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# Heckling in the House of Commons

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*Visitors and observers of the House of Commons have long remarked on the prevalence of heckling in the Chamber. But what are the consequences or benefits of this behaviour? This study offers an analysis of an original set of quantitative and qualitative data gathered in an anonymous survey completed by Members of Parliament near the end of the 40th Parliament. The survey addressed perceptions of heckling in the House of Commons as well as the impact MPs believe heckling has on their work. A significant number of MPs reported that heckling causes them to participate far less frequently, or not at all, in the work of the House. In addition, many of the words used against fellow MPs in heckles are contrary to Charter values. These words include racism, ageism, sexism, religious discrimination, discrimination against physical disabilities and homophobia.*

Heckling is a force in the Canadian House of Commons. Traditionally, if you walk into Question Period, you walk into a wall of sound. Those in the gallery reach for the earpieces, not just to hear the proceedings translated to their preferred official language, but also to make it possible to discern anything at all in the din.

Heckling is much-maligned in spite of the obvious drama it introduces to the Canadian House. Never mind how unproductive it looks, or the self-destruction inherent in a job where hundreds of people yell at you in your own workplace day after day. The House of Commons is where the nation's decisions are made, where taxes go up or down, where we decide to go to war. What role does heckling play in that same room? The reasons for heckling, the attitudes Members of Parliament hold toward this behaviour, the content of the heckling, and how heckling affects MPs' work all deserve examination.

## Context and Literature

Heckling, by its nature, is difficult to study. It is often indecipherable from the galleries. It is not recorded in Hansard because it does not emanate from the person whose microphone is activated. At the same time, heckling has always occurred in the House of Commons. Mark Bosc has written about the behaviour

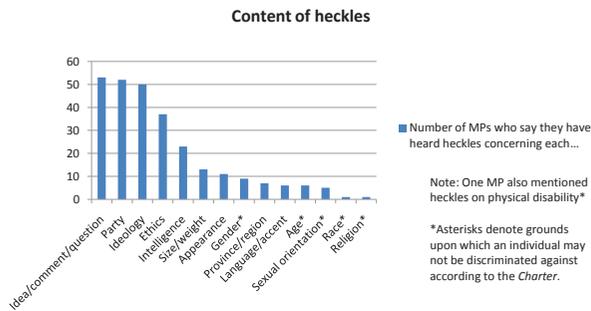
of Members of Parliament shortly after Confederation. He found media accounts from that time that described members who acted "somewhat in the manner of irrepressible school boys in the absence of the teacher" as they sent "whirling in every direction...paper balls, blue books, bills...cushions...hats and caps of all styles," made meowing noises, set off firecrackers, or played jewsharps to distract the person speaking.<sup>1</sup>

Even now, however, there is a significant focus in the media on the childish behaviour of MPs in the House of Commons. Some columnists defend heckling and "big-boy words" in the interests of passionate debate,<sup>2</sup> while others directly compare MPs to students in a hypothetical failed classroom where pupils take "every opportunity to hurl allegations at each other,"<sup>3</sup> or characterize the rhetoric in the House as "the stuff we learned was inappropriate in elementary school."<sup>4</sup> There is also a theme in many media reports that heckling and similar behaviours are male. In addition to the "big-boy" comment above that equates personal attacks with masculinity, media reports often employ some variation of "testosterone politics"<sup>5</sup> to describe heckling.

The attitudes in the media are not necessarily germane in and of themselves. They become more important when they mirror the perceptions of the general public. Indeed, the suggestion that the public is fed up with heckling appears regularly in the media. The *Hamilton Spectator* describes heckling as a "problem that is not new – teachers were complaining about question period behaviour in front of school groups decades ago."<sup>6</sup> The problem of bringing

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*Mackenzie Grisdale was a Parliamentary Intern in 2010-2011. This is a revised version of her paper prepared for the Parliamentary Internship Programme in June 2011.*



guests to Question Period persists; several MPs who participated in this study shared anecdotes of bringing students and teachers to Question Period only to watch their guests leave in disgust.

