

# Can We Finally Fix Question Period?

Michael Chong

*As many observers predicted at the time, the introduction of television cameras to the House of Commons in 1977 gradually changed the daily ritual of question period. In recent years, QP has become more spectacle than substance. Could the reforms promised in the Liberal platform, which closely echo those proposed by MP Michael Chong, make it meaningful again?*

The election of a Liberal majority brings with it the prospect of reforms to question period. The Liberal platform promised to fortify the use of discipline by the Speaker, allow more time for questions and answers, designate a weekly question period for questions to the prime minister (PMQs) and examine the use of online technologies.

Some of those proposed reforms are based on a motion adopted by the House of Commons on October 7, 2010. That motion, seconded by 20 MPs from three different parties, tasked the Procedure and House Affairs Committee with exploring reforms to question period, including:

- elevating decorum and fortifying the use of discipline by the Speaker
- lengthening the amount of time given for each question and each answer
- examining the convention that the minister questioned need not respond
- allocating half the questions each day for MPs, whose names and order of recognition would be randomly selected
- dedicating Wednesday exclusively for questions to the prime minister, and
- dedicating Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday for questions to ministers other than the prime

minister in a way that would require ministers be present two of the four days to answer questions concerning their portfolio

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The Procedure and House Affairs Committee did not complete its work before the May 2011 general election and the proposed reforms died with the dissolution of Parliament.

In recent years, the various proposals to reform question period have demonstrated a desire among MPs to change this important part of the daily routine in the Commons.

When Parliament was established in 1867, question period did not formally exist in the standing orders



Conservative MP Michael Chong, author of the Reform Act, thinks fixing Question Period is a priority for democratic reform. House of Commons photo

governing the House of Commons.

Even after its formal establishment in 1964, question period continued to evolve. Successive Speakers made numerous rulings that established new conventions governing question period. These rulings contributed greatly to its evolution over the last number of decades. Notably, significant changes to these unwritten conventions were made by successive Speakers based on agreements reached in private discussion among fewer than half a dozen MPs in the House of Commons (usually the party whips or house leaders) rather than by changes to the standing orders, which require the consent of the majority of the House.

There are a number of problems with the current conventions and standing orders governing question period. The first concerns behaviour. In recent years, question period has become characterized by boorish behaviour and excessive noise. The introduction of clapping to the Commons in the 1970s has led to

constant applause and standing ovations, often dozens during the 45 minutes of question period. Further, the standing order concerning irrelevance and repetition is not enforced. While question period was never intended to be like high tea in the afternoon and a well-timed heckle can add much to the to and fro, noise levels and disorder have often become so great that the proceedings have often been unintelligible.

Both the Liberal platform and the 2010 motion proposed to fortify the use of discipline by the Speaker. The current standing orders governing question period provide the Speaker with a great deal of power to address these issues. However, previous Speakers have been reluctant to use these powers, leaving it to MPs to self-regulate. It remains to be seen whether Speaker Regan will use the full range of his powers, including the naming of members (expulsion), to more rigorously enforce order.

At the beginning of the 36th Parliament in 1997, Speaker Gib Parent held discussions with the house leaders of the five recognized parties in the Commons. They agreed to limit questions and answers to 35 seconds in order to accommodate questions from all four opposition parties. Previously, the time limit had been longer and at the Speaker's discretion. While a substantive question and substantive answer can be had in 35 seconds or less, the rigidity of this time limit has had the effect of encouraging rhetorical questions and answers over substantive ones.

Both the Liberal platform and the 2010 motion proposed to lengthen the maximum time given to ask and answer a question, so perhaps there will be a consensus to change this convention in the current Parliament.

Yet another longstanding issue concerns the convention that ministers need not respond to questions put to them. Sometimes it is not possible for a minister to respond, such as when abroad representing Canada. However, often a relevant question is put to a minister present, but the government designates another minister to answer. A more substantive question

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period would mandate that ministers respond to questions concerning their area of responsibility. The 2010 motion proposed this reform; the Liberal platform did not.

Another problem with question period is the enormous amount of resources required on part of a minister's offices. The daily routine of preparing, attending and debriefing can take up to four hours out of a minister's schedule; time that could be spent on the important work of managing a ministerial portfolio. Out of a typical ministry of several dozen ministers, fewer than a dozen will be asked questions in a typical question period. In other words, more than two dozen ministers and dozens more staff spend half the working day for naught. If structured differently, question period could provide the same level of democratic accountability while significantly reducing the time and resources required of the ministry.

Both the 2010 motion and the Liberal platform proposed to dedicate a weekly question period for questions to the prime minister. By adopting weekly PMQs and a rotating schedule for the remaining ministry, both ministry and opposition would benefit. The ministry could more effectively use their time and resources for question period, and the opposition could better focus their limited resources and research on specific issues and ministers based on the rotating schedule.

Perhaps the biggest problem with question period is that MPs have lost the right to ask spontaneous questions of the government. Subsequent to the introduction of television to the Commons in 1977, a significant change to question period was introduced by Speaker Jeanne Sauvé,

who found it difficult to choose from among the several MPs who would spontaneously rise to be recognized for a question. According to former Commons Clerk Robert Marleau, after private discussions between Speaker Sauvé and the party whips, lists of MPs designated to ask questions were submitted to the Speaker prior to each day's Question Period by the party whips (or someone designated by the party leader).

MPs must now request to get on the party list and have their questions vetted beforehand. Each party submits its list of questioners to the Speaker in advance of question period, and the Speaker recognizes those on the list. Many MPs rarely get on the list to ask questions.

Party leaders, through the party whips and the party lists, have taken control over what used to be a member's right to ask a question as determined by the Speaker.

The 2010 motion called for allocating half the questions each day for backbench MPs, as determined independently by the Speaker. This would restore the right of MPs to ask questions, a right that was lost when the party lists were implemented. It is interesting to note that the Liberal platform was silent about this proposed reform.

It remains to be seen if the Liberal majority in the Commons will adopt the reforms proposed in their platform and in the 2010 motion. There is a real opportunity to reform question period to better use time and resources, produce more substantive questions and answers and hold the government more accountable. **P**

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