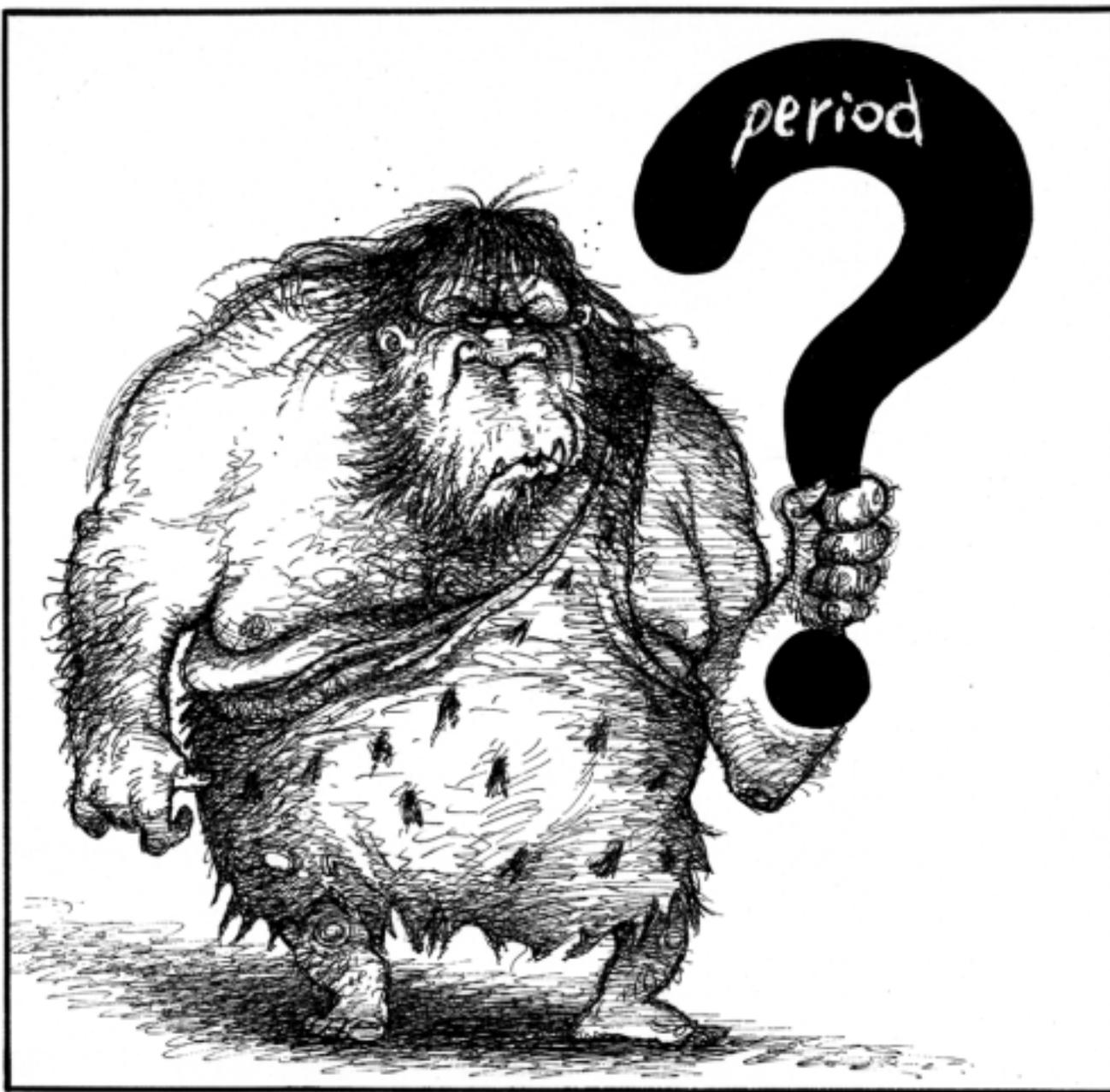


THE QUESTION
PERIOD: WHAT
FORMER MEMBERS
THINK

OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON

PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

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In This Issue...

Save for when votes are being held or for special events such as the Speech from the Throne or the Budget debate, the only time of the day when all MPs are in the House is during Question Period. That daily tournament, which has much in common with a verbal jousting matches between mediaeval knights, has become the main arsenal of the Opposition in its efforts to probe the deficiencies of the government and the weakness of ministers. The House of Commons has as a consequence become a unique kind of shooting gallery, with government and opposition members cheering and jeering from the sidelines.

