

A Question of Accountability: Is Question Period in Canada working?

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ABSTRACT

Question Period in the Canadian Parliament seems at once to be the best known and the most misunderstood activity of the federal government. While its official purpose is “to seek information from the Government and to call it to account for its actions”¹, Question Period is more commonly understood as a venue for public accountability. It is, however, possible that Question Period does not function effectively even in this purpose, because the practice lacks depth and meaningful discussion, its participants lack decorum, and the representation of debate lacks enlightened reflection. This paper examines whether Question Period in Canada is indeed achieving its purpose of keeping the government publicly accountable, or whether it is failing for the aforementioned reasons. It goes on to assess the recent reforms offered by MP Michael Chong for enhancing the function of Question Period, and discuss whether his suggestions would be effective in the contemporary parliamentary context.

Introduction

Question Period in the Canadian Parliament seems at once to be the best known and the most misunderstood activity of the federal government. For many Canadians, sound bites of parliamentarians blustering at each other during this hallowed hour are their only representation of our elected leaders, as these shouting matches are what draw the most media attention and appear most frequently on the evening news.

Yet of all the work that happens in the House of Commons, Question Period ranks least in importance to terms of actually accomplishing anything. The real work to pass legislation is done largely

by committees, and the content of that legislation is rarely debated or mentioned during Question Period; the opposition instead typically chooses to dwell on disgraced characters and searing controversies. In the most recent parliamentary session this is seen in such episodes as: Rahim Jaffer and Helena Geurgis, the statements of international development Minister Bev Oda before parliamentary committees investigating CIDA funding changes, and potentially scandalous prisoner transfers in Afghanistan, among other things.

The official purpose of Question Period is “to seek information from the Government and to call it to account for its actions.”² While initially questions were to be solely concerning matters of urgency, rule changes in 1975 and guidelines set by Speaker Jerome increasingly allowed more general lines of questioning, until it became the more-or-less open forum for debate that it is now.³ The introduction of televised coverage in 1977 brought attention to the issue of improper conduct, and Speaker Bosley attempted to address this in 1986 by reminding members to be mindful of not wasting time, behaving decorously, and reaffirming the purpose of Question Period as a rendition of information and accounts. Speaker Bosely also emphasized that the members should be given the greatest possible freedom in regard to subject matter when posing questions.⁴

Academic literature generally concurs that the central purpose of Question Period is one of public accountability.^{5,6,7} Acting on behalf of the public, elected members have absolute freedom to question cabinet concerning its actions, with rules in place to ensure “that no issue is inviolate, that all are eligible to be examined...in the glare of the most embarrassing public spotlight.”⁸ Thus, while the stated purpose is to seek and give information, the real objective, at least on the part of the opposition, is to point out many mistakes that the government is making, and call them to public account.

However, many have suggested that the “embarrassing public spotlight” is ineffective. Criticism centres around three main objections: that Question Period lacks depth and meaningful discussion,^{9,10} that its participants lack decorum,^{11,12,13,14,15} and that the representation of that debate lacks enlightened reflection.^{16,17}

This paper examines whether Question Period in the Canadian Parliament is indeed achieving its purpose of upholding public accountability in the government, or whether it is failing for the reasons mentioned above. It goes on to assess the recent reforms offered by MP Michael Chong for enhancing the function of Question Period, and discuss whether his suggestions would be effective in the contemporary

parliamentary context.

The Embarrassing Public Spotlight

Parliamentary expert C.E.S. Franks wrote about Question Period in 1987, ten years after it became televised.¹⁸ He acknowledges many of the current criticisms of Question Period, but ultimately writes favourably of its form and function. He argues that “the challenging of the 'noble lies' of the state through the institutionalization of doubt in question period and debate is one of the unusual and underappreciated virtues of the parliamentary system.”¹⁹ Politicians are apt to tell “noble lies,” as Plato writes, and this public spectacle encourages the elected members to scrutinize everything. In some ways, it is a constant check on executive powers, but instead of the checks and balances that remain largely behind the scenes in the American republican system, this check is the most common representation of government to the people.

