

Question Period and Canadian Democracy*

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Introduction: a ceremony of curiosity

A curious phenomenon takes place in the House of Commons just after two o'clock on Mondays through Thursdays and just after eleven o'clock on Fridays. The public galleries, normally virtually empty, now fill up with interested members of the public. Harried teachers and energetic students are promptly ushered to their seats by serious-looking security personnel, who ensure that no one writes down anything or leans on the railing. Clusters of MPs come in to fill their seats, most of which have been empty since the previous day. Since two, backbench MPs have been making one-minute statements about matters of interest to them or their constituents, but no one pays them much attention. The Pages, bright and enthusiastic university students from all over Canada, are kept busy getting glasses of water and

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delivering last minute notes to the Ministers sliding into their front benches. The journalists file in just before a quarter past two, most of them carrying notepads and pens to take full advantage of the privilege denied all others in the House except the Members themselves. The energy level rises until finally, at 2:15, the Speaker stands up, nods to the leader of the opposition, intones "oral questions, *questions orales*," and announces the leader of the opposition, who promptly stands up. So begins the curious daily ceremony called Question Period.

Any examination of Question Period must commence with the recognition that it constitutes a seriously under-studied component of Canadian politics.¹ Ministers, MPs, and their staffs generally regard Question Period as the highlight of the parliamentary day, while journalists and 'policy wonks' tend to rely on it for the definitive statement of 'what's important and what's happening in public affairs.' Indeed, it is increasingly rare to see political analysis or commentary which is not drawn from or informed by the daily ceremony and the scrums which follow it. Question Period is also crucial to democratic accountability since, in the words of one MP, "[Question Period] is what makes ministers think through the consequences of their actions."²

In response to the paucity of academic treatment of Question Period, this paper takes a threefold approach. The first section is expository and descriptive, outlining the characteristics of Question Period in various Canadian jurisdictions and providing a brief

¹ The most comprehensive treatment of Question Period in Canadian legislatures has come in various papers written by parliamentary and legislative interns. See, for example, Leslie Geran, "Question Period: Strategies, Procedures, and Preparation; or Alberta's Legislature Grows Up," Alberta Legislative Internship Program, June 1990; David Doherty, "The Effectiveness of Question Period in the Legislature of Ontario," Ontario Legislative Internship Program, June 1981; Jeffery Kerr, "Reviving Responsible Government: Improving the functioning of institutions of government," Manitoba Legislative Internship Program, 1994, especially pp.13-24; and Ralph Bertram, "Question Period," in Jean-Pierre Gadbourey and James Ross Hurley (eds.), *The Canadian House of Commons Observed: Parliamentary Internship Papers* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), pp.3-34. For detailed studies of Question Period in Ontario, see Christopher J. Schnarr, "Question Period strategies in the Ontario legislature," Christopher Jones, "Question Period tactics and the Ontario New Democratic Party," and Hilary Deirdre, "Question Period and media coverage of environmental issues," all in Graham White (ed.), *Inside the Pink Palace: Ontario Legislature Internship Essays* (Toronto: Ontario Legislature Internship Programme / Canadian Political Science Association, 1993). See also Douglas Fisher, "A Question of Question Period in the House of Commons," in Robert J. Fleming (ed.), *Canadian Legislatures: the 1986 comparative study* (Toronto: Office of the Assembly, 1986), pp. 45-52.

² Peter Milliken, MP, interview with parliamentary interns.

comparative perspective. This section focuses on Question Period's duration, content, and style. The second section zooms in on the actors themselves, examining who they are and what roles they play. I also examine Question Period's audience, focusing on the newsmedia. In the third and final section, I take a more theoretical view of Question Period as central to democratic accountability. My underlying argument is that a reform of Question Period is necessary to the wider project of rebalancing the relationship between legislative and executive power and restoring the legitimacy of Canadian legislatures and legislators. The paper thus attempts to connect an examination of Question Period with wider concerns about the changing shape of governance in a parliamentary democracy, the nature of opposition in contemporary politics, and the contested meaning of democratic accountability.

Setting the stage: the mechanics and operation of Question Period

'Question Period' is a mainstay of parliamentary systems, and analogous formal opportunities to question government exist, in one form or another, in virtually all contemporary democracies.³ Though the functions of such opportunities for questioning may be similar across jurisdictions, their mechanics and operation differ significantly, notably in terms of duration, content and style.

Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons is 45 minutes in duration on every day the House sits (Monday through Friday). This is longer than in many jurisdictions but shorter than in others. Parliamentary procedure in many European countries, for example, provides for an hour or more of oral questions, but often there is only one Question Period a week.⁴ As shown in the table below, the duration of Question Period differs wildly among the provinces, varying

³ The Interparliamentary Union's 1976 study concluded that the "putting of questions to Ministers is a procedure for information and control used in almost all of the countries under consideration whether or not the Government is politically accountable." Of the 54 countries surveyed, only five — Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Monaco, and the United States — did not provide for oral questions. Valentine Herman and Françoise Mendel, *Parliaments of the World* (Interparliamentary Union, 1976), pp.854-877.

⁴ For example, one hour per week is devoted to oral questions in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Norway and the French *Assemblée nationale*. In Sweden, there are one or two question hours per week, while oral Question Period is limited to 30 minutes weekly in Belgium. In Italy, there are 40 minutes of oral questions daily, but questions must be submitted in writing 15 days in advance. After the Minister's reply, the author of the question may speak for 5 minutes, implying that Italy's 'Question Period' is not nearly as spontaneous as the Canadian version. *Parliaments of the World*, *op cit*.

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from a low of 15 minutes in British Columbia⁵ to a high of 90 minutes on Wednesdays in Nova Scotia.

