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Chair

Mr. Dan Ruimy

Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology

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• (0945)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.)): Welcome back, everybody, to meeting 57 of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology.

We are continuing our study of Bill C-36. Today we have appearing before us the Honourable Navdeep Bains, Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development.

We're just going to get right into it.

Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'm pleased to be here to address this committee regarding Bill C-36. I'm here accompanied by my deputy minister, John Knuble. If you have any difficult questions, feel free to direct them towards him.

Today I would like to outline the elements of the legislation that is before the committee, explain the intent behind some of the provisions, and address some of the concerns raised during the committee's study of the bill.

We all agree on the importance and value of impartial and high-quality statistical information that responds to stakeholder needs. Statistics are a public good.

[Translation]

Governments have a responsibility to ensure statistics are of the highest quality possible. People from all walks of life—individuals, businesses, non-profits and governments—depend on them.

[English]

High-quality statistics are necessary to properly plan services, improve social outcomes, and help businesses grow. Obviously, we know the benefits are very important, and as we've heard from many in this committee, statistics should not be a partisan issue.

Clearly, there's need for formal independence, and currently Statistics Canada is treated by convention as an arm's-length agency with little direct involvement by the minister overseeing it. However, the agency's independence is not formally legislated. The decision to replace the 2011 mandatory long-form census with a voluntary service exposed a vulnerability in the Statistics Act. That's clearly what prompted this discussion. This was obviously a platform

commitment, and hence we're here today. It allowed the government of the day to make a decision on a statistical matter with little openness or transparency.

[Translation]

This decision compromised the quality of data and the level of detail about the Canadian population. It deprived smaller communities of the information they needed to make informed decisions at the local level.

[English]

That's why the government quickly reinstated the mandatory long-form census, but more action is needed to ensure decisions on statistical matters are made independently and based on professional considerations.

The proposed amendments respect that Statistics Canada is recognized as a world-leading statistical institution. They enshrine into law the long-standing convention of independence conferred to Statistics Canada, and they will safeguard the quality and impartiality of the information produced by Statistics Canada.

Let me outline the amendments proposed in this bill and provide more detail on certain aspects on which questions were raised during the committee's study of the bill.

Under the current act the minister responsible for Statistics Canada has overarching authority for decisions about the agency's operations and its methods for gathering, compiling, producing, and disseminating statistical information, but in practice, this authority is delegated to the chief statistician. The bill will amend the act to formally make the chief statistician responsible for all operations and decisions related to statistical matters. This is a key important feature of the bill. This is the essential element of meeting our commitment to strengthening Statistics Canada's independence and bringing our legislation into alignment with the United Nations' principles and the OECD's recommended practices.

[Translation]

Given that statistics are a public good, however, the minister will remain accountable to Parliament for Statistics Canada.

[English]

The amendments have been drafted to balance independence, quality, and relevance while increasing transparency to ensure the government can be held accountable. Again, it really is about independence, transparency, and accountability. They ensure that the responsibilities of the minister and the chief statistician are clearly defined. They also ensure that these responsibilities come with the requirements for transparency and accountability to Canadians, and that the minister will retain authority to issue directives on statistical matters or programs. This is an important power that must remain with the executive.

[Translation]

Information and data needs are constantly evolving with societal and economic changes. This reality highlights the importance of why governments must be able to work with Statistics Canada to collect information on topics that are important to Canadians.

[English]

However, the bill ensures greater transparency around these directives, and it empowers the chief statistician to request written and public direction before acting on them. The bill clearly assigns to the chief statistician the responsibility of deciding what methods to use to collect data, including whether surveys will be mandatory or voluntary. Because mandatory surveys can be intrusive on respondents and are tied to penalties, the bill also requires that decisions to make a survey mandatory be published for transparency purposes.

It also requires that the minister be advised of such decisions before they take effect. Should the minister deem it to be in the national interest to make a decision that directly affects statistical matters, the bill requires that such decisions be authorized by a Governor in Council and tabled in Parliament as well.

[Translation]

As you can see, this bill ensures that independence does not come at the expense of transparency and the capacity to hold the government to account for decisions that impact Canadians.

[English]

The bill also proposes to create a new Canadian statistical advisory council—I know there's been a fair amount of discussion in this committee about that as well—which would replace the existing National Statistics Council. The new council will provide advice and will help ensure Canada's statistical system continues to meet the needs of Canadians.

During the committee's study of the bill, we heard questions about the council's purpose and how it differs from the existing council. We also heard concerns about the representativeness, or the number of representatives on the new council, and the potential for partisan appointments.

● (0950)

[Translation]

First, I would like to thank all past and current members of the National Statistics Council.

[English]

Their contributions to Canada's statistical system are an important reason why Statistics Canada is recognized as one of the world's best statistical agencies. I would especially like to thank the current members of the National Statistics Council for their recent contributions. This includes consideration of options and advice on how to strengthen Statistics Canada's independence.

As for why we're creating a new council, the rationale is simple: transparency and strategic focus. Entrenching the new council in legislation will increase transparency around the work it does and the advice it provides.

