

*Statistics Act Amendment*

ment. That people are led to question the integrity of government, to suspect the motives behind information gathering, suggests to me that government is viewed not as a benevolent administrator but as a "big brother". As the government passes a freedom of information act we should also have concerns regarding the protection of an individual's privacy and certainly of involuntary personal information gathered under protest and interconnected to computer systems. A freedom of information act needs a companion freedom of privacy act.

The argument we hear in justification of StatsCan surveys is that they provide us with the basic information necessary for public and private decision making, and for informed discussion of the public issues that concern Canadians. But how does Statistics Canada go about getting this basic information? The family expenditures survey, as I already mentioned, asked a multitude of questions about the various items and services Canadians spend their money on in a year.

Let us assume for the moment that such a detailed examination of the spending habits of Canadians is absolutely necessary for shaping economic policy. That is a big assumption, but let us for the moment accept it. Then, Mr. Speaker, we must ask ourselves who could accurately recall the amount of money spent on a particular item over a year? None the less, under section 29 of the present Statistics Act, they are compelled by law to give an answer. Somehow I doubt if this method encourages accurate or even honest answers. Yet the answers given are supposedly those which are used to chart Canada's economic future.

I think what I have just described provides a partial answer to another question: Just how valid are these detailed examinations of Canadians' spending habits for shaping economic policy? We have it on the authority of the former finance minister, while he held the post, that StatsCan could not be depended upon to provide a reliable estimate of Canada's economic growth. And the respected C. D. Howe Institute has also questioned the reliability of Statistics Canada figures. Inaccurate growth figures projected by Statistics Canada in the early 1970s formed the basis for government budget assumptions, which in turn led to government policy which actually created inflationary pressures. I think we are all aware of the consequences of that earlier government policy.

Many of these assumptions were based upon business statistics and not detailed household expenditures that I described earlier. However, if information from business sources poses such a problem for Statistics Canada, how can that organization be expected to cope with myriad details of personal family expenditures? My own feeling is that in the hands of government, to paraphrase Lord Acton, information corrupts and absolute information corrupts absolutely.

I do not wish to give the impression that I am against the job for which Statistics Canada was created. We do indeed have a vital need for Statistics Canada. But it is also vitally important that those statistics, and the projections which are based upon them, be accurate ones. I do not believe that Statistics Canada can be expected effectively to fulfil its

mandate as long as its questions are so broad ranging and are backed by compulsive and coercive legal sanctions. How far will the details go and remain accurate and relevant? I am sure that most of the reports that were made from those very statistics are lying on shelves gathering dust somewhere and have not provided any real assistance to economic growth in Canada.

It is obvious that Statistics Canada and, by association, the government must regain the trust of the people. It is perfectly apparent to me that it cannot be done until we convince Canadians that the information we seek from them will be treated with respect and not abused. Statistics Canada guarantees that all information given by an individual will remain confidential. That guarantee, however, looks less impressive when information files are subsequently lost, and it looks almost useless when information files are sold by Statistics Canada employees. A citizen has enough cause to suspect the motives of government in asking personal questions without dishonest methods making him even more doubtful.

It seems to me that we should be seeking to inspire confidence in StatsCan so that Canadians will not be reluctant to respond voluntarily to survey questions. We already have cause to doubt whether StatsCan can even answer many of the questions it sets for itself. Perhaps it sets its goals too high, or perhaps we ask too much of it; but we must not expect that the situation will improve by compelling people to answer even more and more personal questions. StatsCan would be faced with a flood of details, and the citizen would wonder why the government wants personal information so badly that it will resort to legal sanction to back its demands. Whatever we hold the role of government to be, surely we do not give it the right to impinge upon the personal rights of citizens.

I would ask the House to consider my bill, which would remove the penalty on individuals for refusing to answer questions other than those pertaining to basic population census information. I feel that only from this first step can we as government re-establish the public's faith in StatsCan and in government itself. I ask also that we amend section 29 as it pertains to individuals, and in so doing remove an impediment to accurate and reliable statistical information. Let us begin to move toward renewed confidence by removing the threat and by taking the first step by voluntary response.

We are one of the fortunate few countries in the world to enjoy the luxury of a democratic system. Implicit in the notion of democracy is the faith of the people to know what is good for them. We trust the people to elect us and we abide by their choice. What we are doing in section 29 of the current Statistics Act is the equivalent of penalizing people for not voting. It is indeed a sad state of affairs when people cannot indicate their objection to an all-knowing central government agency for fear of prosecution. Are we really dragging so near to 1984?

By all means, encourage compliance with statistical surveys. But let us take a more positive approach than fining people for refusing to respond. Let us demonstrate the need for Statistics Canada and the benefit we can derive from an effective