DURATION OF QUESTION PERIOD ACROSS CANADA

HOC	45 minutes every sitting day (Monday - Friday)
SEN	? minutes every sitting day?
BC	15 minutes Monday - Thursday, none Friday ⁶
AB	50 minutes every sitting day (Monday - Thursday)
SK	25 minutes every sitting day (Monday - Friday)
MB	40 minutes every sitting day (Monday - Thursday)
ON	60 minutes every sitting day (Monday - Thursday)
QC	45 minutes every sitting day (Tuesday - Thursday)
NB	30 minutes every sitting day (Tuesday - Friday)
NS	90 min Wed, 60 min Tue and Thu, none Mon or Fri
PEI	40 minutes every sitting day (Tuesday - Friday)
NF	? minutes every sitting day (Monday - Friday)

In other words, the amount of time which Canadian legislatures devote to Question Period ranges from one hour per week in British Columbia to four hours per week in Ontario, and averages just under three hours weekly.

Since the exact amount of time allocated to Question Period is essentially arbitrary, there are periodic calls for either lengthening or shortening it, usually without effect.⁷ In contrast to many other elements of the parliamentary day, Question Period is generally scheduled to occur at a set time. It is commonly preceded by statements by Members, often on topics of interest to their constituents. In the House of Commons, these statements are commonly referred to as 'S.O.31s' in

⁵ In addition to having the shortest amount of time devoted to oral questions of any jurisdiction in Canada, British Columbia's 15 minute Question Period is also the shortest in the Commonwealth.

⁶ There exists no clear explanation for why there is no Question Period on Fridays. As Neil Reimer notes, "[t]he agreement that was made between the parties when a formal Standing Order re: QP was introduced was simply that there be four Question Periods per week. Part of this is due to the fact that Wednesday is an optional sitting day. If the House does not sit Wednesdays, we do in fact have a QP on Friday." (Reply to questionnaire).

⁷ A recent exception is Alberta's Question Period, which was lengthened from 45 minutes to 50 minutes in 1993. The last procedural changes in Nova Scotia occurred in 1987.

reference to the standing order (number 31) which establishes them. In addition, most jurisdictions provide for the introduction of guests either just before or just after Question Period, reflecting the fact that guests generally come to attend this most lively part of the parliamentary day.

In terms of content, the ways in which Question Period's various functions are translated into a concrete set of procedures differ markedly between jurisdictions. In the British House of Commons, for example, which is otherwise quite procedurally similar to the Canadian House of Commons, the content and rules of Question Period differ substantially from those of its Canadian counterpart. Though the duration of 'Question Time' (from 2:30 to 3:30 on the first four days of the week) is quite similar to that of Question Period, individual ministers answer questions on a rotating basis, each Department coming up every four weeks or so. The Prime Minister appears twice weekly, answering questions from 3:15 to 3:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays in what is known as 'Prime Minister's Question Time.'

The rules concerning questions in 'Question Time' are also much more elaborate than those of Question Period in Canada since, in marked contrast to the procedures of Canadian legislatures, questions must be tabled in advance, usually by as much as fourteen days.⁸ Each member may table a number of questions, which are then placed in a lottery, from which the top twenty or thirty are published. At the start of question time, the Speaker calls the MP whose question is first on the list. The MP promptly stands, says 'number one,' and sits down again. The relevant minister then rises to deliver a prepared answer, after which the fun begins. After the minister's (often boring) answer, the MP asks a supplementary question. As in Canada, opposition MPs usually provide no prior notice of their supplementary, which must relate to the main question but can add a topical angle or spin. At the discretion of the Speaker, other MPs may also be called to ask supplementaries. An opposition 'frontbencher' will usually be among those asking supplementaries, particularly if the question is an important or politically sensitive one. The procedure is repeated for subsequent questions on the order paper.⁹ 'Question Time' in the British House of Commons is thus seemingly much more structured than the apparently spontaneous 'free-for-all' of its Canadian counterpart. It would

be erroneous, however, to assume that Question Period in Canada is unstructured. On the contrary, it is highly 'scripted' in content.

The most obvious way in which Question Period in Canadian legislatures is scripted concerns the lineup, the order in which MPs ask their questions. The lineup is predetermined in two ways: the number and order of questions assigned to each party is usually set and, within those limits, each party caucus determines who will fill the party's slots. These prioritised party lists are given to the Speaker, who calls upon the members when it is their party's turn. The precise formula adopted for establishing the lineup differs from province to province and changes following each election to reflect the new party standings. In Alberta, for example, the Speaker recognises the leader of the opposition for the first three questions, the leader of the third party for the next one, and then a government member for the next one. After that, questions alternate between the government and the opposition. Each questioner is allowed two supplementary questions. One of the most contentious rules is that there should be no preamble to supplementary questions. Though all the parties have agreed to this, members frequently use preambles anyway, sometimes as a response to the previous answer.

In Nova Scotia, too, the order of questions posed is set. The leaders of the opposition parties usually ask the first question for their party, but this is not set. Other members will sometimes take the lead if the topic is in their critic area. As in Alberta, all questions have two supplementaries and all questions—especially the supplementaries—are supposed to be brief. No preamble is permitted on the supplementaries, but this rule is rarely enforced and even more rarely followed. As is the case elsewhere, there is no set time limit per question in Nova Scotia. In a one hour Question Period, ten or so questions with supplementaries are usually asked, while fifteen or so are asked in the 90-minute Question Period on Wednesdays.¹⁰ Ontario's procedures stipulate that Question Period starts with two questions from the leader of the opposition, followed by two questions each from the leader or leaders of the other opposition parties in order of their membership in the House. All parties—including the governing party—then rotate in questioning, starting with the official opposition.