With the decline in the significance of debate in the House of Commons and the preoccupation of television with the dramatic, Question Period has unfortunately become the only part of daily proceedings that gets substantial media coverage. As a result it has become for the public the defining moment of the parliamentary day.

Many observers consider that the contemporary Question Period does not convey a favourable image of Parliament. Michael Bliss, the distinguished historian, is not alone in decrying "the daily disgrace of the Question Period". Yet what other means remain for the opposition to hold the government to account?

To assess the value and the cost of Question Period as it has evolved, the Parliamentary Centre recently invited six able former members—Jim McGrath, Monique Bégin, Aideen Nicholson, Ray Speaker, John Solomon and Pierre de Savoye—representing all political parties in the House to participate in a panel discussion on the subject. Having served in Parliament, some on both sides of the Chamber, they understand the importance of Question Period. They are fully aware of the constraints of the system, they love the institution and they wish it well and, now that they have retired, they can look on Question Period with greater detachment. The result offers a fascinating insight into the inner workings of the practice, the tension that it can generate, and some interesting ideas for possible improvements.

Peter Dobell
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Cartoon by Anthony Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

By Peter Dobell

The Question Period poses a dilemma for the House of Commons. On the one hand, it has become the major weapon of the opposition parties for calling the government to account, particularly because it gets media attention like nothing else. On the other hand, the thrust and parry of Question Period has turned the process into guerilla theatre, a term used by one of our panelists. The impression it creates reflects badly on Parliament, constantly eroding the public's respect for the institution and for the MPs they elect to represent them.

In the hope of generating some ideas for reforming the practice, the Parliamentary Centre invited six experienced former members to participate in a free-ranging discussion of Question Period.

The panelists described candidly how they felt during the daily Question Period—their frustrations, their anger, their disgust. There were some fascinating reminiscences of their participation in the related *late*

show. Most of all they expressed concern that the environment is so pervasive that it is now virtually impossible to put a genuine question and get an informed and considered answer.

Out of the discussion there emerged one novel and interesting idea. The *late show* might be moved to 3:00 p.m., that is immediately following the Question Period. However, only if a question had been submitted in writing and in advance—usually an indication that a serious answer is being sought—would the questioner be entitled to pursue the subject on the *late show*.

The panel discussion which follows throws a thoughtful light on the contemporary Question Period.

To assist the reader, the names, party affiliation, constituency and years of service in the House of Commons are listed below.

Name	Party	Constituency	Years of Service
Jim McGrath	Progressive Conservative	St. John's East Newfoundland	1957-63 and 1968-86
Monique Bégin	Liberal	Saint-Léonard— Anjou, Québec	1972-84
Aideen Nicholson	Liberal	Trinity, Ontario	1974-88
Ray Speaker	Reform	Lethbridge, Alberta	1993-97
John Solomon	NDP	Regina-Lumsden- Lake Centre Saskatchewan	1993-2000
Pierre de Savoye	Bloc Québécois	Portneuf, Quebec	1993-2000

THE QUESTION PERIOD: WHAT FORMER MEMBERS THINK



Peter Dobell (PCD)

Some weeks ago I had a visit from Jim McGrath. He was concerned with the unfavourable impression of Parliament that is conveyed by Question Period as it now functions. He indicated that he felt that he had some responsibility, because when in opposition he had been particularly aggressive in his questioning. He wondered if anything could be done to improve the way Question Period works.

I thought it worthwhile to seek the views of former Members. Each of you retain an interest in the institution, you follow developments there carefully, you are pleased when Parliament looks good and distressed when it doesn't. No longer being in Parliament, you are freer to express personal opinions. You represent all of the parties in the House and your combined experience is considerable. So this discussion is intended to explore the issues raised by Jim. And for that reason, I'll ask him to lead off.

JIM McGRATH

We should begin by asking how effective is Question Period in holding the Government to account. That question speaks to the genesis of the Question Period as it currently exists. As you know, back in the '60s the government brought in some major rules changes. They did away with the Committee of Supply, that was the old committee of the whole, which examined estimates in the House. That was when the Government was truly accountable. When they took the Committee of Supply out of the House, the estimates were automatically referred to standing committees, which had to report back to the House by the end of May. If they didn't report back to the House by midnight at the end of May, they were deemed to have reported to the House.

With the loss of the power to review estimates in the Committee of Supply, the Question Period took on increased importance. It also became more structured. The Leader of the Opposition got the

first question. He in turn would designate certain people within his caucus to go in with supplementaries. At this stage it was to some extent effective. Regrettably, the process quickly became formalized to the point where a list of questioners was handed to the Speaker. That practice destroyed spontaneity, because it meant that it was no longer possible to get effective supplementaries in.

