



How Other Countries Count July 30, 2010

Intro:

By making the long form census voluntary, the Federal government has created a firestorm. It might be interesting to look at how other countries are handling their censuses.

Script:

According to the *Economist* magazine, the British are contemplating abolishing the census altogether. That would be the end of a tradition going back to 1801. Only World War Two has ever stopped them, until now.

Abolishing the census may sound dramatic, but Germany is about to do so too. Denmark, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, and Sweden already have.

Their experience is worth considering as Canadian commentators argue that making part of the census voluntary is the end of life as we know it.

The first question to consider is how do they do it? The short answer is that they use tax records, occasional polls, and other government data to assemble their statistics.

The next question is what results do they get? One consideration is the price. Next years' United States census is expected to cost \$11 billion, or \$36 per person counted. Finland's last census, using the more modern database techniques, costs about 20 cents per person.

On the other hand, there is something creepy about letting government departments produce statistics by mixing and matching citizens' data amongst themselves. Ironically enough, having a firewalled, stand-alone census may be better for privacy.

In any case, the current Canadian debate could do with some international perspective.

I'm David Seymour and that was this week's Frontier policy commentary. For more public policy thinking, visit our website at www.fcpp.org.

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Manitoba – 203 – 2727 Portage Avenue • Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA R3J 0R2 • Tel: (204) 957- 1567 • Fax: (204) 957-1570

Saskatchewan - 2353 Street • Regina, Saskatchewan CANADA S4P 2S3 • Tel: (306) 352-2915 • Fax: (306) 352-293

Alberta - Stock Exchange Tower • Suite 1280, 300 - 5th Avenue SW • Calgary, Alberta CANADA T2P 3C4 • Tel: (403) 230- 2435

E-mail: newideas@fcpp.org • www.fcpp.org