The public broadcast of Question Period lends it extraordinary influence. Ministers are well aware that their heated responses in Question Period are more likely to end up on the evening news than their well-rehearsed speeches during debates or more measured response later during the media scrum. Former MP Jay Hill admits the pressure of intense coverage, noting that those who do not make it on the evening newscast “become almost invisible to the public, leading to questions of effectiveness.”²⁰ Prior to serving as Speaker, Peter Milliken mused that “[Question Period] is what makes ministers think through the consequences of their actions.”²¹ Certainly, no one could accuse ministers of not taking it seriously. As reported by MP Michael Chong, when combined with preparation and post-analysis Question Period occupies at least three hours of every day for a minister and his staff.²² No doubt the sheer amount of time and attention required from the minister forces him/her to seriously consider the issues being raised.

As mentioned, there is a very good reason that so much time and energy is spent on Question Period: public visibility. Even if only the most devoted political activists actually watch the broadcast regularly, the media watches intensely, ready to pass on the interesting and controversial tidbits via political talk shows, the evening news or the next morning's paper, acting as “the arbiter of accountability.”²³ The verbatim transcript of the House, *Hansard*, ensures that even the most raucous exchanges are fully available for analysis, and ministers must be willing to defend their statements. When MPs are caught in “noble lies,” they are given no mercy.

In 2010 when Saskatchewan's Health Minister was caught

“misleading” the assembly on whether the privacy commissioner had been consulted on sharing patient information with the hospital foundation for fundraising, the Regina Leader-Post ran stories on it almost every day for a week, and the minister was eventually forced to apologize to the house. The damage to the government’s reputation cannot be discounted, for as Opposition leader Dwain Lingenfelter said at the time, “The issue of telling the truth and bringing truthful information to the assembly is fundamental to the democratic process because if you can't believe what ministers are saying in the house ... that's not the way it should work.”²⁴

Beyond catching politicians in awkward situations and demanding explanations for their decisions, Question Period also plays a more subtle role in public accountability. Agenda setting is an important element in policy making, and the media attention and public interest in Question Period affects issue saliency. The more questions the opposition asks on certain themes, the more those issues will be in the news and on the minds of citizens. One study shows a correlation between issue priorities of the opposition, as represented by their questions in Question Period, and the Canadian public, as represented by “most important problem” (MIP) questions in polling. This correlation is even stronger when considered along partisan lines, which is possible because MIP questions are usually asked alongside voting intentions.²⁵ Of course, it is impossible to say whether the interest in those issues originates from the opposition caucus or from the public, but either way these issues are more likely to receive policy attention.

A beneficial side effect to issue saliency is increased public engagement. Public accountability is only important if the public actually cares. Franks justifies the “exciting and enjoyable” format of Question Period in that its true audience is the public, and a report on the television of Question Period notes that the daily broadcast is “good political theatre.”²⁶ Although committee work is also recorded and broadcast, it is, as described by Franks, “protracted and dull,”²⁷ therefore receiving much less media attention and thus less interesting to the general public. So one could argue that occasionally outrageous behaviour is a worthwhile trade-off for consistent media coverage and public interest. Or, as Franks implies, Question Period is unruly and outrageous because the public demands it to be entertaining and exciting. Since the institution is accountable to the public, it makes sense that its format should please the public. However, this argument can be equally applied as a criticism, and will be discussed further in the next section.

To summarize, Question Period is a valuable institution because it is a check on executive powers, made more effective by its highly visible

format, ensuring that ministers must answer for their decisions to be judged by the media and the public. Moreover, issues discussed in the House roughly correlate with public concerns, thereby influencing agenda setting for public policy. The exciting format of Question Period serves to solicit public interest and increase political engagement. In the next section we examine the most common criticisms of Question Period, and determine if these attributes hold true, or if they belong to an idealized conception of Question Period that has ceased to or has yet to exist.

