
What to do about Question Period: A Roundtable

Michael Chong, MP; Marlene Jennings, MP; Mario Laframboise, MP; Libby Davies, MP; Tom Lukiwski, MP

On May 7, 2010 a motion calling for the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to recommend changes to the Standing Orders and other conventions governing Oral Questions was introduced by the member for Wellington–Halton Hills. Among other things the Committee would consider ways of (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 in a way that would require Ministers be present two of the four days to answer questions concerning their portfolio, based on a published schedule that would rotate and that would ensure an equitable distribution of Ministers across the four days. The motion was debated on May 27, 2010. The following extracts are taken from that debate.



Michal Chong (Conservative, Wellington–Halton Hills): Canadians know that something is not quite right with their democratic institutions. They may not know exactly what processes, procedures and rules need to be changed but they know their institutions need to be fixed and they want them to be reformed.

We need to respond to these concerns and we need to reform Parliament. Parliamentary reform begins with the reform of question period. If the heart of our democracy is Parliament, then the heart of Parliament is question period, the 45 minute period each day where members of Parliament ask questions of the government in order to hold it to account. Question period is televised and each day its proceedings are relayed by the national media to millions of Canadians.

If one thing has been made abundantly clear to me as a member of Parliament for the last number of years and to all of us in this House, it is that ordinary Canadians are disappointed with the level of behaviour in question period and they want their parliamentarians to focus on the issues that really matter to them.

Since this motion was made public, I have received phone calls, letters and emails from citizens across this country. From Kingston, a proud member of the Canadian military wrote me:

I have served in the Canadian Forces for over 24 years and the lack of civility in the House of Commons has been an occasional topic of conversation throughout the years. I've often thought it extremely ironic that my elected political leaders could sometimes be so immature and exhibit such appalling behaviour when my fellow soldiers, sailors and airmen are required to uphold such high standards of deportment both in and out of uniform.

This concern has also been voiced to me by school teachers, truck drivers, grade five students and boardroom executives. In fact, teachers have told me that the level of behaviour in question period is such that they will not take their classes here anymore. This is the surest sign that question period needs to be reformed.

More than four out of ten Canadians refused to vote in the last election. This is a sign that our Parliament needs to be reformed. Question period has become more about scoring cheap political points rather than about the issues that really matter to Canadians.

Question period has become more about scoring cheap political points rather than dealing with the issues that really matter to Canadians.

Question period has become a time where behaviour that is not permitted in any boardroom, dining room, or classroom regularly occurs here in the people's room. As a result, there is a growing divide between Canadians who are becoming more and more apolitical and a Parliament that is becoming more and more partisan.

We, as members of Parliament, need to bridge that gap by reforming Parliament and regaining the respect of Canadians. That is why today I move Motion No. 517, a proposal to reform question period. It contains six specific proposals to address question period and make it focus on the issues that really matter to Canadians.

First, the motion calls for the elevation of decorum and the strengthening of the authority of the Speaker.

From teachers with students on class trips to boardroom executives, Canadians want behaviour in question period improved. The current behaviour is unacceptable in any social setting, let alone this country's Parliament. Pleas for better decorum are insufficient. We, as members of Parliament, need to give a mandate to the Speaker of this House to enforce the rules already in the Standing Orders and in current convention.

The second proposal is to lengthen the time given to ask a question and the time given to answer a question. Currently, 35 seconds are allocated to the questioner and 35 seconds to the answerer. It is an insufficient amount of time. As a result, we get rhetorical questions and rhetorical answers.

The lengthening of time given to ask and to answer a question is something that was done here at one point in time. The short 35-second rule is a recent introduction to this Parliament. For decades, parliamentarians had a minute to a minute and a half to ask a question, and ministers had a minute to a minute and a half to respond to questions. Lengthening the amount of time given to ask and to answer questions will lead to more substantive questions and more substantive answers.

Writing in the *National Post*, Tasha Kheiridd opined that:

the current 35-second format may produce tailor-made soundbites for the evening news, but hardly allows for depth or reflection.

She added that the motion:

is supported by research done on Western European Parliaments where it was found that

extending the question and answer time made for more substantive exchanges.

The third proposal contained in the motion calls on the committee to re-examine the convention that a minister need not respond to the questioner. Sometimes I understand it is not possible for a minister to respond, as they are out of the country in carrying out their duties representing Canada abroad. Other times the problem is that the 35-second rule results in questions that are rhetorical and answers that become rhetorical, and the government, for good reasons, chooses to designate a particular minister to respond to those rhetorical questions.

