

QUESTIONS FOR DEBATE IN THE QUEBEC NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Parliamentary procedure ought not to be dismissed as an esoteric pursuit of interest only to Clerks-at-the-Table, a few professors, and the odd parliamentarian. In fact, procedure is of fundamental importance to the policy questions which interest most politicians, the press and citizens generally. This article looks at a procedure intended to enhance parliamentary scrutiny of government activities. It also illustrates how parliamentarians in one jurisdiction can benefit from learning about practices and procedures in others.

Questions for debate differ from both ordinary questions asked during question period and the motions which permit members to raise matters of public interest on Wednesdays. The very rigid and precise rules governing the latter do not allow for such close debate as under the question for debate. Nor should they be confused with the mini-debates provided for in section 174 of the Standing Orders. This formula enables a member who is dissatisfied with an answer given to a question he has asked to raise the matter again. This may take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays at ten o'clock in the evening and may not last longer than ten minutes.

A Member who wishes to submit a question for debate must first place on the Agenda Paper a notice signifying his intention to question a Minister on a matter of general interest within the latter's administrative competence. The Member may not submit a question substantially identical to one already standing on or notified in the Agenda Paper. Furthermore, not more than one question for debate may be considered per week. If there are several notices of questions for debate, the Speaker of the Assembly may, in theory, decide the order in which they will be called. In practice, however, he simply designates the party which is to question the Minister and leaves it up to the party to select one of the questions. This choice is made by the Members in caucus.

The question for debate is held in committee. The name of the committee to which it will be referred must be announced by the Speaker on Thursday of the preceding week, before the orders of the day are called.

This announcement is equivalent to the convening of the committee in question. Thus convened the committee meets at ten o'clock in the morning on the appointed day, generally a Friday. It is not subject to all of the rules which normally apply to standing committees: for instance, there is no motion, no vote, no quorum and no report to the Assembly. Even the right of Members to speak is subject to special rules.

The Member who has given notice of the question for debate is heard first with the Minister being questioned answering immediately afterwards. Each such speech is limited to twenty minutes. Thereafter, Members may speak as often as they wish, provided they do not speak more than twenty minutes in all. This restriction does not apply to the Member who asked the question or to the Minister. The Minister may be accompanied by civil servants and he may also authorize them to speak although this is exceptional. The committee sits until one o'clock in the afternoon. Questions for debate may not be discussed at any other sitting of the committee.

ASSESSMENT OF THE QUESTION FOR DEBATE FORMULA

From the time this measure was introduced on November 17, 1977, until April 13, 1981, Members submitted fifty questions, of which thirty-five were debated (two in 1977; sixteen in 1978; and five in 1980). The reduction in questions debated in 1980 should not be constructed as

indicating a lack of interest; it was not possible to hold more than five debates owing to the Standing Orders and the referendum campaign.

To date, all questions for debate have been submitted by Members of the opposition parties. Although the Standing Orders do not specify that questions for debate may be submitted only by Members of the Opposition, to date all questions have been submitted by members of the opposition parties. (63% by the Liberals, 31% by the Union nationale and 6% by others.) Considering the number of sets held, the Quebec Liberal Party, with an average of three times as many Members as the Union Nationale from 1977 to 1980, nevertheless debated only twice as many questions. Furthermore, the Union Nationale submitted twenty-one notices of questions for debate as compared with the Liberal Party's twenty-seven.

The large number of questions which were merely notified, that is, which were never debated (fifteen out of fifty questions, or almost one-third), are unequally divided between the two opposition parties; five had been submitted by the Liberal Party and ten by the Union Nationale. This leads one to conclude that the Union Nationale tended to accumulate a large store of questions for debate during this period.

SUBJECTS OF DEBATE AND MINISTERS QUESTIONED

One might also ask whether the subjects of questions for debate chosen by opposition parties are related more to current matters than to the direction and workings of government policies in general. For a question to deal with a topic of current interest, there should normally not be too long a delay between the time the notice is submitted and the time the question is debated.

Between 1977 and 1980 some sixty-two per cent of all questions were debated less than nine days after notices were submitted, while only nine per cent of the questions were debated more than thirty days later. The average time between the notification of a question and its discussion before a committee is relatively short. The shortness of this interval indicates that opposition parties prefer to wait until the deadline before placing a question for debate on the Agenda Paper. Such a tactic enables them to choose a question on a current matter in which citizens and the news media will naturally be more interested.

Despite the wide variety of questions for debate, they can nevertheless be grouped according to subject, based on the primary functions of government.

Members were chiefly interested in the government's economic and administrative functions; each of these accounted for forty per cent of all questions debated. Education, cultural affairs and social affairs were far lower on the scale. The government's economic function includes mainly natural resources, primary and secondary industry, manpower and transport. The high level of interest displayed by Members in the government's administrative function may be explained by the desire to ask questions about sovereignty-association, negotiations in the public sector, the public accounts and justice. On the other hand, in choosing questions for debate, opposition Members neglected for the most part the areas of education and social affairs, although these account for the largest slice of the government's budget. Finally, this procedure might have been expected to encourage Members to discuss certain regional problems. In fact, although Members frequently refer to situations which have arisen in their own ridings, this is rarely the main point of the question. Only two questions of regional importance were raised and these concerned only the metropolitan area.