I'm told that it's difficult to find out who the current members on the National Statistics Council are, and that it's difficult to find out what issues the council has considered and what advice it has given to the chief statistician. This will not be the case with the new council.

[Translation]

The members of the new council will be asked to provide advice on specific issues related to the overall quality of Canada's statistical system. And the bill will require the council to prepare an annual report on the state of our statistical system.

[English]

Having 10 members will enable the new council to provide depth and strategic focus to the advice that it will be asked to give. The new council is meant to be highly strategic, and I fully expect it to formulate its evidence and advice based on a variety of sources, including the chief statistician and Statistics Canada's extensive advisory structure.

The new council will compliment the comprehensive advisory committee structure already in place at Statistics Canada. As you heard in previous testimony, this includes the seven provincial and territorial committees—including the federal-provincial-territorial consultative council on statistical policy—and ensures that all provinces and territories have an effective voice on statistical matters.

There are also 13 advisory committees in various subject matter areas, which include nearly 200 members from every province and territory, and a cross-representation of Canadian society. Council members will be appointed by a Governor in Council in an open and transparent manner, based on merit. This process will limit the potential for partisan appointments.

Colleagues, I read with interest the comments of Mr. Ian McKinnon, chair of the existing National Statistics Council.

He said to the committee, “The advisory council fills a new role, one which would be difficult for the current statistics council to perform, frankly, and the creation of that new entity is I think an essential and pivotal part of the promise that this bill holds in transforming it from just letters into a well-operating and successful change to the Canadian statistical system.”

Clearly, colleagues, I agree with Mr. McKinnon's assessment.

The bill will also change how the chief statistician is appointed. This is another area that I know has come up for discussion. The position will be a renewable term of no more than five years, and the appointment will be made through an open, transparent, merit-based selection process, in accordance with the government's new approach to Governor in Council appointments.

The chief statistician will serve during good behaviour, and may only be removed by the Governor in Council for cause. This will strengthen the independence of the chief statistician in his or her decision-making capacity.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, let me highlight a few more amendments.

This bill addresses situations in which Canadians refuse to provide information related to the census and other mandatory surveys.

• (0955)

[English]

It will remove from the act the penalty of imprisonment for those who do not comply with a mandatory request for information. Again, this was an issue that was discussed extensively in the media when the previous changes were made. Canadians who do not comply will continue to face the possibility of fines of up to \$500.

The bill will also allow the transfer of census records after 92 years. This is consistent with our commitment to open and accessible data. This will benefit researchers and historians, as I mentioned before.

Obviously, the response rate to the census has been very successful. In 2016, we saw that, and we want to make sure that we share this information in a timely manner.

Finally, the bill updates some of the language in the act as well, which is important.

[Translation]

The amendments in this bill were developed based on consultations with many Canadians as well as with international experts and bodies.

[English]

As I mentioned, they include the guidance and the principles of international organizations like the OECD, the UN, and other jurisdictions. We worked very closely with many other bodies as well.

[Translation]

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, we understand that trusted information is essential for making informed decisions.

[English]

I would like to thank all the individuals who took the time to appear before this committee to offer their advice and input to the important work you have undertaken in the review of Bill C-36. The amendments contained in Bill C-36 will enhance and protect the independence of Statistics Canada, increase transparency, and support evidence-based decision-making.

I look forward to the swift passage of this legislation.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before we jump to questions, I failed to introduce Mr. John Knubley, the deputy minister of the Department of Industry.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: For the record, I introduced him as well, so we're all good.

Thank you very much for reinforcing that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to jump right to Mr. Arya.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming here, and for bringing this excellent legislation that delivers on one of the campaign promises.

One of the most important organizations closely associated with Statistics Canada, and which knows the workings of Statistics Canada, is the Statistical Society of Canada. Their representative at the last meeting said they had almost unanimous approval for this legislation, which is a very good thing.

Their recommendations were quite limited. One was that they wanted a search committee. The other was that they wanted one of the Statistical Society of Canada's representatives to be on the advisory council.

I asked about the current system. Even before the changes you are proposing, the current system of appointing the chief statistician has worked well in the past, and the Governor in Council process, in my opinion, is also quite good. Would you like to address that?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much for your question. You're absolutely right. This legislation does honour a commitment that we made, which released them from the issue around making the mandatory long-form census voluntary, which compromised the quality of data and which brought this issue to light in the public domain.

We honoured that commitment by reintroducing the mandatory long-form census on day one. This is to continue on that path to reinforce what existed in convention, the independence of Statistics Canada. I'm really delighted to hear that the Statistical Society of Canada was supportive. Obviously they were engaged. We had a robust engagement process, an outreach process through which we engaged many stakeholders, because, again, we wanted to be very thoughtful and deliberate about how we approached this legislation and we wanted to find that right balance.

Clearly, some of the comments they made around the search criteria for the chief statistician are important. This is a very important and prestigious position, and we want somebody who is really qualified. That is why, as you mentioned, we are proposing a Governor in Council process, which is going to be merit-based, open, and transparent.

