

which is functioning responsibly, sensibly, and also with proper respect for the human and civil rights that have been properly represented here this afternoon by the hon. member for Kingston and the islands.

● (1740)

Mr. Gilbert Parent (St. Catharines): Mr. Speaker, I was almost intimidated by the hon. member for Egmont (Mr. MacDonald) and nearly shied away from speaking, but seeing that he said he thought no one was going to speak after the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald), and then himself proceeded to do so, I decided that I would too.

[*Translation*]

On studying Bill C-213, one could get the impression, Mr. Speaker, that a concerted effort is being made to harm, annoy, harass and even threaten the Canadian public, that a plan is even now being implemented or that steps have been taken for Statistics Canada to do so. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In all its activities, whether they are directed towards industry, employers or Canadian individuals, Statistics Canada is endeavouring, above all, to get the voluntary co-operation of the respondent, and not to threaten him with penalties as stipulated in the Statistics Act.

[*English*]

I think hon. members would agree that the record of Statistics Canada over the years for producing high quality, timely, and relevant statistics speaks well for the level of co-operation the agency has been able to obtain. There is a motto at Statistics Canada: "The respondent is our most important resource". Better than anything else I think this summarizes the approach the agency takes to the Canadian public.

The requirements related to compulsory response outlined within the Statistics Act have been in effect for some 60 years since the early history of legislation pertaining to the production of statistical information. Those who object to compulsory response may be overlooking, as has already been discussed by my colleague, the complementary provisions of the Statistics Act which outline the privileged relationship between the agency and the respondent and provide an absolute guarantee of the confidentiality of individual information. In support of such guarantees, employees of Statistics Canada are required to take an oath of secrecy and they too are subject to severe penalties for breaching the trust reposed in them. The hon. member for Kingston and the Islands mentioned that this was not the answer, and the hon. member for Egmont said we should not be penalized in any way for trying to gather information.

In 1976, if I recall correctly, surveys were sent out in my riding of St. Catharines by Statistics Canada. I know a few people who were involved in that exercise and I asked them what the response was when they went to the homes with the survey forms and asked people to fill them in and return them. The initial response was about 40 per cent.

Statistics Act

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Did they prosecute the rest?

Mr. Parent: They did not prosecute but they had to go back and ask people to fill them in, and the majority did. There was no prosecution that I know of but I guess in this, like everything else, we are quite cavalier about laws that are made when we attach penalties to them, yet in any country if we relied on the average citizen he would co-operate. What I am saying is that when we bring in laws that have penalties to back them up, it is not the worst thing in the world so long as the information requested is truly necessary.

I agree with hon. members that information should be available to us, and the questions should be reasonable and geared to help people carry out their duties and not simply for the sake of gathering statistics. I think we should be able to gather the information necessary for running this country.

The hon. member for Egmont had a question about housing starts in Prince Edward Island and he went to Statistics Canada. Why did he not go to the provincial housing authority in the first place if he knew they had the information? I agree that we should be upgrading our system of gathering information, but to say that because Statistics Canada is going about it the wrong way it should be scrapped, is something with which I cannot agree.

Statistics are vital to many areas of planning and decision-making within the business community and government. An important example of how statistics directly affect individual Canadians is the case of labour contracts, pensions, and family allowances which are based upon escalation clauses keyed to the consumer price index. Clearly the production of these and other statistics which affect the well-being of all Canadians necessitates the gathering of information and this, in turn, requires inputs by citizens. I am confident that those who furnish this information do so willingly, recognizing the net benefit to them in the long run.

As I have said, the compulsory response provisions of the Statistics Act have been carefully counter-balanced by confidentiality provisions to prevent the disclosure by Statistics Canada of information which could be related to an identifiable respondent. These confidentiality provisions have always been scrupulously respected by Statistics Canada. Not only are these very rigorous security measures but, more important, the great majority of employees take their responsibilities very seriously. My colleague pointed out earlier that in all the years Statistics Canada has been in operation no one has ever been proven to have knowingly given out information which would in any way hurt a respondent.

In case it should seem that Canada is out of step with the rest of the world, let me say that in other countries such as the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, and Sweden, all of which have highly respected statistical systems, their statistical legislation also finds it necessary to embody similar provisions related to compulsory response, coupled with the necessary procedures for prosecution and fines, but truly only as a last resort.