The Ministers to whom questions for debate were most frequently addressed by opposition Members from 1977 to 1980 were, first of all, the Minister of Industry and Commerce with six then, tied for second place, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Labour with four. At the other end of the scale, no questions for debate were addressed to the Ministers of Public Works, Immigration, Revenue or the Environment during this period, while one was asked to the Minister of Cultural Affairs, but it was not debated.

PARTICIPATION AND PUBLICITY FOR QUESTIONS

An average of five persons participated in each question for debate although some had as many as eleven while others had only two or three.

Opposition parties very rarely delegate more than two Members and there has quite frequently been only one, that is, the Member who submitted the question, who is generally the party's official critic in the area which the question concerns. The fact remains that the number of participants is relatively small. This is no doubt a corollary of the special right to speak which is granted by the Standing Orders. Government ministers are always accompanied by a few other Members of their party and, when necessary, their parliamentary assistants. Yet, in 1979, the Minister was the only representa-

tive of the party in power present in fifty-five per cent of all cases.¹

From 1977 to June 1980 the participation of civil servants was required on only four occasions, or in twelve per cent of all cases.

Does the press report on these Friday morning debates? Quantitative research on the subject has revealed that *Le Devoir* covered twenty-two out of a possible thirty-three questions, or 66.6 per cent; *Le Soleil* covered ten out of a possible twenty-two questions, or 45.4 per cent, taking into account the months during which it was crippled by a strike.

If one uses quantity as the chief criterion for judging the coverage given to questions for debate, *Le Devoir* would lead the pack, particularly since, on several occasions, the articles in question appeared on the front page, which was not the case in *Le Soleil*. However, other factors related to the quality of news reporting also come into the picture. For example the assignment of a staff reporter to cover an event shows a greater interest on the part of the editorial staff of the newspaper. In this regard, *Le Devoir* contains an equal number of articles written by its correspondents and copied from Canadian Press, whereas seventy per cent of the articles appearing in *Le Soleil* are written by a parliamentary correspondent or reporter.

Questions for debate are requested by the Opposition and involve an exchange of views. To what extent does the press reflect this aspect, which is the very foundation of parliamentary institutions? The headlines of articles provide an interesting initial indication in this regard. Most of the headlines in *Le Devoir* (over sixty-five per cent) make reference to Ministers' statements or to government plans and decisions. Only one headline out of twenty-two looks at the issue from the Opposition's point of view. Similarly, only one title clearly refers to a debate between the Opposition and the Government. The remaining titles (twenty per cent of the total) provide information of a more general nature and are less directly associated with any one particular party.

As for the content of these articles, except for the few cases already mentioned, the text does not indicate that there has been any debate or exchange of differing points of view. This is even more clearly evident in the articles published in *Le Devoir*. When the Opposition is mentioned at all, it is usually to say that it raised the issue in question. This information is usually contained in the second paragraph, but may also appear at the end of the article. The name of the opposition Member involved is not always given. In some cases, only the Ministers'

statements are quoted, with the parliamentary committee cited as the context. This may be true, but it does not give a complete picture of the situation. This was the case on March 31, 1979, when *Le Devoir* carried a front-page article by Bernard Descôteaux under the headline "The electoral map: Committee to be granted sweeping powers". The bulk of the article was devoted to statements by Robert Burns. On the same day, *Le Soleil* published an article by Paul Bennett entitled "Premier will continue to choose district returning officers". One paragraph of the article is devoted to arguments put forward by the Opposition, although no particular Member is mentioned. This kind of distinction is thoroughly characteristic of the difference noted between *Le Devoir's* coverage and that of *Le Soleil*; the latter covers questions for debate less frequently but reflects their spirit and procedure more faithfully.

CONCLUSION

Do questions for debate fulfil the dual purpose for which they were designed, that is, to keep the public better informed on aspects of public administration and to ensure greater control of government activities? Bearing in mind that the referendum was held during the period under study, the number of questions submitted to Ministers for debate was high. Questions debated by Members of the National Assembly were quite varied, although there could have been a greater number of questions dealing with education and social affairs.

In view of the number and variety of questions debated, it may be said that the two aims of controlling government activities and informing the public are achieved fairly well, given the restrictions inherent in the system of ministerial accountability. The achievement of these two aims, however, does not depend on the Members of the National Assembly alone, but also on the reporting of these questions for debate in the press.

The televising of these questions for debate since March 30, 1979, is certainly an aid in achieving these two aims. On the other hand, an analysis of Quebec newspapers reveals that only slightly more than half of the questions submitted for debate are reported on by the press. Furthermore, this analysis shows that speeches by Ministers are given preferred coverage by reporters, so that it is difficult for readers to realize that any debate has taken place.

(Translated from French)

NOTES

1. See France Talbot, "Les questions avec débat à l'Assemblée nationale", *Bulletin de la bibliothèque de la législature*, Quebec, October 1980. 80-81.