
Observations on the Theory and Practice of Parliamentary Government

by Ashley Cochran and Heather Cochran

Several legislatures have internship programs which provide an opportunity for university graduates to observe the real world of parliamentary government. This article by two such interns looks at some reasons for the gulf between what is expected and what is provided by our elected institutions.

“Well, I guess that’s why it’s called Question Period, not Answer Period!” By the end of our term as interns at the British Columbia Legislature, this phrase had become a common refrain among both participants and observers of the daily Question Periods. As recent Political Science Graduates and rookies to the legislative scene, however, the quip was of more than a passing interest. It spoke to what we found most shocking – and most frustrating – about our first hand experience of our system of parliamentary democracy.

In our first year Political Science classes we learned that parliaments were “talking places” – the buildings in which first nobility, and then elected officials, developed solutions to public policy problems and debated the issues of the day – and of course the odd scandal too. While this may be a simplified and perhaps optimistic reading of the function of legislatures, it is also the reading which informs many proposals to reform and renew this fundamental democratic institution. This reading also speaks to our collective desire for parliaments to be places for discursive engagement among our elected representatives. It is, after all, figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Pierre Elliott Trudeau – the brightest minds and the best orators – who fill our political imagination and play the role of archetypal legislator in our political mythology.

Watching debate in the BC Legislature, we found that there was certainly no shortage of ‘talking’. But while

facts, messages and information abounded, they type of substantive dialogue and conversation that ideally lead to elucidation and edification were often at a premium. In Question Period and debate alike, ministers and members often spoke past each other in a battle of messages. The tendency to speak in sound bites and avoid rather than rebut opponents’ arguments diminished the potential for dialogue inside the chamber. Legislators, however, often invoked a different audience and implicitly addressed their remarks to this group outside of the chamber. This group is the public.

Indeed, it is the observers of legislative debates who are frequently invoked by legislators, and who are the intended recipients of the messages delivered during events like Question Period. The clip format used for stories in the evening news creates both an imperative and a receptacle for the thirty second sound bites legislators use to communicate with the public, and with voters. If one has only a limited amount of time in which to communicate with this important group, it is understandable that one would want to be seen delivering a positive message rather than attempting to engage with an opponent in a discussion that could easily be construed as ‘bad news’.

In many ways the public is now the intended recipient of legislators’ statements in the House, and it is the public that has become an increasingly important party in a ‘conversation’ that had previously been largely confined within the walls of legislatures. While the effects of the media on politics have been widely studied, it is the shifting locus of conversation from within legislatures and out to the public that we wish to discuss here. It is our belief that developments in communications technology

Ashley Cochran and Heather Cochran were legislative interns at the British Columbia Legislative Assembly in 2007.

and the media have transformed legislatures from 'talking places' and forums for discussion into a medium for communication with a remote audience. While politics is often likened to theatre, we believe that legislatures themselves have in many ways become theatres or stages upon which legislators ask questions and deliver statements not so much to elicit a response from their colleagues, but to convey a message to an 'audience'.

The transformation of the legislature from forum to medium, however, comes at the expense of the conversation and dialogue it was intended to foster and that it could foster in the broader society as well. Today, however, legislators' tendency to use parliaments as stages makes their colleagues less conversation partners than foils for their presentations to viewers. While the public represents a new addition to this 'conversation', their status as audience inherently limits their ability to engage in any discourse with legislators. Like the audience in a theatre, this audience is expected to be one in the most literal sense: a group that listens and watches, but that can do nothing more than observe. This transformed parliament generates no expectation let alone avenue for the audience to communicate with those inside the 'talking place'. The attention legislators give the public in implicitly directing their comments to them is thus less democratizing than it may appear on the surface. The conversation lost within the legislature itself is thus not recouped through legislators' engagement with the public.

This transformation constitutes a change in the mode of communication that defines parliaments as 'talking places'. In essence, we contend that the 'talking' which occurs in parliaments is increasingly directed at an audience located outside of the 'place'. The fact that the intended audience is located outside of the 'talking place' and that communication with it occurs at a distance has several important implications for our main thesis. First, it is not only the case that this audience has little opportunity to engage with the speakers, but when the audience

or some subsection of its members does find its way into the 'talking place', they are not so much represented as popular theories of democracy would suggest, but are rather made into representations. That is to say, they are abstracted from the intricacies of their social contexts. While this is in some respects an inescapable consequence of the nature of representative democracy, it is greatly exacerbated by a mode of communication that mitigates against conversation and gives subjects the appearance of objects or props in a performance.

Additionally, we believe that the mode of communication that has come to dominate parliament is a source of disengagement on the part of the public, or 'audience'. Although electoral and institutional reforms are often seen as the solution to rising public cynicism, we would contend that such changes cannot be entirely effective until the mode of communication we have identified above is adequately interrogated and addressed. And while it is frequently presumed that declining citizen engagement is driven by forces outside of political institutions, we would contend that to the extent that parliament itself is becoming less and less of a place for engagement, it plays a significant role in fuelling popular disengagement.

In particular, we believe that the fragmented nature of the 'conversations' that tend to characterize legislatures plays a role in deterring the public from becoming more involved in the political process. Legislators' statements are often seen as being nothing more than 'spin' and are frequently viewed by the public with a large measure of distrust and boredom. Increasing the level of genuine engagement within parliament would re-create an important space for citizen engagement.

This is but one piece in the puzzle of reinvigorating our democracy. Much like Question Period, our term as interns left us with more questions than answers. Our time inside the legislature gave us valuable insight into how parliaments work, how we might like them to work, and what separates the two.