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Symbol vs. Substance: Theatre, Political Career Paths, and Parliamentary Behaviour in Canada

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On Saturday, October 24, 2009, *The Globe and Mail* newspaper advertised that it would be enhancing its online content with Jane Taber's Ottawa Notebook.

Among the selling features of this content was: "Question Period summaries" (A9).

"More Question Period?" I thought.

A few days earlier, a Parliamentary Secretary with the governing Conservatives had said to me: "Nothing gets accomplished in Question Period, that's fair."

As the interview was finishing, he stated: "I have to go and prepare for Question Period. The minister is away ... so I'm a hopper."

Question Period would be starting in approximately 2 hours.

Much of politics is adversarial and symbolic. Beyond simply the need for policies to be debated, there is also the need for scrutiny, opposition, and of course communication of the process to the public. The mass media play a very significant role in all these aspects, in acting as searchlights upon the workings of government. What often results, however, is that minor issues are made into major spectacles, politicians distort the actions of their competitors, and attention-seeking, even unruly, behaviour is often displayed. As parties and their members engage in such activities, the public, media, and the members themselves seem to engage in two common types of responses. On one hand, there are those that appear to call for greater decorum, civility, and respect in our political institutions. On the other, there are those that seem to focus upon, and enhance the value of, these attention-seeking behaviors in their present form by giving them more attention.

This study will focus upon why MPs engage in behaviours that, arguably, are designed primarily to gain attention – often through negative statements – rather than substantively address an issue or present solutions to problems. It will probe the reasons for MPs behavioural choices, specifically by aiming to determine how MPs view the opportunity structure for advancement within their own party and in parliament.

Part of understanding attention-seeking behaviour requires understanding the mass media. The media play an important and powerful role in informing the public about political actors and what happens in Parliament, and they have for many years. Political actors, at the same time, recognize the need for media attention and seem to seek ways to ensure that they don't slip down on the media's priority list. Elected politicians and political parties aim to garner as much coverage – positive coverage, that is – as possible and gain the best exposure (i.e. front page in newspapers, top story on television news). Such coverage can include accomplishments and positions on policy issues, but can also include attacking the accomplishments and positions – or lack thereof – of opposing political parties and members.

The media, on one hand, links the public and the political – it is sometimes viewed as simply a means for information to flow between these two groups. However, it should also be viewed as an institution itself that plays an active role in shaping discourses and outcomes in political matters. It can be argued that it engages in a form of symbiotic relationship with political actors. That is, both depend upon the other for survival. And the view that is put forth in the following pages is that the media appears to have played a significant role in shaping the norms of the political institutions that it covers by influencing actors to seek opportunities to meet the media's expectations. The media, by lavishing attention upon MPs in some areas while ignoring them in others, and showing a demand for certain forms of behavior, leads the democratically elected parliament to adapt to this particular demand.

One point of focus in the parliamentary day, where much media coverage originates, is Question Period (QP). Both the nature of QP itself and media coverage of it indicate that it has become a made-for-media event, despite the misgivings by some MPs toward this (e.g. Chong 2008, 2010; Chong et al. 2010; Hill 2010; Pearson 2010). QP holds a long history in Canada, and many would suggest it often plays some important democratic functions. It is seen as an opportunity for the legislature to hold government to account by questioning and scrutinizing its actions (Franks 1987; Docherty 1997, 2005; outside Canada, see also Chester and Bowring 1962; Franklin and Norton 1993). It is believed to

play some role in policy-making, (e.g., Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking 1996; Howlett 1998), and has also been shown to play a substantive representational role both of partisan and constituency interests (Penner et al 2006; Soroka et al 2009; Blidook and Kerby forthcoming). QP may also be a venue where MPs showcase their abilities for their political masters, in hopes that this will aid them in future promotions (Atkinson 1978).

QP is, importantly, also the most common means by which citizens access their parliament. This is true, in part, because QP provides quick clips and obvious conflict, and it is consequently the most common parliamentary venue that receives media coverage (Smith 2007; Soroka 2002a, 2002b). While there are occasions where committee proceedings, votes, or exchanges in the House may receive media coverage, such occasions are rare and normally only occur when these venues provide similar drama to that of QP.¹

Historically, MPs' opportunities to question the government of the day in parliament have been permitted since the 19th Century, though the rules for doing so have been adapted a good deal over time and were not officially codified in the House Standing Orders until 1964. Posing oral questions to the government was not defined as being a "right" of MPs (rather than simply a privilege), until the 1970s when Speaker of the House James Jerome stated this to be the case (O'Brien and Bosc 2009).

It has been suggested that one of the biggest factors in affecting MP behaviour in the House was the introduction of television cameras. These were first used in 1977 in order to both televise the proceedings of the House and to make these recordings available to news media. While providing the public with direct television coverage of parliament is likely to be widely, if not universally, viewed as an overall positive development in democratic practice in Canada, it has also been suggested that this development has had some negative effects.

Perhaps the most common complaint is that television has led to an over-emphasis on Question Period. It is also felt that individual Members

¹ Examples include Rahim Jaffer's appearance before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates in April 2010, or the proceedings of the Public Accounts Committee dealing with the "sponsorship scandal" in 2004.

tend to play to the cameras—that they grandstand—in the hopes of getting a 15-second clip on the evening news. (“Watching the House at Work”, Ninth Report of the Standing Committee on Elections, Privileges, Procedure and Private Members’ Business, December 1989 - Quoted in O’Brien and Bosc 2009).