Of course, politics-aficionados may view any media report on heckling as suspect since many believe the media perpetuate such behaviour by reporting on it. Still, we must note that many journalists push for more decorum in the House. This is the case in numerous articles, but we will take one example. After the late leader of the New Democrats issued a condemnation of sexist heckling, Chris Selley wrote in the *National Post*, "That a Canadian politician would demand an end to sexist heckling tells you most of what you need to know. A non-politician would instead propose doing away with heckling, period."<sup>7</sup> Ultimately it would be difficult to claim that the media at large either encourage or discourage heckling, but there is, at the very least, significant attention paid to it by journalists.

It is important to note as well that, both before and during Speaker Milliken's time in the Chair, there have been efforts to alter the Standing Orders to give the Speaker more overt power to enforce discipline in the House. Speaker Fraser convened an unofficial advisory committee to study the problem in 1992. The House never debated the changes to the Standing Orders the committee recommended.<sup>8</sup> In October 2006, Joe Comartin and Dawn Black, both NDP MPs, attempted unsuccessfully to revive the report of that advisory committee and implement its recommendations. In 1995, Milliken, as then-Chair of the Procedures and House Affairs Committee, helped look into "increased penalties for 'abusive, racist, or sexist language'" with such consequences as "docking the pay of offending MPs, cutting off their phones, or lengthy suspensions."<sup>9</sup>

## Method and Results

The data in this paper come from an original data set gathered using a survey delivered by the author to all members of the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament during March 2011.<sup>10</sup> In addition six sitting MPs agreed to interviews before the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament fell.<sup>11</sup> Sheila Copps, who served as

an MP from 1984-2004 and has also been Deputy Prime Minister, was also interviewed. She was widely-known as a heckler and she helped elucidate why some believe heckling is useful. These conversations supplemented the survey data and the participants agreed to have their names used in association with their comments.

The surveys were based on self-reporting. There could be a tendency to under-report one's own participation in heckling, even though the responses were anonymous. A further limitation is that some MPs indicated they defined heckling differently than what was stated on the survey itself, which read, "for the purposes of this survey, the definition of 'heckle' is: to call out in the chamber of the House of Commons without having the Speaker's recognition to speak." Some respondents said that anything involving humour was not heckling. So, witty heckles were not, in some cases, reported as heckles at all.

MPs readily admit that heckling is a major feature of life in the House. A majority of respondents said that heckling takes place in the House of Commons frequently (63.3%), or continuously (18.3%). MPs are far more likely to say heckling occurs more in Question Period than at any other time in a typical sitting day. This was followed, in order, by Statements by Members, Private Members' Business, Government Orders, Routine Proceedings, and Adjournment Procedures. The qualitative data also suggest that more heckling occurs when a controversial bill comes up for debate, as well as when the overall climate in the Chamber is tense. Many MPs expressed that the time when the survey was delivered was indeed stressful as a contempt ruling was about to spark an election.

The surveys showed that heckles encompass a range of topics, a minority of which run against the values enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. As the chart "Content of heckles" indicates, most of the heckling in the House of Commons deals with the heckled MP's idea, comment or question. Much less frequent, but still notable, were heckles involving MPs' appearance, gender, age, race, sexuality, and religion.

The heckles that MPs said resonated the most were personal attacks. Often, MPs were reluctant even to divulge examples of heckles they recalled, while some would refer vaguely to "racism and sexism" or "homophobic" remarks. However, specific examples of personal attacks include a comment from a male Conservative MP who recalls heckles "Targeting a Conservative's religious beliefs" and "Labelling a rural MP from the prairies a redneck." Another MP noted that heckles sometimes touch on physical disability as well.

One female Conservative MP heard someone yell at her, “That was dumber than you look.” This MP raised other points as well: “Personal attacks like ‘idiot, liar, stupid, chicken’ and heckling about gender (usually aimed at women by women), for example alleging the women are puppets, stooges, robots under the direction of men are particularly offensive.”

The language toward women can also turn vulgar. In her interview, Sheila Copps recalled being called a ‘slut.’<sup>12</sup> A female NDP MP wrote about a time when she heard a Liberal frontbench MP stand up to speak only to be called a ‘cunt’ by a government backbencher.

