
Reflections on Reforming Question Period

Hon. Jay Hill

There has been much discussion recently about ways to reform Question Period. Much of it has centred around motion M-517 by Michael Chong. (See Autumn 2010 issue for a full discussion of this motion). In this article a longtime MP and former House Leader put the issue into a longer term perspective.



I would like to start by congratulating my colleague, Michael Chong, for his efforts to reform Question Period in the House of Commons. The motion he has brought before the House is an ambitious one. Using the United Kingdom as an example, Mr. Chong has clearly and succinctly outlined how he believes Question

Period can be changed for the better.

In the original motion Mr. Chong requested that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs consider the reforms and report to the House with recommended changes. During an initial debate on the motion and through consultation the Government put forward an amendment to focus the House committee study on ways to ensure the effectiveness of Question Period, including an examination of the practices of other Parliaments that may be relevant to our system.

If successful this will be one of the largest overhauls to Question Period in our nation's history.

That being said, this is far from the first time Members of Parliament have examined how to institute better decorum during Question Period.

When I was first elected in 1993 as a member of the Reform Party of Canada, it was clear that Canadians wanted change. The election had produced the largest turnover of MPs in Canadian parliamentary history with the majority Progressive Conservative government reduced to just two seats from 151. The NDP also fell below official party status, electing only nine members. This turnover meant that almost 200 MPs were either heading to Ottawa as a Member of Parliament for the first time, or in a few cases, re-elected following a break in service.

With 52 seats, two shy of forming the official opposition at the time, the Reform Party came to Ottawa looking to change the way politics was done – including Question Period. For the first few months of the 35th Parliament in 1994 we asked probing, thoughtful and respectful questions, sat in silence during the answers, and only occasionally applauded one of our questioners, usually our leader Preston Manning.

The Liberal front bench hurled insults, shouted and jeered as usual, while the media constantly derided us as “ineffective” and “naïve”. Even our supporters began to question when they did not see us on the nightly news. We soon found out that in the House of Commons, like in many other places of work, it is inevitable that people bring themselves and their behaviour down to the lowest common denominator.

I remember once in those early years I was criticized in the House by a member of another party for heckling, my reply was that when you are the brunt of constant heckling and jeers, there are really only three

A former House Leader and Whip, Jay Hill represented Prince George-Peace River in the House of Commons from 1993 until his resignation on October 25, 2010. This is a revised version of his presentation for a panel organized by the Public Policy Forum in Ottawa on September 16, 2010.

options available. First, you can leave the chamber – however, that is not an option. It is your job as a Member of Parliament to represent your constituents – a job that all of us take very seriously – and to leave the chamber during House proceedings is abandoning those who have allowed you the honour and privilege of representing them.

Second, you can go over and punch out the individual hurling the insults. But that may raise some eyebrows and will most likely be frowned upon. Those of us in the chamber at the time remember how close Darrel Stinson came to resorting to this on one occasion. And finally, you can resort to defending yourself verbally by shouting and heckling right back.

So we eventually gave up, coming to the conclusion that if we could not get the House to change when so many were new – it was highly unlikely that it would ever change. Now here we are –17 years later – and the only thing that has changed is that it has somehow gotten even worse. I suspect that successive minority governments has something to do with it – with members of all parties constantly aware they might be thrust into a partisan campaign on a moment's notice.

While problems with Question Period obviously exist, there is no doubt that it plays an important role in Canadian democracy. During my years in Opposition, Question Period played a vital role in allowing us to keep the Liberal Government accountable and to uphold the legitimacy of Parliament. This was especially true during the infamous sponsorship scandal when it became clear that Canadians wanted answers from their Liberal Government.

When used effectively, Question Period allows the Opposition to hold the Government responsible for its decisions, while at the same time allowing the Government to explain and highlight the reasoning behind those decisions. Unfortunately, Question Period has also disintegrated into simple “theatre” with each party competing for that five second sound bite that will make the evening news.