I can tell you right now the fact that we reintroduced the mandatory long-form census and the fact that we're bringing forth legislation to strengthen the independence of Statistics Canada have really positioned this organization in a much more positive light. There is a great deal of excitement around this organization going forward and there will be a lot of interest from very highly qualified individuals from around the world who would want to take on this role. We're very confident that a Governor in Council appointment, which will be very open and transparent, will attract the best and brightest to be part of that process to apply. We think that is good for the organization, and I'm confident that we will have somebody very capable going forward as well.

On the advisory council, as you know, that's going to be again a Governor in Council process as well. So, for anyone who expresses an interest we would—

• (1000)

Mr. Chandra Arya: In fact, I have a question on that advisory council. I know it's a very strategic body. As you mentioned and as we all know, we have some 13-plus committees with about 250 people trying to advise the chief statistician, and obviously he can't have a one-to-one relationship with all the committee members. However, I think eight to 10 members at this strategic level, where he can have regular, personal, one-to-one interaction, is quite good. There were some suggestions that this number is low.

In my view, the number appears to be good; eight to 10 is good. The moment you start increasing the number, then the chances of the chief statistician being able to interact on a personal level will be diminished. What do you say about the comments that this number is low and it has to be increased?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I think we have to understand the mandate of the new Canadian statistical advisory council. It's going to publish a report. It's going to report to the chief statistician and the minister. It's going to provide strategic advice. It does not, by any means, undermine the current Statistics Canada professional advisory committees. There are 13 of them with specific subject-matter expertise. If you look at the federal, provincial and territorial consultative council on statistical policy, those comprise roughly 200 individuals. There is a lot of subject-matter expertise and a lot of volunteers that will still be part of the process.

I think for a member body, 10 is a good working number. As you know, many boards comprise that number, give or take. It's a workable number that allows for robust conversations and more focus around the strategic advice they will be providing. I'm confident that number finds that right balance between being an effective body and being an accountable body.

Mr. Chandra Arya: I'm glad that you guys consulted OECD and some of the countries like the U.K. and the Netherlands. Of course, each country has a different system. The Netherlands, for example, doesn't do a census. The last time it did one was in 1971. It uses information from registers.

How does our proposed bill on Statistics Canada compare with those in other countries?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: It's interesting that you mention 1971. I was speaking to my officials before, and as we were drafting this legislation, I was talking about the timelines of some substantive

changes that were made to the Statistics Act. There were some changes in the 1980s and some in the early 1970s, I think in 1971. This, again, really emphasizes our commitment to strengthen the independence. It is long overdue but it was in convention, so this is a very important step.

How does this compare? We looked at a lot of equivalent peer countries—Australia, the Netherlands, the U.K., Ireland, and New Zealand. As you mentioned, we looked at the UN's fundamental principles around official statistics and the recommendations of the OECD Council on Good Statistical Practice. These changes put us in a much stronger position. They align us with those international practices, policies, and principles, and further strengthen the reputation of Canada's statistical body, which, again, had world recognition. It had a great reputation. This further enhances that.

Mr. Chandra Arya: On the term of the chief statistician, I think the current bill allows for one renewable term. Somebody asked, why limit it to that? At the same time, the former chief statistician, Munir Sheikh, said that they don't go for any fixed.... What happens if he or she may not perform as expected?

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The objective of the term limit is, again, to have that accountability mechanism, to be transparent, and to be merit-based. The reason that we have a renewable term is, again, with regard to the census, to have the ability to execute the census and see it through properly. Also it's good for succession planning. It's good to have new leadership come in. I think the maximum 10-year term limit potentially provides ample opportunity for a new chief statistician to come in and make a meaningful impact.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Nuttall, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for joining us today—to Mr. Knuble, as well.

You started out by saying any tough questions should go to Mr. Knuble, so perhaps I should direct them all that way at this point.

All kidding aside, thank you for taking the time to be with us today. I was hoping I was going to get to spend a couple of hours on the court with you in a month, but that's not going to happen.

I just wanted to take some snippets from your presentation today and apply them to some of the questions that I've been asking. I think other witnesses who have been giving testimony have been bringing this forward as well.

I'm just going to read a couple of pieces out. "As we've heard...in this committee, statistics should not be a partisan issue", and in the past there have been statistical matters dealt with with little openness and transparency. Also, "more action is needed to ensure decisions on statistical matters are made independently and based on professional considerations." More directly to the point we've heard "concerns about the representativeness" of the new council and the "potential for partisan appointments". Finally, "As for why we're creating a new council, the rationale is simple: transparency and strategic focus."

I guess what I want to get at is that I understand the words on paper. I also understand there are some things in this bill that do provide more power to the chief statistician. There are also movements that are taken away from that. This isn't a one-way train to openness, transparency, and keeping government out of the process in terms of statistics.

When I look back at previous appointments to the innovation committee, I see that five out of the 10 people were Liberal donors. We've had the president of MaRS on that committee, who then came back and made a recommendation to give clusters funding. I'll be interested to see what happens with that.

While I understand what you're putting on paper, I question whether the partisanship is not embedded directly into this bill to begin with. I think that the record shows that when these people are appointed there's already been a tinge of disappointment. It resulted in a \$800-million fund brought forward in the budget. That's a huge concern when we're looking at statistics going forward.

● (1005)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you for that question.

