

Debate

Time : 28/09/2010 11:56:05

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on this. I want to commend my colleague who brought this forward.

I will be splitting my time with the member for Don Valley West.

There are a number of terms that get used in the House far too often. One of those terms is "unprecedented". When members talk about something that is unprecedented they seem to be talking about things that have not happened for 72 hours. It becomes part of the vernacular here.

However, I think it is entirely unprecedented. How many people have come together to say that this decision on the long form census is foolish.

The response to this decision has brought groups east, west, north south, left and right, religious and secular, business and labour, people who have all come together to talk about this senseless census consensus which everybody believes in. It makes no sense to do this.

Even recently I received a copy of a letter that was sent by the Mayor of the Halifax Regional Municipality, which was not copied to all Atlantic members as he usually does, to the hon. Minister of Industry which states:

The mandatory requirement for people to complete the long form census results in a validity and comprehensiveness of date that is not likely to be achieved under a voluntary system.

That is from our Mayor, Peter Kelly of HRM slamming this Conservative government. We will see if he continues to do that.

This has caught people off guard. No one can really understand it. Some people say that it is simply dumb. That is a charitable assessment that it is simply dumb, because I do not think that the government was dumb on this issue. It might be dumb on other things, I will give them credit for that, but on this I do not think it was dumb at all.

I think that this was done purposely. The Conservative governments knows the value of information. It just does not want to have to use it to make or justify decisions. It does not want to know what governments might be able to do based on need because it does not believe that the government has a role in assisting people or citizens who need help.

The best characterization of this decision that I heard this summer was made at a round table held by my colleague from Winnipeg South Centre in Winnipeg. A University of Manitoba professor, a non-political person, with now axes to grind, came and expressed amazement at this. What she said was that in this country the government is going from evidence based policy to policy based evidence. We see this all the time.

The government comes up with a conclusion and then it manufactures the evidence to justify it. It makes it up out of thin air in many cases. Governments are supposed to believe in evidence and information.

I think one juxtaposition we might want to make is I think the government uses information when it suits it. I will bet its donor base at that big war room that sits somewhere in Ottawa with apparatchiks to sit around computers and are making calls for money and doling out false information about opposition members, I bet the government is not asking for less information from their donors. They know the value of information when it comes to that.

What we have is a Conservative government that does not want information but a Conservative Party that does. It knows how to use money. It knows how to use wedges in society, unlike most governments in Canada, Liberal and Progressive Conservative that see a wedge in society and want to bring those people together, this government wants to drive them further apart.

The Conservative Party wants all the information it can get. The Conservative government wants to take a Sergeant Schultz approach, "I know nothing and therefore I can do nothing to make things better".

This argument that we hear, as was brought forward in the summer hearings and since by the Minister of Industry and I will quote one thing here:

We believe it is not appropriate to threaten jail. God forbid, somebody actually takes it to the limit and actually fines himself with a three month jail sentence for objecting to answer those personal questions.

We hear this now all the time. It is the most ridiculous thing we could ever imagine. Here is a solution. I offer it at no charge to the government. Let us have amnesty day for all of those Canadians languishing in Canadian jails because they did not fill out the census. We could do it by noon and it is one minute till noon now. It would be the cheapest, easiest amnesty in the history of this country. No one has gone to jail for not filling out the long form census. It is a ridiculous allegation.

The member for St. Paul's is proposing it in her legislation. We support it. Change that. There is no problem but do not take away the integrity of our long form census.

I want to talk about a group that is going to be really hurt by this. They are among the people who are most marginalized. A lot of people who work with people

who live in poverty are saying they cannot do their work if they do not have the information. They know that in many cases the government most likely does not want to have the information because it does not want to assist. It does not want to have the evidence. It does not want to know who is poor. It does not want to know even who is disabled.

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It is unbelievable that we would actually have in this country a government that would bring in a policy that hurts people most marginalized, but it is a trend. The PAL survey, which studies participation and active living among people with disabilities, was cancelled.

When that happened, Laurie Beachell, who is with the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, said:

We've got a huge challenge here. We had something that was working. It's gone.

This spring, the government finally ratified the UN convention on the rights for the disabled. There was some hope in the disability community that, finally, people were going to listen to them, and the current government. For the first time, maybe something positive was going to happen.

However, we have the cancellation of the PAL survey. On top of that, we come in with the double whammy of the long form census. We could even go further to say that the CCL, the Canadian Council on Learning, which brought information together on how we are doing on learning and looked at vulnerable populations, was cancelled as well. That makes no sense whatsoever.

Mr. Carney from the Bank of Canada has indicated, "There is a non-trivial range of data that would be affected".:

That is a pretty delicate way of putting it compared to many others.

However, people in the disability community are saying this is not a small problem for them. This is a huge problem.

I am quoting from an article from Canwest:

The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, a national organization representing millions of Canadians who live with hearing loss, has said it is a crucial source of information about disability, diversity, employment, income, education and other issues. This information is used to provide a solid foundation for good legislation, public policies and programs. And they urge the federal government to immediately revoke its recent decision to eliminate the mandatory long form census.

