

What is the point of the Census?

I duly filled in my Census to comply with the law and ordered the email receipt to be able to prove it. As we now live in a snooper state where government keeps so many records about us it is difficult to fathom why they need to conduct a census.

They know who I am , where I live, where I work and all the details I supplied for my National Insurance number, Passport and driving licence. They have Income tax records, National Insurance records, residence records for Council Tax, health records through the NHS ,a birth, marriage and divorce record. So why do they need to know again who I am, where I live, what my general state of health is, what job I do and what my marital status is despite knowing all this already? They also wanted to know a few of the qualifications I hold, all known to the Examining Boards and Universities which are part of a government guided educational system.

They might argue that the point of the Census is to catch up with a minority who have not duly complied with all the form filling needed by everyone from the Passport office to the Council Tax desk. I fear that if people are housing illegal migrants or covering for people dodging Income Tax and national Insurance they are unlikely to blow their cover by providing honest answers to the census form.

They might also argue it helps them plan future services and policies. If that is the purpose then it would need to be more precise and detailed than the form they provided. Let's take the possible use of census data for a skills audit and future skills policy. The form did not allow someone to explain what professional qualifications they might have, made no distinction between the three main levels of degree to encompass research oriented doctorates as opposed to first degrees, and did not press home general enquiries about apprenticeships to discover which areas were best served. Asking people to make a general assessment of their health is hardly sufficient evidence to plan NHS capacity. The GPS know much more about their patients. The multiple questions about identity and background were more detailed than some other areas.

Of course good government needs good data. Instead of spending money on another general survey the government should clean up and use the huge quantities of data it already holds. Why not start by reconciling National Insurance numbers with employee and Income Tax records? Why have more NI numbers been issued that there are meant to be employees? Why not use the substantial NHS data held on all using the service to model future patterns of service need and capacity better? Why not improve a system of patient records with non UK users receiving bills? Why not ask for consolidated data from Examining Boards and Universities to improve national data over skills and education if they think there are holes in their current knowledge?

It is even more bizarre that the census will not take place in Scotland when on its own logic it needs to be U.K. wide.

I hope this is the last general Census we face. On the general topic of population numbers and migration what we want is a reliable total available monthly, with good systems and border controls to assure us that the numbers are accurate. All those welcome to come legally should be included in the moving totals as permits are issued on arrival, with effective controls against illegals. For the working age population it should be one person, one NI number.