Theatrics for the masses

Former parliamentary intern Willem Maas describes Question Period as requiring a daily rehearsal and script, acted out like a play for the audience of the public, and he quotes MP Peter Milliken as saying “the whole ceremony is quite rehearsed.”²⁸ This description of Question Period is quite different from the spontaneous, truth-seeking institution that Franks writes about. In a setting where every detail is anticipated and planned for on both sides, it is unlikely that meaningful dialogue will result, since the MPs come armed with questions, and the ministers come armed with answers, and whether the two correlate is purely a matter of chance. In fact, the idea of Question Period as theatre touches on all major areas of current criticism—that the dialogue is simply scripted and lacks depth or meaning, that the “actors” are amateurish and lack poise, and that the “critics,” or media, do a poor job representing the spectacle to the public.

The first criticism can perhaps best be summed up by a phrase attributed to the government of Premier Gordon Campbell in B.C.: “It’s Question Period, not Answer Period.”²⁹ If this phrase represents the typical approach of ministers, then the chances of the opposition actually uncovering truth, or achieving honest answers, will be scant. In fact, the current rules for Question Period do not even require a minister to answer questions posed to him/her.³⁰ While an outright refusal to answer is unlikely to happen because it would reflect badly on the minister, in actuality many of the responses do not contain an answer. In the same documents from Premier Campbell’s office mentioned above, ministers are told to answer the best they can, but if they cannot, to “ATTACK!! – NDP record, evidence of internal conflict, etc...”³¹

Such a strategy is likely quite common, though rarely written down for the opposition to obtain and distribute widely. The Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan earned a feature article in *Maclean’s* for his highly adversarial approach and personal attacks on opposition MPs, titled

“The Man who Ate Question Period.” The best defense, the article reads, is a “merciless and vicious offense,” as embodied by Van Loan in his role as Conservative bodyguard.³² Former MP Jay Hill notes that only three responses are possible when under attack: to leave, to resort to physical violence, or to respond in kind. And since the first two responses are not feasible, one can only “resort to defending yourself verbally by shouting and heckling right back.”³³ Of course, as proven by both Campbell and Van Loan, as well as too many other politicians to name, the favoured method of attack in politics means partisanship at its worst. No matter how important the issues on the table are, politicians seem adept at simply using them as launching pads for discussing the mistakes of the previous government, or the arrogance and incompetence of the present one.

This penchant for adversarial and partisan exchanges severely compromises the effectiveness of Question Period as a check on executive powers, as it very quickly degrades into yet another game of scoring political points. The U.S. Congress has previously considered whether a similar institution would be beneficial in the republican political system. Their rejection of Question Period is premised in large measure on the perceived scarcity of substance. Instead of improving oversight, the analysis feared that “ministers answering questions [might] provide only such information as they want, and that the information obtained might not warrant the expenditure of time and effort required.”³⁴ The study also raised the potential for Question Period to further intensify partisanship, where, “Members of the Congress would value political point scoring more highly than pragmatic inquiry.” To encourage decorum and propriety the report suggested concurring the rules of legislative debate in any Question Period format.³⁵ This last proposal might be too optimistic, as one could point out that, for the most part, legislative debate in Canada is quite civil and different in tone from Question Period.

The tone and behaviour seen in Question Period is possibly the most criticized aspect of the institution. One columnist likens the broadcast to the Jerry Springer show.³⁶ While this may be hyperbole, there is no doubt that “parliamentary” no longer deserves its adjective meaning of “admissible in polite conversation or discussion; civil, courteous.”³⁷ Indeed, a report to the Privy Council Office notes that 64 per cent of Canadians believe that “debates in [Question Period] are often disrespectful, reducing public respect for the House of Commons.”³⁸ In assessing potential application of Question Period in the United States, Congress heard from observers of Question Time in the UK (very similar to Canada in many respects), that it is “the twice-weekly exhibition of schoolboy humour” and “an undergraduate pastiche of a White House

press conference.”³⁹ MP Michael Chong is even more denigrating, calling the Canadian variant “a testosterone-laden, anger-filled screaming match, characterized by aggressive body language and by those who can yell the loudest.”⁴⁰