On basketball, I hopefully look forward to the opportunity in the near future to play with you and our other colleagues to raise money for charity.

With regard to the fund you're talking about, obviously it's not within the scope of the conversation, but I'll quickly speak to it. Then I'll get to the specific matters pertaining to Bill C-36. The \$800 million in terms of the super clusters investment was actually a campaign commitment that we had made. It was not a reflection of who we appointed as innovation advisers. That was a campaign commitment that we honoured in our first budget, a while before we had identified innovation leaders across the country.

With regard to this bill, you're absolutely right, we're very sensitive to the fact that we want to end political interference. We learned some hard lessons in 2011, when a voluntary form was brought in which compromised the quality of data. Hundreds of communities did not receive data because the sample size wasn't sufficient. Particularly in our rural or remote communities, which need this information for planning purposes—to build schools, for social services—this really undermined our ability to proceed forward in a meaningful way to address those issues.

The quality of data has a significant and direct impact on Canadians. Based on those challenges, based on those issues, we took immediate action by reintroducing the mandatory long-form census. That's why, for our going forward now, what we want to

accomplish is taking what's in convention right now in terms of Statistics Canada and enshrining it into law.

We have a very balanced approach to this.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: But you're doing the exact opposite of that in removing the chief statistician's ability to name the advisory committee. I know it's a changed committee, it's a transformed committee, but you're doing the exact opposite of that. The convention is that it's the chief statistician. In fact the convention in many jurisdictions around is that it's either a third party body or a chief statistician and not the Governor in Council, but now you're taking responsibility for that.

When we look at strategic direction, if I'm the cabinet, I appoint the right people to get the right strategic direction to get the right answers that I'm looking for and the right survey going to the right people. To me, and I may be cynical—this place may make you cynical—what's happening here is that this is the place to start if you want to set up the data.

● (1010)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: In think in terms of the selection of the advisory committee, clearly it will be done through a Governor in Council process that is very open and transparent and merit-based. As well, in terms of the mandate of this council, they will provide strategic advice. They will not get into the operational know-how. That is something that we have clearly outlined is the prerogative of the chief statistician and the experts at Statistics Canada. They will determine how to proceed on the operational side of it. That will not be compromised. There will be no political interference in that.

That's something we learned from the 2011 experience. We do not want to interfere in the matters with regard to getting good-quality data, reliable data. I think this legislation clearly deals with that and provides that assurance to the chief statistician.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: Okay.

This may be a little tongue-in-cheek, but this a question I've wanted to ask.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Sure.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: This is in terms of a bailout of Bombardier before...or a loan, or investment, or whatever language you want to use.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): I have a point of order.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: I'd like to know what statistics—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Nuttall.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: —we were able to use, or we would want to use, that are not currently in the system—

The Chair: Mr. Nuttall, we have a point of order, and I need to speak to the point of order.

Go ahead on your point of order.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have a minister with us, Mr. Chair, and it's very important that our focus should be Bill C-36. When we talk about Bombardier, I think it is out of order. We want to make sure that the minister's time is well spent and is focused on that.

The Chair: I would agree that we need to keep it within the scope of Bill C-36. That is the scope. When the minister comes for main estimates, that would be an appropriate time.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: I realize that there's no debate on a point of order, so I will "point of order" and say something back.

It's helpful if you let me finish my question to determine whether it's within the realm of the item we're discussing.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: As long as it's not Bombardier—

The Chair: This is on Bill C-36—

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: Oh, as long as it's not Bombardier. Perfect. No Bombardier.

The Chair: We have another point of order.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Yes. A member is not to be intervening in the decisions of the chair.

The Chair: A member has not—

Mr. Brian Masse: That's what we're hearing right now, that a member, not the chair, is making decisions for the committee.

The Chair: No—

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes, we are. We just had that.

The Chair: Members are allowed to bring up a point of order. It's up to the chair to understand that point of order. The question is—

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Dhaliwal just set a condition on whether Bombardier is raised is his decision to make with regard to Alex's point of order right now. That's for you to decide, not for any other member on the other side.

The Chair: If you will recall, the point of order was on Bombardier. As I explained to Mr. Nuttall, we need to keep the focus on Bill C-36, because that's within the scope of why we are here today.

Now, if you can relate Bill C-36 and Bombardier together, then....

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: I have a couple of comments.

I think the minister is more than apt to be able to slap my question aside and doesn't need points of order.

Second, it was actually related to the item in terms of one of the things you pointed out, the changes to previous census information. To use Bombardier as an example, what information and statistics can you use going forward that perhaps weren't there in the past to be able to come up with a good decision-making process in terms of jobs—the effect on jobs, the effect on the economy, etc.?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The decision with regard to the repayable contribution for Bombardier is consistent with the program guidelines in the strategic aerospace defence initiative. We'd be more than willing to share those criteria around jobs, such as the 1,300 jobs that

we were able to secure through that R and D investment. That's how we look at those kinds of investment opportunities. How do we strengthen the aerospace sector, how do we focus on research and development, and what kinds of jobs, good-paying jobs, can we secure? That's the data and the information we used.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mr. Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here today.

