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## Axing census questions adds up to trouble for Tories

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OTTAWA—They are the 61 questions that helped paint the portrait of a nation, queries on your language, aboriginal heritage, ethnicity, education, employment and commuting habits.

And yes, there were even questions about the number of bedrooms in your home.

Put it all together and the data gleaned from Form 2B, better known as the long census questionnaire, formed a treasure trove of information for statisticians, sociologists, policy-makers and urban planners, a critical snap shop of an ever-changing nation.

But starting with next year's census, that portrait is about to go badly out of focus, experts say. That's because the Conservative government has quietly eliminated the long census form. In its place will be a voluntary National Household Survey sent to one-third of households — up from one-fifth for the long form — as well as the mandatory eight-question census short form, according to Industry Minister Tony Clement.

"The decision by this government concerning the census is truly a stupid decision," Liberal MP Marc Garneau said Wednesday.

"Mr. Clement has clearly not understood the importance of having clear, accurate data that allows us to take the right decisions for this country."

Critics accuse the Conservatives of taking their cue from right-wing groups in the United States, where opposition to the census has flared as Americans fill out their questionnaires this year. The U.S. dropped its own long form questionnaire in the 2010 census, replaced by a mandatory "American Community Survey," which is sent to a rolling sample of households each month.

British Prime Minister David Cameron also announced the end of a 160-year tradition by eliminating the national census, but his government said it can use existing databases and credit reference agencies to provide more accurate information.

Canadian experts here say that axing the long questionnaire will cripple municipal planners and leave policy-makers in the dark on key issues such as immigration, linguistic issues, aboriginals and visible minorities.

"Let's be clear. This is ideological and it touches on the most vulnerable Canadians and the federal government's ability to deliver progressive programs to help them," said Garneau, his party's industry critic.

If the Conservatives were hoping to slip through this surprise change quietly — it was made with little consultation and announced with no fanfare — they appear to have guessed wrong.

In shades of the Tories' December decision to prorogue Parliament and their subsequent attempt to tinker with the words of the national anthem, other decisions that sparked howls of public protest, outcry is mounting over the surprise death of the census long form. And it's not just the number crunchers who are upset.

Rather, it's been a disparate collection of academics, public health nurses, bankers — all of whom depend on the data for their work — who are speaking out almost daily to denounce the government's move.

"It really will be disastrous," said Frank Cunningham, professor emeritus in philosophy and political science at the University of Toronto.

He said the "astonishing" decision smacks of a government that doesn't do much planning.

Echoing other professionals, he said the voluntary survey that Clement proposes to replace it with will be "useless."

The data will be suspect and, because of the change in format, it will be impossible to properly compare the findings to previous census results, he said.

"My speculation is that the government simply didn't think this through," he said.

"It could be just a populist play to an imagined constituency of people who want to get the government out of our faces."

Cunningham is one of 41 academics from the University of Toronto's Cities Centre — a hub of research on urban issues — who wrote a letter to Clement warning that without the data from the census, city planners will be badly hindered in planning new schools, affordable housing and transit services.

Graham Fraser, Canada's commissioner of official languages, has launched his own investigation, fearing that the end of the long form will leave Ottawa in the dark about languages across the country.

"This credible national source of data has been a critical tool for the government to assess the viability of official language communities," Fraser said in a statement.

And Ivan Fellegi, retired after serving as Canada's chief statistician, warns that aboriginals, new immigrants and low-income earners who tend not to respond to voluntary respondents will be hurt by the loss of data.

"So we are at great risk of losing potentially a lot of information about some of the most pressing social problems," he said in an email.

Don McLeish, president of the Statistical Society of Canada, said he's both surprised and pleased by the growing backlash, as he called on Ottawa to reverse its decision.

"The government, which collects a great deal of money and spends a great deal of money on matters of policy has to do so with the best information they can get," McLeish said.

"I think they've made this decision badly. It would have been better made had there been proper consultation with experts."

But Clement insists the government "will not be revisiting the issue."

"The government does not think it is necessary for Canadians to provide Statistics Canada with the number of bedrooms in their home, or what time of the day they leave for work, or how long it takes them to get there. The government does not believe it is appropriate to force Canadians to divulge detailed personal information under threat of prosecution," Clement said in a statement.

But critics dismiss claims that Canadians are upset about the intrusion or worry about privacy breaches. The office of Canada's privacy commissioner says they've had just three complaints about the last two censuses.

Garneau suggests the Conservatives are taking a cue from right-wing groups in the United States, who see the census as government interference in private life.

"Interestingly, the extreme-right fringe in the United States has opposed the census for decades, where it is championed by the Tea Party movement today," Garneau said.

Indeed, Conservative gripes about the "invasive" census echo complaints aired in the United States, where citizens were required to fill out census forms this year.

Republican Congressman Ron Paul, of Texas, a crusader for smaller government, had an answer for the U.S. census: "None of your business."

"The census should be nothing more than a headcount. It was never intended to serve as a vehicle for gathering personal information on citizens," Paul said on his website.

Republican Michele Bachmann also said she wouldn't be filling out the census beyond the number of people in her house, fearing the information could be abused.

"What I don't appreciate is that the census is turning into a justification to justify evermore big government programs," she said in a television interview earlier this year.

Bachmann, of Minnesota, was joined by the likes of television commentator Glenn Beck in urging Americans to provide only the bare minimum information.

However, the Reuters news agency reported Wednesday that the \$15 billion (U.S.) census is near completion with a response rate unchanged from a decade ago.