In some provinces, the lineup is specified in even greater detail. In Prince Edward Island's Legislative Assembly, for example, the first 25 minutes of Question Period are currently allotted to the official opposition, with the first question to the leader of the official opposition. After the first

⁸ The practice of submitting questions in writing before receiving an oral reply is not uncommon. Indeed, Parliamentarians in *most* jurisdictions are required to table their questions at least a few days prior to receiving an oral reply. Canada, along with Australia, is one of the few jurisdictions where no prior notice of main questions is required.

⁹ Philip Norton, *Does Parliament Matter?* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p.96

¹⁰ Source: George C. Moody, MLA, House Leader, Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative Caucus, and John Holm, MLA, House Leader, Nova Scotia NDP Caucus.

question, the Speaker may continue to recognise the leader or any other member of the official opposition. For the next 6 minutes, the Speaker recognises the leader of the third party. For the remaining 9 minutes the Speaker recognises normally members of the official opposition. On occasion, however, a private government member may request to be recognised.

Procedurally, Question Period in many Canadian jurisdictions is quite constrained and limited, but the rules are not always followed. In New Brunswick, for example, questions are supposed to be of an urgent nature but most often are not. New Brunswick's standing order 42(2), in common with formal procedures in many other Canadian jurisdictions, even specifies that questions and answers "shall be concisely and clearly put without argument or opinion", but it is difficult to see how this rule can be strictly enforced. The rules governing what kinds of questions are allowed in Question Periods across Canada generally follow *Beauchesne's Rules & Forms*, which is the rule book used in the Canadian House of Commons.¹¹ Of particular interest are *Beauchesne's* observations that the "primary purpose of Question Period is the seeking of information and calling the Government to account" (§410:5), that the "greatest possible freedom should be given to Members consistent with the other rules and practices" (§410:6), and that questions should not be hypothetical or offend the *sub judice* principle—in other words, that they should not deal with matters before the courts (§§410:12 and 15). *Beauchesne's* also states that all "questions are put to the Government. The Government decides who will answer" (§418), an important rule in the sense that it allows the government to 'protect' certain ministers by deflecting attention to another member of the government—although this strategy can also backfire.

The last of the three main ways in which Question Period differs across jurisdictions is in its style. While duration and content are relatively easy categories to subject to comparative analysis, it is difficult to measure 'style'. Nonetheless, the style of Question Period can be broken down into three main components: the level of partisanship, the informal expectations, and the qualities of the actors themselves.

The first of the factors which influence the 'style' of Question Period is the level of partisanship. This refers primarily to the nature of the relationships between parties and the extent to which 'party concerns' dominate discussion. Do the parties generally cooperate or compete? Are

the ideological differences stark and pronounced, perhaps leading to irreconcilable discourses or insurmountable obstacles to cooperation? Conversely, are parties ideologically similar, perhaps leading to cooperation, but also possibly leading to the perception that particular parties are competing for the same voters? If the leaders of a particular party feel electorally threatened by another party, they may tend to competition rather than cooperation. At the individual level, how do members interact with their counterparts from other parties, and what role does personal animosity (or the sharp distinction between 'friends' and 'foes') play? More generally, to what extent do individual members faithfully 'toe the party line' in Question Period? Some members focus on the party-political angle in their questions, but others stick to the issues rather than attempting to score 'cheap' political points. Finally, to what extent do various opposition parties 'gang up' on a particular minister or issue, and to what extent do they pursue separate agendas? As these questions indicate, partisanship is an elusive concept with chameleonlike qualities.¹² Watching Question Period, it is clear that a humorous or lighthearted atmosphere can be suddenly transformed into an intensely competitive one as a particularly partisan question or reply hits a nerve.

The second element of the style of Question Period concerns the informal expectations of the actors. Much of what happens in Question Period is based on shared conventions and expectations which are not explicitly specified in the formal procedures. For example, a key expectation is that the leaders of the opposition parties will address their questions to the Prime Minister or Premier though, in theory, they could just as well question ministers. A related convention is that members of the cabinet actually attend Question Period unless it is virtually impossible for them to do so—a convention which is not always followed in some foreign jurisdictions. Ministers are also expected to inform opposition caucuses of upcoming absences, so that these do not prepare questions for the minister on those days.¹³ Another expectation is that a particular party's 'slots' are not monopolised by the party leader or a few prominent members and that each member usually asks no more than one main question (with supplementaries). Despite this convention, however, there are many

¹¹ *Beauchesne's Rules & Forms of the House of Commons of Canada, with Annotations, Comments and Precedents*, 6th Edition, prepared by Alistair Fraser, W.F. Dawson and John A. Holtby (Toronto: Carswell, 1989)

¹² Though there is general agreement that 'excessive partisanship' is normatively bad, there is disagreement on the precise meaning of partisanship as a concept. See, for one working definition, Michael J. White, *Partisan or Neutral? The Futility of Public Political Theory* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997)

¹³ See Douglas Lewis, "The Question Period Weapon in Canada." *The Parliamentarian*, v.63(4) October 1982, pp.344-347.

members who rarely ask questions in Question Period, a problem particularly acute among government members.

The assumption, of course, is that government backbenchers gain the cabinet's or minister's attention within caucus. This is not always the case, however, a fact which provides government backbenchers with an incentive to break the expectation that government members ask only 'soft' questions pre-approved by the minister to whom they address the question. If it is true that the vast majority of MPs are nobodies, it is also true that those who ask questions are noticed more than those who do not. The disincentives for breaking the convention of 'soft' or 'fluffy' questions from government backbenchers, however, are palpable in the tight party control which seems to characterise Canada's Parliament and legislatures. Finally, the procedures for Question Period in the House of Commons and in most provincial legislatures specify that questions may not only be directed to ministers but also to the chairs of parliamentary or legislative committees, but this possibility is rarely invoked. As with its other stylistic elements, Question Period's informal conventions are open to change, though this happens somewhat less frequently than changes in the degree of partisanship displayed in Question Period.

