained in section 29 which are directed against those individuals who refuse to answer Statistics Canada questions. The two exceptions—and I emphasize these—would be questions contained in any census of population, or agriculture. As the law presently stands, persons who refuse, or neglect to answer virtually any questions posed by Statistics Canada, are subject to criminal conviction and a maximum fine and/or a penalty of \$500 and three months' imprisonment, respectively.

Before I proceed further, Mr. Speaker, I should like to announce that it is my intention to propose an amendment to Bill C-213 at committee stage. It has been brought to my attention that the effect of Bill C-213 as it presently stands would be to exempt corporations as well as individuals from the necessity of complying with requests for information from Statistics Canada—information other than, of course, that which is solicited for the purposes of a population or agricultural census. It was not my intention when drafting Bill C-213 to have its relieving provisions apply to corporations. This unintended consequence would occur as a result of the definition of the word "person" in the Interpretation Act. According to that act, the word "person" includes a corporation. I will, therefore, be seeking at committee stage an amendment to Bill C-213 which would limit the application of its relieving provisions to individuals.

I have been advised by a spokesman from Statistics Canada that penalty provisions of the kind contained in section 29 have been a part of the legislation under which Statistics Canada and its predecessor, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, have operated since the latter's creation in 1918. Penalties of this severity may have been appropriate in the early years of the operation of this agency when only minimal census details were requested. However, the times—and Statistics Canada—have changed. Statistics Canada is now a much more sophisticated data-collecting instrument. It is no longer concerned with merely the minimal details of the population of Canada—for example, the age, sex and number of its citizens—but is concerned with a host of other matters as well.

There is not merely a population census every five and ten years, but a whole series of complex surveys which are conducted on an almost continuous basis and which relate to areas such as the level of unemployment and the consumer habits of Canadians so far as food and housing are concerned. The recipients of these questionnaires are chosen at random by computer and are often required to complete detailed surveys, some of which exceed 16 pages in length and require consider-

[Mr. Deputy Speaker.]

able time to complete. People have written to me complaining that it has taken them two or three hours to complete lengthy questionnaires. In the case of the so-called labour force survey, the recipient must submit to not just one questionnaire but to a series of monthly questionnaires for a period of six months.

The questions contained within these surveys often demand of the citizen very detailed information on matters which may be of privacy to him, or her. One recent survey, for example, requested information from the householder as to the amount of alcohol and tobacco consumed. Another requested information as to the degree to which child care facilities were utilized by the respondent. The former of these two surveys, the food expenditure survey of 1974, also contained questions relating to the ages, salaries, professions, mortgages, stocks and bonds, land interests and, finally, food expenditures of the respondent and his family. This last item contained questions dealing with the amounts of money spent on meals eaten out, dry cleaning, laundry, reading material, personal care articles, the estimated cost of home-grown vegetables used, and gifts received. Space was even included for the names of the stores where the items were bought, as well as their location. The housing survey of the same year was equally detailed and contained, for example, a series of questions relating to the nature of the bathroom facilities contained within the respondent's home.

As one can see from these examples, these surveys can be extremely detailed and often contain requests for information of a personal nature which the recipient of the questionnaire, for reasons of personal privacy, may wish not to reveal. The problem is particularly acute in the case of rural and small town areas where the surveyor may be an acquaintance of the respondent. The surveyor, although he is sworn to secrecy and is subject to heavy penalties if it can be proved that he violated this confidentiality, is required, depending upon the nature of the survey, to either direct the questions verbally to the householder, in which case he also records the responses of the householder, or scan the questionnaire after it has been completed by the householder.

These practices can, naturally enough, cause a great deal of consternation among respondents. If a respondent is reluctant to answer the survey as a result of these procedures, the surveyor is—in the case of some but not all of the surveys—instructed to advise the householder that he can send the completed form directly to Statistics Canada rather than having it pass through the hands of the surveyor. I am aware of this practice. This option is not, however, sanctioned by law. It is merely a matter of policy which could, where it exists at all, be withdrawn at any time by Statistics Canada. Nor, as I am informed, is the surveyor in these cases instructed to advise the respondent of the option at their first encounter, but only after some hesitation has been expressed by the respondent.

According to Statistics Canada, the purpose of the penalty provisions within the act is to ensure that the validity of statistical information which is collected is not distorted by the refusal of some recipients to respond. But Statistics Canada also admits that the majority of Canadians contacted are more than willing to co-operate with the requests for information