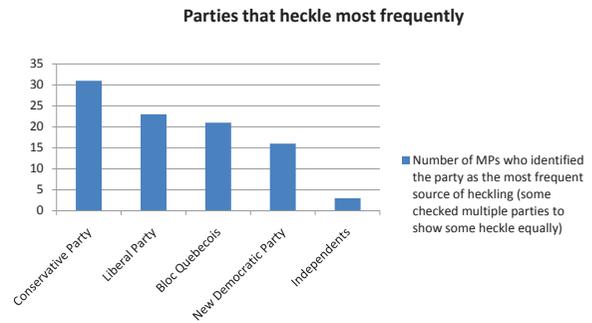
Several comments also suggested a feeling that women MPs tend to be heckled more than male MPs, which the statistical analysis of the surveys was unable to confirm. However, the qualitative comments indicate that heckling may be of a sharper tone toward women than toward men. One female MP wrote that she has observed “heckling that starts when certain women stand up, before they’ve even begun their question.” Another respondent picked up on this theme and suggested ageism also plays a role: “As a young woman MP I have often seen how I have been heckled at a much higher volume than male MPs... I remember on a student issue being heckled ‘You’re not a university student anymore.’”

Some gendered heckles target men as well, however. Martha Hall Findlay said in her interview that, “I hear all sorts of comments about height or the classic one will be to somebody who’s vertically challenged -- ‘Stand up when you want to talk!’ Even though they might be standing already.”<sup>13</sup>

Though the data do not show that women are heckled more frequently, it would be worth further research to determine whether heckles toward women vary in substance or volume compared with those toward men.

Overall, even though heckles concerning an MP’s party, idea or ideology are most common, the data show that racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic and other discriminatory sentiments were certainly part of the 40th Parliament.

As an MP spends more time in the House of Commons, he or she may develop immunity to heckling. The effect of years of experience in the House of Commons on how frequently an MP hears heckling approaches significance. Those who have served the shortest amount of time (up to 3 years) were likely to hear more frequent heckling than both the group with 3-5 years of experience in the House and the group that has served for 6-9 years. The comparison between



the least experienced group and the most experienced (those who have served for ten or more years) did not approach significance but still suggested the same pattern; MPs report hearing heckling less frequently as their years of service increase.

Although MPs usually say they have heckled, most of them do not consider themselves among the most frequent hecklers. The vast majority (83.3%) of MPs who responded said they have heckled in the House of Commons. However, a majority also indicated that they do not do so very frequently. Only 8.3% of respondents put themselves in the top two categories of hecklers (those who heckled ‘A few times a day,’ or ‘A few times a week’). Just under half, or 48.3%, say they heckle less than once a week.

There may be some blame-shifting at work here. Conservative MPs are more likely than Liberals to say the opposition heckles more than the government. The Conservatives also seem to be more likely than the NDP to feel this way, but this test did not approach significance. However, the data show the opposite. MPs were most likely to report hearing heckling from Conservatives as seen in the chart, ‘Parties that heckle most frequently.’ However, the results depicted here may simply result from the party standings during the 40th Parliament. The Conservatives had the most seats and therefore the most populated pool of possible hecklers, followed by the Liberals, the Bloc Quebecois, and the NDP.

There was no significant correlation between the amount of heckling an MP hears and how frequently he or she claims to heckle. In other words, even if people say there is a great deal of noise in the Chamber, they do not tend to attribute it to themselves.

A cyclical element may also be at work in heckling. There is a moderate correlation between how often an MP heckles and how frequently he or she is heckled when speaking. So, if you yell at others more often, you might also find that more people yell at you, you may yell back, and so on. Two MPs’ comments encapsulate this position: “Heckling encourages future

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heckling," and "I feel drawn to heckle back when I strongly disagree with a position being put forward by a heckler." Of course this is the perennial 'chicken vs. egg' dilemma, but it is a possible factor in why heckling has proven difficult to eliminate from the House.