Thus, if we are going to overhaul question period, if we are going to have more substantive questions and more substantive answers, then we should also examine the convention that a minister need not respond.

Fourth, I am proposing in the motion to allocate half the questions per day to backbench members of Parliament. Currently, in question period, members of Parliament may only ask questions in the House if they receive the prior approval of their House leader and party whips. This, in my view, is a denial of the right of the backbench members of Parliament to represent their constituents and to ask questions of the government in relation to their constituencies.

The introduction of the approval of the House leader and the whip for a member to ask a question in question period in all parties is a recent practice. It is not something that was present here before the 1990s. In fact, I was speaking with a former parliamentarian who sat in this House for over 20 years in the 1970s and 1980s. He told me that he was shocked to find out that the Speaker no longer recognized members in the House spontaneously during question period. In fact, he told me that up until his time in Parliament, the first two or three rounds in question period went to the leaders and their designates. After that, it was backbench members of Parliament who could catch the eye of the Speaker and rise and ask questions that were of concern to their constituents. We need to go back to some sort of system like that in order to strengthen the role of this legislature.

Speaking on *The Sunday Edition* with Michael Enright on our nation's public broadcaster, former New Democrat leader and respected parliamentarian Ed Broadbent said, "We still have to make changes to magnify the role of individual MPs". He added, "It is up to individual MPs to assert themselves and to assert their democratic rights".

The final two proposals contained in my motion would dedicate specific days for the Prime Minister and other ministers of the Crown to attend question period. Presently, preparing for question period requires almost four hours a day per minister. There are roughly forty ministers of the Crown in the government. Each minister spends four hours a day either in question period or preparing for it. That is not unlike what has happened in previous governments as well.

In a typical question period, only about five or six, maybe eight or nine, of those ministers actually answer questions. In other words, thirty ministers of the various ministries each spend four hours a day preparing for and sitting through question period and yet contribute nothing or provide no answers. As a result, a lot of time and resources are used unproductively.

I am suggesting that we keep the amount of time dedicated in the House for question period the same, but am arguing for a rotational schedule that would better allow the government to use its resources and time wisely, and also allow the opposition to focus on specific issues on specific days.

I therefore hope that members will accept and support this call to start the debate on the reform of question period.

Canadians want their Parliament reformed. They want their democratic institutions fixed and they want the level of debate elevated. This motion is a first, but important, step toward that parliamentary reform.

I want to end on a final note about the great parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, who once observed: "All government—indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, every prudent act—is founded on compromise and barter." I am prepared to embrace the spirit of Mr. Burke's observation. I am open to friendly amendments that support the spirit of this motion in order to build a consensus, so I urge my fellow members to support this motion.



Marlene Jennings (Liberal, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce-Lachine): I would like to say from the outset, on behalf of the official opposition, that the Liberal Party intends to support the motion. We believe this is a commendable initiative. We believe it is time, once again, to look at the way oral question period is set up and its purpose.

We are quite pleased that the member for Wellington-Halton Hills has confirmed to the House that he is open to suggestion and changes. He wants his motion to be adopted in the House and referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. He also wants members of this committee, of which I am one, to do a comprehensive study in order to improve the content and the form of question period.

I would just like to give a little bit of information to this House regarding Australia and the United Kingdom. It is my understanding that in the United Kingdom, the prime minister's questions take place every Wednesday when the British House of Commons is sitting for a period of thirty minutes, and that this particular practice was established in 1961. Members of Parliament wishing to ask a question must submit their names on the *Order Paper*. The names are then drawn by lottery to produce the order in which they will be called by the speaker.

The leader of the opposition is traditionally the first member of Parliament from the opposition benches to be called after the first question, and that is whether that first question comes from the government or from the opposition benches. As well, the leader of the opposition is allowed six supplementary questions in two groups of three. Finally, if the Prime Minister is away on official business, then a substitute answers questions. Those are just some of the procedures that exist in the British House of Commons. It is a stark difference from what we have here in Canada.

In Australia, question time is an institution in the Commonwealth Parliament and in all state Parliaments. Questions to government ministers normally alternate between government members and the opposition with the opposition going first.

The House of Representatives standing orders allow the prime minister to terminate question time by moving that further questions be placed on the notice paper. It appears that it is possible for the prime minister to prematurely terminate question time, although this is almost unheard of due to the criticism it would generate.