Then along comes television and the whole thing becomes a show. It has become a competition to see who's going to make the 45-second clip on the evening news. With four parties in opposition it started to go further downhill. Spontaneity has disappeared. After the Official Opposition, which I think has five questions, then you go to the Bloc Québécois, and by the time you end up with the two smaller parties, I mean you're all over the map! Does that hold the Government to account? Not by a long shot.

I believe, frankly, that unless Question Period as it now exists is changed, the public's perception of Parliament will continue to be, to put it mildly, very, very negative. As a matter of fact it's embarrassing.

When we had a Reform Committee of the House which I had the privilege of chairing with two Opposition Members as vice-chair, André Ouellette and Bill Blaikie, we decided that we would operate by consensus. It worked well. We got 50 recommendations through by consensus. The one issue that we could not touch was Question Period, because my colleagues, to their credit, said: "Look we will not be able to get this by our caucuses, they just won't buy it". The opposition is reluctant to give up this Question Period where they can perform.

In retrospect I would like to see a new attempt to bring in written questions. A written question would be submitted 24-hours before and placed on the Order Paper. The next day the Minister would reply to the written question and then there would be supplementaries. Of course that means that ministers would know whether or not they were going to be questioned on a particular day. If they were not going to be questioned, obviously they would not have to be in the House. It is ridiculous to expect 30 Cabinet Ministers to sit through that 45-minute charade day in and day out. In my view Question Period has to change. My suggestion is based to some extent on the British system

which I think is still effective in the British Parliament. Question Period in Canada has become a charade.

PCD

I invite the other members of our panel to react to those rather strong statements. Who would like to begin?

Aideen Nicholson

When I was first elected, the system of referring estimates to committees had just been adopted. You could easily tell which ministers were accustomed to the old system of defending their department's estimates in the House, because they were absolutely knowledgeable. Now ministers bring along an entourage of officials and it is the officials primarily who are questioned by the members. So there is accountability for the department as a whole, but a minister who has become the prisoner of his or her department would simply refer all questions to officials, and there isn't true accountability there.

Question Period is in fact guerilla theatre. And many of the so-called questions have very long preambles which imply blame, impute motives and do all the

I certainly in my time have given notice to ministers. If you want an answer, that is what you do, because then it is clear you are looking for an answer,

things that the Standing Orders say questioners are not supposed to do. A Speaker who tried to impose the rules would be on his feet all the time in Question Period. That I think is a real problem. Jim is right that people are competing for a spot on television and that means they're competing for high drama rather than for facts. There is another side to it too. Many members frame their questions depending on what is a hot media issue, rather than doing independent research and framing their questions drawing on what constituents are likely to be interested in. The search for scandal takes precedence over the search for fact.

I would absolutely agree with Jim on going to the Westminster system of giving notice. When I was first elected, members not infrequently gave notice of their

questions to the minister. I certainly in my time have given notice to ministers. If you want an answer, that is what you do, because then it is clear you are looking for an answer, that you are not just launching an attack. When I visited Westminster I remember that they had occasional days that were more free-for-all and nearer ours, but for the most part members gave written notice. Ministers came prepared to answer and not all ministers attended every day. It was a more dignified, more sensible proceeding which I would like to see happen in our Parliament.

PCD

Another opinion?

Pierre de Savoye

My perception of the Question Period begins in 1993, so I was very interested in the information that dates back to the 1960's. We in the Bloc Québécois noticed that the Question Period was really TV-driven and that meant there were a few rules to follow. If you were not dramatic, you would not be in the news. If you did not attack someone or something, you would not be in the

Basically it's a game where you try to gain visibility. But it is an illusion. People are not impressed and you project a

news. You had to prepare phrasing that took no more than 8 seconds. After a while you recognized the rules that paid off and those that did not and you followed those rules that are basically set by the TV industry. So this Question Period is not a question period to interrogate the government on what's going on or to make the government accountable. It is only a matter of visibility on the TV channels. I think that is how it went wrong. The government on their side realized the same thing, so they practiced their answers to the questions based on the morning news, so as to be ready with their 8 second cuts. Basically it's a game where you try to gain visibility. But it is an illusion. People are not impressed and you project a disgraceful image of the whole parliamentary process.

Now do we have an alternative? Well, I don't think committees are. When ministers appear before committees they are careful to be very bland and leave when the time slot comes to an end. So where is accountability? Even the Auditor General has difficulty having his own effort listened to by the House. In Québec, there is on Fridays what is called *interpellation* where a minister has to respond for an extended time period to questions from the opposition or even from his own party. Maybe the Parliament of Canada should adopt that practice.