So while Franks may have defended MPs' behaviour by the wish for excitement from the public, it seems that now, at least, that behaviour is more of a deterrent than an enticement. Of all of the criticisms leveled at Question Period, this one, on the surface at least, seems the easiest solved. The Speaker of the House is given the authority to discipline MPs, and the rules state that questions, among other things, must not “create disorder” or “make an accusation by way of a preamble.” Moreover, the government must, in its answer, “adhere to the dictates of order, decorum and parliamentary language.”⁴¹ More than one Speaker of the House has attempted to set guidelines for appropriate behaviour, including Speaker Bosley in 1986, who reminded members that “the public in large numbers do watch, and the House, recognizing that Question Period is often an intense time, should be on its best possible behaviour.”⁴²

Unfortunately, the behaviour of MPs is less influenced by the results of opinion polls or the occasional denigrating remarks of columnists, or even the chastisement of the Speaker, and more subject to the larger currents of demand found from mass media. Even Franks, who largely defends Question Period, concedes that the “superficiality of media coverage is the greatest single obstacle” to useful discussion, and feared that “the parts of parliamentary politics that reach the public are not those that explain and defend, but those that oversimplify and attack.”⁴³ Yet the media is absolutely essential to the efficacy of Question Period, as already noted, because it is the means by which the public become involved—a critical element of public accountability. But even when it is the public for whom the MPs “perform,” the media plays the role of the critic: digesting, analyzing, and breaking up into sound-bite-sized tidbits the quality and content of that performance.

Most media coverage of politics is focused on Question Period when the government is in session. Catherine Murray suggests that explanations lie in how the government has restricted media access to the parliamentary process by centralizing power in the PMO and, even more likely, the relatively inconsequential news value of committee business. The news agenda is primarily chosen based on the scope or potential for conflict,⁴⁴ which is indeed played out in political coverage. Committee coverage is low, although the debate has more substance. Question Period coverage is high because it meets the media's requirement of conflict.

There is a possibility that the televisation of Question Period has

exacerbated this problem, feeding the media's need for the 15-second clip or sound bite.⁴⁵ Media coverage ends up focusing less on substance and more on style: how aggressive and assertive or photogenic they are, or their hairstyle or dress.⁴⁶ One former political reporter explains that the most important issue for the press is an indication of the level of success or failure for the government; therefore, "the importance of issue resolution is not the actual substance of the resolution but the way in which it was accomplished and the political consequences it has set off."⁴⁷ In all of these representations, framing is far more important than content, whether it is a short and snappy story on the evening news, or an index of success for the government in power.

The reason why media representation is simplistic or inflammatory comes back to the preceding discussion of public demand. If the media selects stories according to their level of conflict, it is because those are the stories that the public is assumed to desire. Former journalist, turned political communications strategist, Elly Alboim claims that only 30 per cent of the public are active and interested in public affairs, and that the other 70 per cent are largely unconcerned with politics, except at election time and during major events. Because the "uninterested" represent the largest portion of consumers, news agencies seek their attention, "and proceed to select and redefine content to interest them and pander to them."⁴⁸ In other words, media coverage aims for the lowest common denominator, resulting in further distortion of an event already suffering from a tendency toward partisan, hollow discussion.

As a result, the visibility of Question Period has been enhanced "out of all proportion to its value,"⁴⁹ receiving the largest share of attention while achieving the least amount of governance. Even though Question Period has the qualities necessary for public accountability, sufficient distortion and dilution take place as to render it largely ineffective. Partisan attacks and political jousting result in exciting exchanges that are deemed newsworthy, and the public eagerly watches the battles, all the while complaining about the behaviour of those they elected for just those qualities that hold their attention. But as much as the system feeds itself and propagates empty and antagonistic exchanges, it may be that the tide of demand could turn the opposite direction. For that to happen, the public and the media have a shared responsibility to demand appropriate parliamentary behaviour and substance, and parliamentarians are, of course, responsible for their own behaviour in reacting to that demand.