### Perceptions of heckling

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In spite of the drama heckling causes, MPs are not very likely to say it enlivens debate. Almost half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "Heckling enlivens debate in the House of Commons and helps MPs make their point." Of the slightly more than 20% who tended to agree, very few (1.7%) said they strongly agreed. Speaker Milliken said in his interview that heckling tends to bring "lively debate" to the House, which puts him at odds with most MPs on this question.<sup>14</sup>

A majority of MPs do see heckling as problematic. A full 60% of MPs said they either agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (30%) with the statement, "I see heckling as a problem in the House of Commons." No MP strongly disagreed with the statement, and only 8.3% disagreed with it.

The NDP finds heckling more problematic than the other parties. Ten of twelve NDP MPs surveyed, or 83%, found heckling problematic. The two remaining NDP MPs neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The NDP MPs were more likely to find heckling problematic than the Liberals. They were also more likely to say heckling is problematic than the Conservatives, although the differences between the NDP and Conservatives on this question did not approach statistical significance.

Many MPs seem to perceive heckling as inevitable. A majority of MPs (61.7%) agreed or strongly agreed (6.7%) with the statement, "Heckling is a fact of life in the House of Commons." MPs disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement equally (8.3% in each case). Those who agreed gave a range of reasons, from "has been part of the to and fro forever" to "heckling is like hockey fights." Others also mentioned that heckling "is the nature of the political system -- adversarial." Several parliamentarians referred to the "two and half sword lengths" distance between the opposing front benches as a sign that heckling and other combative behaviours were built in to the architecture of the Commons.

However, some who agreed that heckling is a fact of life also said there remains an opportunity for change. One of these MPs wrote, "It is a fact of life only because the Speaker allows it to the degree that it is." Another added, "While I doubt it will end, if I take steps to be

a better MP at debate, I become part of the solution. It will be a slow process but one we must start."

There were quite a few comments supporting the view that controlling heckling was a personal responsibility. For example, a Conservative MP who has served more than 10 years in the House said he has heckled "several times - and I always regretted it and should not have allowed myself to be provoked. No good comes of it." During Libby Davies' interview, however, she disagreed with placing the onus entirely on the individual. Rather, she felt "the Speaker should be taking more control and naming members. And...if necessary, pulling them out, taking away their questions. Self-discipline works sometimes, and then it fails again."<sup>15</sup>

### Public Opinion

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MPs overwhelmingly believe that the public views heckling and MPs who heckle with disdain. When asked this directly in a qualitative question, only three of the 52 MPs who responded suggested that some members of the public might think heckling is ever acceptable. Even those three felt the dominant view was negative. Their comments were: "90%+ hate it," "Some like the cut and thrust. Most consider it embarrassing conduct," and, "Some don't like it. Others accept it as a result of the makeup of parliament." In the remaining 49 comments, MPs often described the public's perception as "disgust," or simply, "They hate it."

Several MPs also said they have received complaints about decorum. Sometimes the complaints have an impact; James Bezan spoke in his interview of how he renounced heckling following a letter of complaint from a group of school children.<sup>16</sup>

Those who do not visit the House in person may still be indirectly influenced by heckling. This is because heckling may sway how some members of the Press Gallery interpret events. Martha Hall Findlay described a phenomenon she said occurs on Wednesdays during Question Period:

You have more members of the media in the press gallery and so they are affected by what goes on in the House, other than just when one person is speaking... If there's a particularly rowdy day and one side or the other is very loud...it can give the impression of team enthusiasm, party enthusiasm...of party solidarity... I say this because I've seen a number of reports after the fact where a reporter will say something like, 'The government was really under the gun today in Question Period.'...It won't be because of the individual questions, usually, it will be because there was a greater atmosphere of noise and reaction.<sup>17</sup>

This critique may be possible to substantiate with future media analyses.

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## Impact of heckling on MPs

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The data suggest heckling is an important factor in the extent to which MPs participate in the House. Over a third (36.7%) of MPs indicated that heckling caused them to reduce their participation at least occasionally. By contrast, only 13.3% of MPs indicated that heckling sometimes caused them to increase their participation in the business of the House.