Aideen Nicholson

Do you mean, Pierre, that there is no Question Period in the first four days of the week?

Pierre de Savoye

Oh yes, there is a Question Period.

Aideen Nicholson

So what's the distinction?

Pierre de Savoye

Friday's *interpellation* is on a specific subject, and it does not last only five minutes. It can continue for several hours.

Aideen Nicholson

So it's a committee of the whole, but one full day a week?

Pierre de Savoye

In a way. But, like Question Period, there are no motions or votes, only the deputies interested in the subject of the *interpellation* participate and the concerned public will be listening because substantive and detailed answers are often given.

PCD

And two other things. The decision as to the subject of the *interpellation* is taken a week previously, so that the interested communities are alerted. It is covered by television. Technically it's not a meeting of the Assembly, it is an informal discussion among deputies focussed on one subject. What I find fascinating is that even Members of the Federal House from Québec are not familiar with this interesting practice.

Pierre de Savoye

You're right, Peter.

PCD

Can we have opinions from two panelists who haven't spoken yet, Monique who was a federal minister and Ray who was a provincial minister.

Monique Bégin

I was mainly on the receiving line of Question Period and I totally agree with the description Pierre just gave of playing to television. I had even greater difficulty as an opposition member because I knew the constraints faced by my successor, David Crombie, who was a very decent Tory. During the Question Period, it's very rare that you can really attack for something worthwhile. I agree with all of you who spoke of an illusion. To add to the illusion, I understood at the end of my time in Parliament, I understood that beyond the job of governing there is a second level of reality which takes priority. It's the daily interaction between ministers and the government spending time trying to prepare for a rebuttal and a counterattack, and the opposition at the same time preparing their attack. So there is a level of reality which is entirely a media event that takes place on the grand theatre stage every day, which consumes enormous time on both sides which I find wasteful. This media event masks completely the reality of what goes on and what should be questioned. I find that very serious, very wrong.

I personally hated the Question Period because it was for me extremely stressful. Unless you're extraordinarily good at stalling. Some of my colleagues possessed the art of answering without saying anything. I didn't have that talent.

Having lived Question Period, I recognize that somehow it's like a gymnastic that does keep ministers on their toes. I needed to know what was happening in my department and preparing for Question Period helped to keep me informed.

I did not receive notice of questions often. I don't recall having ever received a written notice of a question. Once in a while we would get a telephone call from a member's office telling us that he or she intended to ask us something, so then we were ready.

I don't know how we replace Question Period. I like very much the description of the *interpellation* in Québec. I did not know about it. I wonder how

it might be married, because I understand what Jim said at first, the opposition won't give up Question Period easily. There is give and take that's needed there.

PCD

I want to ask you a question. You said that Question Period forces a minister to keep on his or her toes. In other words, your department is

I needed to know what was happening in my department and

under some obligation to come to you with information about things that haven't worked out that could be potentially embarrassing. Is that not a positive factor?

Monique Bégin

Yes, I see that as a positive factor, definitely. However, one important consequence has not been touched on. There is something wrong with Question Period in that some individuals—I'm talking of ministers—who might be remarkable heads of their department, don't have the knack of fighting back or appearing to fight back, when they answer in Question Period. Historically it has gone as far as literally destroying individuals, starting with their health. Before my time, there was the famous cases of Guy Favreau. In my time I saw the damage Question Period can do to people. I have in mind Jean-Luc Pépin in one of his portfolios and Pierre Bussière. That is a side that I find very wrong.

PCD

How about you Ray? It would be interesting to get a perspective not only when you were in the federal House, but what it was like in the Alberta Assembly?

Ray Speaker

I guess as a general comment I would agree with all the comments that have been made. But I strongly support the continuation of a Question Period in some format. Jim traced the growth of Question Period. I lived through that, being elected in early 1960s in Alberta.

PCD

Did it develop in the same way in Alberta?

Ray Speaker

Same way, practically the very same route it has arrived at where it is at today. In my first session of the Legislature we really didn't have a Question Period, but all ministers and all members sat in the House at all times, we did everything in the House, and attendance was high. Then, as committees became active, attendance started to drop off, just like in the House of Commons.

The thing that concerned me most about Question Period was the fact that it is, and Monique has made that point, media-driven. I always felt that that was wrong, that MPs should look at issues beyond the media agenda. But you get so caught up in the process. If the media raises a story one day, you know that if you hook into that story, you're going to get something on radio, television, or the print media.

I think one of the best questions of late concerned that Russian diplomat. When the issue was raised in the House, the minister was held to account and he responded in a positive way. That was good.

