

# StatsCan boss quits over census changes

By Shannon Proudfoot, Postmedia News July 21, 2010



## Munir Sheikh, head of StatsCan.

### Photograph by: Postmedia News, Photo Handout

OTTAWA — The head of Statistics Canada has resigned over the Conservative government's controversial decision to axe Canada's long-form census and replace it with a voluntary survey.

"This relates to the question of whether a voluntary survey can become a substitute for a mandatory census. It cannot," chief statistician Munir Sheikh said in a statement posted Wednesday night to the agency's website. "Under the circumstances, I have tendered my resignation to the prime minister."

He could not discuss the advice he and Statistics Canada gave the government on the census because the information is protected by law, he said. Sheikh said it would be up to the government to reveal that information if it chose to do so.

"I have always honoured my oath and responsibilities as a public servant as well as those specific to the Statistics Act," he said in the statement.

Ian McKinnon, chair of the National Statistics Council, the body that advises Statistics Canada, issued a statement expressing "deep regret" on behalf of the council over Sheikh's resignation.

"I would like to . . . acknowledge the integrity with which he has faced an impossible situation over the past few weeks," McKinnon wrote. "During this period, his scrupulous observance of the limits imposed on him by his

obligation to respect the confidentiality of advice he and his agency gave to Cabinet left him unable to defend his professional competence or respond to statements that tended to cast doubts on the professional competence of Statistics Canada."

Industry Minister Tony Clement, who oversees Statistics Canada, said in a statement he acknowledges Sheikh's resignation "with regret" and that the agency's "preferred approach" would have been to keep the long-form census as it was.

"However, after the government's decision to replace the mandatory long-form census, Statistics Canada was asked to provide options for conducting a voluntary survey of households," he said. "One of the options provided — the voluntary National Household Survey — was chosen."

The government announced at the end of June it had scrapped the mandatory long-form census and replaced it with a voluntary survey — a move that's been met with heavy criticism from community and religious groups, municipalities, think-tanks and academics.

Critics say a voluntary survey could produce a skewed and unreliable national demographic portrait, while the Tories maintain that a sufficient sample size will yield accurate results and minimize the invasion of Canadians' privacy.

Previously, 20 per cent of Canadians households received the mandatory long-form census every five years, providing information on issues such as ethnicity, education, employment and disability. That questionnaire will now be replaced with the voluntary National Household Survey and sent to one-third of households.

In his statement, Sheikh thanked Prime Minister Stephen Harper for giving him the opportunity to lead "an agency that is a symbol of pride for our country" and he thanked Canadians for providing the agency with the information that allows it to function.

"To you, the men and women of Statistics Canada — thank you for giving me your full support and your dedication in serving Canadians," he wrote to his former co-workers. "Without your contribution, day in and day out, in producing data of the highest quality, Canada would not have this institution that is our pride."

Sheikh closed by wishing his successor well and promising "not to comment on how he/she should do the job."

"I do sincerely hope that my successor's professionalism will help run this great organization while defending its reputation," he concluded.

Clement said Wayne Smith, assistant chief statistician of business and trade statistics, would become interim chief statistician until a permanent successor could be found.

Sheikh took over Statistics Canada's top job in June 2008, with a salary in the \$200,000-to-\$235,000 range. Before his appointment, he had been deputy minister of labour and associate minister of human resources and social development, along with holding a variety of other positions during a 30-year government career.

Born in Pakistan in 1947, he earned a master's degree in economics from McMaster University and a PhD in economics from the University of Western Ontario.

"My message to all of you is this: When a product passes through your hands, make sure you are fully comfortable with its quality," Sheikh said in his annual address to employees in March. "Quality is Statistics Canada's hallmark — it is fundamental to our reputation."

Agency staff said rumours swirled earlier Wednesday that Sheikh might step down, after he abruptly cancelled a town-hall meeting scheduled with employees and said he was "reflecting" on his position and that of the agency.

To this point, Sheikh had remained silent throughout the uproar over the changes to the census. The agency itself has been largely muzzled, no longer permitted to grant interviews and responded to inquiries only with brief e-mailed statements.

Former chief statistician Ivan Fellegi, who spent 50 years at the agency and 22 in the top job, had previously said he would have resigned if such a change had been forced on him when he was in charge.

Before Sheikh announced his resignation, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff slammed "the mere fact that the leader of Statistics Canada would be considering his options after this unprecedented display of political pressure and ideological pressure.

"You think education is expensive, try ignorance," he said, speaking in Batiscan, Que., during a stop on his Liberal Express cross-country tour. "And they're trying ignorance. It's ridiculous."

Clement has said the change was prompted by widespread privacy complaints from constituents.

Canada's privacy commissioner has received three complaints about the census over the past decade. Statistics Canada says it received 22 letters and e-mails expressing concern during the 2006 census collection period.

"The Government of Canada took this decision based on one simple principle. Government cannot force Canadians to divulge private and personal information under the threat of fines and jailing," Dimitri Soudas, Harper's director of communications, wrote in an e-mail to Postmedia News. "The democratically elected government took the decision and asked the public servants at Statistics Canada to implement it."

Clement has said several times that Statistics Canada signed off on three options for altering the census and he chose one of their recommendations. But Statistics Canada staff say they made clear to the government that they have serious concerns about the quality of the data under this plan.

In an interview published Wednesday, Clement said that some people at Statistics Canada "like to think" they are an independent agency, but in fact they report to him as minister. He said the agency was "perfectly willing" to go ahead with abolishing the mandatory long-form census at his request, and that as minister, he was entitled to believe they were comfortable with any options they provided him.

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