

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Supplementary Budget Estimates

19 – 20 October 2011

Question No: SBT 836

Topic: Data Collected on Same-Sex Marriages

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Senator Abetz asked:

Senator ABETZ: There have been suggestions that this census, for the first time ever, will take same-sex marriages into account and somehow record them. If the questions are all the same, are we now using a different methodology or are we digging deeper into the forms to come up with that statistic?

Mr Pink: I will ask Mr Paul Lowe who heads up our census project, and who really deserves the thanks that you gave to me, Senator, for the success of the 2001 census.

Mr Lowe: Senator the questions did not change between 2006 and 2011.

Senator ABETZ: That is what I thought.

Mr Lowe: We will still be coding people that report that they are in a same-sex marriage as de facto couples, in line with the Marriage Act. However, we have decided this time that we will report on a new classification. We call it, 'Relationship as reported'. Of those same-sex couples that report that they are married, in the relationship question we will report the numbers of those as, 'Relationship as reported.' It is some new information we are collecting from the census. The census is for all Australians so we believe we have an obligation to return that information to the community.

Senator ABETZ: Do you take that attitude in relation to all the matters that you ask the people about? Clearly, this is an extra step you are taking. If you consider that you have an obligation to the Australian people then do you have an obligation to dig deeper in relation to other permutations of the information that is available from the census form?

Mr Lowe: I am not sure where you are coming from with the question.

Senator ABETZ: In Australia, it is the policy of both major parties that—rightly or wrongly; I do not want to enter into that debate tonight—you cannot have same-sex marriages and those that are registered overseas are not acknowledged as being of legal effect in Australia. The question then is, why are we collecting the information on something which the law, for public policy reasons, does not recognise?

Mr Lowe: As I said before, the information that we are returning and the way we code the information, the way we treat same-sex marriages, is in line with the Marriage Act and that has not changed. We have reported information on same-sex couples since the 1996 census. We certainly do not want to enter into the debate about same-sex marriages but I believe that this information may be of value to the community.

Senator ABETZ: So the Australian Bureau of Statistics made that value judgment all on its own. Or was it approached by government in relation to doing this?

Mr Lowe: As far as I recall, we were certainly not approached by government—through our consultation process with a lot of users of census data, which includes government agencies, research organisations and the public themselves, who can put submissions in. In that process we had some submissions where people were interested in this information.

Senator ABETZ: All right. Was it government agencies that made that submission to you as opposed to the government?

Mr Lowe: As far as I recall, in that process, it was not government agencies but was rather coming from community groups and the general public.

Senator ABETZ: Are you able to give us a list of those organisations, because one would anticipate that you would have known that this would be fraught with some degree of controversy and one would be interested as to which community groups in that case helped motivate this change?

Mr Lowe: I would have to take that on notice.

Answer:

This information has been collected in previous Censuses but not included in the standard Census output products that are available free on the ABS website. However, it has been available through paid consultancy services. During the public hearings, which are held as part of the consultation phase on content for the Census, there was general interest in the ABS publishing this information as part of standard Census output rather than through paid consultancy services. A list of the organisations or individuals that requested this is not available.