Those in the latter group made comments including, "It fuels me to focus and push back – to make my point even more emphatically," and "I speak in a louder, sharper voice because of the noise – which is neither necessary (due to microphone placement) or beneficial."

The MPs who said heckling discourages them from participating painted a different picture. Some comments include: "Disrespect demotivates," "I turn my earpiece off and also escape to the lounge whenever possible," "I usually attend Question Period, debates etc. but choose to just tune out the discussion and work on constituent emails, letters etc," "I find I lose my concentration," and "Why participate in Q+A or in debate if someone just disregards your position and tries to belittle you."

The comments of MPs who said heckling had no effect on their participation in the House are also noteworthy. One MP wrote that heckling "helps my ability to speak at times (in the riding) when some folks disagree and are yelling negatives your way." Another said, "I find it discouraging." One MP even uses heckling to assess her speeches. She wrote, "I am of the opinion that if they heckle I'm getting to them and making valid points."

MPs also noted more conspicuous effects of heckling. Several pointed out that the noise makes it difficult to concentrate. One NDP MP described "a private member's statement that I made that was completely drowned out by heckles made in reference to another party's private member's statement... An indication of the level of volume was ...the request by the Hansard office for the text of my statement as they could barely hear it." In such cases, heckling presents a very practical challenge to the business of the House.

Sheila Coppins indicated that heckling can reveal something about an MP's character. She referenced both her own experience as well as Peter Mackay's alleged heckle calling Belinda Stronach a 'dog' to suggest that heckling can be a way for MPs " ...to divulge this underlying current of sexism that runs through their thinking." She indicated that heckling may encourage better answers during Question Period:

It's one of the probing tools that you can use to sometimes get to the right answer. So the

mask falls away, partly because of the pressure that happens when there's a particularly heavy question in the House, a lot of times there'll be more heckling, there'll be more noise, there'll be more pressure on the minister. That sometimes causes them to actually answer questions more truthfully than they would if they were in a silent chamber and just sticking to their script.<sup>18</sup>

Copp's view was not reflected in most responses in the survey. Instead, MPs of all parties offered a different explanation for their heckling. The most common response was that MPs heckle to signal that the person speaking is lying. An example of this type of comment from an opposition member is, "When the government plays fast and loose with the truth, I become upset." And from a government member, "When someone says something I know to be untrue or outlandish."

A related pattern emerged from opposition members. They tended to add that they start heckling when ministers do not give relevant answers when they respond during Question Period.

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## The Crossing Guards

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Some respondents indicated that House Leaders, Whips, and Party Leaders all take formal stances on heckling within each party. However, that advice is not always memorable. Within the sample, 53.3% of respondents said they had never received formal or informal advice from their parties about how to deal with heckling in the House of Commons, while 41.7% of MPs said they had received advice of some kind.<sup>19</sup>

NDP MPs appear more likely to report receiving formal advice on heckling than those in either the Conservative party or the Liberal party. There is no significant effect of party when comparing the Conservatives and the Liberals in terms of whether an MP has received formal advice on heckling.

The relatively high amount of formal advice the NDP appears to share with MPs on heckling may cause NDP members to be more attuned to heckling. This suggestion comes from data showing that the NDP report hearing more heckling than the Conservatives and the Liberals. There was no significant difference between how frequently the Conservatives and Liberals hear heckling.

The advice MPs said they received from parties was not to participate in heckling, to ignore heckling, and to stay focused on whoever has the floor. One NDP member indicated that the formal advice was complemented with practical training in her party. She wrote that MPs did some "practice runs" to work on how to "stay focussed on what you are delivering and ignore heckling." Together with the previous findings,

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this suggests that the NDP's approach to heckling may stand quite apart from that of other parties.

Libby Davies indicated that all parties do at least some formal work to cut down on heckling.<sup>20</sup> She said, "there have been many efforts to change, within parties, between parties... We have discussions with other House Leaders, the Whips have discussions, so I do know that each party actually tries to deal with it in various ways, but it's like we're sunk ... into this culture of hurling insults and abuse."<sup>21</sup>

The party to which an MP belongs does not seem to have an effect on whether one receives informal advice on heckling. Examples of informal efforts to curb heckling include shushing, arm movements to quiet people down, asking people to stop, or, in one case, physical checks. A 60-69 year old male Conservative reported he likes to "smack the guy beside me from time to time when he is simply making mindless noise."