There is also no time limit for answers in the House of Representatives of Australia and of its members states, but a time limit applies in the Senate of Australia.

Finally, the Parliament of the State of Victoria allows for a set number of "questions without notice" to be asked of ministers, proportionately from each party represented in the House

Some members have suggested that should this

motion be adopted in its current state, that there would be a danger that members of the opposition might not receive the number of questions proportionate to the number of seats that they hold in this House.

I think that is a very important point. We should look at how to do it in a way to ensure that each opposition party would receive their proportionate numbers. There might be a lottery for the Liberals, a lottery for the Bloc, and a lottery for the NDP, and they would have the proportionate number of questions.

I also think that it would be interesting for the Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to look at the legislatures here in Canada. In the legislature of my province, the beautiful province of Quebec, during oral question period at the National Assembly, the time allotted for questions is much longer than the time we are entitled to in the House.

I was a great fan of the National Assembly before coming to Parliament Hill and I must say that, with a few exceptions, it truly allows the opposition parties and the government to get into a topic and address it in a more detailed manner. I found that this gave those watching, including myself at the time, a better understanding of the issues. I understood the issues better and the reasons why a party adopted a position on a particular issue and why another party defended a different position. I understood better why the government had made a certain decision or adopted a certain policy. The members of the opposition had more time to ask questions and the minister had more time to answer.



Mario Laframboise (Bloc Québécois, Argenteuil-Papineau-Mirabel): We have had a minority government since 2006. Inevitably, this government is feeling a little oppressed by opposition questions. Prior to that, we had the sponsorship scandal, and question period in the House had a significant impact on what happened in Canadian politics.

If we want to change how things are done, it is very important that the opposition not lose any of its power to put questions to those who deserve them. At the time of the sponsorship scandal, Alfonso Gagliano was bombarded with questions every day. So we have to look at how the Conservative member's motion will affect this way of doing things.

The Bloc Québécois agrees with the first para:

- (i) elevating decorum and fortifying the use of

discipline by the Speaker, to strengthen the dignity and authority of the House,

We have already mentioned this many times in the House. Of course, we believe the Speaker has the power to elevate decorum. That is his responsibility, and he must exercise it.

The motion contains other paragraphs:

- (ii) lengthening the amount of time given for each question and each answer,

I listened to the speech given by the Liberal member just before me. She mentioned the Quebec National Assembly. We must not forget that at this time, the House has two and a half times more members than the National Assembly. If the Conservatives' reforms for the House of Commons go ahead, this would add about another 30 members and the House of Commons would have three times more members than the National Assembly. So it is only natural that, during question period, the questions and answers are longer because there are fewer members.

As I have already mentioned to the Conservative member who moved the motion, the problem is that we do not want to see the number of opposition questions decreased as the amount of time for questions and answers is lengthened. Obviously, it was not clear. What he said was that we would have to ask shorter questions. Why would the Bloc Québécois ask 30-second or 20-second questions? Because it wants to keep the same number of questions it has now. Otherwise, question period would have to be extended. But extending question period would affect committees and all kinds of other things. Things are this way for a reason.

The third paragraph states:

- (iii) examining the convention that the Minister questioned need not respond,

We have always said that this is question period, not answer period. The ministers could always claim that they answered us, and then provide unsatisfactory answers. I have to wonder about that paragraph.

- (iv) allocating half the questions each day for Members, whose names and order of recognition would be randomly selected,

Once again, if the point is to allow every member in the House to be eligible for the random selection, so just as many government members as opposition members, that means that government members would get more questions, and the opposition would get fewer. That means that we would not have been able to ask the 440 questions that were asked during the sponsorship

scandal, and that the Bloc Québécois would have fewer opportunities to clean up Parliament.

(v) dedicating Wednesday exclusively for questions to the Prime Minister, and

(vi) dedicating Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday for questions to Ministers other than the Prime Minister in a way that would require Ministers...

That would mean that if a current affair involves a minister and his day is Thursday or Tuesday of the following week, we would have to wait a week before being able to question that minister. That makes no sense. We would have to wait a week before we could ask the Prime Minister a question on Wednesday. Take, for example, the effect that question period had on the sponsorship scandal. Every day it helped reveal the scope of the largest scandal involving the Canadian government in our country's history.