You're correct that it was an unusual circumstance in 2011, but there has been a history of trying to make the census information statistically relevant to the nation for many decades. It is important not only for ourselves domestically but also internationally. It was undermined by an ideological drive to get rid of the quantification of that material. Hence, we had ridiculous arguments—and I see it's ending in this legislation—about putting people in prison, for example, and other extreme measures that were never undertaken but that usurped serious public discussion about the issue.

What has come about, though, is the serious consequence that two chief statisticians ended up resigning during the process. Both of those chief statisticians have presented in front of committee regarding this bill, and both have suggested amendments related to improving the independence of the chief statistician, which was the problem that created the 2011 situation.

I'm wondering if you and your department have had a chance to review those suggested amendments by the chief statisticians, the former ones who resigned. This was unique in Canadian history. I don't think we've had that before. It may be unique in the world. What is a commentary back to those chief statisticians who have presented testimony in front of our committee?

• (1015)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Could you, if you don't mind, specify which recommendations they brought forward that you'd like me to speak to?

Mr. Brian Masse: I'd like you to address proposed section 4.1 in particular, regarding the overall independence and making sure that no cabinet or ministerial decision that could be related to changing... and also the ability for them to speak in public so that chief statisticians do not feel influenced with regard to any commentary they provide. They have specifically called for amendments related to those things.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you for that, and I appreciate the question. We've been clear on the matter of how this is done. It's really up to the chief statistician. With regard to 4.1, looking at that specific provision, I think it was Munir Sheikh who brought that particular item up for discussion.

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes, that's correct.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Our view on this is that we believe that as minister I am accountable in the House for Statistics Canada, accountable to Canadians. Our objective was to reinforce the strength and the independence. That's the objective of this bill.

With regard to operational know-how, we believe that should be the domain of the chief statistician and the experts. If there are unique cases where the minister believes he or she should get involved, we have a transparent process to deal with that through an order in council and by tabling that change in the House. We looked at the 2011 experience and realized that was what really caused this issue to emerge—where the minister was saying one thing, the chief statistician was saying another thing, and there was a lack of transparency.

We believe those measures adequately deal with any kind of intervention by a minister, because a level of accountability and transparency would be clear. I can tell you right now that our intent is clear. We want the chief statistician to focus on how the data is collected. What do we want to determine? For example, we're committed to the environment. We're committed to clean technology. If we need data on how to collect more information on clean technology, we'll determine what we need. How that's done will be determined by the chief statistician.

Mr. Brian Masse: Since you've raised the environment, I think the number one thing, if you were committed to it as a government, would be to prohibit the OPG from storing nuclear waste next to the Great Lakes. This is opposed by my American colleagues in the U.S. Congress, so a stat won't be necessary for that.

At any rate, I want to highlight a difficulty that I have. I understand that there will be some more connections back to the House, but on Bill C-36, which is still in the House right now, your government has moved closure on an amendment I have for that bill. What confidence can we have that there is going to be improved independence when, for example, an amendment related to gender, race, and equity on a previous bill is now subject to a motion for closure? Truly, what openness is there in this government to actually accept amendments?

We've had testimony on Bill C-36 and on Bill C-25, specific testimony from chief statisticians. I want assurances that there is going to be a serious evaluation of those potential amendments. Bill C-36 received some of those suggestions. We went through the process, and now we have the House closing debate on them. The amendments of former chief statisticians are fairly significant. They're not partisan. Is there going to be an openness for amendments from your government?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Just as a point of clarification, I believe you're talking about Bill C-25, are you not?

Mr. Brian Masse: I'm using Bill C-36 as an example, as it's been raised.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: No, this is Bill C-36 right now, but you're talking about changes to Bill C-25.

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes, I'm sorry; I am confusing it with this.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Don't worry about it; I just wanted clarification on it. The changes you proposed, then, are to Bill C-25.

Mr. Brian Masse: Yes.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: You're well aware that on Bill C-25 a process took place in the committee. The changes were reflected in the legislative agenda, and there's a legislative process that would deal with them. It's very clear how that process works; it's very open.

From my perspective, however, on the specific question around the order in council and taking it to cabinet, we believe that doing so clearly provides transparency and accountability, and puts a spotlight on any changes the minister wants to make or that the chief statistician needs to undertake on matters of operational know-how. I think that level of accountability and transparency is unprecedented.

• (1020)

Mr. Brian Masse: I think it's going to be a real challenge to see whether your government is actually open to these changes.

Lastly, I want to move towards Shared Services. What is the reason to move the independence of statistics to Shared Services? What is the actual objective at the end of the day versus what we have heard as testimony, that it would be more advantageous and more secure if in-house operations for Statistics Canada remained the same and did not have to be outsourced? What is the advantage to the public of using Shared Services as part of StatsCan's repertoire of discussion with Canadians?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Overall, I think the objective of Shared Services is to have, from a StatsCan perspective, good-quality, reliable data with integrity. Isn't that right? I think this is what Canadians want, and it's the objective.

The operational IT issues related to that objective, however, are something in the domain of the chief statistician. He or she will determine how that arrangement works and whether they can secure the data and make sure the data is of good quality and high integrity. Those are the operational know-hows that the chief statistician needs to determine.