The third factor which influences the style of Question Period does change regularly: the actors. After every election, the actors change and the style of Question Period undergoes transformation as well. In Alberta, for example, the biggest recent change in Question Period occurred after the 1986 election. Prior to the election, there were only four opposition members. In practice, this meant that "the Speaker would recognise any member who wanted to ask a supplementary question... so you could have an entire Question Period that was taken up with one topic. It was much more spontaneous than it is now, and there was a lot of back and forth since government members would make up questions on the fly to give ministers a chance to look good."¹⁴ In addition to changing the party-political balance, elections can also inject new life into Question Period as new members with colourful personalities or other personal qualities enter the house.

Non-electoral changes in the actors also influence the style of Question Period. The resignation or departure of a minister or member can greatly change the equation. For example, Question Period was a central focus of both the *Oui* and *Non* campaigns in the 1995 Québec referendum campaign, but Lucien Bouchard's departure during the campaign

significantly modified Question Period, moving the focus of the campaign away from daily verbal confrontations with Prime Minister Chrétien and other Liberal ministers to more 'photo-op' types of engagements as the leaders of both campaigns toured Québec.¹⁵ In terms of bringing certain members into play on certain issues, cabinet shuffles or the rearrangement of opposition critics can also have dramatic effects. A certain member may be an excellent critic on one issue, but fare poorly in other areas.¹⁶ Political parties take the 'Question Period variable' into account when deciding which of their members occupies which post, and it is always fascinating, after a cabinet shuffle, to see which opposition critics change their focus in order to keep shadowing a certain minister.¹⁷ These three stylistic elements—the level of partisanship, informal expectations, and the qualities of the actors themselves—largely determine what actually happens on the stage of Question Period.

On stage: the actors and their audiences

A casual observer of Question Period in the House of Commons might assume that it involves only a handful of people. After all, only about a dozen MPs and a correspondingly small sample of ministers and parliamentary secretaries actively participate. The view that Question Period involves only a few people per day, however, is quite wrong. Every morning before Question Period, groups of people scattered around Ottawa gather together to draft the 'script' for the day's Question Period.

Small committees in each opposition party caucus meet to go through the previous day's news and map out strategy for the coming day. These committees are crucial because they determine how the party formulates political issues, as well as how it reacts to current events. Because of the importance attached to Question Period strategy, membership on the Question Period committee is often a sought after prize among MPs and assistants. In Ottawa, the Question Period committees are usually chaired by the House Leader or Deputy House

¹⁵ See my Parliamentary internship paper, *op cit*.

¹⁶ The terms 'excellent' and 'poorly', of course, are judgementally loaded terms. On the criteria commonly used in such judgements, see the next section.

¹⁷ It would be an interesting though methodologically difficult endeavour to study the precise linkages between cabinet shuffles, opposition critic shuffles, and the 'Question Period calculation'. To what extent do parties and their members weigh the Question Period 'optics' (and, I suppose, 'acoustics' as well) when considering portfolio changes? Anecdotal evidence suggests it plays a significant role, but finding firm empirical data remains a challenge.

¹⁴ Gary Garrison (Director of Public Information, Legislative Assembly of Alberta), reply to questionnaire.

Leader and include the party Leader and Whip (or representatives from their offices), as well as some senior or influential MPs and one or more ‘whiz kids’.¹⁸ The exact composition of the Question Period strategy committees, of course, varies from party to party and even from month to month.¹⁹ The chief aims of all this strategising are generally to ensure that the party’s message gets maximum play and that the government’s failures are brought to light.

Concurrently, staff in the various government departments prepare briefs which attempt to anticipate ‘hot issues’ so that ‘their’ minister is not caught off guard. A well-prepared reply to a ‘surprise’ or potentially embarrassing question ensures that both the minister and the department appear primed and in control. In this game, different ministers and different departments have different styles. Some ministers prefer indexed briefing books while others carry cue cards or flip to the relevant page of a coloured binder when called upon to answer a question. Throughout, the Prime Minister’s Office coordinates the production of ‘talking points’ or ‘discussion points’ which, far from being about discussion, actually concern ‘the line’ that is to be taken should any particular issue arise. The tendency seems increasingly to be to utilise marketing techniques such as ‘spinning’ the question to focus on a particular (prepared) message, making *Question Period* into something less than *answer period*.

Question Period is Parliament’s primary stage for holding the government accountable, but this stage has not always existed in its present form. Though procedures for ‘question time’ were introduced in the British House of Commons in 1849, it took over a century before similar procedures were established and regularly utilized in Canada. Some trace the start of ‘modern’ oral Question Period in Canadian legislatures to its increased use in the pipeline debate in 1956²⁰, but the highly formalized Question Period we know today is quite a new phenomenon. In fact, Question Period was not formally established in some Canadian provinces until the 1970s.²¹

At first, there were many procedural changes to Question Period, and *Beauchesne*’s notes that “[f]ew parts of the proceedings of the House have changed over the years as much as the Question Period” (§407). In contrast to the heavy changes of preceding decades, however, there have been few recent changes to Question Period in Canada. Even the introduction of televised broadcasting of parliamentary and legislative proceedings, seen elsewhere as having significantly impacted many aspects of parliamentary behaviour²², is generally seen as being of little significance in Canada, though opinions are mixed.²³ In the eyes of one MP, for example, “television has made Question Period more dramatic. There is more outrage in questions, and more vigour in responses. The control of the questions is fixed [and] the whole ceremony is quite rehearsed.”²⁴

For whom is the ceremony rehearsed? Any portrait of Question Period’s actors is incomplete if it ignores the audience. Members of Parliament themselves often seem to place far more importance on Question Period than other parts of the day, and this ascribed symbolic and strategic importance is due chiefly to the fact that the media take the bulk of

²² See, for example, Bob Franklin (ed.), *Televising Democracies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), assessing the impact of the introduction of television to the British House of Commons.