While historically the House Speaker would choose which members to recognize to ask questions, the Speaker now generally follows the guidance of the party whips (though s/he may exercise her/his discretion in doing so), who supply lists of MPs and the order in which they should be recognized (O’Brien and Bosc 2009). Parties and their leaders, beside organizing their questions each day, also have an interest in looking as though they are on the offensive while trying to place their competitors on the defensive. In September 2010, for example, the opposition Liberal Party readjusted its frontbench to present a more effective attack on the governing Conservatives (Taber 2010). In turn, it has sometimes been suggested in the media that some frontbench government positions are allocated based upon an MP’s ability to defend the portfolio in the House.

As the dramatic, media-centred nature of QP appears to have increased in recent years, many have criticized QP for detracting from the form of behavior we might otherwise expect of a country’s highest law-making body. As the focus of the parliamentary day for the media, it appears to have become “guerilla theatre” (Smith 2007) or “simple ‘theatre’” (Hill 2010). Some have argued that attempts to make the forum more civil and policy focused have been met with charges of naiveté or with decreased media attention for these “offenders” of QP’s presumed incivility (Hill 2010; Manning 2010). Former Conservative House Leader Jay Hill posits that previous attempts to make debate more civil and substantive were abandoned.

So we eventually gave up, coming to the conclusion that if we could not get the House to change when so many [MPs] were new – it was highly unlikely that it would ever change. Now here we are –17 years later – and the only thing that has changed is that it has somehow gotten even worse. (Hill 2010: 5).

Recently, there have been calls for reforms – such as Private Members’ Motion 517 during the previous (40th) Parliament – that called for an increase in the ability of all MPs to ask more meaningful questions, and for parties to loosen their grip on who asks questions (Chong et al. 2010). The motion, which was adopted by the House, also called for an exploration into longer time limits (in opposition to media “sound bites”) as a potential improvement in this forum.

Given that Question Period has garnered attention as a forum where dramatic, or symbolic, action has emerged as one of the behavioural norms, the question that this paper asks is whether MPs are, in fact, guided by an incentive structure that prioritizes *symbolic* behaviour – and perhaps even behaviour that they themselves find of little value – over *substantive* debate. The research conducted here is focused upon the parliamentary venues, behaviours, and characteristics that MPs themselves identify as important to gaining promotion within one’s party. It aims to explore and understand the degree to which MPs perceive themselves and their colleagues as being rewarded for being *actors* in the “guerilla theatre” as opposed to being *parliamentarians* or *policy makers*.

This research question is important for a number of reasons. First, promotions are one form of gaining influence, so the question asks if the Canadian parliamentary system overtly values symbol over substance in the distribution of influence. Certainly holding a portfolio within a political party (critic or cabinet/PS) does not, on its own, mean that an MP holds influence, but holding such positions usually signifies greater influence than lacking such a position. Critics in opposition often find themselves in Cabinet if their party achieves government status in the future. While collecting data for this research project, one interviewee – while noting that some of the party’s positions are allocated based on gender, regional, or other representational considerations – stated: “Yes, the influence with the leader can be found. There are certain indicators of your influence. One would be the Question Period profile and one would be a critic's portfolio” (Interviewed April 21, 2010).

Second, the question matters because it relates to public trust in government. Trust in government is in decline in most western democracies and

certainly in Canada (Pharr and Putnam 2000). Further, there is evidence that increased negativity in the communications of political actors plays a significant role in this decline (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997), while it certainly appears that media coverage of politics focuses upon negative interaction, which may also precipitate this decline. While there is debate about whether decreased trust is a function of societal change as opposed to institutional failure (Nevitte 1996, Howe and Northrup 2000), there is reason to believe that negative and symbolic behaviour in politics plays some role in affecting citizen trust in government.

Third, the question is important due to its implications for the job satisfaction and, in turn, the voluntary turnover of MPs. This is a parliamentary culture that, according to recent research, appears to turn away those who enter office hoping to affect policy in favour of those with party-oriented motivations (Kerby and Blidook Forthcoming). It is possible that if some policy-oriented MPs feel their parliamentary roles are relegated to symbolic partisan politics, then they will increasingly feel out of place in the institution. This likely exacerbates voluntary turnover, and arguably turns away the type of MPs whom the institution would do well to attract, if policy-making is to be one of its functions.

Finally, the question speaks more broadly to the form of legislature that is desirable. Much of the research that follows will draw attention to the increasingly scripted, and party-controlled, debate within the House of Commons. If indeed the House of Commons is increasingly seen as simply a media battleground for political parties, rather than a policy forum where both parties and individual MPs have a meaningful role to play, then this would only serve to trivialize the purpose of the legislature and the roles of its members.

After outlining the broad reasons that lead to both symbolic and partisan behaviour, and some of the challenges it presents to democratic governance, this paper will then explore the views of MPs in Canada regarding the nature of parliamentary behaviour and the incentive structure that leads to promotion with Canada's parliament.

The “Show” of Politics

The argument put forth in this paper is that there are incentives for political actors to prioritize symbolic action over substantive action. Empirically, this paper will attempt to determine if political actors believe that symbolic actions are more important to promotion within their party than substantive actions.