One other thing. If a genuine issue has been raised, and the minister has not responded, I think there should be some procedure to permit a follow up for accountability. The *late show* in the House of Commons might serve that purpose. I don't know whether that's the format for it, but there should be some way...

Jim McGrath

It's what it was intended for.

Ray Speaker

That's good. As Monique said, when some ministers—and I was a minister in the Alberta Government—answer a question, they may take it in a different direction than was intended, perhaps in an attempt to divert the theme of the question.

PCD

Can we pursue this *late show* idea? Ray, you've suggested that there should be some way of pursuing a subject where a genuine question hasn't been dealt with. Would you or Jim like to say something about that?

Ray Speaker

Yes, I think there should be a space to do that. I also think that, if a good issue has been raised in committee, it could be brought back into the House.

PCD

What do you mean 'a good issue in committee'?

Ray Speaker

Well let's take this Russian diplomat question. If a genuine question has been raised and the minister had not been accountable on the issue, I think it should be possible to bring it back into the formal parliamentary session so the issue can be dealt with in a public arena where it's most transparent.

PCD

Jim, would you have views on that?

Jim McGrath

Yes. The *late show* idea was a good one in its concept, but unfortunately at the adjournment at 6:00 o'clock, there's nobody left in the gallery, and usually there isn't even a quorum in the House. And the parliamentary secretary is charged with the responsibility of dealing with the particular grievance.

Ray Speaker

So I would see it being brought in earlier.

Jim McGrath

Yes, ineffective in its present form, but Ray has a good point. I think it should be brought in earlier. For example, why not take the *late show* grievance procedure, which is what it is, and tack it on to the Question Period at 3:00 o'clock.? The Question Period is over at 3:00 o'clock, then you can get up with your grievances for a half hour and in that way it could be more effective. But look, unless something is done about the present format, I think that it's going to be difficult to restore any credibility to it.

Monique Bégin

Can I speak against the *late show*? I served one year as a Parliamentary Secretary to Foreign Affairs and I did the *late show* at 10:00 o'clock or whenever it was at that time, very late. I remember, I received at 6:00 o'clock, if my memory serves me well, a formal answer from the department. I was not supposed to change an iota from the answer, and usually they were drafted in *la langue du bois* as we say in French,

verbose and containing nothing substantive. I fear that's the nature of the beast. So I'm against it.

John Solomon

If I could intervene on this for a moment. I've been a member of a government in Saskatchewan, I've been in opposition in Saskatchewan, I've been a Member of a fourth and a fifth Party in the House of Commons, so I've covered all the bases. I believe that Question Period has great value. I think it provides an opportunity to raise issues at a different level. I agree it's media-driven and that the media want to entertain rather than educate. I recognize that Question Period can be improved, but we shouldn't rule it out because it is uncomfortable for government Ministers.

I'll tell you why. I had a chance to golf with Bob Dole's campaign manager in Phoenix, Arizona a few years back. He was Bob Dole's campaign manager when he was running for Senator in Kansas. This

Why couldn't we tack the *late show*, which in fact is a grievance period, on to 3:00 o'clock? In that way we would have the grievance procedure

guy was a wealthy person, he owned a number of banks and he was a lawyer by profession. He said, lookit, your system in Canada has great merit in that there is some accountability.

The point I'm making here is that we really don't appreciate what we've got until we lose it. In the States, for example, if you're a wealthy lobbyist or a very wealthy corporation, you can access your politicians quite easily. But the politicians aren't questioned anywhere, either in the House of Representatives or in the Senate or the President. The only people that question them are the press, so it becomes a kind of inside game, where the insiders know what's going on, but they don't get to question each other or find information that may be valuable to the running of the country.

So I think the Question Period has value as a major instrument in an arsenal of weapons. But

asking a question and hoping you get media attention is not your best bet as a member of the opposition to advance your position. When I was in that position I used the Question Period to raise the issues, but then called the media in my riding.

Jim McGrath

I just want to pursue for a moment Ray Speaker's idea because I think it has a great deal of merit. The origin of Question Period is important. A member would get up and say, Mr. Speaker, before the Orders of the Day are called, I want to direct a question to the minister of so and so. And it was a genuine question. Now why couldn't we tack the *late show*, which in fact is a grievance period, on to 3:00 o'clock? In that way we would have the grievance procedure before the Orders of the Day are called. A member could get up and say, "Mr. Speaker, I'm not at all satisfied with the answer I got from the minister, he may have inadvertently misled the House and here are the facts."

