

*Statistics Act*

solemn guarantee that the information provided by respondents will be treated with absolute confidentiality and will never be released to anyone outside Statistics Canada in a form which could identify the respondent without the prior written authorization of the respondent. Statistics Canada employees are sworn to secrecy and severe legal penalties are prescribed for any breach of confidentiality. During the years in which Statistics Canada has served the Canadian people there has never been any substantiated case of a Statistics Canada employee having intentionally violated this principle. The second corner-stone of the statistical system is that in return for this solemn guarantee that information about them will be treated in strictest confidence, individual Canadians and Canadian business entities have a statutory obligation to respond to legitimate statistical inquiries carried out by Canada's central statistical agency.

If I may divert for a moment, may I say how important it is to Canada and to the factual economic base of information that is necessary that we have the greatest trust and faith in Statistics Canada. Recently, during the time of the estimates of the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce, there was an inquiry into some matters of Statistics Canada. After those two meetings, where full opportunity was given to members on both sides of the House to question whether there had, in fact, been any leak in confidential information, no such evidence appeared at any time.

● (1720)

Subsequent to that, in my capacity as parliamentary secretary to the minister responsible I had further occasion to go into the allegations and surrounding circumstances in great detail. As a result of what I was able to find out, I am confident that Canada is well and truly served by an agency of which we can all be very proud. The confidentiality of information, the high standard of professional excellency insisted upon by the chief statistician, Dr. Kirkham, and, indeed, the high standard of professional excellence of all the people in that organization can lead Canadians to have pride and certainty in the accuracy of the organization not only in relation to the results but also in relation to the very up-to-date and scientific methods and procedures used by the agency in the conduct of its business.

Canadians should realize that notwithstanding certain innuendos levelled against the organization from time to time, none of them has ever been proved. On the contrary, these allegations have only demonstrated that Statistics Canada has been conducting itself according to the highest standards, and we can all be proud of it as Canadians. The overwhelming majority of Canadians, far from resenting the compulsory nature of Statistics Canada surveys, readily co-operate by providing basic data for the production of important national statistics. This is undoubtedly due to the importance Canadians attach to good statistics as a basic element in public and private decision-making and for informed discussion of the public issues that concern them.

[Mr. Poulin.]

Although the overwhelming majority of Canadians readily co-operate with Statistics Canada, there are nevertheless significant numbers of individuals who are not prepared to co-operate voluntarily. In some cases this reluctance is based on the legitimate concern over the right to individual privacy. Statistics Canada is most sympathetic with this position and recognizes that its legislative authority is not a licence to bombard the people of Canada with frivolous, irrelevant or offensive inquiries. But in this day and age there are certain kinds of basic information which government, be it federal, provincial or municipal, simply must develop as a basis for policy and program responses to the many complex problems of our society. In order to address these problems—sometimes just to identify them—there is no substitute for good information. It is no easy task, in a democratic society, to balance these two conflicting principles of the right of the individual to privacy and the need to obtain certain essential information.

If I might digress for a moment, I find a serious inconsistency in the position of the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands. On one hand she is proposing an amendment to the Statistics Act which could have a serious impact on response rates to Statistics Canada surveys and which could, in turn, jeopardize the reliability of important economic and social indicators. At the same time, her political colleagues are frequent critics of the reliability of these same indicators and champions of improved statistical reliability.

There is one important point I would like to stress. This government is not opposed in principle to the concept of making the response to certain official statistical surveys voluntary. Indeed, at the present time officials of Statistics Canada are studying the scientific and technical implications on the quality of data that the introduction of voluntary responses would have. It is possible that in the future some Statistics Canada surveys could be conducted on a voluntary basis. However, to introduce voluntary response to virtually all surveys, as this bill proposes, without first having carefully analysed the resulting impact on the quality of the statistics, would be an irresponsible leap into the dark with possibly devastating consequences for the statistical system.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, in the area of business surveys, where there are obvious costs associated with compiling the necessary responses to Statistics Canada surveys, it could not be assumed that businessmen would be willing to continue incurring such costs when it is not legally binding on them to do so. It is true that those businessmen who are themselves users of statistical data and recognize their value would probably continue to respond to surveys. But there are many businessmen, particularly those who own or manage small businesses and who make less direct use of statistical data in their daily affairs, who would simply not participate in surveys if they were voluntary.

This government recognizes the necessity of reducing the paperwork burden on businesses, and especially on small businesses. However, the solution is not to simply eliminate survey-taking or to shift overindiscriminately to voluntary response. Information relating to small business is critical to the compi-