However, while some of the resultant behaviours may lead to cynicism about elected federal officials by both citizens and media, the broader reasons behind these behaviours are not necessarily negative. Rather, it is possible that we are experiencing the intersection of two potentially progressive forces in the development of modern political behaviour and representative democracy, yet the result may be undesirable behaviours by Canadian parliamentarians. First, there is evidence that citizens generally are both less partisan and less ideological (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Dalton 2004), and their behaviours indicate a greater concern for specific issues and new forms of political activity (Norris 2003). If we desire a more engaged and critical citizenry, then these trends represent progress toward that goal.

Second, parties and individual politicians – at least on the surface – appear keenly aware of citizen interests. Some research indicates that political actors and governments are clearly interested in understanding – and showing that they share – the interests of the citizens (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; though see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Polling in Canada has increased substantially in recent years and parties and governments make significant use of these to gauge public interest (Hoy 1989; Savoie 1999).

Nevertheless there is not only the evolving trend of the decline of deference in Canada (Nevitte 1996), but also a broader trend of distrust that is evident across western democracies, as noted above. As parties try to increase, maintain, and solidify political support, the often negative tactics used in doing so appear to (somewhat ironically) erode voter engagement and support for political actors more generally (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997). This is partly a function of citizen skepticism itself (*cultural*), and also a result of parties’ attempts to

capitalize on that skepticism through engaging in conflict with political competitors (*elite behavior* and perhaps *institutional*).

As the media tend to prioritize events that portray conflict, and attempt to simplify the nature of those relations by avoiding significant details of debate (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) political actors in turn construct and shape their behaviours to fit this form of communication. That is, if policy debate is going to be portrayed as simplistic and sensational to the represented, then elected policymakers will place less effort and emphasis upon the details of policy debate and place greater effort and emphasis into the portrayal of the difference in policy position and, often, the political actors themselves. The latter focus invites greater negative framing of potential shortcomings that are unrelated to a specific issue, or of personality differences.

In the modern era, political parties are sometimes viewed as little more than campaign machines. This may be, in part, a response by parties to the mass media, where they see little value in committing significant resources to policy formulation. Parties in Canada have been noted in the past few decades as being in significant decline for their generation of new policies (Canada 1991: 13). Franks states: “There is a paradox that at the same time as the parties are so influential and powerful with parliament, they are weak outside it, both in terms of gaining consistent strong allegiances within the electorate and in terms of generating ideas and policy proposals” (1987: 7). Canada has moved increasingly toward leader-centred, rather than party-centred, politics and the discipline imposed by leaders through their parties has increased (Carty et al 2000; Savoie 1999). Logically, MPs should see their policy activities as less important and their partisan or electoral activities as more important under such circumstances if they wish to increase influence within their party.

Rewards and punishments for MPs are determined by the MP’s party leadership, though the most powerful rewards tend to rest in the hands of the Prime Minister. These rewards and punishments might include promotions to, or demotions from, ministerial positions or committee chairs for government MPs, and critic portfolios and select committee chairs for opposition MPs. Punishment

at the extreme end can include caucus expulsion. MPs from all parties are held in check because they may risk losing their party's electoral candidacy if they lose favour with the party leader (Docherty 1997; Savoie 1999; Carty et al. 2000). The result is a form of MP behaviour that rarely deviates from partisan lines, and which may also result in a willingness to engage in any form of behaviour requested or deemed valuable for the party leader – primarily that of gaining political support at the expense of competing parties.²

Much of this indicates what Manin (1997) has referred to as “audience democracy”. Manin points to the ceding of power from the political party to opinion polls, consultants, non-partisan mass media, and political leaders. Audience democracy is seen as involving insecure elites lacking a significant and stable core of support, autonomous voters, and television-mediated leaders. The elites chosen tend to be “media experts” rather than “political activists”. In this view, parties are seen merely as election machines (or *shows* for the audience) and their policy role is minimal, while individual members are simply parts of this machine (or *actors* in the show).

Understandably, the concept of “audience democracy” is unlikely to be readily accepted by most politicians, as it trivializes their roles and might be seen as suggesting a breach of the principles (or at least the ideals) of liberal democratic representation. While many politicians might speak candidly about the theatre of political debate, or the overdrawn drama of their political opponents, most would likely be more dismissive of the broad reaching and negative connotations of “audience democracy” as describing the system of representation and legitimizing of government decisions to which they are central. Nevertheless, there is evidence that this description may apply in cases such as Canada. If it is true that more citizens are willing to change their mind about how to vote, then parties tend to engage in symbolic and short-term attempts to gain and hold political support.

² Party behaviour itself is not only the result of ‘carrots and sticks’, though Kam (2001) provides evidence that it is not simply the result of similar interests among all MPs of a given party either; party imposed constraints do matter. Nevertheless, Docherty (1997) suggests that MPs become increasingly favourable toward the institutions of government over time, which suggests that they tend to see greater value in party behaviour the longer that they have sat as an MP.

Hall (1996) breaks down the broad categories of participants in the US Congress into two types, which he terms the “workhorses” and the “showhorses”. The former he describes as those who engage primarily in policy and legislative accomplishments, and spend time behind the scenes trying to see concrete initiatives come to fruition. The latter he describes as being those who primarily aim to gain attention and who are often engaged in some form of electioneering. MPs in Canada who wish to gain favour within their political party may view their promotion prospects in much the same way as those of the “showhorses” – that partisan, symbolic actions may serve a greater purpose in an “audience democracy” than engaging in substantive policy action. In Canada’s party dominated legislature, *symbolic* and boldly *partisan* expressions may be viewed as the primary currency of promotion, and those with the skills to engage most effectively in these types of actions may gain influence.

