
The Transformation of Question Period

Richard S. Conley

This article provides descriptive data on the number of prime ministerial interventions in Question Period from the 35th to the 40th Parliaments, including the ministries of Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, and Stephen Harper. Cataloguing a total of 7,227 questions, this study classifies prime ministers' answers by policy area and controls for the number of responses that relate to ethics and scandals across both majority and minority governments. The study underscores the stunning growth of prime ministerial interventions from a comparative, historical perspective with the advent of four-party politics in the House of Commons. The analysis suggests that while scandal was a central component in Question Period during the Chrétien and Martin ministries, and to a lesser degree in the last Harper minority government, allegations of wrongdoing typically comprised fewer than a third of all questions answered by the Prime Minister from 1994-2011.

Several hypotheses have been offered to explain the transformative deterioration of Question Period in the last several decades. The first is that the atomisation of the Canadian party system is to blame. The 1993 federal elections ushered in a minimum of four sizeable parties that were a staple in Parliament until the 2011 election. The net result has been a putative explosion in the number of questions posed to the Government, which has arguably complicated the Speaker's job in enforcing the 35-second rule as opposition parties clamoured for attention.¹ A second recrimination is that Question Period is now a reflection of scandal-driven politics. The focus on alleged ethics violations by members of the Government or scandals involving government programmes supposedly drowns out meaningful debate about the Government's

agenda, and as a consequence, the questions posed do not necessarily reflect Canadians' policy concerns.² Finally, a third charge is that the advent of minority government between 2004-2011 has, *per se*, exacerbated these dynamics as MPs placed political gain above substantive policy debate.³

But just how bad is the situation? Has the number of questions prime ministers answer increased dramatically in the longer view of history? Has scandal become the dominant theme in questioning the head of Government? And what do the results of an analysis of Question Period in the last two decades suggest about scholars' concern about an alleged "decline of Parliament" or executive-centric governance that has supposedly led to a decrease in prime ministerial attention to parliamentary affairs?

This article takes these questions to task with empirical data on the number of prime ministerial interventions in Question Period from the 35th to the 40th Parliaments, spanning the ministries of Chrétien, Martin, and Harper. This study catalogues a total of 7,227 questions answered by prime ministers between 1994 and 2011. The study moves beyond prior research by classifying prime ministers' answers by policy area and controlling for the number of responses that relate to ethics and scandals across both majority and minority governments.

Richard S. Conley is associate professor of political science at the University of Florida. He holds a M.A. degree from McGill University and a Ph.D from the University of Maryland. His interests include the Presidency, Congress, and comparative executives and legislatures. The author gratefully acknowledges a Faculty Research Grant (2009) from the Government of Canada in support of this research. He thanks the staff of the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, as well as Will Hicks at the University of Florida, for assistance with this project.

Charting the Transformation

Prime ministerial activity in Question Period represents a fundamental component of democratic accountability that is crucial in parliamentary systems. In theory and in practice, opposition parties and individual MPs are able to hold the cabinet responsible for its policies and actions by posing questions to, and scrutinising the head of Government in an open forum. As such, Question Period—whatever its putative inefficiencies or frequently raucous nature—is vital in the maintenance of confidence in the Government by the legislature.

The first question central to this study is whether the 1993 federal elections marked a definitive turning point in the number of questions to which prime ministers have responded. To answer this query it is imperative to turn to the methodology and findings of prior scholarship. Many academics have examined the frequency with which prime ministers in Canada, as in Britain and Ireland, answer parliamentary questions. Executive interventions in Parliament are routinely adjusted by the number of days in session (sitting days) in order to make meaningful comparisons across time and between prime ministers, as the length of sessions may vary considerably from one year to the next. The formula utilised to derive standardised scores is the following: $Ax = (D/Nx)$, where A is the activity of the prime minister, or the number of questions answered for session 'x'. D represents the average number of days per session across the entirety of the data set. N is the number of days in session 'x'.