To help further examine the roles MPs play in perpetuating or stopping heckling, the survey also asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement, "Generally, MPs encourage each other to heckle." One quarter of MPs strongly agreed or agreed, while 43.3% of MPs disagreed or strongly disagreed. Examples of how MPs encourage others to heckle included "laughing and applauding heckles," as well as "adding comments," "asking them to do so," "group heckling – chants," and "goading on both sides of the aisle."

## Conclusions

Two major themes emerged in the study that require further analysis. The first is the options open to the Speaker in controlling heckling. The second is the serious implications of heckling on the work of the House.

Many of the comments in the surveys suggest that the 40th Parliament ended with appetites whetted for a more interventionist Speaker. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Speaker of the 41st Parliament, Andrew Scheer, has expressed his desire to have MPs "'show mutual respect' for one another and has pledged to do more to rein in heckling."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Speaker Milliken's responsibility in limiting heckling was a recurring theme in the surveys, and this theme warrants some examination of the precedents and Standing Orders governing the Speaker's role in controlling heckling and decorum. As this would provide ample ammunition for an entire thesis, a brief look must suffice here. The following examination deals mainly with the Standing Orders rather than precedent, partly because if the Speaker's role is to change under Speaker Scheer or subsequent Speakers,

the Standing Orders will have to trump precedent as the mainstay for that change.

Under Standing Orders 16(2) and 48, "When a Member is addressing the House, no other member may interrupt except on an unanticipated question of privilege or point of order... However, while Chair Occupants generally ignore such incidental interruptions as applause and/or heckling, they are quick to intervene when unable to hear the Member speaking or when the latter is unable to continue speaking."<sup>23</sup> That tendency to 'generally ignore' heckling is one of many options, however. Under Standing Orders 10 and 11, the Speaker "shall preserve order and decorum...and shall be vested with the authority to maintain order by naming individual Members for disregarding the authority of the Chair and, without resort to motion, ordering their withdrawal for the remainder of that sitting." There is also a provision in Standing Order 11 for the Speaker to "direct the Member to discontinue his or her speech" if an MP "persists in irrelevance or repetition." These rules on relevance are seen as especially "difficult to define and enforce" since the imperative of free debate is so important.

Many of the personal insults cited earlier could fall under Standing Order 18, which says, "No Member shall speak disrespectfully ...nor use offensive words against either House, or against any Member thereof." However, breaches of this Standing Order are not always easy to address because:

The Speaker has also ruled that if the Chair did not hear the offensive word or phrase and if the offensive language was not recorded in the *Debates*, the Chair cannot be expected to rule in the absence of a reliable record.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, heckling by its nature is not recorded in the *Debates*, so this precedent works to the benefit of hecklers when the room is especially noisy.

In practice, Speaker Milliken felt the actions he could actually take to curb heckling were limited. He expressed in his interview that his role allowed him to "Stand up and tell members to quiet down... I don't know what else the Speaker can do to stop it."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Speaker Milliken did not believe that heckling was generally problematic. In his interview, he stated that heckling is "standard practice," and that "people who are speaking often respond to the heckling, or change what they're saying because of what they're hearing, so it makes for more lively interchange and exchange of ideas in the House." In his view, his role was "trying to control the noise levels so that it's not excessive so that the person who has the floor can continue his or her remarks." Speaker Milliken has also

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noted that the public may be more concerned about the behaviour, since “he regularly receives messages from members of the public concerned about decorum in the House.”<sup>26</sup> However, in his interview he said that most people are more upset by the partisanship of some comments than the noise in the Chamber.

Some MPs suggested specific actions they would like to have seen from Speaker Milliken. One female NDP member wrote, “I have seen the Speaker call ‘Order’ but I do not recall moments where he has singled out members or parties for heckling unnecessarily.” Another MP wrote, “The Speaker could stop heckling in short order by expelling members from the House and he should! We would all change our ways.” As seen above, the Standing Orders do appear to permit these measures, should future Speakers wish to employ them.