The idea of MPs as simply doing and saying as they are told is not a new one – indeed MPs have, most unflatteringly, been described as “trained seals” (Aiken 1974) in their partisanship. The House also depends strongly upon the role of the “The Opposition”, whose expected role it is to check, to prod, and to ultimately replace the government (Hockin 1966: 191-191a). The democratic function that is served by the “adversarialism” in the House (Hockin 1966, 1979; Franks 1987; Smith 1999) – where the opposition virtually always opposes the government – is recognized as playing some valuable function in effective governance. Nevertheless, it tends to result in party members taking (or being asked by their superiors to take) symbolic positions on topics of broad and national significance that the party leadership takes notice of, and, as Hockin notes, often for electoral reasons (1966: 9). MPs may also do so for internal promotional reasons, by showing their mettle in the House and related activities to their political superiors.

More common in the U.S., but increasingly evident in Canada, is the related issue of negative campaigning – or attempts to convince the public, either accurately or inaccurately, that the political opponent is undesirable by focusing upon problems, weaknesses, or mishaps. The primary purpose typically seems to be finding a way to present information so that it will reflect negatively upon the

subject, rather than to present a complete story or present solutions to problems. In the Canadian setting, where it is apparent there is a perceived payoff for focusing on the negative, and where it is clear there are increased costs for attempting to formulate new or innovative policy, MPs simultaneously refer to the excess of work and the lack of resources (Docherty 1997). Under such circumstances, information and competence on policy issues may be traded-off for easier approaches to gaining the sought payoff of political support.

From the public, or media standpoint, there is a belief that politics is observed from a distance and that engagement, as with civic culture, is decreasing. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse state with regard to the U.S.: “vigorous democracy is the last thing people want, and forgetting entirely about politics is precisely what they do want” (2002: 232). Thus, if the government-public link is increasingly disengaged, then the media’s role as a linkage institution (and its “interpretation” of events) becomes more important. Indeed, it is not clear that the public is disinterested, and some forms of political participation have tended to rise in recent years (Norris 2003). However, what might be better taken from statements like that of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse above is that there is evidence that the public generally gives little attention to political matters compared to other interests. Most citizens do not want politics to play a central role in their lives. This is evident in part by the fact that audience share for network news programs decreases and viewers switch to other programming as choice increases, such that overall political information among the public does not show an increase when availability of political information increases (Prior 2005). In order to compete for audiences, news producers may see consumers as requiring simplification (or “soft-news” approaches) to engage with political stories (Baum 2002). This aids the consumer in connecting with, or caring about, the information being received. Media, in turn, must provide this form of information to compete within an increasingly competitive mass media economy.

If the agenda of media tends to favour conflict and horse-race coverage rather than issue coverage, then the media is likely having an effect in shaping the behavior (and arguably the rules – or at least the norms) of the institutions it covers. In this symbiotic relationship between political actors/institutions and

mass media, the actors/institutions appear to adapt to the demands of media. If the media requires drama – the legislature increasingly provides it.

If, based on this, much of politics is symbol, as opposed to substance, and some of those in influential or decision-making capacities reach those positions due primarily to symbolic qualifications, then the *symbolic* must affect *substance*. If politics is substantially theatre – if MPs are truly actors on a stage – then it is the better actors who are more likely to be rewarded with higher positions of power. Thus, the question is not simply one of whether “good performers” enjoy success – it is almost certain that they enjoy some electoral rewards – but whether they are more likely to affect policy decisions once elected? Does symbol trump substance in the final decisions about who will stand up for either side and hold the positions that are primarily in the spotlight?

There is some evidence, using statistical data on QP, to suggest that MPs see an increase in question activity in advance of being moved to the front bench. This suggests that MPs who are being considered for front bench opportunities either make a greater effort to have questions on their own accord, or that they are given questions by the leadership to determine how effective they will be. Using data over the period 1983-2004 (see Penner et al 2006, Soroka et al 2009) question frequency can be used in comparing backbenchers who later become critics to those who do not. The number of questions per month was compiled for all MPs not holding portfolios³ only (71 MPs in total). Those who went on to fill critic portfolios (49) were compared to those who never held a critic portfolio during their tenure as an MP (22) – though only the months during which the MPs did not hold portfolios were compared. Those who went on to fill critic portfolios had a mean value of 0.92 questions per month, while those who did not had a mean value of 0.62 questions per month. A t-test indicates that the means differ in a statistically significant manner at the .05 level, though this is not a large number of questions – as backbenchers, those who become critics ask about 3

³ Holding an “assistant critic” position was not considered to be a portfolio, though holding a critic’s position, caucus chair, or any formal leadership position (i.e. leader, deputy leader, house leader) was considered a portfolio.

questions over a 3 sitting-month period, while those who will not become critics ask about 2 questions every 3 sitting-months.

The current study was undertaken as an exploration to begin formulating answers to the questions posed above regarding behaviour, perception, and influence. This study seeks to understand the perceptions of those who are elected to Canada's House of Commons, how they view current trends in parliamentary behavior, and if certain forms of behaviour are prioritized by their party leadership.