Pierre de Savoye

That's an interesting thing. I want to build on it. The twist here is the minister at Question Period usually tries to avoid to directly answering the question. *langue du bois* is always there. There are a number of objections to the actual *late show*: first, it comes late in the day; second, it's a parliamentary secretary who answers; third, you have four minutes to state your question and the parliamentary secretary has two minutes to read a paper that was written for him before you stated your case, so that it's frequently irrelevant.

Now what if a minister who doesn't answer a question to your satisfaction during the Question Period is expected to come in person to the *late show* at whatever time it is held. That would probably mean two things. First, at Question Period ministers would try to answer properly, because they wouldn't want to come back on that specific issue. Second, if they do come back on the specific issue they will be well prepared, because they know the media are there expecting more detailed information on that specific issue.

PCD

Could I put a question to you? Do you think the *late show* might be sellable if, in exchange, ministers were not expected to be in the House everyday. However, on the days that a minister were in the House, they

might face being called back, but they wouldn't be there every day.

Jim McGrath

I believe that there should be a roster system for ministers. The opposition should, of course, know when a minister was going to be present in the House. And if the so-called *late show* were to be moved up to follow the Question Period, in other words before the Orders of the Day are called, I think it would make the Question Period much more relevant, and it would make ministers much more accountable.

Monique Bégin

Can I react to that? I'm quite traditional today. I continue to believe that the daily Question Period with all ministers or as many as possible present is important. It does play a positive role, despite all the features we have noted.

Now the idea of redefining the *late show* so that it becomes a serious accountability exercise for ministers themselves, not their parliamentary secretaries, I like that idea very much. If it were to take place at 3:00 o'clock immediately after Question Period, it appears to be better. But the minister may not be ready. Don't forget that often, depending on the nature of each portfolio, the minister has to dance around the issue because he or she is taken by surprise and just doesn't know that particular detail. If it takes place at 6:00 o'clock, at least the minister has time to go and get the answer. So 3:00 o'clock or 6:00 o'clock., each has advantages or disadvantages.

Ray Speaker

Or could it be put off to the following day?

Monique Bégin

Yes, absolutely.

Jim McGrath

But the spontaneity would be lost. I don't think that would be effective frankly.

Monique Bégin

Among all the good things that Jim said earlier is that spontaneity is absolutely important. So how do we reconcile all of that?

PCD

Surely with contemporary communications, if a question arose at the early part of the Question Period, there would be time.

Ray Speaker

Oh, there would be a big scramble in the back field.

Pierre de Savoye

Can I offer a solution? At one point Monique mentioned that she scarcely ever received notice of a question and this seems to be the rule. Now, what if for this *late show* that would come at 3:00 o'clock, what if only those questions that were submitted to a minister in advance and weren't properly answered during Question Period would be allowed to go to the *late show*? That would cause a party that considered an issue to be of importance to submit the question in writing first. Then if they did not receive a complete answer the first time round, they would have the privilege of going to the *late show* at 3:00 p.m.

Ray Speaker

I like that approach. I recall over the years, when I was leader of the opposition in Alberta and then party house leader in Ottawa, there were a number of times I would either phone a minister or his executive assistant ahead of time and say "We have a serious question today and I'd like a serious answer. Here's the question". That worked at times. We got a responsible response

What if for this *late show* that would come at 3:00 o'clock, what if only those questions that were submitted to a minister in advance and weren't properly answered during Question

rather than just gibberish. Now I could see if we could formalize this procedure, giving notice to a minister regarding a serious question, that it would be coming. Then if the response were inadequate, you would have a right to return to the subject at 3:00 p.m.

PCD

In such a situation a minister has probably been given the information. If he fails to answer, it's either because he deliberately didn't want to....

Ray Speaker

Right, then you should hold them accountable.

PCD

Yes.

Monique Bégin

No, no, it may be because he or she has received the *langue du bois* answer from the department and either didn't have time to probe or push or may not know that it's just blah blah.

Jim McGrath

If you think about it for a moment, a written question would have the effect of generating spontaneity in the supplementaries. And if you then follow that with the grievance procedure, i.e., the so-called *late show* at 3:00 o'clock, then you really have true accountability, not the farce that presently exists.

Aideen Nicholson

May I comment on the *late show*? The *late show* has an advantage for the private member who had asked a question. If a minister responded in a way that made it quite clear that either by intent or just by misunderstanding, he answers a question other than the one that had been asked, the member in the six minutes or whatever one has in the *late show* could make it very clear what the question was and why it was being asked. And that was an advantage for members and maybe members saw it as such. Giving written notice would obviate the need for that because the written question could be as clear as the member wanted to make it be.

