

OP-ED/GUEST COLUMN



Can Question Period really be fixed?

First minority Parliament in a generation set to open on Oct. 4, QP should be reinvented



Photograph from The Hill Times files
LET THE GAMES BEGIN: MPs LIKE TO PUT ON A GOOD SHOW IN QUESTION PERIOD, BUT ISN'T IT GETTING A LITTLE TIRED?

By GARY LEVY
 Concern about the democratic deficit has tended to focus attention on several large issues — holding governments to account, finding a review process for the Supreme Court and other appointments, fixing imbalances caused by our first-past-the-post electoral system, creating mechanisms to ensure ethical conduct.

All very laudable, but by concentrating resources on huge and perhaps intractable problems we are distracted from considering issues such as the use of Parliamentary time, the committee system, and the most sacrosanct of Parliamentary proceedings, Question Period. With the first minority Parliament in a generation set to open on Oct. 4 this is a good time to reflect on prospects for improvement in these areas.

Question Period is generally considered so fundamental to the Parliamentary process (although it is a creation of the 1960s) that Members have been loath to contemplate whether it is as useful as it is entertaining.

In the last Parliament, the usual pattern was for opposition questions to cast aspersions or repeat accusations floated in the media or elsewhere. Not surprisingly, government answers took the form of

denials or comebacks. The supplementaries were then used to ask the very same question which invariably produced a similar answer. The process continued until pandemonium would break out with the House Speaker calling for order. This general pattern was repeated day after day for most of the 45-minute Question Period.

Another oddity is the way questions directed to one person, usually the Prime Minister, ended up being answered by a completely different person. Are we to believe that the person who asked the question did not know to whom to address it or that the person to whom it was addressed was incapable of answering? Why is this absurd process held in such high esteem?

The usual response is that Question Period must be adversarial and confrontational. It is not for the timid or the weak. Out of this battle truth, accountability and responsibility somehow emerge. A more objective observer might conclude that we suffer from a collective self delusion. An auditor might even ask if we are getting "value for money" from Question Period!

Different jurisdictions take different approaches to Question Period and

congressional systems do not even have one. But there's no need for anything so radical. A couple of fairly simple reforms could inject a bit of common sense, if not dignity, into the proceedings.

For example, let's find a way to make sure the person who is asked the question is the one to answer or else explain why he or she is not answering. Certain conventions might have to be rethought, such as whether a previous minister can answer for issues that occurred during his time in office, but that is not an insurmountable problem.

Why not introduce a rotation system so that only certain Ministers are in the House on certain days. This might encourage focus on more departments and more issues rather than one or two which happens to be in the newspapers that day.

The main opposition to a rotation system when it was suggested by Pierre Trudeau many years ago was that it could deprive the opposition of opportunities when something happened on a day when that minister was not scheduled to be in the House. The advent of break weeks and a fixed Parliamentary calendar (which did not exist when Trudeau floated the idea) have made it more difficult to argue that ministers must always be in the House so they can be questioned. According to this logic, Parliament should always be in session which is hardly the case.

Perhaps the Prime Minister would only be in the House one day a week but the opposition could grill him for the full 45 minutes and that would surely make more sense than the present practice of having him sit there while other ministers answer questions addressed to the PM.

The problem of repetitious supplementaries should also be addressed. For years the practice has been to strictly observe time limits for questions and answers but to turn a blind eye to relevance and repetition. A few decisions by the Speaker could go a long way in this regard. A really radical Speaker might even go back to the old practice of recognizing Members who catch his eye instead of accepting lists of questioners from

the parties. This would reward those who play by the rules.

Perhaps we could even think about having a "Leader's QP" which is all the media really cares about after which the leaders could be excused and the other Members and ministers could carry on.

Or, perhaps there could be a longer, focused period of debate and exchange between government and opposition. Some provinces, notably Quebec, have provisions for such a

procedure. Federally, we have the "late show," which takes place at the end of the day and allows government and opposition to discuss and debate questions in a much more profound way than what takes place in Question Period. The problem is that nobody sees this and because notice is required the subject may not be as "hot" as it was originally.

There are lots of other procedural issues to be addressed, but unless Question Period is on the

short list of things to be fixed we should not expect much progress in other areas. With thoughtfulness and hard work by all Members and by the Chair, Question Period could be improved and that should set the stage for other significant changes in the way Parliament works now and for the future.

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The Right Honourable Donald F. Mazankowski, P.C., O.C., LL.D.

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Mr. Mazankowski's advice is widely sought by business and government. He is a director or trustee for a number of Canada's leading companies including Power Corporation of Canada, Shaw Communications Inc., Weyerhaeuser Co., ATCO Ltd., Yellow Pages Income Fund and Canadian Oil Sands Ltd. He also recently chaired the Premier's Advisory Council on Health for Alberta, which established the agenda for health reform in that province.

As a cabinet minister, Mr. Mazankowski led the privatization of Petro-Canada and Air Canada, and served in the positions of Deputy Prime Minister, as well as Minister of Finance, Transport and Agriculture, respectively. In addition he was President of the Privy Council and President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Mazankowski is the recipient of numerous honorary degrees and awards including the Order of Canada, the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal and the Alberta Order of Excellence. The Public Policy Forum of Canada honoured him for his distinguished contribution to the quality of public policy and public management in Canada.

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