This study was conducted over the course of approximately 1 year, with data collection consisting primarily of qualitative interviews, in which I travelled to Ottawa to meet with MPs on Parliament Hill. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 20 MPs and one official from the Bloc Québécois leader's office.⁴ Interviews were semi-structured and were designed to probe: (1) how much Parliamentary actions matter to MP promotions, (2) what Parliamentary venues stand out as the ones that matter, (3) what particular actions stand out as the ones that matter, (4) the degree to which symbolic partisan actions, or theatrical skills, are seen as important to promotion for MPs.

Responses in these interviews were, as can be expected, highly varied. On more than one occasion an interviewee would state that s/he was probably not adding a great deal to the research, or that I probably already knew what s/he was telling me. I would often remark, however, that despite the fact they all work in the same place, MPs offer surprisingly different accounts on some of the key questions, and this was true in cases of MPs from the same political party, and of both on-record and off-record commentary.

All of this being said, the responses are informative not only in terms of what they say, but also on the points where they vary. Much of the variance is one of viewpoint – that is, MPs view what Parliament *should be* differently, and

⁴ Interviews were conducted with 11 Liberal MPs, 5 Conservative MPs, 3 NDP MPs, and 1 BQ MP. 5 were former Cabinet Ministers while another 6 were either current or former Parliamentary Secretaries. Most of these, along with all of the remaining 9, had held opposition critic (or Shadow Cabinet) positions at some point in their career. Interviews were conducted in October 2009 and April 2010. Approximately 60 MPs chosen at random were contacted, on top of which invitations were sent to party leaders and either deputy leaders or House leaders for each party (only the House leader of the BQ was interviewed out of this latter group).

views of what *should be* often affect responses in terms of both fact and opinion. MPs also view what is happening in Parliament in a more or less favourable manner depending on how well they or their parties are doing. Not surprisingly, Conservative MPs tend to feel things in Parliament are better – or feel more positively about how Parliament operates – than opposition MPs.⁵ Some MPs view what their parties are doing, or what should be acceptable behaviours or strategies in different ways that other MPs within the same party. Some MPs are optimistic, some are not, and some are likely more predisposed to liking the Canadian Parliamentary system as it currently functions than are others. Some of the MPs I spoke to did not seek re-election after the 40th Parliament – one of these, Liberal MP Keith Martin, seemed to have few good things to say about Parliament or its parties in announcing his choice to leave (Taber 2010a).

More specifically, MPs hold different views about the media, about what factors affect promotion, and about what *success* in parliament actually is. Many are willing to express a critical view of particular events, outcomes, members, or political parties – both their own and others, though primarily the latter. Similarly, many are willing to criticize the media. Fewer are willing to express a critical view of themselves or of the broader system of institutions within which each of these MPs works, and this is one of the key challenges in collecting data for this research.⁶

My hope is that, in the sections that follow, I can effectively capture the stories of these MPs and use them in a manner that is accurate of each, representative of the whole, and coherent in effectively exploring the topic.

The following section looks at MPs' views on the media and the degree to which it plays a role in their parliamentary careers. This is followed by a section on preparation for and prioritization of QP by MPs from both opposition and

⁵ This is not true in every case, though it is evident as a trend across interviewees.

⁶ The use of interview data in this paper is not meant, in any way, to degrade the words or actions of the MPs who shared their thoughts with me on this matter. I am extremely thankful to each of them, and I intend to accurately represent – as best as possible – the range of views expressed. At the same time, I hope to engage fully with their expressions and expose possible problems for further debate. Part of my interview process was designed to capture an element of both the MP's stated views and contrast these with the MP's actions or those of their parties.

government MPs. Finally, MPs' views on the importance of certain forms of behaviour, and their effect upon promotions, is assessed.

MP awareness of the Media

Among the topics of importance to this research is simply the general awareness that MPs have of the mass media in their daily activities, and how much effort goes into seeking out media coverage. MPs and political parties survive by public perception and so, not surprisingly, they have a high degree of awareness of what the media is covering – and how it is being covered – each day. Dennis Bevington (NDP: Northwest Territories) indicated that media hits – what sources, what stories, who is mentioned – are calculated for the party every day.

Your relationship to the media and your ability to get into the media is a big thing. That's something that can't be understated. If you are a hard worker and bright as hell, but if you don't have the ability to project that into the national media, then you and your work don't get covered (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

Separately, a Conservative parliamentary secretary (C1) stated:

The media can literally make you or break you. ...backbenchers don't tend to get attention unless they do something that you know really good or really bad that draws some to that, and it really depends, depending on how good or bad.

I mean you can be the greatest thing since sliced bread if you have done something done and that's all the media talks about, they can hurt you. ... Certainly if you do something dumb in public, it is going to get the leader's attention (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

It is clear there is both an element of fear and respect for the media. On one hand, MPs must be constantly aware of when a simple mistake or miscommunication – like those that many of us make in our daily lives – can become a national and life-altering news story. Rarely does this happen in a

positive direction for an individual MP. But there is also a sense that attention must still be sought – that is, you can't simply plug away on a project and hope that it will gain positive attention, because there is too much competition for media attention for that to happen.

There is also a level of immediacy to media coverage that increases the need to have something to provide regardless of the circumstances. One Conservative MP (C2) stated:

... there is no time either, in this day and age. You have to respond so quickly to everything. The news media is just instantaneous. Something will happen and it's on the networks in 10 minutes. And so you have to be able to have some kind of a power mass behind you to build and respond to these things so fast. You know, you think there must be rooms full of people back there somewhere just waiting, but there isn't. There might be one room full (Interviewed April 22, 2010).