Hope for Reform

Recently, MP Michael Chong's efforts to reform Question Period illustrates that at least some parliamentarians are interested in change. His motion (Motion 517), which ultimately died when the House was dissolved earlier spring, called on the House Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to examine the following potential measures with respect to Question Period:

- i. elevating decorum and fortifying the use of discipline by the Speaker, to strengthen the dignity and authority of the House,
- ii. lengthening the amount of time given for each question and each answer,
- iii. examining the convention that the Minister questioned need not respond,
- iv. allocating half the questions each day for Members, whose names and order of recognition would be randomly selected,
- v. dedicating Wednesday exclusively for questions to the Prime Minister,
- vi. dedicating Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday for questions to Ministers other than the Prime Minister ... based on a published schedule^{50 51}

The first proposal has already been mentioned in this paper, as it seems an obvious solution to poor behaviour. While Chong does not offer ideas on how to enforce what has already been tried, MP Jay Hill's written response to his motion suggests that a change in decorum will only work if the House has "a disciplinarian Speaker willing to exert his or her authority," and, more importantly, that Speaker has the support of all of the House and Party leaders.⁵² Such a level of unanimous support would, undoubtedly, increase the chance for lasting change, especially if MPs are no longer faced with the impossible challenge of how to react to heckling from across the aisle.

However, as discussed, the undercurrent of demand for this level of theatrics is complicated and beyond the control of the House. Yet if some measure of control were enforced and MPs did, in fact, behave more fittingly, then the media may be forced to give more thoughtful coverage and pay more attention to the issues, since their actions would no longer be louder than their words. Of course, it is just as likely that political coverage would be scaled down, or that the media would find new ways to elicit emotional outbursts, perhaps in the media scrums that follow Question Period. Hill suggests that for real change, the media should not turn those who behave poorly "into some sort of folk heroes," but instead

they should be “castigated as being immature and given a black mark on their career.”⁵³ But for such a radical turnabout in media coverage, the public demand must support it. However, if this double current of demand shifts, the potential for real change is greatly increased.

The balance of Chong’s proposal aims to elevate the quality of the verbal exchanges. If politicians have more time to speak, he reasons, the quality of both questions and answers should improve.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, longer time allotments for questions and answers in provincial legislatures do not necessarily result in intelligent discussion. Indeed, in Saskatchewan at least, it simply gives the minister the chance to reach even further back in history when listing the many wrongs of the previous government.

The idea of giving ministers (including the Prime Minister) scheduled days on which to answer questions is certainly a good one, in that the executive does not need to spend such a massive amount of time on this daily event, and can spend more time focusing on their portfolios. However, it is less obvious how this will contribute to the quality of dialogue. Ministers already thoroughly prepare for Question Period, and doing this on two days instead of five is unlikely to change their “plan of attack.” If anything, answers could become even more scripted. Britain’s Question Time operates on a similar schedule to what Chong describes, and the criticism is no kinder on the quality of their dialogue.⁵⁵

If nothing else, Chong’s motion draws attention to the crisis facing this institution and the need for reform. Hill’s response and written support for the motion proves that Chong is not alone in his wish for positive change. But since Chong’s ideas for reform do not reach the crux of the problem, media representation, they are unlikely to result in substantive change. Hill recognizes the media’s important role, but without suggesting any solutions, laments that until the nature of that coverage is changed, “[he is] wary that any true change will be made.”⁵⁶ In the committee debate of the motion, MP Libby Davies also recognized the vicious cycle of the media’s need for sound bites and the parliamentarians need to be heard, and suggested, “Maybe we should invite the media to the committee as well and have a discussion with it about decorum, question period and how it works.”⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the entirety of the mass media cannot be invited to committee, sat down in a chair, and lectured on the need for gravitas in Question Period. Yet the widespread support shown during the committee’s first hearing does prove the appetite for reform, even if the barriers prove insurmountable. However, that appetite will have to be tested some other time, because the bill died with the election called on March 26, 2011.

The problems facing Question Period reflect institutional flaws:

firstly, the dysfunctional relationship between government and the media; and secondly, the problem of public engagement with politics and public demand for quality information and analysis. Both are immense topics that this paper only begins to address, and have much larger implications beyond the effectiveness of Question Period. It is no wonder then, that Question Period is such an important and controversial institution, given that it touches on two nerve centres of democracy—mass media and public engagement. The institution of democracy demands public accountability of the government, but democratic citizens must demand it also, or its functionality is crippled. As Franks writes, “to institutionalize this type of accountability in a political system is no mean feat”;⁵⁸ however, to make that accountability meaningful and effective is a challenge that still needs to be met.

