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FRANK GRAVES RESPONDS TO SCRAPPING OF MANDATORY LONG CENSUS FORM

This article was written as a response to ["Give Me Back My Compulsory Long Form Census Questionnaire"](#) by Dr. Alex Himelfarb, Director of the Glendon School of Public and International Affairs, at York University.

[Ottawa – July 16, 2010] - As a professional researcher, I am dismayed by this development. But I believe that this latest episode is just a symptom of a broader malaise which is increasingly infecting our society. Ironically, some 50 years after the coining of the term Post Industrial Society, where knowledge and intellectual capital occupy "axial" significance, we seem to be seeing a withdrawal into know nothingism and seat of the pants decision making styles.

The role of accurate empirical indicators in guiding societal decision making traces its way back to at least the encyclopedists and their notion of political arithmetic. Notably, the term "statistics" is rooted in "measures of state". The evolution of statistical data to inform decision making has advanced dramatically over the past century. There have been dry wells dug in the search of an ideologically neutral calculus of decision making (the social indicators and social accounting movement of the seventies are examples) but overall, the idea that sound knowledge of social and economic conditions was a precondition for good policy and management in an increasingly complex and turbulent world seemed to be a given.

In recent years, this assumption of the critical role of reason and evidence seems to be under siege. In the Government of Canada, social research has been largely abandoned. But the problem is not unique to Ottawa. Everywhere, statistical standards are eroding badly. In a world of Survey Monkey, Poll Daddy, and the ubiquitous online polls found on most media websites, scientific sampling and measurement are not even remote considerations. The voluntary, self-selected samples which produced the Literary Digest "poll" debacle in the last century and led to the development of scientific survey research are increasingly becoming the norm, even within the polling and market research industry.

So it is refreshing and important to hear authoritative figures like Alex remind us of the continued need for sound statistical evidence to chart our way through the turbulent and complex new society we live in. I am not entirely sanguine that these voices will be heard and I fear the ultimate costs will be poorer and less fair decision making. If there is one clear lesson from the past, it is that seat of the pants intuition and ideology are all notoriously bad methods for sound decision making at the societal level.

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President