²³ John Holm, House Leader of Nova Scotia’s NDP writes that “[t]here have been few changes over my 13 years as a member. With the advent of television, people are more careful phrasing their questions. It is surprising how many people watch the House and it is from QP that the media usually draw their stories. They pay attention for the first half usually expecting latter items to be of less significance.” In contrast, Charles Mackay, argues that Question Period’s characteristics *have* changed over time, though he posits that this is “largely attributable to the personalities and characteristics of the Members involved in the various exchanges. Naturally, some Members are greater orators than others, some more learned in questioning (lawyers) etc. and others versed in delivering the snappy ‘one liners’.” In short, I think less to do with the formal operational Rules of OQP and more to do with the Members and public opinion of the day.” Cameras were introduced in the PEI House in the Fall of 1997 and, “to date, have not dramatically changed the operation or decorum of Question Period. We will be in a better position to judge the effect of this change in a year or two.” Art Fordham, Acting Assistant Clerk in Nova Scotia, is of the opinion that question has not changed at all over time, and he also does not think that the introduction of television had changed it. Neil Reimer argues that British Columbia’s “Question Period has changed very little over time. As far as television goes, it has changed the decorum in the House generally—Members are better dressed and the most inflammatory kinds of statements are perhaps less frequent because they’re more likely to be reported. I don’t think TV has had a great impact on QP specifically; unlike in Ottawa, television stations in British Columbia tend not to use clips when reporting on the issues raised in QP—it’s more likely that they’ll scrum the minister and opposition member afterwards.”

²⁴ Peter Milliken, MP, interview with parliamentary interns.

¹⁸ Currently, for example, Reform Party communications strategist Ezra Levant, a member of the party’s ‘snack pack’, focusses on Reform’s Question Period strategy, and similar individuals work for the other parties.

¹⁹ For example, if a particular minister or issue is ‘hot’, the party’s critic for that area will usually attend the Question Period strategy sessions.

²⁰ See Leslie Geran, *op cit*.

²¹ Question Period was not established in Saskatchewan until 1977, and came to British Columbia only in 1973. although the practice of posing written questions had existed since before Confederation.

their parliamentary coverage from Question Period.²⁵ With this focus of media attention, Question Period is central to the parliamentary behaviour of Canadian political parties.

The polemical space²⁶ of Question Period is constructed through the mediation of the newsmedia. Though there are people who watch parliamentary proceedings—especially Question Period—directly from the galleries or unadulterated on CPAC, the sole impressions which the vast majority of the public receive about the House of Commons are filtered through the newsmedia, and the same phenomenon is true in the provinces. How does the fact that debates in the ‘public sphere’ are filtered through the newsmedia impact popular understanding of Question Period in particular and politics in general?

The consensus in contemporary media studies is that the reigning philosophy of the newsmedia is defeatist or, at the very least, extremely cynical.²⁷ The media are seen as presenting “public life mainly as a depressing spectacle rather than as a vital activity in which citizens can and should be engaged. The implied message of this approach is that people will pay attention to public affairs only if politics can be made as interesting as the other entertainment options available to them, from celebrity scandals to the human melodramas featured on daytime talk programs.”²⁸ The comparison between Question Period and melodramatic talkshows is frightening and, thankfully, overblown. Nevertheless, the treatment by many journalists of politics as nothing more than a narrow, partisan and party-political-inspired focus on ‘strategy’ “invites viewers and readers to see themselves not as voters

but as spectators evaluating the performances of those bent on cynical manipulation.”²⁹

To what extent can efforts aimed at improving Question Period’s efficacy succeed in such a situation? The ‘natural instinct’ of the newsmedia remains “to present every public issue as if its ‘real’ meaning were political in the narrowest and most operational sense of that term—the attempt by parties and candidates to gain an advantage over their rivals. Reporters do of course write stories about political life in the broader sense and about the substance of issues [...but] when there is a chance to use these issues as props or raw material for a story about pure political tactics, most reporters leap at it.”³⁰ The reason why so many journalists privilege tactics over substance is that it is easier (and seemingly more ‘informed’) to write about how politicians ‘position’ themselves, or how they ‘handle’ issues, than it is to examine the issues themselves and report what politicians say and do in light of their policy positions. These journalists subscribe to the faintly Clausewitzian-sounding view of Question Period as “the continuation of the election campaign by other means,” and thus focus on Question Period as an entertaining show of partisan wrangling rather than as a contest of—and dialogue between—competing political ideas and ideals.³¹

There is much to feed this rather narrow view of Question Period. For example, the focus of much media criticism of participants in Question Period is not on incorrect logic or faulty information but rather on how questioners and respondents should be more ‘aggressive’ or ‘assertive’, so that the *style* of a question becomes more important than its *content*.³² In other words, the implicit (and often explicit) assumption is that it is important to be aggressive, forceful and demonstrative if one is to ‘succeed’ at the game of Question Period. Likewise, there is virtually unanimous agreement on the importance of being telegenic, an assertion which might easily lead to a situation where complex political issues are overshadowed and overwhelmed by in-depth ‘analysis’ of the timbre of an MP’s voice, and the state of his or her (usually her) dress and hairstyle rather than what he or she does or thinks. The danger is that we will eventually reach a stage where political parties hire actors to play on the scintillating stage of

²⁵ C.E.S. Franks cites a study by two parliamentary interns which concluded that “even though the House spends far more time debating bills than on Question Period, newspaper coverage of Question Period exceeded coverage of debate on government bills by a ratio of thirty-five to one.” There is little evidence to counter the claim that this is still the case, or even more so than previously. C.E.S. Franks, “Debates and Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons: What purpose do they serve?” *American Review of Canadian Studies* XV:1 (1985), p.5. See also C.E.S. Franks, “The ‘Problem’ of Debate and Question Period” in John C Courtney (ed.), *The Canadian House of Commons: Essays in Honour of Norman Ward* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1985).