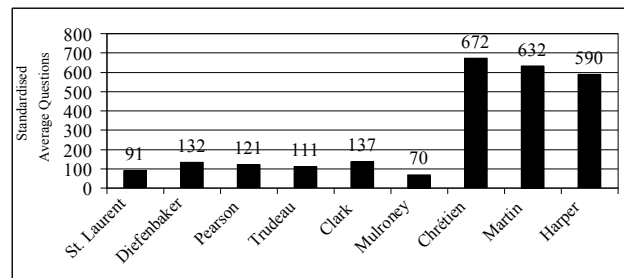
Using this approach, James E. Crimmins and Paul Nesbitt-Larking studied prime ministerial activity in the Canadian Parliament, including prime ministers' answers during Question Period, from the ministry of Louis St. Laurent to Brian Mulroney (1949-1993).⁴ Although their findings were inconclusive, they did uncover significant variation in the number of interventions by individual prime minister and across sessions. Minority or majority contexts in the House of Commons did not appear to explain much variation. On balance, John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson were the most active, whereas the frequency of prime ministerial interventions declined under Brian Mulroney rather significantly. Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking attribute differences in prime ministerial activity largely to personality, leadership style, and patterns of attendance.

Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking's data for an earlier period in Canadian history may be juxtaposed with those assembled for this study for the 35th – 40th Parliaments. Figure 1 uses the prime minister as the unit of analysis and shows the average number of

interventions across sessions. For Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking's study the mean number of days in session was 169; for the period 1994-2011 the average number of sitting days was 153.

Figure 1 places into sharp relief the degree to which the pace of interventions by prime ministers has, in fact, been fundamentally transformed since 1993. There has been a nearly *six- to seven-fold increase* in the average number of questions to which Chrétien, Martin, and Harper responded, controlling for the number of days in session, compared to their predecessors. Responses by the last three prime ministers are fairly uniform at approximately 630, adjusted for length of session. Clearly the advent of a more fragmented party system in the House has carried considerable ramifications for the prime minister's role in Question Period.

Figure 1: Average Questions Answered per Session, St. Laurent – Harper

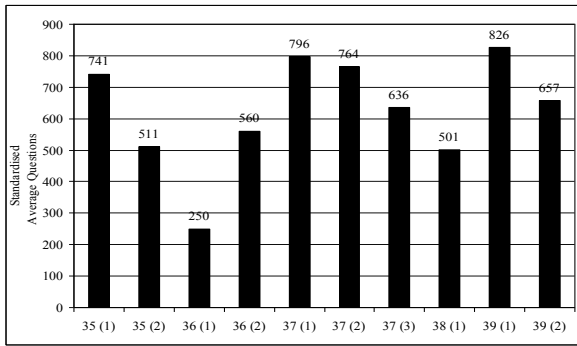


In and of itself, minority government does not appear to explain either an increase or decrease in the number of questions to which prime ministers respond. Figure 2 shows the standardised scores for interventions by Parliament and session. The first session of the minority 39th Parliament under Stephen Harper is the high water mark at 746, but is comparable to the first session of the 37th Parliament under Jean Chrétien. The nadir for interventions came in the 36th Parliament following the 1997 elections. The Liberals won only 155 of 301 seats, and admittedly the Chrétien government's agenda was tempered following efforts to reduce the deficit in from 1993-1997.⁵ Given his reduced mandate, the Prime Minister focused on the development of international business and his major domestic effort included reform of the justice system, which did not galvanise considerable opposition angst.

The Themes of Questions Posed

The most significant matter is whether alleged ethics violations and scandals have become a permanent fixture of Question Period in the Chrétien-Martin-Harper era, or whether the phenomenon is largely

Figure 2: Questions Answered by Parliament/Session 35th – 40th Parliaments (1994-2011)*



*Standardised score by days in session

confined to a particular set of circumstances in each ministry. Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c classify prime ministerial responses by policy area from the 35th to the 40th Parliaments. Using the subject heading noted in the *Hansard* and analysing the substance of the questions, responses were folded into six broad categories: 1) ethics and scandal; 2) the economy, taxes, and finance; 3) foreign affairs, including defence, international trade, Afghanistan, and terrorism; 4) social policy, including unemployment insurance, the status of women, environmental policy, etc.; and, 5) matters pertaining to Québec. Policy areas that did not fall into these categories were classified as “other.”

Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c take a sharp focus on questions by policy area. The data show that ethics issues comprised roughly a fifth to a third of all questions to which Chrétien responded from the 35th to the second session of the 37th Parliaments. Thus, from early in his ministry Chrétien faced queries about matters pertaining to several ministers and public inquiries to which he felt compelled to respond. Chrétien confronted the greatest number of ethics allegations in the first session of the 37th Parliament following the 1997 elections

Figure 3a: Questions Answered by Policy Area, Jean Chrétien, 35th – 37th Parliaments