Secondly when Monique talked about *langue du bois* that parliamentary secretaries were faced with, sometimes one was answering, not for one's own minister, but for another. A parliamentary secretary who couldn't be present might hand a sheet of paper at 6:00 o'clock and asked to read the answer for him or her. I declined to do so unless I knew the topic. On one occasion what I was handed from another department was so patronizing and so off-point that I would have considered it insulting to the member who had asked the question and who was a very responsible, experienced and knowledgeable member. So I went to him and simply said frankly I had an answer for him, it wasn't very good and would he agree to postponing his question for another day, which he agreed to. A less experienced

member might have refused to accept the postponement and insisted on getting either the dumb answer prepared by the department or whatever the parliamentary secretary could come up with on the spur of the moment. However both of these problems, both the member's question not being properly understood and the inappropriate answer, would be solved by giving written notice of the question in the first place.

Monique Bégin

Can I add something? It seems to me that we have not discussed the purpose, the objective, the goal of Question Period. For me, it's one technique, a highly visible one, permitting opposition members to bring current problems to the attention of ministers who live in a world of longer term policy development. Question Period brings the daily topics to the forefront.

Could there be four days of the traditional Question Period followed by the *late show* along the lines we have been discussing, with the fifth day set aside for the *interpellation*. The *interpellation* as Pierre described it has the advantage of not having a vote at the end of the day and of permitting a more comprehensive and hopefully more real exchange on a given topic towards more solid stuff. That's what I like.

Ray Speaker

What about Wednesdays dedicated to something like that?

Jim McGrath

The problem with Friday in Ottawa, as you all know, is nobody's there.

Monique Bégin

Yes, that's right, it should be on Wednesday.

PCD

One thing you should know about the *interpellation*, Often the subject chosen by the opposition is of interest only to a sector of the community. It might be, for instance, on forestry policy so that the members who are interested could all stay and attend, but the rest of the legislature would go home. So the fact that it's Friday doesn't mean that no one is there, it just means that the only members who participate are the ones who care.

John Solomon

I think there are some other changes that could be made. In the Saskatchewan Legislature we have 58 seats and we have a 45-minute Question Period. In the House of Commons we have 301 MPs, and we've got a 45-minute Question Period. I think that has to be extended to about an hour. It would also be good to draw from British practice where a particular topic or two topics are selected on a certain day of the week. Such an arrangement would provide a good balance for ministers who could devote more time to their portfolios, rather than sitting in the House of Commons waiting for questions that never materialize. I think that would be a more efficient way to improve this situation.

PCD

That sounds a bit like the Québec practice of *interpellation*.

John Solomon

I know their system. But the British system is different and works well. The Prime Minister appears one day a week and he's peppered with questions. Or they have the Minister of Health who appears on a particular day and all the questions are related to health. But they have one day a week where they do this and it's a much more efficient use of a minister's time and opposition members as well.

Monique Bégin

So questions are not on one particular topic of one portfolio. They can be on anything within that portfolio?

John Solomon

Yes, exactly.

Monique Bégin

Oh, I like that! Much better.

Jim McGrath

It's interesting to reflect on the British system for a moment. The question that goes to the Prime Minister on Prime Minister's question time, which is Thursday, is a written question and the question usually is, "Can the Prime Minister give his or her schedule for the rest of the week?" That opens everything up.

PCD

Now I want to conclude with a general question. Jim began by saying that he thinks that the impression conveyed to the public of Parliament by Question Period, which is the part of Parliament that gets the most media attention, leaves an unfavourable

Too often the behaviour of MPs during the Question Period is distasteful and disgraceful...sometimes I was really

impression. I've sometimes put this view to members and they tell me that when they ask constituents for their impressions, they are usually told it's fine. It's just wonderful. My assumption is—and this is what I'd like to put to you—that they are talking mainly to their supporters, in other words, to the people who like to see them fighting. I want to hear from each of you, what do you think is the public impression conveyed by Question Period?

Jim McGrath

Well, the particular members whom you just cited must have been talking to their mothers and fathers. But look, I just want to make this comment, Peter, and I think it is very important. For starters, if nothing else is done, eliminating or substantially reducing the preambles would be a giant step forward.

Pierre de Savoye

Could I add to this? Of course if I speak to Bloc Members or people who are on my side, they will approve all the tough questions we directed against the Government. That is natural. But if you talk to the ordinary fellow, they don't listen to Question Period. They see some bits here and there in the news bulletin at 6:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. and that's it.

PCD

But Pierre, the evening news...