²⁶ This term is taken from Oliviero Toscani. *La Pub est une charogne qui nous sourit* (Paris: Hoëbeke, 1995), p.50

²⁷ See, for example, George Bain, *Gotcha!: How the Media Distort the News* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994); Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990)

²⁸ James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), p.8

²⁹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *op cit*, p.10

³⁰ James Fallows, *op cit*, pp.26-7

³¹ Jeffrey Simpson, interview with Parliamentary Interns.

³² For example, one critic notes that “many observers have felt that the Reform group has been badly upstaged by the more aggressive and forceful members of the Bloc Québécois caucus led by the demonstrative Lucien Bouchard.” “Reform Readies Rat Pack,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 23, 1994 p.A6

Question Period while all the real decisions are made behind the scenes.³³ Such an outcome is foreseen in the pessimistic view that the “Commons’ only hope of relevance, then, is as theatre, complete with props, emotion and drama. Regrettably, a lot of it is going to be cheap drama”.³⁴

But this rather negative portrait of a narrowly (mis)focused Question Period filled with cheap drama, however, is not necessarily the way things have to be. Question Period can serve broader functions. As one experienced MP notes, for example, it is true that Question Period is “a lot of showmanship, not all of which is intended to elicit information.” But there is “more to it than meets the eye. It is an excellent way to bring pressure to bear, and it may be the only stage which the opposition has.”³⁵ There are dangers for all actors as well, however. As the Director of Communications who organises the Prime Minister’s daily briefings before Question Period notes, Question Period is “the *only* stage for opposition parties,” a stage on which both government and opposition must deal with the threat of overexposure in Question Period’s complex and ever-changing interplay of issues and personalities.³⁶ With so much attention, it is important for the actors to be wary of Question Period’s bright lights. As Jean-Luc Pepin once noted, “the fear of Question Period is the beginning of political wisdom.”³⁷

Interpreting and evaluating the performance

Question Period is often evaluated in terms of the numbers of questions asked, or in terms of the subjects covered. A whole range of political actors maintain statistics on everything from which MPs ask questions—broken down by party, region, gender, and so on—to how long the questions and answers take. What one does with these numbers, however, is often a matter of choice. For example, one recent study of Question Period concludes (fitting observations to game theory models) that male and female MPs play different games in Question Period, and hold different underlying strategic goals.³⁸ It is not quite clear, however, how a

gender-conscious analysis of Question Period can proceed conceptually. In addition to tabulating statistics on the numbers of questions asked by male and female MPs, a gender-conscious content analysis of Question Period could examine rhetorical styles (such as self-deprecation or use of particular imagery), or probe Question Period with the tools of literary analysis³⁹, but there currently exists no truly satisfactory theoretical or conceptual framework for such analyses. As Marshall McLuhan cautioned long ago, “program and ‘content’ analysis offer no clues to the magic of [various] media or to their subliminal charge”.⁴⁰ Literary and content analysis of Question Period may allow us to draw a more or less accurate (and certainly colourful) portrait of the ‘stories’ of the contest, but can tell us very little about their meaning and impact. In other words, examining Question Period with the tools of literary analysis might yield a more or less accurate view of ‘what happened’, but can do little to answer the questions ‘why?’ or ‘so what?’ In addition to a quantitative approach, then, one can attempt to form a qualitative judgement of Question Period.

One major reason that Question Period in Canada is so unsatisfying to so many people is its intensely partisan and antagonistic character, a character reinforced by the fact that government MPs only rarely ask tough questions, when they do so at all. The pressure to keep things lively often seems to mean that petty party-political squabbling replaces meaningful discussion and debate of public policy, and the whole ceremony has accordingly been described as “contrived, unconstructive, and overly confrontational.”⁴¹ From time to time, an experienced government backbencher may challenge the government on policy issues, but these occasions are rare, not least because government MPs are discouraged from publicly challenging ‘their’ ministers. Such a partisan and antagonistic attitude in Question Period is unproductive, however.

Government MPs are uniquely positioned to engage in constructive criticism, and the best place for such criticism may not always be caucus meetings, since they often operate under restrictive rules and since their memberships are generally not adequately representative. Indeed, given Canada’s current electoral system, no single party caucus is likely to ever

³³ This fits with some of the recent scholarship on the importance of the media to the development of ‘catch-all’ parties. See, for example, some of Peter Mair’s recent work.

³⁴ Globe and Mail editorial “Wave a white flag over the Commons,” Monday, March 16, 1998

³⁵ Peter Milliken, MP, interview with Parliamentary interns.

³⁶ Peter Donolo, interview with Parliamentary interns.

³⁷ Cited in Michael Kalnay, “Managed Mayhem: Question Period in the House of Commons,” *Parliamentary Government*, 8:4 (summer 1989), p.7

³⁸ Susan Markle, “Politeness in Politics: Women’s and Men’s talk during Question Period,” MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1994.

³⁹ As C.E.S. Franks suggests. See his “Debate and Question Period,” chapter 7 in C.E.S. Franks, *The Parliament of Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1987)

⁴⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁴¹ C.E.S. Franks, “Parliament, Intergovernmental Relations, and National Unity,” unpublished manuscript (Intergovernmental Affairs, Privy Council Office, 1997)

be truly representative of the country's diversity.⁴² Parliament as a whole may not be fully representative either, but as a rule MPs as a collective body represent more diverse and multifaceted views than MPs within any one particular party. This strength of Parliament as a whole can be harnessed in a Question Period which encourages broad, issue-based discussion and debate. Besides the familiar dichotomy between government and opposition within the House, there is another distinction which is just as fundamental: the dichotomy between the executive and all other MPs. This is the separation of the executive from the legislative.