Inevitably the issue of Question Period arises in most interviews without it having been probed. Members are asked a range of questions regarding the factors that affect who sits in the government or opposition front benches. While handling oneself on one's feet in the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate is usually viewed as an important skill, few MPs indicate that there is much substance to QP, though many indicate that there is certainly a high value placed upon it. Rather, many point to the media in affecting its value.

According to now-retired NDP MP Judy Wascylycia-Leis:

See the problem with Question Period – the media and its focus on Question Period – is that your sense of purpose is often hard to find unless you make Question Period and you make the news. So that's the unfortunate part; that's your validation. You're not in the mood and you're not getting much media on a regular basis, you start to wonder you know, 'am I doing the right thing?' Even though you are accomplishing all kinds of things on all kinds of levels: you are helping constituents, you have convinced the minister to take up this issue, you fix this problem over here

with revenue Canada, and you have 6 amendments though Bill C6 – the Consumer Protection Act – its great but it's not enough. ...

We have all come to recognize that Question Period is for media primarily, and then whatever issues don't get covered by the media at least there is some local purposes for them (Interviewed October 21, 2009).

Ms. Wascylcia-Leis indicates a sense of frustration that is similarly evident with other MPs – that of attention being weighted heavily in favour of certain forums, which means that MPs feel that important initiatives are often not noticed. The latter portion of the statement begins to touch upon the idea of change in parliamentary forums to meet the media's needs, an idea that was first connected to the symbiotic relationship between media and other political institutions. It speaks to the notion that QP is primarily designed to meet goals set out by the media, and those of parties only insofar as the parties are interested in the media.

A number of MPs point to this media effect upon behavior in parliament, and few indicate that it is a positive effect.

One Liberal MP (L1), like other MPs, recognizes the inadequacy of QP to serve a fundamental purpose in Parliament:

It's awful tough to take a complex public policy issue and reduce it into a 30 second question and expect much. It is hard for ministers to respond in that time. I think QP, as it is now, is broken. ... I think it is – watching QP – I don't think it would give people a good feeling about their Parliament. It's a pox on all our houses (Interviewed April 21, 2010).

Other MPs, like those noted at the start of this paper and some who will be included later, appear to concur with the notion of QP being broken, or of it requiring substantial change to be effective. Nevertheless, it is a forum that receives a good deal of attention. The following section will look at the priority that is placed upon QP – the time and resources that are committed to it by the political parties and their MPs.

Preparing for QP

As politicians and parties gain knowledge about what forums matter – where power lies, where policies can be changed, and where votes are won – those forums come under greater control by those in leadership positions. The effects are noticeable. Few politicians take significant risks or leave opportunities to chance in these forums. In some cases, political parties have specific policies about what MPs may do, or how preparation is to be conducted.

Debate continues about the increasing role of partisan control in a range of House matters, which, according to some interviewees, have recently focused upon Private Members' Business and Standing Order 31 Member Statements. Control over Question Period by parties – in contrast to PMB and SO31s – has been clearly entrenched for many years, though the attention given to maintaining control over messages seems to still be on the increase.

One Conservative MP (C3) describes the role of political parties in QP this way:

QP used to be a situation where the first 2 rounds were allocated by the whips. Obviously these questions went to the leaders of each of the opposition parties, then subsequently the other members of those parties that the whips have designated. Then beyond that it was entirely up to the Speaker to recognize private members if they stood to be recognized in the House. That has all changed. The entire roster, so to speak, for QP is now entirely determined by the 4 whips of the 4 parties in the House of Commons.

There is still a lot of substantive discussion that takes place, and certainly there is also quite a bit of symbolism, and hyperbole, and partisan rhetoric that flies around. I don't think that's any different than what has happened in the past years. The difference is that the autonomy of the member to give voice to that either rhetoric or substantive discussion voluntarily is no longer there; that increasingly the leaders of all the parties are exercising that autonomy on behalf of the member (Interviewed April 22, 2010).

It is not surprising, given the control over who asks questions, as well as the all-out attempts to show a weaker government (or opposition, as the case may be), that parties prefer to leave little to chance in this crucial forum. MPs appear more intent on embarrassment (or avoiding embarrassment) than on discussion or debate.

According to the Conservative Parliamentary Secretary (C1) quoted earlier:

It is hard; the opposition tries to throw you off, they heckle like hell when you're talking and all that kind of stuff. I learned a trick from watching the Prime Minister and he always stands and he always talks to the Speaker because that's who you are going through to the rest of the House. I have adopted that practice where whatever the question is I will stand up and look directly at the Speaker and just talk to him. And there is noise going on and stuff, but you try to tune it out and just really concentrate on the speaker, because you will see a lot of people who will get heckled and they are listening to the heckle and it makes them hesitate. That's when they know they have gotten to you because they have your attention.

In an attempt to further control the message and delivery of it, political parties have adopted rehearsals for QP, where the MPs that are slated to ask questions that day attend in advance of the crucial show time. While an interesting development that appears to have been implemented by some parties in the 1990s, it should also be worth noting that this takes up the time of the individual MP as well as members and officials within the party leadership.

The Parliamentary Secretary (C1) whose statements are noted at the start of this paper indicated that approximately the next 2 hours were spent preparing for QP that day, though s/he had only minutes earlier indicated its lack of value. Among the other things s/he noted about QP were that the competitiveness is enjoyable, and that it can provide: “a good shot, a good line, that's great fun”.