Louise Normand, the national president of the association, said:

Throwing out the mandatory long form questionnaire flies in the face of international commitments that Canada made only a few short months ago.

There are people across this country, specifically people in the not-for-profit organizations, the charitable groups, the health foundations, and social agencies, who need this help.

We have heard from the marketing groups. We have heard from just about every single religious organization in this country. We have heard from chambers of commerce, the federations of independent business. We have heard from all kinds of municipalities. We have heard from provinces.

I specifically want to provide the voice today, in this discussion, for Canadians with disabilities, the people that every member, all 308 members of this House, would agree are worthy of attention, are worthy of assistance. Individually, everybody would say these are the people who deserve help and Canada is the country--Canada is, to many people, the standard of how we treat people who need help the most. We are not as great as we should be and we are not as great as we sometimes think we are. However, I am sure that every member of this House would say that they want to be there for Canadians with disabilities, that they want to be the one who provides assistance, equal opportunity, that they I want to be the one who stands and says that if somebody, especially through no fault of their own, has been dealt a hand that means that they need some assistance, they want to be the one who helps to provide that.

We believe that government has a role in assisting people with disabilities. Yet we have a policy on the census that flies in the face of that. It would mean that people would not be counted and people would not have their information taken. Then the government would be able to say that it does not have the information, that it cannot assist those people, that it does not even know what they need, because it has not counted it. What makes it even worse of course is that the government knew what it was today.

Today's *Globe and Mail* headline states, "Tories' new data would be lost with census change court documents show. They were told that some survey data will not be usable for a range of objectives for which the census information would be needed.

That is Rosemary Bender assistant chief statistician.

So, what we have had is this incredible consensus, this unbelievable and unprecedented senseless census consensus in Canada that our government is not acting in the best needs of people in this country. And when it comes to people with disabilities and people who are living a marginal existence right now, on top of many aboriginal groups and minority language groups and all the others that rely on this information, not only will they not have it, but they will not even be able to index it to previous years because the data integrity will now be violated

Questions and Comments

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Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker that is an excellent question.

The people in this country who have disabilities and those who advocate on their behalf are concerned that the government is simply not going to have the right information. People with disabilities, like many other marginalized groups in Canada, are not going to fill out an optional census. That is just not going to happen. I think it has been established, statistically verified that is not going to happen.

However, it is not just the census. I mentioned the PALS, the participation and activity limitation survey, which was cut by HRSDC. They say they are going to replace it, just like they are going to replace CCL and everything else, but we have not seen the signs of it yet.

We have also lost the following: the workplace and employee survey cut in 2009; the survey of financial security has been cut; the longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada. These are all pieces of information that add up collectively to information about Canadians that will assist the government in determining what programs and assistance is needed for those people in Canada who most need our help. They are being cut.

I mentioned the Canadian Council on Learning: why would one cut that? Everybody knows we need more information. We are heading into an age when we will have jobs without people and people without jobs. We need to know where we are on education. We need to know who is being educated; we need to know who is not. We need to know why people with disabilities are not being full partners in getting their education. How do we help them? That is what a government is supposed to do.

The government is just saying no, it is not our problem. We do not want to be there. We do not care. This is a piece of that.

Questions and Comments

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Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the member spoke about the concern he has with asking questions about what religion somebody might be, yet the religious organizations in Canada, such as the Anglican church, the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Fellowship, the United Church, are all demanding that the census be used. I will quote Bernie Farber, the CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress. He says:

Every Jewish federation in the country signed a letter to the Prime Minister asking that he reserve the census decision. Without that demographic data we just can't plan properly.

Bishop Pierre Morissette, President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, said:

The long form census is one of the only ways in which we at the national, regional and diocesan levels can gain knowledge of the demographics and identify the geographic areas where our services are required.

The churches are saying that they need this data. One of the ways churches help many people is by helping those who need help the most--the disadvantaged. That brings me to people with disabilities who are very concerned about this.

Does this member think he knows more about the needs of vulnerable Canadians and the needs of Canadian churches than the most vulnerable themselves and the churches themselves?

Questions and Comments

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Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my colleague's comments were a good encapsulation of the situation.

The member for Markham—Unionville a few minutes ago referred to how foolish this whole debate is, how unnecessary it is. In many ways, it is almost like having a debate in the House about whether the earth is flat or round; it is that bizarre.

My colleague from Sault Ste. Marie spoke about poverty. He was in Winnipeg in early August, as I was, for a poverty round table to try to determine how to make Canada serious about combating poverty. He heard the concerns, as he had heard before, of people who were trying to do things for people in the community.

The Canadian Council on Social Development, CCSD, has done a lot of work on the census over the summer. I congratulate it for the work that it has done. At one point the organization referred to some work that it has done and asked:

What will we be left with without the long form? A skewed picture of mostly middle class Canadians. We will look less diverse, less poor, ultimately less in need of government support.

I certainly believe that is what the government wants. It wants a skewed picture of this country so it will not have to spend money that it does not want to spend on needs that it does not want to recognize. I wonder if my colleague shares that view.