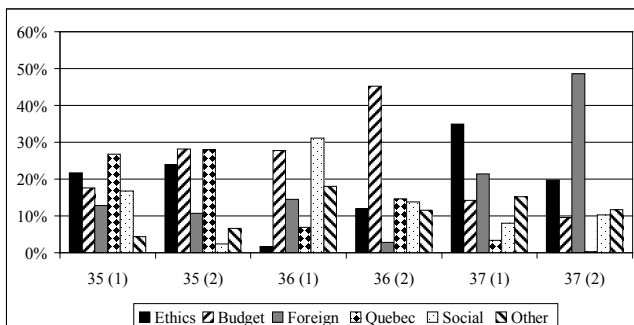
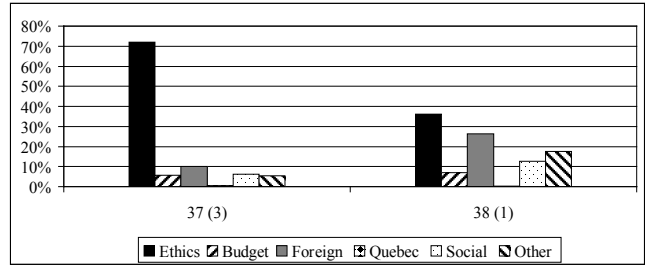


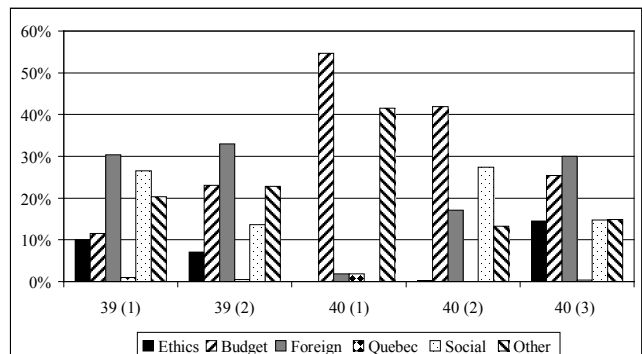
Figure 3b: Questions Answered by Policy Area, Paul Martin, 37th Parliament (3rd Session) and 38th Parliament, (1st Session)



and revelations of financial improprieties concerning the Liberal Government’s Sponsorship Programme in Québec. Ironically, however, it was after Chrétien’s departure in 2003 that ethics questions reached the high water mark (Figure 3b). In the third session of the 37th Parliament (2004) the Gomery Commission inquiry dominated Question Period. Nearly *three-quarters* of all questions to which Martin responded concerned the scandal and his alleged involvement while Minister of Finance. The pace of ethics questions was halved in Martin’s subsequent minority government (38th Parliament)—his ultimately having been cleared of wrongdoing—but still constituted over a third of all prime ministerial interventions.

The rate of ethics questions dropped significantly thereafter, constituting less than a tenth of all questions answered by Harper in the two sessions of the minority 39th and 40th Parliaments. In the third session of the 40th Parliament ethics questions to the Prime Minister comprised 15 percent of the total, well behind the budget and foreign affairs. Despite scandals involving allegedly doctored documents, recriminations of election funding improprieties, and the charge of

Figure 3c: Questions Answered by Policy Area, Stephen Harper, 39th – 40th Parliaments



contempt of parliament over legislative cost estimates, nearly all the ethics issues were raised between mid-February 2011 and the fall of the government at the end of March 2011.

On balance, the evidence suggests that much of the concern about the dominance of scandal in Question Period is linked to particular points in time. The data for the Harper ministry suggest a return to the “modal” categories of responses that typically focus on the economy and foreign affairs—with the clear exception of the closing days of Canada’s most recent minority government. Questions regarding terrorism, US-Canadian relations, and the peacekeeping role of Canadian troops in Afghanistan peaked following the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003, and have routinely occupied a fifth or more of questions to which all three prime ministers responded. Similarly, budget questions generally comprise a significant portion of Question Period, and reach an acme in the years when new budgets are presented. Finally, questions on Québec were most prominent at the outset of Chrétien’s ministry in the run-up to the 1995 referendum. The frequency of questions concerning *La belle province* dropped significantly thereafter, despite the presence of the Bloc as the second largest opposition party for most of the period under study.

The Decline or Resurgence of Parliament?