Pierre de Savoye

In the evening news you have only a small cut of a few seconds. Of course, if you performed well, your people will be happy. If you didn't perform well, if it's the government that does well, your side won't be

happy. I think the format does not leave a good impression and I will tell you why. If you talk to ordinary people they will tell you that too often the behaviour of MPs during the Question Period is distasteful and disgraceful. And as a matter of fact they are right. I've been sitting there, you've been sitting there, and sometimes I was really ashamed at how things were unfolding.

Ray Speaker

Are you speaking of the catcalls and the noise, or of the way presentations are made?

Pierre de Savoye

No, I'm talking about the general attitude of the House, with the Speaker having to stand up and try to bring the House back to order. This behaviour is not serving the interest of the House or the public.

Ray Speaker

Right. They feel that the behaviour of members is very elementary, childish. Yes, that's a better word.

Pierre de Savoye

I don't really blame MPs for their reactions. You're sitting in the House for 45 minutes, you have no question to ask, the only thing you're being asked to do is to applaud the people from your party who do ask questions. So you're kind of cornered into a reactive mode and sometimes some members overreact and it's contagious.

Aideen Nicholson

Well I certainly agree with what has been said about the disorder that arises as a result of injudicious applause and support on both sides of the House. That certainly offends people. The other thing that offends the better informed people is that sometimes it's quite clear that a question is asked with malicious intent. For example, when a minister who has just taken over a portfolio is practically called a criminal because of something that happened two years before. Of course, if the problem wasn't dealt with at the time, it needs to be dealt with now. Then it's fair game to ask the current minister if he or she is informed about it and what corrective action will be taken and will it all be made open. But it's not fair game to call names and hold him or her responsible....

Monique Bégin

And try to destroy the person!

Aideen Nicholson

Yes, and there are really a lot of well-informed people around, and many don't belong to political parties. But they are knowledgeable and when they see this kind of attack, they don't like it. I've talked to potential candidates who were really turned off, telling me that they couldn't go in for that kind of intellectual dishonesty.

Ray Speaker

Yes. At our symposium for new Members of Parliament a couple of weeks ago, this concern was raised.

PCD

Did they feel strongly about it?

Ray Speaker

Yes they did. They said they did not want to be part of what one member called a zoo. He said he couldn't believe what he'd seen in this first week already. Part of the problem with conduct in the House, with the lack of decorum, is that you're getting 301 of the

I sat there hour after hour with people sometimes saying things that were just totally outrageous. I just couldn't stand it any more and I would start heckling.

most political people in the country locked into the same room for four years. We all understand the procedure in terms of being recognized by the Speaker to ask a question. But keep in mind, you have to be patient, and patience wears thin when you've got these very political people in the same room. So I'm not sure if there's ever going to be an answer. After all Parliament is the place where we go to speak. Unfortunately many Members think they can speak from their seats rather than when they're recognized and that creates a whole new dimension. To some degree the House during Question Period has become an entertainment centre. In terms of trying to get your message across, how do you succeed? Do you try to do it educationally, or do you try to do it through the entertainment process?

Jim McGrath

But in the final analysis the Speaker has to know when to rein the House in and when to let it go,

because otherwise you have this enormous frustration that builds up and that usually results in the heckling.

Ray Speaker

But again, reverting to when you were back in the House, all of you. I've tried to be patient throughout my life, but I sat there hour after hour with people sometimes saying things that were just totally outrageous. I just couldn't stand it any more and I would start heckling. It just drives you crazy sometimes. Regarding the preamble to questions, the house leaders did in the last Parliament get together and determine that the preamble should be in the form of a question and short.

John Solomon

Right now it's 35 seconds for somebody asking the question.

Ray Speaker

The minister's answer also had to be short. I thought that was a good change and I did see some improvement. Members also practiced their question.

PCD

Which of course reduces still further the spontaneity. Quite often they have prepared a follow-up question, a supplementary. But they're so programmed that even if the minister's answer points in another direction, they stick to the original answer.

Jim McGrath

And of course the list that's submitted to the Chair has in effect destroyed spontaneity as well.

Ray Speaker

Oh absolutely, yes. Could I just add one thing, Peter? This is in defense of the media. Jason Moskovitz made a comment at our symposium that would be relevant here. At one time, he said, there were reporters who reported on the regions and tried to bring regional issues to the people. Jason said that since the cutbacks, which have affected all of the media, there is often only one person in Ottawa to cover all the issues. So whatever issue they cover becomes a national issue. Since the time and our opportunity to gather information is limited, Question Period is often the only sounding board. This is what he told the new Members.

PCD

Monique, have you final impressions?

Monique Bégin

No, no, I agree with what has just been said. I still think it should exist, but it should be reformed.

PCD

As the initiator of this discussion I have found it fascinating and even encouraging. Some ideas that came up might even be taken up.