



ABS Census Farce Reminds Us Statistics Are The ‘Eyes Of The Bureaucrat’

Publish Date:

August 2016

In 1961, Murray Rothbard, the most important libertarian economist of the 20th century, wrote about the evils of government statistics.

“Statistics are the eyes and ears of the bureaucrat, the politician, the socialistic reformer. Only by statistics can they know, or at least have any idea about, what is going on in the economy ... How could the government impose price controls if it didn’t even know what goods have been sold on the market, and what prices were prevailing? ... Cut off those eyes and ears, destroy those crucial guidelines to knowledge, and the whole threat of government intervention is almost completely eliminated ... It is difficult to see what, for example, the central planners at the Kremlin could do to plan the lives of Soviet citizens if the planners were deprived of all information, of all statistical data, about these citizens. The government would not even know to whom to give orders, much less how to plan an intricate economy.”

For Rothbard, the easiest way to cut the size of government is to abolish government statistics. “Statistics, so vital to statism, its namesake, is also the state’s Achilles heel.”



When Nick Xenophon and the Greens advocated boycotting parts of Tuesday night's census, they probably didn't realise how far they were advancing the cause of anarcho-capitalism in Australia. They also might not have realised how their stance on the census was so completely at odds with the other things they say.

So for example, Xenophon enthusiastically supports the federal government-owned Australian Submarine Corporation helping build \$50 billion worth of submarines – yet the \$470 million census run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a federal government agency, is “a monumental failure of a government program of the first order”.

Meanwhile the Greens are eager for the government to take ever-increasing amounts of people's income through higher taxes, yet they're not happy when the government wants to keep people's personal details on a database for four years.

Still, one doesn't have to be a full-blown Rothbardian to have grave concerns about the census. And no matter how muddle-headed Xenophon and the Greens might be sometimes, their call for a boycott of elements of the census was absolutely right and appropriate. It was only after they were willing to take the extreme step of a boycott that the government and the mainstream media finally paid attention to the grave privacy risks of the census. This was despite the fact that many organisations (including the Institute of Public Affairs) had for months been talking about the unprecedented invasion of privacy posed by the census.

Until now the failure of the census has been portrayed as a technology stuff-up. But it's also a story of the unrestrained arrogance of government bureaucrats and the reluctance of ministers to challenge those bureaucrats.

It's unacceptable for the Bureau of Statistics to want to hold in perpetuity the personal details of individuals as revealed in the census. Yet it appears no minister has thought to challenge the bureau's demands. The supposed justification for the ABS keeping personal data is that it will provide for a “richer and dynamic statistical picture of Australia”. Again, until Nick Xenophon and the Greens started speaking out about the census, no one had bothered to ask the ABS what such gobbledygook means.

No one has asked questions even more basic – such as why the government should know what a person's religion is. Sure, it's interesting to know the percentage of the population practising Zoroastrianism, but just because something is interesting to social science researchers doesn't mean citizens should be coerced into handing over such information to the government on pain of a fine for non-compliance.

If we are to have a census, it should be voluntary. (For that matter, voting should be voluntary too.)

Even better than making the census voluntary would be to abolish it all together. Which is what a number of other countries, including Britain, have done. In 2010 then Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper, in an effort to strengthen people's privacy, abolished his country's compulsory



census.

At least something good has come out of the census debacle. Australians now have a much better understanding of the limits of technology – and of the limits of government.

The article originally appeared in The Australian Financial Review