

Submission to: Senate Standing Committees on Economics In Relation to: The 2016 Census

This submission is my personal view of the 2016 Census. I am an individual not associated with any political party or lobby group. Following are the issues that concern me the most, together with some proposals to address.

1. Compulsory Names & Addresses

Issues

- There is widespread public opinion that the Statistician does not have the power under the relevant Acts to make it mandatory for people to furnish names and addresses. This is supported by a previous Statistician (Bill McLennan 1995-2000) and a view, in 2005, by ABS that such a requirement would require changes to legislation. Names are clearly non statistical in nature.
- By making names and addresses compulsory, the Statistician has put in jeopardy the whole Census:
 - If held by Courts that he had no power for this, the whole Census will become invalid as people would have been coerced.
 - By making this information compulsory, the Statistician has provided people with incentive to provide false information to protect their privacy.
- There is also widespread public opinion that the Statistician did not conduct a proper Privacy Impact Statement. There is no evidence that ABS properly consulted stakeholders or obtained agreement with the proposal or obtained informed consent. In effect the ABS made their own rules because they did not like answers gained from others.

Proposals

- That Parliament make the rules for a whole of government approach for the collection of personal data, including proper Privacy Impact Statements.
- That Parliament make the rules for a whole of government approach for the use of personal data.
- That people be able to give informed consent.

2. (a) Tracking People Over Time

(b) Linking to Other Data

Issues

- Census is no longer a snapshot of the population as at Census night. It has become clear that the data will be held and compared to later Census data, notwithstanding ABS continuing to claim otherwise to the public.
- It has also become clear that Census data will be now linked to other unknown “administrative data” without any informed consent by individuals involved. The extent of this linking is unknown.

Proposals

- After proper enquiries, consultations and debate:
 - That Parliament make the rules for a whole of government approach for the linking of personal data.
 - That Parliament make the rules for a whole of government approach for the sharing of personal data.
 - That Parliament make the rules for a whole of government approach for the safe storage of personal data.

3. Benefits of Census

Issues

- What are clear examples of major infrastructure projects or other significant decisions based on Census data/analysis?
- What are the alternative sources of information available to ABS in lieu of collection by Census?
- How can the Census be measured on a cost/benefit basis?

Proposal

- That Parliament initiate a process to determine the clear rationale for the Census and then apply it, having regard to alternative data sources and benefits to Australia, compared to the costs involved.

4. Outmoded or Inadequate Census Questions

Issues

- Overall, questions have not been updated to reflect changes in families & society.

Examples:

- Question 19, why not include additional religions?
- Question 3, why isn't there a choice for other than male/female?
- Why is it that questions 20, 21, 22 are not better targeted so that looking after a baby is quite different to looking after an elderly person?
- Why does Question 33 stop at \$150000 per year earnings. This is not rich.
- What is the point of Question 18 Ancestry? How is this relevant to decision making?

Proposal

- Engage with all important stakeholders/decision makers (not just academic researchers) to make all of the Census relevant and useful for the benefit of Australia overall.

5. Inadequate Data Security

Issues

- David Kalisch told Senate (Joint Committee Public Accounts and Audit Report 447) that ABS will not comply with DSD standards until June 2017 due to “whitelisting” non compliance. This means that ABS is not sufficiently protected in the Cyber security area.
- Minor DOS attacks caused ABS to abort on line Census on 9 August.

Proposals

- Until ABS meets DSD standards, monthly audits by DSD with reports to Parliament.
- No projects to link or share data to be approved until security standards and other requirements as above met.
- Major projects to be approved at Ministerial level.

6. Integrity of Information Supplied on Census Form

Issues

- By making names and addresses compulsory, the Statistician has provided people with incentive to provide false information to protect their privacy.
- The possibility or probability of this may be acknowledged or an attempt made at “normalising” the data concerned.
- Already ABS “is adamant the quality of data has not been compromised”.

(<https://au.news.yahoo.com/a/32649253/zero-tolerance-abs-threatens-two-million-households-with-fines-after-bungled-census/#page1>). How would ABS know this with certainty at this very early stage, as there would have been no substantial analysis?

Proposal

- Parliament require a formal report from the Statistician about the apparent extent of false and/or incorrect and/or missing data, the reasons and rationale for drawing conclusions and the consequences of this.

7. The Funding and Resources to the ABS

Issues

- Did funding and other resources provided to the ABS hinder the efficient and effective conduct of the Census? In my view the answer is clearly no. The Statistician chose willingly, in the light of funding and all circumstances, to proceed with the Census in accord with the plans made.
- Has a full scrutiny of ABS expenditures been carried out to ascertain how the funding and other resources have been applied on a discretionary basis? For example:
 - 47 Executives at \$12m p.a.
 - Pot plants at \$450000 p.a.
 - Corporate Services at \$106m p.a., Financial Services at \$7m p.a., International Relations at \$5m p.a.
- How much, if any, of the \$100m that the Statistician said would be saved by the on line Census, was saved?

Proposals

- Parliament conduct a full review of ABS expenditures.
- Parliament conduct a full review of ABS decision to proceed with the Census in the light of funding and all other circumstances.
- Parliament hold the Statistician accountable for the additional cost of the Census as a direct result of:
 - loss of public trust due to privacy concerns, and
 - the on line system failures.

Overall, I consider that the 2016 Census was mismanaged and has resulted in a significant decline in ABS trust and additional unplanned costs. This has in turn reflected in very low on line return rates, slow manual submissions and dubious data.

There has never been a time when the ABS has been held in such a low regard.