I believe the interim chief statistician, Anil, came before this committee and talked about meaningful progress that had been made in respect to some of the issues with Shared Services.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mr. Longfield.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Minister, for being here. It's always good to have you here, and thanks to Mr. Knuble for joining us as well.

I want to build on what Mr. Masse was putting forward about Bill C-25 and the impact of that legislation on Bill C-36 and the way we would look at building the advisory council to have diversity within it. We had testimony about the number of people, but we haven't really addressed how we make sure that this strategic body has adequate diversity.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: First of all, thank you very much for that question, Lloyd. I know you've had extensive experience sitting on numerous boards and understand board governance structure very well, and even the role of advisory committees.

Clearly, with Bill C-25 we were promoting and are promoting diversity on boards—diversity of thought, diversity of perspective. That diversity allows for better decision-making and better outcomes. There's clearly data around this, many studies demonstrate it, and it's good for the bottom line for many companies. Clearly it constitutes a strong value proposition.

We want to emulate what we preach in Bill C-25 and deploy it in a meaningful way as we move forward with the advisory council. We want to promote diversity of perspective and thoughts and regions and ideas in a very thoughtful way. This provides another opportunity for the Governor in Council process to be very open and transparent and to engage the greatest number of people we possibly can.

I believe a fair amount of excitement and attention will be given to this process because of our government's commitment to Statistics Canada and good-quality data, the fact that we reintroduced the mandatory long-form census, and the fact that we're reinforcing and strengthening the independence of Statistics Canada. This will encourage many people to become involved in the process, and therefore, we'll have many good people to choose from.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you, Minister.

How does this advisory council or advisory board relate to other government departments? How do we leverage the assets we have at Statistics Canada to help other government agencies make good decisions based on data and statistics?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Are you talking about the advisory council?

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Yes.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The advisory council is going to have a very clear strategic focus, providing advice to the chief statistician and me or the minister responsible at any given time. They'll produce an annual report that demonstrates the level of accountability and transparency. In that report, I think clearly they will work with and engage other departments to determine how best to use the data.

If you take a step back, one area our government is looking at is open data. We're looking at how we can make more data available, how we can take data from other departments. When it comes to open data and issues around that matter, I think Statistics Canada can and will play a leadership role. I believe that's where the advisory council can make some meaningful suggestions.

•(1025)

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: You pulled out the nuance of my question. We use open data internally as well as externally. This group could help advise in that process.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: That's correct, yes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: That's within our legislation...?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Correct.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: With the legislation, we had a couple of testimonies around sections 21 and 22 in regard to which would be subservient. They said there was some conflict between the directions from those two sections. The Westminster system allows for the minister to have input on decisions, but as you said, going through Parliament, going through an open process.

Could you comment on sections 21 and 22? We heard that a few times.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: What specifically in sections 21 and 22 did you want me to highlight?

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: They said that in terms of section 21, the chief statistician has powers and authorities, and within section 22 the minister has powers and authority. Who rules when?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: When it comes to the operational know-how, when it comes to determining how the data is going to be collected, what kind of data is going to be collected, whether it's mandatory or voluntary, for example, all those powers and authorities lie within the domain of the chief statistician.

With regard to what data we're going to collect and what kind of information we need, what areas we want to focus on, that lies within the prerogative of the minister.

That's what this bill does very clearly. It takes the convention that currently exists and it enshrines that in legislation. It says very clearly that the minister will determine what kind of information we want to collect, and how we go about doing it is left to the prerogative and expertise of Statistics Canada and the chief statistician.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thanks.

In regard to the composition of the advisory board, bringing it from 40 down to 10 and including some payments to the people who are on the board.... Remuneration was mentioned. I'm not sure that was really clarified, whether remuneration is really per diems or travel expenses versus being paid a stipend or an annual fee to sit on the board. Could you clarify that?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Again, you're right, it is remuneration. My understanding is that it is based on a per-diem model. These individuals are going to be subject-matter experts. They're highly qualified thought leaders. These individuals understand the importance of good-quality, reliable data. There are modest amounts through per diems to accommodate the efforts they're making to meet up and to provide advice to the chief statistician and the minister. It's not a substantial burden on the treasury. It is a very modest cost.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I have sat on a lot of boards, and I'm still trying to find boards that pay.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: It's always on a volunteer basis, and this is along the lines of this. It's not going to cost a lot of money to sit on this board. I've also had that experience.

I'm finished with my time and my questions. Thank you for clarifying. It's great to see you.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mr. Dreeshen. You have five minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and Mr. Knuble, for being here. I appreciate your coming to talk about this particular bill.

The OECD framework for good statistical practices clearly states the importance of professional interdependence. I think that's important. We're getting amendments, suggestions, from both the former CSs and former members of NSC, who are telling us that there should be probably between 20 to 25 members for the new council. Of course, we've heard Mr. Arya's endorsement for the number that has been chosen.

It's important that as we look at bringing amendments to this discussion, it is realized that they come from advice that has been given to us by witnesses. We will look at that. We'll try to find a number. If it is carved in stone, we'll find that out as we go through the discussions.

