

Statistics Act

It should be pointed out again that a refusal in a sample survey is not merely the refusal of an individual to furnish information solely about himself. The individual who refuses to answer a sample survey is denying information about hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of people from the particular group which he represents. Statistics Canada does not institute legal procedures at the initial point of refusal. The agency's policy has been one of co-operation and assistance, with a final resort to persuasion in order to obtain a high level of response. Though prosecution is rare, it has to be available to the agency as an ultimate sanction in order to maintain the high response rate necessary to the production of meaningful statistics. An example will serve to illustrate this point.

Several years ago a survey was conducted with a universe of some 68,000 corporate respondents. After an initial response of 61 per cent, a letter was sent requesting the remaining 26,000 non-respondents to complete the survey questionnaire. This resulted in a further response of 70 per cent, leaving a balance of some 8,000 non-respondents. A second letter indicating the legal requirements to respond produced a further response from 58 per cent of those non-respondents. Again, subsequent correspondence produced a further 71 per cent response from those 3,000 remaining non-respondents. Of the less than 1 per cent balance of non-respondents, a certain number had gone out of business. However, after a review, 20 were considered for prosecution, and the Department of Justice was consulted. The Department of Justice announced that prosecution proceedings would be commenced. Then all but three corporations responded, and these three were prosecuted and fined for non-compliance with the Statistics Act. Therefore we are looking at three corporations, out of a possible 68,000, which were prosecuted. We hope that it was not the stick that brought the others to a final response, but if the stick were not there I do not think the response would have been a complete one.

● (1750)

At one point Statistics Canada discontinued prosecution proceedings for a large annual survey with a view to relying upon respondent co-operation, as the hon. member for Egmont said. After several years it was found that response rates had begun to deteriorate sharply, with the result that prosecution procedures were reinstated. Even though the final stage of prosecution has not been necessary to obtain a high response rate, it is evident that a system of law which does not provide for sanctions would weaken Statistics Canada's historical success in producing meaningful statistical information.

As my colleague has mentioned, there are cases where it may be feasible to introduce voluntary response as a method of conducting some surveys, and officials are carefully studying this question. However, I think the evidence I have just outlined confirms the position stated by my colleague that there could be a serious negative impact on the quality of statistics produced by Statistics Canada if the provisions in the Statistics Act to compel response were suddenly eliminated.

[Mr. Parent.]

I might add that the real losers, if such a deterioration took place, would be the Canadian public. It is not inconceivable that incentive grants, certain transfer payments, pension and family allowance indexing, collective bargaining, and a host of other activities and programs would be adversely affected by a deterioration in the quality of the statistical indicators produced by Statistics Canada. These activities affect the lives of literally millions of Canadians, and I am therefore hard pressed to understand the cavalier way in which the bill under consideration appears to deal with this issue. There is no mention, either in the bill or its accompanying explanatory note, of the possible impact of the bill on response rates and data quality, and I therefore assume that the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands is simply unaware of the possible ramifications of her proposal. It is for these reasons therefore, Mr. Speaker, that I would urge, as has my colleague before me, that members of this House reject this ill-conceived bill.

Mr. D. M. Collenette (York East): Mr. Speaker, my two colleagues, the hon. member for Ottawa Centre (Mr. Poulin) and the hon. member for St. Catharines (Mr. Parent), have spoken at some length concerning the possible impact on the quality of statistics which might result from the implementation of Bill C-213. Hon. members may have the impression that Canadian practices with regard to the gathering of official statistics are somewhat behind the times and that we continue to hang on to archaic and unnecessary procedures that other, more enlightened countries have found it possible to discard.

The officials who operate Canada's national statistical system are always anxious to learn from their colleagues in other countries about new developments which will make it possible to maintain or improve the quality of their outputs, while at the same time reducing the burden on respondents. In this connection it may be useful for me to go over a review which Statistics Canada conducted in 1975 of the statistical legislation of other countries. The review concentrated on five countries, the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States. All of these countries have well developed, highly sophisticated, national statistical programs, and all have one or more pieces of legislation which regulate the collection, compilation, analysis and publication of statistical data by their respective statistical agencies. It is clear from this review that all of them rely, for the continuing viability of their operations, on some form and extent of mandatory reporting, although like ourselves they do not use this as a stick with which to beat respondents.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the legislation which governs the operations of the business statistics office contains a provision for undertaking legal action against non-respondents to official surveys of business establishments, with a maximum fine of \$125 for a first offence and up to \$500 for a second offence.

In France the legislation governing their Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques also contains provisions for a penalty of up to \$500 for a first offence for businesses which refuse to respond to official surveys. If a firm