NOTES

- ¹ House of Commons, (2010): http://www.parl.gc.ca/compendium/web-content/c_g_questions-e.htm
- ² Ibid.
- ³ House of Commons, (2009): <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/procedure-book-livre/Document.aspx?sbdid=3F818022-AD6E-411C-B495-EC000CF32935&sbpid=E686AB38-E1ED-4484-88A2-16A2A9294D66&Language=E&Mode=1>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Walker, H.W., (1951): 461-468.
- ⁶ Franks, C.E.S., (1987).
- ⁷ Docherty, David Campbell, (1997)
- ⁸ Franks, supra note 6: 154.
- ⁹ Glassman, Matthew, (2009).
- ¹⁰ Chong, Michael, (2008).
- ¹¹ Frontier Centre for Public Policy, (2007): <http://site.ebrary.com.libproxy.uregina.ca:2048/lib/uregina/docDetail.action>.
- ¹² Kheiriddin, Tasha, (2010): sec. Full Comment.
- ¹³ Wherry, Aaron, (2008).
- ¹⁴ Glassman, supra note 9.
- ¹⁵ Chong, supra note 10.
- ¹⁶ Franks, supra note 6.
- ¹⁷ Robertson, James R., (2005).
- ¹⁸ Franks, supra note 6.
- ¹⁹ Ibid: 156.
- ²⁰ Hill, Jay, (2010).
- ²¹ Maas, Willem, (1998): 1
- ²² Chong, supra note 10.
- ²³ Alboim, Elly, (2001): 2
- ²⁴ Hall, Angela, (2010).
- ²⁵ Penner, Erin, Blidook, Kelly, and Soroka, Stuart, (2006): 1006.
- ²⁶ Robertson, supra note 18: 4.
- ²⁷ Franks, supra note 10: 147.
- ²⁸ Maas, supra note 21: 6.
- ²⁹ Smith, Charlie (2009): <http://www.straight.com/article-205046/premier-gordon-campbells-office-its-question-period-not-answer-period>.
- ³⁰ House of Commons, supra note 1.
- ³¹ Smith, supra note 29.
- ³² Wherry, supra note 13.
- ³³ Hill, supra note 20.
- ³⁴ Glassman, supra note 14.
- ³⁵ Ibid: 26.
- ³⁶ Kheiriddin, supra note 12.
- ³⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, (2010): http://dictionary.oed.com.libproxy.uregina.ca:2048/cgi/entry/50171825?query_type=word&queryword=parliamentarian&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha.

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- ³⁸ Frontier Centre for Public Policy, *supra* note 11: 5.
³⁹ Glassman, *supra* note 24: 28.
⁴⁰ Chong, *supra* note 10.
⁴¹ House of Commons, *supra* note 1.
⁴² House of Commons, *supra* note 3.
⁴³ Franks, *supra* note 6: 159-60.
⁴⁴ Murray, Catherine, (2007): 525-550.
⁴⁵ Robertson, *supra* note 18: 4.
⁴⁶ Maas, *supra* note 21.
⁴⁷ Alboim, *supra* note 23: 4.
⁴⁸ *Ibid*: 5.
⁴⁹ Robertson, *supra* note 18: 4.
⁵⁰ Chong, Michael, (n.d.): <http://www.mikechong.ca/news2.asp?ID=133>.
⁵¹ Chong, Michael, (2010): 26
⁵² Hill, *supra* note 20
⁵³ *Ibid*.
⁵⁴ Chong, *supra* note 10.
⁵⁵ Glassman, *supra* note 14.
⁵⁶ Hill, *supra* note 20.
⁵⁷ Chong, Michael, Davies, Libbey, Jennings, Marlene, et al., (2010).
⁵⁸ Franks, *supra* note 6: 154.

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