Liberal MP Judy Sgro similarly stated: “QP is a playtime, it's an acting time. It's what they tell you all the time.” (Interviewed April 20, 2010).

Many MPs who were interviewed pointed to the lack of time and resources in terms of what they can accomplish in Parliament. A few made comparisons to U.S. Representatives in terms of their greater amount of resources and staff. This is an important point, and one that begs the question of how time and resources are spent. In this case, the answer is surprising.

Even if QP is seen as generally providing relatively little substantive value, the MP who must provide responses – be they a minister or a parliamentary secretary – cannot afford to be ill-prepared. Opposition parties commit a surprisingly large amount of time to this particular forum. BQ House Leader, Pierre Paquette (Interviewed October 21, 2009), along with much of his staff, spends approximately half the work day on QP, with meetings and preparation beginning at 7:00 am through 11:00 am (these also include the BQ leader's office), and rehearsals beginning at 1:00pm, with QP itself taking place from 2:15pm – 3:00pm – approximately 6 hours in total. Two MPs, chosen by lottery each week, also attend one of these morning meetings. Anyone who is selected to ask questions is also asked to attend rehearsal.

Similarly, the Liberal Party has what is called a “tactics meeting” each morning, which was chaired by House Leader Ralph Goodale at the time of these interviews (David McGuinty now holds this position), and which was attended by a handful of selected MPs. According to one Liberal MP (L3), one of the main activities at this meeting is the QP line-up for the day. While Mr. Goodale was not interviewed for this project, the process that was described by other members sounds similar to that of the BQ.

While opposition MPs are able to pitch questions at their party's morning meetings, the ones who are successful in securing these opportunities must show particular skills in question delivery. When the Question Period line-up is being constructed in Liberal tactics meetings, one Liberal MP (L3) stated:

The important thing always is: *can they land the question?* ... Can you get a clip in the media, can you deliver the line, or do you agree to a line in a script in the rehearsal and then change it at the last minute and don't tell anybody? ...

[What matters is] your ability to inflict damage. If it's not adversarial and aggressive and hard hitting, you are not going to get up at Question Period. So people who want to ask thoughtful questions ... if you ask a question to which there is an answer then you shouldn't be in Question Period, right? *'What is it, is the government incompetent or dishonest?'* That's the question that you are going to get, and if you deliver it with great indignation, then you'll get those spots (Interviewed April 20, 2010).

While noting that some individuals can gain a lot of respect for asking important, substantive questions in QP, Rodger Cuzner – Liberal Whip at the time of interviewing – stated:

There is a great line from Herb Gray when he was Opposition House Leader ... People would bring a question to the table to get ready for Question Period ... and Herb would say, 'That's a wonderful question – an important question – but how does it embarrass the government?' And that's pretty much what QP boils down to (Interviewed April 22, 2010).

While the process of the NDP's morning tactical meeting was not discussed, the party has a similar morning session at which MPs can pitch questions that they would like to deliver. NDP MP Dennis Bevington indicated that he only pitches one or two each week due to both the time involved in choosing a good question, and the competition involved in getting one chosen.

Overall, it seems that most MPs do spend a portion of their morning on the lookout for potential questions, though it is likely that they will only pitch these occasionally. In the cases of most backbenchers, they will only be successful less than once per month on average. In the end, the effort can amount to nothing – perhaps even the view that one has wasted the party's time if the question is chosen and then is not "successful". Mr Bevington stated:

There's nothing worse than ... asking a question when somebody just asked the same question. You have to be very careful with that. It's absolutely useless to you as a backbencher. As a party leader you

might get away with it, but not as a backbencher. If you ask the same question as somebody else, you are chasing cars. The issue is going by and you are running after it like a dog chasing a car. (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

It was suggested by more than one MP that questioners sometimes need to think on their feet, and find a way when a similar question has already been asked to ask a question that still seems relevant when their turn arrives. What is clear from most MPs is that the time committed by the party to choosing questions and questioners is quite significant – the purpose being to capitalize on the political opportunity presented in those 35 seconds in QP. It is certain that QP is a high priority among parties and their members, and that both preparation and attendance are given a very high priority in terms of time and resources. Wording of questions is carefully chosen with an eye toward attack and embarrassment, and the presentation of questions is rehearsed in advance to ensure that the MP does not waste the opportunity.

Interestingly, some of the discussion in the interviews centred upon the approach taken by the Liberal Party to mount an effective opposition to the governing Conservatives. In asking about the balance between symbolic expression and substantive expression in the forums of the House, and often focusing upon Question Period, various Liberal MPs noted that there are competing views as to the most effective means of approaching the opposition role, and to the tactics employed in the House by the Conservative Party and, its predecessor, the Alliance/Reform party.

Rodger Cuzner pointed to the effectiveness of exaggeration and media messaging in framing government actions from an opposing point of view:

We play a little bit different. The Conservatives by nature are more ruthless than any of the other parties ... The way that they will attack an individual – we saw it with Judy Sgro, we saw it on Stephane Dion and Michael Ignatieff. They were pretty vicious on Jane Stewart and the ‘billion dollar boondoggle’ ... which was a brand – and they repeated it and repeated it and repeated it – until now it continues to be part of our

lexicon of terms: ‘The billion dollar boondoggle’. When, in fact, there was no billion dollar boondoggle; probably \$190,000 that wasn’t accounted for. ... It was just great branding by Preston Manning ... you just continue to repeat the message, and we don’t do a very good job at that.