Still outstanding is the question of how to reduce the heckling that arises when some members perceive something said in the House as a ‘lie.’ This is not easily solved, but the Speaker may be able to insist on more relevant answers during Question Period under a new interpretation of the irrelevance and repetition clause in Standing Order 11.

### **The Real Cost of heckling**

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One must question whether the House is as productive a work environment as it can be if heckling causes one-third of members to participate less than they would like in the business of the Chamber. Furthermore, the noise compromises the debate in the House whenever a significant number of MPs cannot hear the person who has the floor.

Some of the effects of heckling, however, are less conspicuous. Heckling is not merely a question of volume or even rudeness; the effects can run deeper. For example, Martha Hall Findlay explored the idea that heckling may be a symptom of the dysfunction of Parliament as a whole:

This isn’t just heckling, but there is some behaviour in the House by certain members that suggests that it’s all a game. It suggests a lack of seriousness...And if heckling and the lack of respect shown to your colleagues ultimately have the effect of diminishing the respect for the process and for Parliament, and quite honestly I think that’s partly what we’ve seen, that is a much bigger problem...If you can have people start to show more respect for each other and what they have to say in the House, that, I would hope, would add to a resurgence of respect for parliament and its processes.<sup>27</sup>

The question of respect for the institution is especially of interest now, since the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament so recently came to an end on a confidence vote that held the government in contempt of Parliament.

Heckling’s effects are also felt outside of the House, however. Ed Holder indicated that when MPs heckle, a chain reaction may set in:

The louder the din in the House, the more that tends to get noticed by media. Unfortunately it also gets noticed by the viewing public...The sad thing is, what happens when the people change the channel?...When we’re no longer deemed to be relevant, what happens then? The trouble is we have such dramatic impact on people’s lives.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, the issue of respect for, and engagement with Parliament is very serious, especially when it involves the public. Voter turnout in the 2011 election was just shy of 62%, suggesting that much of the country is not engaging in politics. Not a single MP surveyed or interviewed said that the public views heckling and MPs who heckle in a positive light, and the media also regularly point out that the public despises this behaviour.

The content of heckling may exacerbate the public’s disengagement from Parliament. As we have seen, MPs sometimes heckle each other on matters of race, religion, age, gender, sexuality, and even disability. Though these instances are rare, it is significant that such attacks occur at all. These are protected grounds under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Although this study did not survey the public, it may be that Canadians would have particular difficulty reconciling these types of heckles with our expectations of MPs.

Perhaps most importantly, is it not possible that lower public engagement caused by heckling could also impact the work of the House of Commons? If behaviour in the House contributes to low voting rates, then it indirectly affects the composition of the House of Commons, and could have other consequences for democratic participation, such as reducing some citizens’ willingness to give feedback on policy to their MPs.

MPs generally feel troubled by heckling, not only in terms of the impact it has on their work, but also in terms of the negative views of Parliament it reinforces among the public. They hold the Speaker largely responsible for heckling even though some admit it is also a matter of self-discipline. There was an appetite in the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament for a more interventionist Speaker in the future. There is also a strong suggestion that MPs feel there would be less heckling if exchanges in the House were more fact-based and relevant to the question or debate of the day.

Still, a thoughtful minority of MPs see heckling as a catalyst for more frank comments during Question Period and debates. That view, combined with the seemingly cyclical nature of heckling and the prevailing

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attitude that heckling is a fact of life in the House, are likely factors in why heckling has been such a feature of the Chamber since 1867.

This study indicated that the NDP holds a different attitude toward heckling than other parties. Upon appointing his shadow cabinet at the beginning of the 41st Parliament, the new, and now, sadly, late Leader of the Opposition, Jack Layton, promised that his party would not heckle in the House.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this difference in attitudes toward heckling may also result from the NDP's never having served as either the Government or the Official Opposition at the federal level. Now that it has taken over as the Official Opposition, the party could either confirm its potential to be the most likely to crack down on heckling, or the newfound status may eventually lead the NDP MPs to heckle as much as their Liberal and Conservative cousins.

