

*Statistics Act Amendment*

the activities carried on by the firm or corporation, I again presume the intention of this amendment is that those areas will be commercial areas, areas which may have a more direct bearing upon the economy and upon the statistics which Statistics Canada requires with respect to the economy than would be the case with individuals. Those are the assumptions that I am making.

In itself it seems like a worthy objective that we should say to Canadians, "Look, we will encourage you to respond to surveys on a wide variety of issues, but in the event that you do not do so, you will not be subject to prosecution under the Statistics Act unless you give false information with respect to these very specified limited areas," and I enumerated these areas just a few moments ago. That indeed might be a satisfactory approach to this problem. But immediately questions come to my mind, being someone basically quite unfamiliar with the internal operations of Statistics Canada, when I see this kind of provision in this context. Would there not be other information which Canada and the government requires from individuals, information which individuals should be required to respond to but which is not included in this very narrow list set forth in the bill of the hon. member for Fraser Valley West?

I say that I really do not know but I raise the issue, might there be? Let me give an example of what I mean. When one looks at Statistics Canada, one finds a wide range of areas where information can be sought; there is no doubt about that. Under section 21, general statistics, there is an enumeration of items (a) through (u). In fact, (u) is a basket clause which says "any other matters prescribed by the minister or governor in council" where the chief statistician is entitled essentially, I presume, to order these surveys and require information to be furnished by Canadian individuals, hence falling under all the penal provisions of the act in the event someone does not respond or gives false information.

But as I look at these items I see, for example, something like agriculture. Does this mean that a farmer in Canada would not be required to respond with respect to information bearing upon his crop production, his crops or diseases, or any other area that might affect agricultural production in this country? Does that mean that Statistics Canada would be shackled in so far as individual farmers are concerned and not be able to obtain this kind of information which they would in turn be able to obtain, I would submit under the amendment, from an incorporated farmer of which I imagine there are many in this country? I know that there are many in my province and I suspect the same is true across Canada.

I raise that as an example of the kind of problem I see in a very restricted amendment of this kind. Again, it may not be a problem, but I say that this bill brought before us may very well have the effect of undermining this very important role of Statistics Canada. I say this recognizing the validity of a number of points which the hon. member has made and which I think will cause us all alarming concern if the situation is not corrected. The issue is: are we to solve the problem of Statistics Canada in any meaningful way in this area of what might

[Mr. Johnston.]

be described as an invasion of privacy, with this amendment? This amendment still permits, and I emphasize this, the prosecution of individuals who are associated with firms or corporations, but does not permit the prosecution of individuals per se except with respect to this very narrow list of items.

• (1730)

I raised just one example with respect to agriculture. As I say, since the list goes from (a) to (u), it would seem quite possible that there are a number of areas which we might regard as being information which should be at the disposal of the Canadian government. It should be at the disposal of the policy makers of this country, but will become unavailable from individuals because of this proposed amendment to the act.

There is another route which I think should be followed at this stage. Undoubtedly, you, Mr. Speaker, have been in this House when questions have been raised during question period over the past several weeks with regard to the operations and methodology of Statistics Canada and whether we can rely upon some of the economic material or documents coming out of Statistics Canada. Today our entire forecasting apparatus, our reporting to the OECD, our international position, and everything else are determined by information gathered by Statistics Canada. One wonders whether the time has come for us to conduct a serious examination of the affairs of Statistics Canada, as has been suggested. This was in fact raised in a question on November 23 by the hon. member for Thunder Bay-Nipigon (Mr. Andras). The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Stevens) indicated a consultant firm would be established to look at Statistics Canada and its methodology.

It might be more appropriate at this stage to suggest an in-depth examination to determine whether many of the problems raised by the hon. member with regard to simplifying the volume and complexity of surveys that have not been made public cannot be avoided, and to determine whether it is possible to attack this problem which he so eloquently outlined today, namely, is there a way we can prevent Big Brother from carrying on into the lives of individual Canadians under the auspices of this act, with the possibility of criminal prosecution in the event that the person does not comply or respond?

An hon. member on the other side, who is a practising lawyer, told me how distasteful it is as an attorney to take actions based on this provision of the law, namely, to prosecute Canadians for failing to respond to these surveys. Like everything else, these issues are seldom black and white. It would appear there is room for great abuse, as outlined by the hon. member.

I would find it absolutely repulsive to consider that if someone gives false information with respect to wallpaper used in his house, its cost, application or anything else, that person theoretically could become subject to prosecution under an act of this country. A law of that kind in this country must be examined and modified.

I commend the hon. member for taking these initiatives. However, I suggest that the proper forum for this is a greater