I think it's important that we recognize it, and of course there's not necessarily a guarantee that cabinet directions and directives, decisions, are as transparent as one might suggest, as these things are made behind closed doors, but that has already been mentioned.

I have two things I wanted to ask. Based on the provisions of Bill C-36, who gets to call the shots when it comes to IT services? Will it be part of the new powers granted to the CS, or will it be the minister who gets to decide what kind of IT infrastructure StatsCan will use?

On the other question, was it your call or Mr. Anil Arora's call to stick with Shared Services Canada?

• (1030)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much.

I want to thank you again for the thorough job you and the committee have done in meeting with a lot of witnesses. As you mentioned, from those conversations, there are many proposed suggestions for changes.

One of them, of course, is the potential composition of the new Canadian statistical advisory council, for instance, and the number of 10 or, as you had suggested, 20. Look, we feel that 10 is a very reasonable number in terms of being a number that will be focused on the priorities of providing good advice and strategy, but I believe you'll have that conversation among your committee members as you're looking through the bill. I wish you all the best in that endeavour.

With regard to the chief statistician in terms of Shared Services, clearly, as I said before, when it comes to operational matters, or when it comes to IT matters, those are really the domain of the chief statistician, the individuals who work in that agency, and the experts there who understand the importance of reliable data—data that is of good quality, high level, and not compromised. Clearly, that's something they have to determine, and they have to be very clear going forward that if it's shared Services Services, then under that model, can they continue to provide good-quality, reliable data with a high level of integrity? That's exactly what the legislation—

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: I appreciate that, because that, I think, was one of the questions that was mentioned before. We heard testimony that putting it into Shared Services is not necessarily going to add to the security side, the integrity side, and so on. There was a concern

about that in the discussions. That's more or less why I was wanting to flesh that out.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: One of the things I've talked about a lot seems minor to a lot of people, I know, but the fact is that Canadians are living longer and longer, and there's a decision to not allow it to be optional to check off whether or not you wish to have your statistical information public after 92 years. It could be simple. It could be done. I know that we've heard about genealogical studies and all of these other kinds of things. I'm within about two hours of having a grandchild—

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

I'm thinking about—

Mr. Brian Masse: You should be at the hospital.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Yes, I know. I'll get on the plane as soon as I can.

I'll be 96 years old when the data comes out from the 2021 census. I'm looking at this and trying to say to a lot of people that if you want to get real information, give us some sense of security. For the person who is putting that information down, there is no particular reason that it should be presented, but there might be a bunch of other folks on the sidelines who think it is important. I'll go back to one of the surveys we had done and the statement we had about the 60,000 people who were of the Jedi religion. These kinds of things crop up every once in a while.

I'd like people to recognize the fact that it says that people's information is supposed to be secure, and I'd like it to stay that way.

The Chair: You've run out of time, Earl, but congratulations.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: By the way, that's amazing news, and congratulations on that, Earl.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: If I may, Chair, would you like me to quickly respond to that?

The Chair: Yes, if you can do it very briefly.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I will.

The issue is in regard to the 92-year provision for making that information available to the archives. We've really found the right balance between the need for protecting personal information and, again, for providing that information, as you mentioned, to genealogists and historians. Again, this speaks to our government's overall commitment to having more open data after 92 years, and particularly if somebody fills out the census at the age of 18, then 92 years after that.... I know that people are living longer, but we think this provides the right balance with regard to protecting that person's personal and private information and then making it available for the public good going forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to you, Mr. Jowhari. You have four minutes, if you can....

•(1035)

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you.

The Chair: I want to make sure that Mr. Masse gets the last two.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Welcome to the committee, Minister and Mr. Knuble.

I want to acknowledge the staff behind you, Minister. They've done a great job of giving us the information we need to make sure that the questions we bring to the committee and to you are very focused.

I want to go back to the independence, specifically on the statistical method. So far, we've talked about the what and we've talked about the how. You've been very clear during your speech that the what is going to come from the government, through you, and that the how is going to be determined by what I call the "statistical method", by the chief statistician. However, Bill C-36 leaves open the possibility of the chief statistician being overruled on methodological issues by the responsible minister, i.e., you.

What I would like to ask is, what circumstances would necessitate something like that? What is the process that's in place to make sure it brings the transparency that's needed to ensure everyone is aware when such things happen?

Thank you.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Again, that's a very good question. Clearly, this is the issue that prompted the 2011 discussion as well. The reason we have that provision is that the minister is ultimately accountable for the Statistics Act. Obviously, if there's an intrusion or some sort of change made to how the data is collected, then we have to disclose that in a very transparent manner. Potentially there could be many possibilities.

At this stage, clearly, Statistics Canada has an enormously positive track record of collecting good-quality, reliable data. I don't foresee a future government intervening in the operational know-how, but if it does it has to be an extraordinary circumstance, and clearly it has to explain why. Also, that transparency and accountability becomes even more evident through the order in council and also by tabling it in the House.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay, so we have a well-defined process that says that the circumstances have to be explained, and then that has to be tabled in the House. That allows us as members to be able to discuss and get an understanding of what it needs to get there.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: That's correct. In 2011 and prior to that the minister claimed that he had received advice that having the mandatory long-form census was not necessary to collect good-quality, reliable data, which was not the case. That caused the problem in the past, so we want to avoid such a scenario going forward. Hence a level of transparency, having a clear process, and having two mechanisms in place—one through order in council and the other through the House, one at the executive level and one at the legislative level—would deal with that kind of circumstance going forward.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you.

