

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Additional Estimates – 25–26 February 2009

Question: aet 79

Topic: 2011 Census

Hansard Page: E7-8 (26 February 2009)

Senator ABETZ asked:

Senator ABETZ—We are going through the current areas. Can I just ask, in relation to the freeze on the census, are we finding out from this international conference, where the Australian Statistician is, how many other countries have had the foresight in these difficult circumstances to cut the census and thereby, I imagine, the quality of the census? Do we know how many other countries are following suit?

Mr Farrell—The United States, Canada and New Zealand are three countries that I know of that are having considerable consideration of their budgets for the population census. The matter has been a major issue in congress in the United States. There is a consideration of the methodologies being used for conducting the census in New Zealand as well, and in recent censuses Canada has significantly changed the way it undertakes its census.

Senator ABETZ—‘Significantly changed’—does that mean freezing it, reducing the number of questions or increasing the number of questions?

Mr Farrell—In each country there are different social, technological and other impacts that are addressing how the census is conducted. Each country is going through different mechanisms to determine the best methodology at the time.

Senator ABETZ—Every country, I would hope, would go through that process to see what questions are relevant, what questions should be included, what depth of questioning should be undertaken et cetera and what information should be gathered. But what other countries are in fact cutting the chief information gatherer, if I can call the ABS that? It just seems to me a very retrograde step and I would be interested to know how many other countries in the world are doing that.

Senator Conroy—I am sure the officers do not have that information to hand, but we can take it on notice and see if there is any—

Senator ABETZ—They were very helpful last time when I asked them what cyclical periods ABS census data was collected over. I have tried them with trick questions from all sorts of countries and I have got all these wonderful answers because they are very knowledgeable, Minister. I think you do not do them due justice as to their knowledge of the international scene.

Answer:

Different overseas countries are at different stages in their preparation for their next census, and the majority of countries are yet to finalise the topics to be collected. However, early indications are that NZ will be collecting information on the same

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number of topics as their last census, while the UK and Canada may extend the number of topics to be included. The USA has dropped the number of topics they collect in their census, but information on these topics is now collected via a rolling survey that is conducted on a continual monthly basis for each year between their censuses.

Funding for census activities has been increased in the USA and UK and this has been provided to address particular issues they experienced in previous censuses. Funding for the Canadian census is comparable to that received for their 2006 Census, while NZ is currently in the middle of their budget submission process and the outcomes of this process are not yet known.