
Rethinking Question Period and Debate in the House of Commons

by Hon. Michael Chong, MP

Many parliamentarians and students of Parliament agree that Question Period has become a caricature of what it is supposed to be. Yet for years there has been any no serious attempt to re-examine this fundamental and high profile part of the parliamentary day. In this article the author offers some specific ideas about what is wrong with Question Period and offers some ideas about what can be done to improve it. He also looks at ways to improve the conduct of debate in the House of Commons.



In my view, Question Period and Debate are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the House of Commons. As a result, the House is becoming increasingly irrelevant as these are the two essential features of the House. Why should we care whether Question Period or Debate in the House are truly relevant? I think there are two very good reasons why we should care.

The first reason we should care is that Question Period and Debate can effect public policy. If one examines the broad sweep of Canadian history, some of the great debates of the day powerfully effected public policy outcomes in this country. If Debate and Question Period are becoming increasingly irrelevant, this has consequences for public policy outcomes, policy outcomes that affect the daily governance of Canadians.

The second reason we should care has to do with Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers. If we believe that it is essential that the legislature to hold the executive to account for the functioning of a good democracy, then Question Period and Debate are important tools in meeting this objective. This is why

parliamentarians and other stakeholders need to consider what has happened to Question Period and Debate and come up with ideas and solutions to improve them.

Why is Question Period Irrelevant

In my view, Question Period is increasingly irrelevant for three reasons. It is rhetorical. It is incomprehensible. And it is not conducive to attracting women to public life.

Rhetorical thirty five second questions produce rhetorical thirty five second answers. This does not advance the understanding of any particular issue.

Question Period is incomprehensible. Many questions and answers are incomprehensible because you literally cannot hear yourself talk in the House of Commons. The noise levels and the yelling and screaming are often at such levels that you cannot actually hear what is happening even when using the ear piece and with the volume turned all the way up. Often one can see ministers crouching over their earpiece trying to discern what the question is.

This is most unfortunate. Of all forums in Canada, the House should be *the* forum for reasoned debate. Instead, it is a place that more resembles a Roman coliseum where gladiators spill blood and fight for the crowd's emotions. And if one believes that Canada is facing some very big challenges in the coming decades, those challenges can only be met with reasoned debate. If we meet the big public policy challenges with an emotional response we are in very deep trouble.

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Question Period is not conducive to attracting women to public life. It is a testosterone-laden, anger-filled screaming match, characterized by aggressive body language and by those who can yell the loudest. This does not help to attract women to stand for public office. How many women would want to get involved with that tangle of testosterone that takes place every day between 2:15 and 3:00? This is a very important issue, for the number of women in our parliament has declined in recent years. In my view, one of the very important elements required for good policy outcomes is the involvement of women in public life

What can be done

I think there are three things that can be done about Question Period. First, we must lengthen the time allowed to ask and to answer questions. Thirty five seconds is the current time allotted to ask a question or to provide an answer. One cannot possibly ask an intelligent question or provide an intelligent answer in thirty five seconds. If the time given to answer a question was lengthened to one (or two) minutes, meaningful questions would be asked. If one asks a flippant twenty second question, and a fulsome two minute response is given, more often than not, the questioner will look hyperbolic. And vice versa. If one asks a serious two minute question and a flippant twenty second answer is given, the response looks arrogant.

Second, decorum must be more rigorously enforced. The Speaker has the authority to enforce decorum in the House. This authority is granted in the standing orders.

In the history of parliamentary democracy, our present House of Commons must be full of exceptional orators, for virtually all questions and answers are followed by clapping and standing ovations. One might be led to believe that each and every question and answer has been delivered by one of the great orators in history! It has gotten to the point that many members in the House automatically clap after every question and answer, often not knowing what the question or answer was.

Third, we should move to a rotational schedule for the attendance of Ministers in Question Period, if not for all Ministers, then at least for the Prime Minister. As a Minister, I found the daily routine of Question Period enormously disruptive, which included an hour or more of preparation, an hour of Question Period itself and an hour of analyzing what just happened in Question Period. These three hours a day out of a ministers' schedule, every day, five days a week, takes much time away from the important work of running a portfolio. This is not productive time as, most often, many ministers do not answer a single question in Question Period.

One of the models that could be looked to is Question Period in Westminster. There, the Prime Minister appears once a week on Wednesdays to answer a full round of questions for the entire Question Period. It allows more time for the Prime Minister to attend to the executive functions of the state on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and yet be still held fully to account once a week on Wednesdays. There could be a similar rotation schedule, perhaps twice a week, for other ministers.

Speeches and Debate

Let me conclude with some observations about speeches in Debate. Today, virtually all speeches for Debate are written in various leaders' or ministers' offices. Members often have no input into the content of these speeches. They are reading literally someone else's words into Hansard. This is the job of a transcriber, not a Member of Parliament.

Furthermore, the existence of the whip on most votes means that the outcome of Debate is all but preordained before Debate has even begun. So Debate becomes increasingly irrelevant. If a vote is whipped on all sides of the House why would any member care about what other members have to say on a particular issue? If members know how they are voting before Debate begins, then there is no real reason to listen or to participate in Debate.

So what can be done about Debate? Speeches should be extemporaneous. Again, the rule against reading speeches in Debate already exists. It needs to be enforced. In addition, members need more latitude in expressing their views and in deciding the outcome of votes. Clearly, members of the cabinet are bound by ministerial solidarity to support government legislation, but there should be greater latitude for non-cabinet members to freely to express their views and to vote as they wish on many more issues.

Conclusion

Finally, in the context of an institution steeped in much history and tradition, it is important to realize that past practice is not necessarily a prescription for Parliament's potential. It has been said many times in reference to Parliamentary reform that "Oh, this is how it has always been done" or "It was even worse in the 19th century." Even if true, these statements do not justify the current state of Canada's Parliament. Otherwise, women would still not sit in the House of Commons. I think too many people have equated tradition with prescription, and falsely believe that tradition is the *only* way forward. I

believe in tradition. I think tradition is very important. But it is not all.

The Canadian philosopher George Grant once said it is not sufficient for a nation to have only a memory and roots in the past. It must also have a thrust of intention into the future. Memory, tradition and roots in the past are not in themselves enough. And so it is with Parliament. We cannot rest on tradition alone. Parliament must evolve as it has always evolved.

Parliament is a living institution whose permanence is not assured. It is not indestructible. We must be careful not to ignore it and its problems, for one day the dam of irrelevance and frustration that Canadians feel about this institution may burst. At that juncture one can only guess what the outcome will be.