In Canada and other parliamentary democracies modelled on the British system, this distinction between executive and legislative has never been as clear it is in presidential systems, or even in the many parliamentary systems where members of the cabinet do not sit in Parliament. Yet the aim of keeping the government accountable to Parliament need not be restricted to 'the opposition'.⁴³ The fact that MPs could play a central role in a more 'dualistic' arrangement between executive (government) and legislative (Parliament) is recognised by the many government backbenchers who want the government to loosen the reins. In their view, government questions in Question Period should not be allotted only to the eager MPs who are handed questions by the minister's department. Question Period, in this view, should offer all MPs "a chance for serious discussion."⁴⁴

One way in which Question Period could become the venue for such serious discussion is suggested by the Dutch example. In accordance with the principle of dualism, Question Period in the Netherlands features parliamentary leaders, policy critics, and interested members from all parties questioning ministers. While members from parties not represented in government do tend to ask more questions than members from the governing parties, and while members from the same party as the minister do tend to ask 'softer' questions than others, discussion often takes surprising turns. My hypothesis is that the Dutch system of accountability works as well as it does because the meaning and experience of 'opposition' within the

Dutch parliamentary system differ from the concept's meaning and application in Canada.

The idea of opposition is located at the heart of democratic theory. In the partisan model of democracy, this entails that the principal role of non-government parties and members is to question (or simply *oppose*) government policies and actions. The underlying concept is that the fierce and unyielding competition between groups of representatives with clashing ideologies is necessary in order to hold government accountable to the public and promote public scrutiny and transparency. The prime *raison d'être* and justification of Question Period, in this light, is that it allows the opposition parties to question the leaders of the governing party on specific government policies and (in)actions.

This partisan model of democracy, however, fails to adequately provide for all the nuances necessary to policy-making in a modern democracy. While some would argue that Parliament's role should be limited to providing a forum for the 'competitive struggle for the people's vote', a more generous view states that Parliament exists also "to 'express the mind of the people,' 'to teach the nation what it does not know,' and to make us 'hear what otherwise we should not.'"⁴⁵ The first of these three objectives suggests a greater role for public participation, while the other two imply that more earnest attention should be paid to Parliament's representative and deliberative functions.

In line with the rise of the participatory model of democracy, some political parties (both federal and provincial) actively attempted to involve the public directly in parliamentary activity through Question Period. This usually consisted of a party caucus deciding that a certain number of questions forwarded to the caucus by members of the public should be repeated to the appropriate minister during Question Period.⁴⁶ While providing interesting prospects for analysts of the role of parties in mediating between government and citizens, however, such innovations have generally not been long-lasting.⁴⁷

⁴² As a simple example illustrates: Even in the case of a single variable—the regional dimension—Ontario MPs are strongly over-represented and MPs from elsewhere are strongly under-represented within the current government caucus. Such imbalances exist along many other dimensions as well.

⁴³ In the Netherlands, for example, Parliament collectively holds ministers in check—and sometimes even forces ministerial resignations—even though the cabinet enjoys majority support in Parliament. This is known as 'dualism'. A cross-party majority of MPs forcing a specific minister to resign is nearly unthinkable in Canada.

⁴⁴ *The Hill Times*, October 26, 1995 p.7

⁴⁵ A. Paul Pross, "Parliamentary Influence and the Diffusion of Power," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XVIII:2 (June 1985), p.264

⁴⁶ See, for example, "You, too, will get a crack at Question Period", *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, October 6, 1994, p.A4, discussing such proposals by the Progressive Conservatives in Nova Scotia. The party termed their initiative "Mr Premier, I Want to Know..." and, in the opinion of House Leader George Moody, found it successful.

⁴⁷ In Saskatchewan, for example, this idea flourished, then died: "For a short period in the early 1990s opposition members (the Progressive Conservatives, when they were the Opposition) solicited questions from citizens, which they asked the Premier. Of course the Speaker made the members take responsibility for the questions. The popularity of this campaign seemed to wane

A contrasting view on how elected representatives can better fulfil their representative function holds that all members of elected assemblies have an interest in exposing scandals and eliminating abuses of power, since the continued existence of unnecessary waste and corruption threatens the legitimacy of the institution of Parliament and Legislature itself, not simply that of the government of the day. Inherent to the idea of opposition is the fostering of “groups and individuals who have an interest in asking awkward questions, shining light in dark places, and exposing abuses of power.”⁴⁸ Opposition parties have such an in-built incentive. But parliaments and legislatures, too, have an incentive to provide a powerful and effective legislative check on strongly-centralised executive power. The control of the legislative over the executive arm of government is one of the hallmarks of accountability, and this control must involve all members if it is to be truly effective.

A reform of Question Period can play a key role in strengthening the control of the legislative over the executive, and it is important in this sense for government members to seriously question ministers about their policies. In an ‘information age’, where backroom deals can be criticised as much for process as for output, opening up the policy process makes sense because it fosters legitimacy. Much of the nitty-gritty of policy-making can and should occur in parliamentary committees, but there is no stage like Question Period for debating the weighty issues of the day. The need for such a deliberative forum is clear in a modern democracy, since citizen preferences in the political (in contradistinction to the economic) market do not materialise out of thin air but rather develop primarily through exposure to public debates.⁴⁹ This responds to the dictum mentioned above that an important aspect of an elected assembly’s role is ‘to teach us what we not know,’ and to make us ‘hear what otherwise we should not.’