Obviously, at first glance it would be understandable to agree with the principle of this motion. We agree that decorum in the House needs to be improved and we will support any measure to that effect. But, the motion moved by the Conservative member seems to want to muzzle the opposition and we will never agree to that. I can understand that the Liberal Party, which was hit hard by the sponsorship scandal, will support the motion. However, they will understand that the Bloc Québécois, which wants increased transparency in this House, will oppose any measure that would limit the opposition's time to ask questions. Obviously, our discussions and positions will always be aimed at increasing transparency.

I realize that our Conservative colleague has reached out to us, but we have to say that it was the Conservative Party that prorogued Parliament when under a great deal of pressure about the treatment of Afghan detainees. It was this government that refused to turn over the documents, and the Speaker had to make a historic ruling to force the government to turn over those documents. And it is this government that is refusing to allow political staff to appear before committees, so we have to watch out. When I read the motion as written, I feel that the intent is to shut down and muzzle the opposition, but we will always oppose any attempt by the Conservative Party to muzzle us.

This Parliament has always worked a certain way, and I think the results have been good. Among other things, our approach exposed the sponsorship scandal. I have a problem with the Conservatives trying once again to amend the act to prevent people from exposing scandals involving governments in power. We support the first paragraph of the motion, which says that we

must elevate decorum and fortify the use of discipline by the Speaker, but we do not support any of the other paragraphs.



Libby Davies (New Democratic Party, Vancouver East): This motion is a very genuine attempt to be thoughtful about what goes on in this place particularly around question period, and to offer some constructive proposals for us to look at and debate, and hopefully send to the Procedure and House Affairs Committee.

The NDP will be supporting the motion. We believe it should go to committee and there should be a very thorough and detailed debate. Having said that, I do have some concerns that I will put forward.

I want to note that the NDP has long been a champion of parliamentary reform in this House. In terms of recent history, we can go back to the 1985 *McGrath Report*, which was about 100 pages in length and dealt with parliamentary reform. Bill Blaikie, who was a New Democratic Party MP and later became the dean of the House, was very involved in the *McGrath Report*. That report came forward with a number of parliamentary reforms which actually were adopted.

I have to say that since that time, very little change has taken place in the House. We have had a few changes around Standing Orders. Ironically, when the Conservatives were in opposition, we had the changes around concurrence motions, for example, which gave a little more diversity in terms of scope for debate, but beyond that, we really have not dealt with many of the things that need to be looked at.

Certainly our party has brought forward motions in the House, for example, on prorogation and the need to have limits to ensure there are not the abuses with prorogation that we have seen recently with the current government and the Prime Minister. To us this is all part of the debate about desperately needed parliamentary reform.

Even going back to 1992, our member, Dawn Black, was a member of a special advisory committee to the Speaker on decorum. I looked at that report. It was a very good report, but nothing really came out of it.

In 2006, after there had been a few incidents in the House that were just outrageous in terms of sexism, chauvinism and people being completely out of line, there was a review by the Procedure and House Affairs Committee. Dawn Black went to that committee

because she had been on the earlier committee. Again there was a big debate about decorum, but the actual report that came out of the Procedure and House Affairs Committee, the 37th report, indicated what some members thought especially in terms of decorum, but no action was taken.

We do not have a very good record of dealing with these issues and looking at some of the substantive changes that need to be made. Nevertheless, this motion gives us the opportunity to say to the committee that we need to have a serious debate about decorum, about question period, and to look at what changes might be made.

I would like to go through a couple of the specific suggestions that are being put forward by the member.

The idea that there should be longer questions and answers is a good one in principle. One of the problems is that oral question period is confined to 45 minutes. Because there are four parties in the House, and it is all apportioned by party, the time to pose a question shrank to 35 seconds. There are a number of variables. There is the issue of making sure that people have adequate time to ask proper questions and hopefully to get adequate replies. However, unless we extended the time for oral question period, we would be very concerned that as the fourth party, or any other fourth party or even a third party, we would lose questions if there were a longer time to pose a question. We have to think about these different variables.

Long gone are the days when Tommy Douglas would stand and ask a question that was very rational and thoughtful, and maybe a couple of minutes long. There were no TV cameras then. We have to recognize that television and the media's focus on question period has really changed what takes place in this House.

I find it interesting that the member quoted some media commentators who said that they too would like to see more decorum. It is a bit ironic, because it is like the chicken and the egg. We ask these questions which are 35 seconds long. It is getting that media clip. The media are chasing it down and the more outrageous it is, the more coverage there will be. It goes around and around.