The first few weeks of the new parliament before the summer break were certainly quieter than the last days of the 40th Parliament. However, many of the responses to the survey included comments suggesting that this is the usual pattern for any young Parliament, and it is too soon to draw conclusions from anything that has transpired in these early days.

#### Notes

1. Mark Bosc, *The Commons then and now (order and decorum)*, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 1987, pp. 33-34.
2. Scott Feschuk, *Feschuk: Leave our MPs to bicker in peace: Nothing wrong with a little name-calling or yo-momma insulting in question period*, *Maclean's*, 6 December 2010, vol. 123, iss. 47, p. 81.
3. Andrew Cardozo, *Time for shift in decorum, open letter to House leaders: Parliament is in a state of crisis, of high drama, so can't these guys put a kibosh on heckling?* *The Hill Times*, May 2, 2005, p. 9.
4. Peggy Taillon, *Rhetoric at home*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, January 11, 2011, p. A8.
5. *Ibid.*, p. A8.
6. Robert Howard, *MPs' behaviour embarrasses Canada; Parliament: This tradition must end*, *The Spectator*, March 30, 2001, p. A10.
7. Chris Selley, *Heckle all you want...but not if you're sexist*, *National Post*, October 30, 2009, p. A16.
8. Audrey E. O'Brien and Mark Bosc, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, House of Commons, Ottawa, 2009, p. 619.
9. *Too polite for Winston Churchill: the Liberals crack down on Reformers parliamentary jabs*, *Report Newsmagazine*, vol. 10, no. 39, October 16 1995, p. 8.
10. Surveys were distributed in both official languages. Sixty completed responses were received. Women were overrepresented in the survey (33.3% of respondents were women compared to 22% of seats held by women), as were the New Democrats (20% of respondents vs. 11.8% of seats) and the Liberals (36.7% of respondents vs. 25.2% of seats). There were no respondents from the Bloc Quebecois or the independents, so their views are not reflected in any of the upcoming analyses. The Conservatives were represented very well (43.3% of respondents compared to 43.4% of seats).
11. The MPs were: Bruce Hyer, New Democratic MP for Thunder Bay-Superior North; Libby Davies, NDP MP for Vancouver East, House Leader and Deputy Leader for the party; Ed Holder, Conservative MP for London West; James Bezan, Conservative MP for Selkirk-Interlake; Martha Hall Findlay, MP for Willowdale and former candidate for the Liberal leadership Peter Milliken, MP for Kingston and the Islands, and Speaker of the House of Commons.
12. Phone interview with the Hon. Sheila Copps, former MP for Hamilton East. March 16, 2011.
13. Interview with Martha Hall Findlay, MP for Willowdale. Ottawa, ON. March 22, 2011.
14. Interview with the Hon. Peter Milliken, Speaker of the House of Commons. Ottawa, ON. April 5, 2011.
15. Phone interview with Libby Davies, MP for Vancouver East. March 16, 2011.
16. Interview with James Bezan, MP for Selkirk-Interlake. Ottawa, ON. March 24, 2011.
17. Hall Findlay, March 22, 2011.
18. Copps, March 16, 2011.
19. Questions on formal and informal advice were asked separately. The groups were not identical although the percentages were equivalent.
20. Davies, March 16, 2011.
21. *Ibid.*, March 16, 2011.
22. Althia Raj, *Youngest-ever Speaker elected; Job comes with \$233,247-a-year salary, two homes*, *The Gazette*, June 3, 2011, p. A15.
23. Audrey E. O'Brien & Mark Bosc, p. 603.
24. *Ibid.*, 618.
25. Milliken, April 5, 2011.
26. C. Gérin-Lajoie, *'House of Commons'*, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 31, No. 1, Spring 2008, p. 70. (pp. 69-71).
27. Hall Findlay, March 22, 2011.
28. Interview with Ed Holder, MP for London West. Ottawa, ON, March 10, 2011.
29. J. Smith, *'Layton promises to avoid heckling; New shadow cabinet includes a mix of old and new faces, all pledging they'll be behaving civilly'*, *Toronto Star*, May 27, 2011, p. A8.