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# Some Personal Thoughts on Question Period

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**Glen Pearson, MP**

*On October 6, 2010 a Private Member's motion by Michael Chong to reform Question Period was adopted by the House of Commons and sent to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. (For details of the proposed reform see the Autumn issue of the Canadian Parliamentary Review). In this article one member of Parliament explains why he supports reform of Question Period.*



I am a fairly new Member of Parliament so I will give my own personal and frank reflections on what I feel about Question Period and particularly on the reform proposal advanced by Michael Chong.

Before my election to the House I was director of a food bank in London, Ontario. I still am a volunteer director and I was a firefighter for thirty years before I was elected. I ran in a by-election almost four years ago against Elizabeth May.

Elizabeth and I worked together on a number of different issues. Ed Holder who represents London West for the Conservatives is a good friend of mine and one who has helped us a lot at the food bank. So I am used to sitting and working with people in a coordinated fashion in spite of differences we might have. That did not prepare me for what I found when I came to the House of Commons.

When I was first asked to run for Parliament I said no. I had no interest in doing it. But finally in the end, I said yes, in part because my wife said "You should do it – get going." In my campaign I focused on four themes.

- Women's issues
- The environment
- Canada's international reputation and its involvement around the world primarily through CIDA
- How we respect one another.

I thought, and I still think, these things are not being dealt with properly. In fact thirty million Canadians have real issues that are important to them. Somehow, through all the channels and filters many of those concerns end up in the House and in Question Period. Canadians are interested and we need to take them seriously. We should be able to discuss and debate the issues in a civilised way. But we do not. We have party discipline. We have sides that we choose and it is very difficult to have a dialogue.

On my first day everybody stood up and applauded when I was brought into the House as they do for every new Member. Shortly thereafter Question Period began and I felt like I had been swallowed by a hornet's nest. I had to get used to what was going on.

I recently spent a strategic planning weekend with my food bank. Our numbers went up 35%. We help 3,500 families a month. I have yet to see what the answer is to this or even if Parliament sees it is a serious matter. This worries me. There are great issues that Canadians are wrestling with whether they are involved in the political process or not. I think our Question Period should reflect the seriousness and gravity of our situation.

When Michael Chong phoned me on a Sunday afternoon, I was jumping up and down on a trampoline with my three little kids who I have adopted from

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*Glen Pearson is the Member of Parliament for London North Centre. He was a speaker at a panel on Question Period organized by the Canadian Study of Parliament Group on September 21, 2010. This is a revised and abridged version of his remarks to the Group.*

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Africa. He said “Glen, I have come forward with this initiative and I wondered if you would be willing to second it?” I got off the trampoline and, with three kids pulling me to get back on, listened and really agreed with what he was saying.

I thought about the two Veterans from Afghanistan who came to my office two years ago and asked to get into Question Period. I knew them both because the barracks is in my riding. It was a particularly cantankerous Wednesday afternoon. After it was over I went up to get them and bring them back to my office. I said “What do you think?” And these two gentlemen who had been through the wars looked at me and said “Is that what we were fighting for?”

***I have a riding of 110,000 people. They elected me. I should be able to be a dignified and respected Member of Parliament and Public Servant.***

I think that is how the public is looking at us. These individuals, men and women who fight for our security overseas come back and see us heckling each other. These were not the reasons they were fighting for. They believe in our right to debate. They believe in our right to hold different points of view. But they also believe in a Parliament that deals with issues respectfully and works through these processes.

I wonder how many Members of Parliament are embarrassed to bring school kids into Question Period. I think we have to change. The times demand that we change because fewer and fewer people are voting. Fewer and fewer people are paying attention and the moment they see me behaving badly they turn off. They have to see Parliament as a dignified place. In order for that to happen we have to change as MPs.

This proposal to reform Question Period has given us an opportunity that I think is really important and it is time that we as MPs honestly acknowledge that we have not behaved very well. It is hard for us to do that but I think it is necessary. It is time to start behaving respectfully or just admit that we are incapable.

When my party asks me to stand up and put a question in Question Period I ask them to show me the

question. And usually I say no because for me its only purpose seems to be to embarrass the Government. I know this is something that MPs do and it is alright. But it is not my style. So I have not asked questions in Question Period. I sit back and observe and watch John Baird do his thing.

Now John Baird and I have absolutely nothing in common. He always slaps me in the back whenever he sees me. He is probably a very nice fellow but I do admit that John gets under my skin. So one day he said something about an issue that is very important to me. I shouted “That is not true” and everybody around me went yikes – as it was the first time they ever heard me shout. They were very surprised.

I was part of the Foreign Affairs Committee and what Mr. Baird brought up was very important to me. But when I went home that night and phoned by wife, I said “I am an idiot”. Here I am blogging about this shouting and bad behaviour all the time and then I behave deplorably. I did not treat John Baird that well in public and if I am going to make it right, I have to make it right in public.

So I blogged about it to everyone that night and said here is the kind of Member of Parliament I am. I messed up. I can be better than this. We all can be better than this. Then the next day in Question Period I walked over and shook his hand. He told me he knew exactly what I was coming over to do. He received it graciously and I appreciated it.

I do not think we can always demonize other people. Surely anybody who runs for an elected office must have a heart. Surely they must have the feeling that the business they are involved in is very important. I think that what Michael Chong’s motion is saying to us as MPs is look, this is not your House, and this is not your Leader’s House. It is the people of Canada’s House. We have to behave accordingly.

I have spoken with many MPs who feel that what is going on in Question Period is wrong but they do not know how to change it. Well they cannot say that anymore. We have an opportunity to vote for change. I am asking all my fellow Members of Parliament – all of my colleagues, this is our chance. Let us try to change ourselves and be the kind of people we really want to be.