A number of reforms to Question Period can help ensure that parliaments and legislatures are (better) able to fulfil this function of stimulating and disseminating public debate. These reforms can be described in terms of the familiar categories of duration, content and style. In terms of duration, it is clear that sufficient time is essential when there are so many issues to be discussed. It is, of course, healthy

for members and political parties to be forced to prioritise issues, but the current time constraints often seem to leave members from different parties talking past one another.⁵⁰ Ninety minutes may be too long, but fifteen minutes is likely insufficient for full and adequate discussion.⁵¹

In terms of content, the practice of allowing supplementaries only from the member asking the question could be altered. Allowing a variety of members from a range of parties to comment on a certain issue fosters real discussion rather than confrontation.⁵² One exciting way of enabling fuller participation by members on a range of issues involves adapting a version of the British lottery system. In a Canadian version of this system, members would place their questions, which would then be randomly selected and the first ones printed for Question Period. After the minister’s reply and the questioner’s supplementary question, other members should be allowed to follow up with supplementaries of their own. Such adjustments require a strong Speaker to decide when a question has been fully examined, and they also weaken the immediate influence of political parties on Question Period, since party elites would no longer be the ones drafting the ‘script’ for the day’s Question Period. In other words, this reform would remove much of the ‘contrived’ nature of Question Period.

Style is, once again, the most difficult subject to analyse. It is clear to me that the current level of partisanship in Parliament and many Canadian legislatures is deleterious to ‘real discussion’, but it is unclear how precisely this can best be combated. A greater focus on Question Period as a stage to elicit ‘useful information’ may open up the

and has not been a part of Question Period for some time.” Gregory Putz (Deputy Clerk, Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan), reply to questionnaire.

⁴⁸ Ian Shapiro, *Democracy’s Place* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996)

⁴⁹ See Bernard Manin, “On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation,” *Political Theory*, 15:3 (August 1987), pp.338-68

⁵⁰ For example, a conspicuous characteristic of Question Period in the period before the Québec referendum was the sizeable discrepancy in the subjects of questions between the two main opposition parties (the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party). Dividing the questions asked into eight broad issue areas using the categories assigned in Hansard, I found that 38% (first priority out of the eight categories) of questions asked by Bloc MPs concerned the referendum, compared with only 11% (fifth priority) for Reform MPs. In contrast, Reform MPs asked 53 questions on ‘Defence/Foreign Affairs’, representing 19% (second priority) of all their questions, while Bloc MPs asked only 3 questions on these subjects, less than 1% of their total, making this subject the party’s lowest priority. Bloc MPs asked 41 questions on the subject of ‘Industry’, however (third priority), while Reform MPs asked only 2 questions (less than 1%, or lowest priority). While no indicator is perfect, utilising the categories assigned by the staff of the House of Commons removes much of the subjective nature of categorisation. See my Parliamentary Internship Programme paper, *op cit.*, for a fuller discussion of the methodological issues. Even given the methodological limitations, however, such striking dissimilarities are stunning.

⁵¹ The time factor in Question Period is discussed at length in any of the Speakers’ (both federal and provincial) rulings and reminders cautioning members to keep questions and answers short.

⁵² As the case of Alberta cited above makes clear.

charge that it will become ‘boring’ and uneventful. But as it operates now, Question Period almost always degenerates into ‘silly theatre’ which is an ‘easy hit’ or fallback for journalists who cannot be bothered (or more likely are too busy) to go hunting for real substantial news.⁵³

If Question Period has become a partisan show for the media, then at least part of the problem concerns how the media should go about evolving from simple score-keeping to more in-depth analysis. Many media commentators themselves lament the decline of political journalism to a thumbs-up, thumbs-down level of analysis. If the role of journalism is ‘to search for information of use to the public’, then it is incumbent on journalists to take responsibility for going to search for ‘real’ stories. Question Period currently provides an excellent place to start this search, but it should not be the only place journalists look. Parliamentarians themselves bear the largest responsibility for reforming Question Period. In order for Question Period to more closely conform to the model of a site of ‘real discussion’, Canadian parliamentarians should aim to transform it into a daily forum for intelligent, informed, deliberative political argument rather than party-political grandstanding. The statement that Question Period is “the most significant proceeding” in any legislature may be a slight exaggeration, but it is beyond doubt that the daily ceremony is a key support of democratic politics.⁵⁴

Conclusion: from showmanship to democratic discussion

Question Period is one of Parliament’s best tools for holding government accountable, but its possibilities are under-utilised in Canada. In a mediated world of politics as spectacle, Question Period is uniquely configured to fulfil the need to ‘personalise politics’ by ‘bringing home’ issues in ways that citizens can relate to and form and defend political opinions on. Unfortunately, Question Period in the House of Commons and in Canadian legislatures has developed into a contrived and overly confrontational ceremony, which may be entertaining and amusing for pundits but is generally neither constructive nor particularly helpful to citizens. Politics is much more nuanced than a simple dichotomy between supporters and opponents suggests, and Question Period can serve to highlight issues and suggest solutions from perspectives which transcend ‘the party line’.

Responding to the relative paucity of academic study of Question Period, this paper commenced with an examination of how Question Period functions across Canada. In particular, I focused on Question Period’s duration, content, and style and contrasted the ceremony’s formal and informal procedures with some comparative examples. Arguing that Question Period’s stylistic elements—the level of partisanship, informal expectations, and the qualities of the actors themselves—largely determine what happens ‘on stage’, I next zoomed in on Question Period’s actors and audiences, paying particular attention to the role that the newsmedia can play in elevating democratic accountability over petty partisan positioning. Finally, I examined some theories of opposition and dualism and advanced the position that some adjustments to Question Period would help rebalance the current imbalance between legislative and executive control by reinvigorating parliamentary oversight of cabinet decision-making, thus helping to restore some legitimacy to Canadian parliaments and their members. Question Period’s political importance bespeaks the need for transforming it into a site of informed and meaningful discussion about substantial public issues within the context of Canadian parliamentary democracy.

⁵³ Jason Moscovitz, interview with Parliamentary interns.

⁵⁴ The characterisation of Question Period as “the most significant proceeding” of a legislature is from Graham White, *The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p.96.