If we are to change that, if we are to bring back decorum, if we are to look at question period being a more serious part of the work that we do, it also means the media as well will have to change its view of the debate and its view on what takes place in this chamber. 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. I agree that people who come to this place and sit in the visitors' gallery are pretty horrified at the behaviour.

Then there is the idea that there might be an exclusive day for the Prime Minister. In fact, a number of the suggestions come from the United Kingdom model, and I have seen some of that. There are some interesting ideas to allow members to have a space where they can ask questions that are more local, or to know that a particular minister will be in the House. However, we also have to know that the main accountability of the government from the opposition has to happen every day in terms of the questions for the Prime Minister. Only having one day to do that, which is the British model, would be a very significant difference. We would have some concerns about whether we would deal with the level of accountability that we need to see.

There are probably other issues at which we could look. Most of all, from our point of view as New Democrats, in supporting this motion, there has to be a genuine discussion among the parties about how to deal with this. It has to be a non-partisan discussion and it has to look at parliamentary reform overall. I agree the public is very focused on question period because the media is focused on that, but there are other democratic reforms as well.

We had our motion in the House on prorogation, which was approved by a majority of members. We have also brought forward initiatives on proportional representation, which to us is the most fundamental element of democratic reform. It deals with the very manner in which we are elected. The way we are elected now is not representative of the votes that we get across the country. Therefore, the very makeup of this chamber is not reflective of the real standings in terms of the percentage of votes that we get through our parties.

We are willing to look at question period. However, we also want to make a strong pitch here that this is more than about question period. This is about democratic reform and that has to include ideas around electoral reform, proportional representation and the issue of prorogation. In fact, we will be bringing forward a bill on that. These things that are immediately before us.

The member obviously has put some thought into his motion. We should encourage the committee to look at these proposals and maybe look at what goes on in other jurisdictions and look at some reforms that could take place. On the question of decorum, if we mean

it, we have to be prepared to say that changes have to take place. On the idea that the Speaker has enough tools, maybe he or she does. However, all parties have to agree and we have to ensure that the decorum in this place is elevated because people are truly shocked by what they see. As the people's representatives in this place, we should not be seeing that.



Tom Lukiwski (Conservative, Regina-Lumsden-Lake Centre): I believe there is not one member in the House who has not been approached at least one time by a constituent complaining about the antics or the lack of decorum in question period. That alone should make all of us take pause as to our own actions.

Therefore, this motion perhaps is overdue, but also it bears careful examination. Many of the members who spoke before me this evening have suggested potential changes to the motion. The member for Wellington-Halton Hills has said that he would be open to friendly amendments because he recognizes the fact that there is no monopoly on good ideas.

The concept and the spirit of the motion is excellent, but also there can be improvements to the motion. I would like to go over two or three ideas that I would suggest for the member for Wellington-Halton Hills on things I think would strengthen and improve the motion. I would like to present them now for members in this place for their consideration as well.

The first point I would recommend that needs to be changed is a portion of the member's motion that states the Procedure and House Affairs Committee should recommend changes to the Standing Orders regarding question period.

Question period is not governed and bound by Standing Orders. It is a convention, and an informal convention at that, that has really guided question period practices over the last 100 years.

To recommend that the Standing Orders be changed to reflect what question period should look like is somewhat restrictive. Rather than saying the Procedure and House Affairs Committee should recommend changes to the Standing Orders, it should merely recommend that a study be taken by the procedure and House affairs committee. At the end of the day, the committee may not recommend changes to the Standing Orders. It may recommend a number of other things, but it should not be restricted to looking only at Standing Orders. The phrase "to study" is far more encompassing than to recommend changes because this needs very careful study.

Also another portion of the member's motion that says we should examine the convention that ministers need not respond to questions directly asked of them, in other words, suggesting that ministers must respond directly to questions, I am not sure if that is quite what we need.

As the member for Wellington-Halton Hills pointed out, many times there is a good reason for a particular minister not to respond. To force a minister to respond to a question would be a little restrictive.

We have seen many times where, because of the complexity of files, several ministers share responsibilities. Sometimes, inadvertently I am sure, members of the opposition ask a question to a certain minister when it should have been asked to a different minister. That portion of the member's motion is a little restrictive and we should change that, if not outright delete it.

I would also suggest that the six month period that the member for Wellington-Halton Hills is suggesting that the procedure and house affairs utilize to conduct this study is a little too short.

Editor's Note: Debate on this motion was adjourned and no further action was taken before the House adjourned for the summer on June 17, 2010.