

September 9, 2010

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Langevin Block
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A3

Dear Prime Minister,

Over the course of the summer issues have arisen that put the well earned credibility and respected international standing of Statistics Canada at risk. Minister Clement is correct, of course, in noting that Parliament has established the agency not as absolutely independent, but reporting to a Minister with the Governor in Council determining the questions of the census. However, the responsibility of the Chief Statistician for methodological and technical issues, implicit to date, has been called into question. Thus public confidence in the agency and the reliability of its statistics are likely to be reduced in the months and years ahead. The surest way to mitigate that risk is through a reaffirmation of the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (attached).

We call on the government to reconfirm Canada's commitment to the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and to amend the Statistics Act to make clear that the Chief Statistician is responsible for issues of methodology and technique.

As the UN Principles indicate in the preamble: *"the essential trust of the public in official statistical information depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles which are the basis of any society which seeks to understand itself and to respect the rights of its members."* Moreover, UN Fundamental Principle 1 notes: *"Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation."*

Principles two, three and four, in particular, call for the Chief Statistician to be able to maintain public support for, as well as trust and confidence in the methodological basis for Statistics Canada's products. Those principles would suggest that the Chief Statistician be given the statutory responsibility for methodological competence now implicit in the office. Moreover, it follows that the Chief Statistician have the statutory authority to provide information to the public on methodological matters and issues relating to the reliability of the data.

Amending the Act to incorporate these principles might include adding sections as follows:

4 (2.1) *The Chief Statistician shall:*

(i) within the financial parameters provided by the government determine according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data;

(ii) present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics;

(iii) provide such public information that in his opinion are necessary to facilitate appropriate statistical interpretation of data..

Needless to say, this will have significant implications for the candidate the Governor in Council chooses to be the next and subsequent Chief Statisticians.

Prime Minister, our intent in proposing these amendments is to ensure continued public trust and confidence in Statistics Canada and in the quality of statistical information gathered, produced and published by the agency, preserving a world class institution with a stellar reputation.

We are copying the leaders of the other parliamentary parties as we see this issue as absolutely non-partisan and simply and essentially in the interests of good governance.

Yours truly,

Mel Cappe

President, Institute for Research on Public Policy,
and former Clerk of the Privy Council

David Dodge

Senior Advisor, Bennett Jones LLP,
former Governor of the Bank of Canada,
and former Deputy Minister of Finance

Juan Fellegi

Chief Statistician of Canada (Emeritus)

Alex Himelfarb

Director,
Glendon School of Public and International Affairs,
and former Clerk of the Privy Council

c.c.: Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party
Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Preamble

The Statistical Commission,

- Bearing in mind that official statistical information is an essential basis for development in the economic, demographic, social and environmental fields and for mutual knowledge and trade among the States and peoples of the world.
 - Bearing in mind that the essential trust of the public in official statistical information depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles which are the basis of any society which seeks to understand itself and to respect the rights of its members.
 - Bearing in mind that the quality of official statistics, and thus the quality of the information available to the Government, the economy and the public depends largely on the cooperation of citizens, enterprises, and other respondents in providing appropriate and reliable data needed for necessary statistical compilations and on the cooperation between users and producers of statistics in order to meet users' needs.
 - Recalling the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations active in statistics to establish standards and concepts to allow comparisons among countries,
 - Recalling also the International Statistical Institute Declaration of Professional Ethics,
 - Having expressed the opinion that resolution C (47), adopted by the Economic Commission for Europe on 15 April 1992, is of universal significance,
 - Noting that, at its eighth session, held in Bangkok in November 1993, the Working Group of Statistical Experts, assigned by the Committee on Statistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to examine the Fundamental Principles, had agreed in principle to the ECE version and had emphasized that those principles were applicable to all nations,
 - Noting also that, at its eighth session, held at Addis Ababa in March 1994, the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers, considered that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are of universal significance,
- Adopts the present principles of official statistics:

Principle 1. *Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honor citizens' entitlement to public information.*

Principle 2. *To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.*

Principle 3. *To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics.*

Principle 4. *The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.*

Principle 5. *Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.*

Principle 6. *Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.*

Principle 7. *The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.*

Principle 8. *Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.*

Principle 9. *The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.*

Principle 10. *Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.*