In recent decades scholars have been preoccupied with the alleged “decline of Parliament” or “decline of legislatures.” The argument is that governance in Westminster-style parliamentary systems has become dominated by the executive. As a result, there has been a putative decline in prime ministers’ attention to parliamentary affairs, including Question Period.⁶ Scholars have made compelling historical cases for a substantive decline in this form of prime ministerial accountability in both the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The results of this study, however, underscore that such concerns are unfounded in the Canadian case. Four-party politics in the House of Commons from 1994-2011 led to a new institutional reality. There *was* a significant increase in the number of questions to which prime ministers responded. But scandal is *not* the proximate cause. To be sure, for much of the period from 1997-2004 scandals constituted a core component of the debate, as well as in the dying days of Harper’s minority government in 2011. But apart from opposition criticism of the Sponsorship Programme, and ethics issues raised for the Conservative government in the 40th Parliament, prime ministerial activity in Question Period remains healthy insofar as the course of the debate in which opposition parties engage largely follows the

Government’s agenda. If not, as Penner, Blidook, and Saroka contend, there is ample evidence to suggest that opposition parties’ questions reflect the public’s issue priorities among particularised or “partisan” constituencies.⁷

There is also anecdotal evidence that in this new era Canadian prime ministers take Question Period very seriously. In his memoirs Chrétien recalls wanting to “leap to his feet” to answer every question posed and discusses engaging in extensive preparation for Question Period.⁸ Similarly, a recent analysis of Harper’s leadership style accents a particular focus on the importance of organising himself and his ministers for Question Period.⁹ As Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking note, “there are very real risks attached to regular performance in Question period and a major failure in the House has the potential to reverberate through the mass media to the attention of the general public.”¹⁰ Nor can prime ministers stay quiet when faced with queries. Opposition parties are likely to reply with French politician Edgar Faure’s quip: “*Si vous n’avez pas d’opinions politiques, prenez donc les miennes.*”

Conclusions

What does the foregoing analysis forecast for the future of Question Period following the 2011 election and beyond? The Bloc was left with only four seats and the Liberals lost their position as official opposition to the NDP. One hypothesis is that in this new majority governing context Prime Minister Harper might feel less compelled to answer questions. However, the high level of attention that Mr. Chrétien, Mr. Martin, and Mr. Harper himself paid to Question Period may well have created a precedent that will be hard to change.

Extending the response time in Question Period, as proposed by Michael Chong in the 39th Parliament¹¹ is likely to reduce the overall number of questions that opposition parties are able to pose. In light of the findings of this study, a reduction in the overall number of questions to which prime ministers respond may seem appropriate to some observers. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that an extension of time or the reduced numerical strength of opposition parties in the 41st Parliament will yield responses that are more substantively grounded and detailed. Nor will reform warrant that scandals will not form a central basis for institutional debate when allegations of government wrongdoing surface.

Some observers suggest that the loss of decorum in Question Period mirrors the broader contemporary public culture in Canada, one that has become “more confrontational and litigious, less civil and less conciliatory.”¹² This argument is very similar to Eric

Uslaner's explanation for the decline of civility in the US Congress in the last half century.¹³ Institutional norms reflect societal values. Yet others like Frances Ryan contend that MPs' behaviour and the inefficiencies of Question Period derive from the age-old axiom of placing political gain above substantive policy debate.¹⁴ Preston Manning echoed that point by positing that neither the public nor the media are particularly interested in information-seeking questions. Manning recalls that the Reform Party's efforts to circumvent polemic in Question Period was met with recriminations of "naiveté, stupidity and ineffectiveness" in the English language media. Failure to engage in adversarial debate ultimately led to less media coverage that threatened to alienate the party's base.¹⁵

From the vantage point of an observer south of the 49th parallel a corollary on the points made by Ryan and Manning is in order. If Question Period is full of political theatre such "loud and colourful posturing" may well be designed to camouflage relative consensus among the parties on the fundamentals.¹⁶ A content analysis on parties' election manifestoes, reveals little distinction among them regarding welfare or pro-market economics. For the last three elections for which data are available—2000, 2004, and 2006—the Liberals, Bloc, and NDP cluster slightly to the Left, while the Canadian Alliance and now the Conservatives cluster slightly on the Right.¹⁷ This largely centrist configuration is a unique feature of the party system that sets Canada apart from most of its western, industrialised parliamentary counterparts in which ideology plays a far stronger role in party positions.

The rough-and-tumble, gruff, and sometimes uninviting proceedings that now define Question Period and have caused many observers considerable consternation may have much to do with the relative fluidity of the parties' positions. If opposition parties go out of their way to use Question Period as an adversarial forum for electoral gain, the dynamic has much to do with the need to distinguish their positions from the Government when their essential ideological positions are inconsiderable.

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