The Chair: Just to be clear, I haven't cut the time of anybody on this side because I'm trying to make sure you all get yours in.

Mr. Jeneroux, you have five minutes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the clarification on the time. We certainly thought our time was being cut, so that's great. Also, just for the record they've now ceded it to the NDP so who knows who is going to get more time here?

We've moved from a 30-person council to a 10-person council. It appears to us on this side of the table that certain provinces are then going to be left out of this, in particular my province of Alberta. There is no longer a western economic diversification minister; there's Minister Bains and that is it. That goes with all the other agencies as well.

We're feeling this might be yet another cut to my home province of Alberta, keeping them out of the advisory council, which would again be in line with seeing statistics used to determine, create, and keep 1,300 jobs at a place like Bombardier while not having any sort of support for an oil and gas industry that has 160,000 people. Minister, can you help with some clarification for us in Alberta?

•(1040)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you for that question. It really is a point of pride and honour for me to be the minister responsible for Western Economic Diversification. It's a very important agency that provides meaningful economic development and support to Alberta and the other surrounding regions.

With regard to the composition of the new Canadian statistics advisory council, there has been no determination of who those individuals will be. I'm confident that there will be many qualified Albertans that will be applying, because they have an enormous amount of confidence in the independence of Statistics Canada and in the data that's now being produced by Statistics Canada since we moved to a mandatory long-form census, and they will be given every opportunity to move forward.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: I'm glad the selection committee has confidence; however, we are starting to really lack a lot of confidence in your department, confidence that we're not being left out. We've asked time and time again for support for the oil and gas sector, yet we see support going to a company like Bombardier. I'm curious how the statistics line up on your end of the line so that there wouldn't be support for the oil and gas industry, yet executives with Bombardier seem to be having a high rate of salary.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Again, with regard to Statistics Canada, we look at a variety of statistics around labour market information. Clearly, we are seeing positive movement in that area. A lot of jobs are being created in the economy. This is a focal point of our government. We want to continue to see growth in all regions, and we want to see good-quality jobs created in all regions. Over the past eight months, we've seen a quarter of a million good-quality jobs being created, full-time jobs, and we want to continue to build on that momentum. That's the kind of data that I think is relevant, and that's the kind of data that Canadians care about.

The Chair: You have a minute.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

I just have a couple of things on the types of questions that are being asked. When you ask questions, it's usually because the government wants to move forward in a certain direction. You talked about clean tech, green tech, all of that—

The Chair: If we can, let's keep it to Bill C-36, please.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: I will try to do that.

Comparing it to clean coal.... I just want to make one particular point. I was talking to some fertilizer people yesterday. They were talking about the carbon tax on natural gas, and how once that gets completely ingrained into their business they will have no opportunity to send any of their product to the U.S. because there will be no money—

The Chair: Bill C-36, Mr. Dreeshen....

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: —and therefore, it's going to be replaced with coal-fired from China—

The Chair: Mr. Dreeshen, can you put it to Bill C-36, please?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Therefore, when we talk about questions that are going to be presented to the public, let's make sure—

The Chair: Time is up.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: —that it ties into everything that's involved.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much for your suggestion. I appreciate that.

The Chair: We'll move on. Mr. Masse, you have the last two minutes.

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you.

I just want to continue with my line of questioning from the first round. This is where it comes to the end of it. Statistics Canada right now can be one of the best in the world, if not the best. It's close to it

already, despite the roughshod way it went through the last government, to be quite frank. But right now, my understanding is that the current onus of the bill that's in front of us allows the minister to decide whether StatsCan wants to use Shared Services or not. My understanding is that the minister has discretion about whether they choose to do that or not.

Will you allow Stats Canada to do that? Why not allow them to collect their own information and data, and not give it to Shared Services? To put this plainly, nothing has to be outsourced to Shared Services Canada from StatsCan. We can create the independent body that it is and maintain that without actually having exposure to privacy breaches and data exposure.

My understanding is that the new government plan is to allow the minister to allow Stats Canada or independent agencies to comply with that decision. If that is not correct.... That's my understanding of the current situation. Will you allow Stats Canada to in-house all of their stuff, or will they have to go to Shared Services? My understanding is that it's a ministerial decision, not the chief statistician's.

● (1045)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: When it comes to operational matters, the IT stuff in particular, as the current interim chief statistician Anil Arora mentioned, he is working with Shared Services to determine what the best possible outcome is for maintaining the integrity of the data and the quality of the data. That really is at the discretion of the chief statistician. He will make that determination in terms of the best possible IT solution going forward. That's something I completely defer to him.

Mr. Brian Masse: Okay. I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: That's a wrap.

Thank you very much, Minister and Mr. Knublely.

With that, we shall end our day. Have a great two weeks off.

The meeting is adjourned.

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