

Bungling the Australian Census

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Each country needs its exceptionalist message, its sui generis theme. We do something here no one else does, and such like. In Australia, there are many things deemed exceptional. Compulsory voting, on pain of a fine, is one such case. Compulsory voting in a census is another extension of that same philosophy. To not submit, and be damned by the extortionist drive of the State.

This is the somewhat authoritarian background colouring the recent bureaucratic disaster of the 2016 Australian census. It was prized by policy and number wonks as a vast improvement on previous forms, gathering the data about Australian citizens and residents in an unprecedented manner. The sugary advertisements urging people to vote on “census night” on Tuesday gave the impression we were dealing with a very minor inconvenience.

Across the country, families would gather around their computers, “log on” with their designated unique number, and fill in the forms with a minimum of fuss. Not only was the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) keen to get the numbers; it was keen to ensure that those figures were obtained in a manner green and tender. Good for the trees, friendly to the environment.

With all that buzz, not all was good in census land. There were suspicions about the very way, and scope of detail being sought. “Linkage keys”, to take one example, would be created, connecting census material to other data bases (medical, criminal, road traffic, educational).

The tone struck by the ABS did not inspire confidence. Undue hoarding, and preservation of private data, came to mind. Material gathered from every participating subject would be stored for four years, rather than the usual eighteen months. (Did this provide a foretaste of incompetence? A four year window, rather than a smaller one to work with?)

Another troubling feature for pundits and potential participants was what would happen with those linkage keys. Unsurprisingly, these would be a permanent fixture of the statistician’s dream, a record of reference long after the actual collected data of the subject had been destroyed.

Members of Parliament had also made very public statements that they disapproved of the way the census was being conducted and would withhold their names and addresses on the day of submission. Senator Nick Xenophon, for one, was happy to risk the \$180 a day fine and the prospect of a jail sentence.

The Census minister Michael McCormack kept any blinkers he had close at hand. The census was “no worse than Facebook”; those with “a supermarket loyalty card” or “tap-and-go” system were supplying “more information indeed probably to what is available to ABS staff.”

Such comparisons were interesting yet terribly flawed, given that Facebook, for all its defects on what it does with data after gathering it from a user, still maintains an element of voluntariness to those using it. The Australian government was effectively forcing census participants to disclose details of considerable intimacy. Those remaining reticent would, at worse, be jailed.

McCormack also radiated a feeling of smug, grating confidence. No one does it better than the ABS; no one does censuses better than Australia. Until, of course, the crashing of the census site, the debacle, a technological calamity, the total balls up. In the characteristic words of the leader of the opposition, Bill Shorten, "This is an incompetent exercise. If they were handing out gold medals at Rio for incompetence, this Government would be on the winner's podium absolutely." [1]

What exactly happened? For one, the "stresses" of the system from having millions log on simultaneously on Tuesday evening was always going to challenge it, despite the ABS's prior testing on whether its servers could handle 1 million forms per hour. A problematic calculation to begin with, given that online submissions may well have peaked around dinner time, and certainly more than a million an hour. Two stories have subsequently emerged, both running in awkward parallels to each other. The government line, one trumpeted by an increasingly crestfallen census minister, is that no hack had taken place. The world's most secure census system still lay unbreached, the untouched gold standard.

Few believed this vacuous assumption, given that the ABS was insisting that any existing material that had been submitted online would be stored safely and had not been compromised. The ABS had, in fact, surreptitiously removed any statements from its site about data security as the crisis began unfolding. Kernels of truth could be found in the undergrowth of disinformation.

The ABS subsequently threw cold water on the government's claim that no hack had taken place, with David Kalisch from the bureau suggesting that four hacking attacks had been initiated "from overseas". [2] These had been initiated to burst the bubble of confidence or, in Kalisch's words, inflicted as "a deliberate attempt to sabotage the census."

That response showed how much of a muddle the ABS, and the Turnbull government, found themselves in. Neither could quite agree on what happened. The entire system seemingly suffered a meltdown, a collapse precipitated by four denial of service (DOS) attacks that had overwhelmed the system with simulated users. [3]

But such events are not hacking ones, even if they may well enable the compromise of data to take place with greater ease. Continuing with a Rio reference, it is surprising that the Russians were not blamed for that one. Give it time.

Then came the issue of technological hubris. No minister or statistician should ever be permitted to say that any computerised storage system is ever *totally* secure. As Richard Buckland, board director of the Australian Computer Society, observed in prosaic fashion, "There's no way that the ABS could rule out a hack". Generating a "pool of sensitive data" posed the most attractive of targets.

With some carefree disposition, integrity has become the word of the moment. The Australian treasurer, ever the bully from the pulpit of governance, suggested that Australians ignore the current crisis and do their duty.

Fill in the census, stated Scott Morrison, and forget any of this ever happened. The “integrity of this Census itself has not been compromised by the events of the last 24 hours, just as the integrity of the data itself has not been compromised in the last 24 hours.” Except that it has been – terribly.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/census-2016-outage-labor-calls-for-census-minister-michael-mccormack-to-resign/news-story/7d8cd5bfaadfb852311be165b0cc0b8>

[2]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-10/australian-bureau-of-statistics-says-census-website-hacked/7712216>

[3]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-10/there's-no-way-the-abs-could-rule-out-a-hack:-experts/7712442>

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