

Reference: <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=a12767f8-7840-476c-a2d7-31d40b6628e4&k=0>

Mar 12 2007

Stats man strives to never be ‘boring’

Statistics Canada chief ensures reports, like Tuesday's census, tell story behind figures

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Published: Monday, March 12, 2007

Ivan Fellegi is the most experienced hand in the top ranks of the federal public service, but you won't hear him pining for the good old days in Ottawa.

Mr. Fellegi, the head of Statistics Canada — which today releases the first of several 2006 census reports to be rolled out over the next 18 months — was a Hungarian refugee when he began working at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1957.

He remembers the rudimentary, hand-crank calculators, the bells that governed the workday, the desks crammed together in the office building at Tunney's Pasture, people signing in and out of work. Each division within the bureau sent out its own surveys, which were used to produce tables of numbers. Hundreds of workers spent months keying in the results of questionnaires. There was an annual Miss Dominion Bureau of Statistics pageant. Women were secretaries and clerks. English was the only language used for official business.

Tuesday, the Internet is a key tool for information-gathering, delivering survey information that's cheaper, more reliable and easier to analyse. Branches of Statistics Canada have to work together, drawing data from shared census and survey information. The dry old tables of numbers have been replaced by articles with numbers, but also analysis. The agency has a diverse employee group and is very bilingual.

Mr. Fellegi, chief statistician since 1985, is so pleased with the way things run today that he has stayed in the job long after normal retirement age. He is 71, still in charge from his top-floor office in Tunney's Pasture, with big windows that show a beautiful view of Gatineau and the Ottawa River.

Mr. Fellegi is the chief statistician who made getting beyond the numbers a big priority. He wanted to “bring out the story” by getting staff to write reports on surveys with analysis in plain English and French. It is arguably his most important influence on the national statistics agency.

He says that 20 years ago, the Daily, the agency's regular release of statistical highlights, was “awful” and “almost unreadable.” He says the Daily was little more than “elevator statistics — this went up, that went down.”

So the agency set up training sessions in journalistic writing for hundreds of employees to give Canadians statistical reporting that was relevant and “fit for human consumption.” “We don’t want to publish dull stuff, because nobody will read it,” he says. “You don’t want to be boring.”

For a year, part of the writing project was Friday afternoon critique sessions of old Daily editions, sessions that were sometimes painful for staff, but had a positive effect.

“I wanted information to be used. Why are we collecting it? What’s the story?” says Mr. Fellegi. “I wanted people to be aware of their country.”

Experts in various fields will always use Statistics Canada information, but to get into the media and get to the wider general public audience, the agency needs to write well.

“That has been a dramatic change, really a culture change,” he says. He notes that keeping up the clear writing effort is “an ongoing struggle.”

Mr. Fellegi’s rise to the top of Canada’s statistics agency was in some ways unlikely.

His family had suffered under the Nazis and the Communists: his father was imprisoned by the Nazis because he was a known liberal, and the family later lost its business to the Communists. The young Mr. Fellegi slipped out of the country to Austria and joined his sister in Ottawa.

Ottawa was a very small city when he arrived in 1957. In those early years, it was front-page news when the governor of the Bank of Canada, Louis Rasminsky, became the first Jew to be admitted to the Rideau Club. “Everything closed on Sunday, including the movie houses. The streets were basically deserted on Sunday.”

A fellow worker was deeply troubled that a niece was marrying a Catholic, “the ultimate horror.” The city welcomed the Hungarian refugees, but was deeply white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The place “felt like Victorian age.” Mr. Fellegi remembers being a very shy young man and, he says, he had a difficult time understanding Canadian accents in his first months.

But he worked his way up through the organization, picking up mathematical statistics degrees at Carleton University along the way.

The agency has been on the wave of the information explosion in Canada, with its findings eagerly awaited by both public and business organizations.

In the early years the focus was on unemployment, economic output and population.

Governments spend money based on the census numbers. Business uses the numbers to make marketing decisions. In later years, the agency has delved more into education, health and social questions that feed public debates. Today, the agency has about 5,000 employees and a budget of about \$500 million.

Gone are the days of manual survey tabulation. In fact, Mr. Fellegi expects that for the next national census, in 2011, a majority of Canadians will complete it on the Internet. One tradition that the chief statistician does cling to is the agency’s practice of listening carefully to what government and industry clients say they need, while scrupulously maintaining its independence.

“The moment the public begins to perceive that we might be shading to favour certain perspectives, we might as well close shop. Who would want our data if they can’t trust it?” says Mr. Fellegi. “Once the results cannot be trusted, we are basically useless.”