The notion that Question Period can be effective has somehow been lost as Members try to one up each other to score cheap political points. The mud-slinging that has become an everyday occurrence is, to be frank, discomforting and deters from the historical reasoning behind Question Period.

Question Period has become the most visible aspect of Parliament. Since 1977, television cameras have captured each 45-minute session, with many news networks broadcasting at least part of the proceedings

live. This has undoubtedly changed the way Members of Parliament handle themselves while in the House.

It is easy to imagine how this change in behaviour can occur. Just think of what it is like when a camcorder is brought out during a family gathering. Everyone becomes instantly hyper-aware that they are being filmed and our behaviour changes. The same can be said in the House of Commons. When television cameras were introduced, changes were almost immediate.

Prior to the introduction of cameras, all members rose with the Speaker recognizing them in a random manner. This allowed the Speaker to be quite impartial and balanced when recognizing Members.

Three years after cameras were introduced, the Speaker began accepting a list of questioners prior to Question Period because having all Members standing up and down at once didn't look good on camera. In addition, the thumping of tables, which had always been tradition, did not look good on camera. This led to applauding questions and answers.

While these two examples may seem small, they demonstrate how adding cameras in the House of Commons quickly changed the traditions of Question Period. I believe another reason why Question Period has deteriorated to an almost circus-like spectacle is because of the individuals that cover politics. Over the past decade, those that cover politics in the media have more frequently depended on Question Period and the scrums that follow for their stories, instead of focusing on in depth coverage of the issues being brought before the House or its Committees.

With the knowledge that the media will most likely be solely reporting on Question Period on the nightly newscast, Parliamentarians have now become focused on shouting partisan sound bites instead of in depth, thought-provoking questions and answers.

When the media focuses so heavily on Question Period for its stories, the public only sees their Member of Parliament in terms of how he or she performs during the daily session. If his or her question or answer is not highlighted during the newscast, then

they become almost invisible to the public, leading to questions of effectiveness.

With so much focus on Question Period – the public then perceives it to be what Parliament is like at all times – further demeaning the hard work we as parliamentarians do on a daily basis.

Historically, the rules surrounding Question Period have always been governed informally and by consensus. However, our Conservative Government remains open to examining how the current system is meeting the needs of Members and their constituents.

It is clear that Canadians are not interested in juvenile antics and they will eventually tune out any meaningful discussion that does happen to take place. With this lack of decorum, Canadians fail to see themselves and their interests represented.

The public is supportive of constructive change and Members of all political stripes are seemingly receptive to the idea of Question Period reform. But I say “seemingly” because I have been involved in countless discussions over the years where every party points the finger at others as the worst offenders.

I believe in order for Question Period to go through true reform, three things will need to happen. First, the House of Commons will need a disciplinarian Speaker willing to exert his or her authority over those who disrupt the proceedings. Indeed, a recent study by the

Procedure and House Affairs Committee concluded that the Speaker already has the necessary power, authority, and tools to reign in an unruly chamber.

Second, the Speaker will need to have the support of all four House Leaders, Whips, and I dare say Party Leaders – with all parties committed to enforcing change. And finally, the media will have to play a role in this as well. Instead of turning those who are thrown out of the House into some sort of folk heroes, they should be castigated as being immature and given a black mark on their career as a politician for their unacceptable behaviour. Until such time, I am wary that any true change will be made.

I think 1994 was the ideal time to change the way in which Parliamentarians conduct themselves during Question Period. However, despite having almost 200 new MPs and despite the best efforts of Reformers at that time, conduct during Question Period remained essentially the same.

That being said, despite the partisan heckling and bickering that has become an everyday occurrence, it is still far better than some Parliaments and Legislatures in places like Taiwan, South Korea, and the Ukraine, to name but a few of those which have resorted to physical violence. When I see images of these elected officials throwing punches rather than insults across the aisle, I have come to realize that as noisy and disparaging as our Question Period is – it could be a lot worse.