This interview took place shortly after a QP session in which virtually every question posed by the Liberal party in QP contained the phrase “culture of deceit” in reference to the Conservative government. While I recognized this in the QP session, I didn’t realize that I was witnessing a new Liberal Party strategy in its infancy.

According to Mr. Cuzner: “We are trying to get it done on this ‘culture of deceit’. It is the first time we tried it; the first thing that really made sense.”

A Conservative MP (C3) also noted this new strategy and the likely implications of it:

“Three days ago the Liberals developed a new strategy through the Office of the Leader of the Official Opposition to attack the government, now termed the ‘culture of deceit’. So every single question now has the phrase ‘culture of deceit’. All their messaging is now moving in the same direction. Why? Those are not private members who, in their own autonomy and their own thinking, thought: ‘Well, oh, it’s a culture of deceit. Oh, I’ll mention that as a turn of phrase in my question or debate.’ No, this is a coordinated strategy. People are given sheets of paper to read off of and told ‘This is the question you are going to ask and if you do it, you will get a check mark beside your name. We will consider you for various chairmanships of committees, or travel abroad, or where your office is going to be, or whether we are going to make you parliamentary secretary in a future government, or a house officer as a member of an opposition party, we will take that into account.’”

One Liberal MP (L2), speaking about the adoption of QP rehearsals and having a consistent message, stated: “I think it was an experiment for us – and

we've been getting better at it – at messaging, because we saw how [the Conservative Party] would message when they were in opposition. And they were relentless in their messaging and their attack and we have not been that good. So they have bonus points; they know how to stay on message and not free lance and not use their brains. We use too much of our brains. Well we shouldn't be doing it. It is too logical; we are too logical. They go 'nope, it's politics' and that's how it goes" (Interviewed April 21, 2010).

The consistent party message may be one QP strategy recently employed by the Liberal Party. Another one that was clearly an issue of debate at the time was the degree of aggressiveness, negativity, and personal attack that would be permissible in the House. As was noted earlier, the Liberal party shuffled their Shadow Cabinet with an eye to positioning more aggressive MPs in key portfolios. Nevertheless, the nature of the Liberal Party's behaviour in the House was clearly one that MPs within the party were debating. Marlene Jennings raised the issue of increasing verbal attacks within the House.

MJ: If you would look at how the question is framed by the different parties over the last say 25 years, I think that you will see that there has been a real shift. I mean I sat on the other side and I listened to Reform MPs on some issues and it was like, 'My God'. We are on the other side now and we wouldn't do that because we don't feel comfortable. We literally don't feel comfortable doing that. ...

KB: There is at least an increased pressure on all parties to ...?

MJ: All parties to stoop to that.

KB: Your impression is that with the Liberals there is a strong voice to not allow that?

MJ: A very strong voice.

Nevertheless, while Mr. Cuzner was not advocating purely symbolic actions, or personal and diversionary attacks, he seemed to feel that aggressive, adversarial questioning is an important element of opposition that the current Liberal party is not currently strong enough at. It would be naïve to think that

debating strategy in the House does not include agitation, and Mr. Cuzner was clearly pointing to the need to conduct that aspect more effectively. He used a hockey analogy to make his point:

RC: When Brian Burke and Team USA were getting ready for the Olympics and they went down their depth chart in each position, at the end of the meeting ... Brian Burke said, 'okay who are the pricks? ... The guys who are chirping, the Sean Averys.'

That's what we need; we need some pricks.

We've got maybe 5 or 6 people that fit into that category. Ours are substantive people too, ... if there is a particular issue at a committee that we think needs a little more horsepower, we'll pull out one of the members of that committee and put in one of our heavy hitters. The Tories did that last time, some of the members on Public Accounts that weren't that aggressive they would pull in Peter MacKay, who was a former prosecutor, when they were in opposition. They would bring in Vic Toews and those guys will question and question hard ...

KB: ... Your impression is that this is one area where your party is weak?

RC: With aggressive personality? Yes, we are not strong. We are not strong. But we will be.

KB: It would be an area that perhaps you would be more successful if...?

RC: We have had to work hard at becoming a good opposition. And I'll tell you, the first year that we were in opposition, as bad as the government was at being the government, we were just as bad at being an opposition. It takes a while to transition, but we're getting better at being an opposition.

This point about needing aggressive frontbench critics came up repeatedly, often as some MPs referred to the minority parliament and the dynamics that it produces.

According to one Liberal MP (L4), speaking on the characteristics necessary to be in the opposition frontbench: “A person that is very skilled at attacking the government ... they need to have both the ability and the willingness, because some people are not willing to do it” (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

Most MPs argue that the best parliamentarians are still those who possess both theatrical and substantive debating skills and use them effectively.

According to a Liberal MP (L1):

The architecture of parliament is designed to be adversarial, the two sword lengths between the opposition seats and the government seats are part of the problem. Some say they create that, but you can have a really great cut and thrust in parliament ... but the key is to do it in a way that is credible. There are Members of Parliament that are not as active on the floor and necessarily in terms of that aggressive type of attack, but who have an expertise that when they speak on a particular issue, their advice is called on and is listened to. And then there are members of parliament who combine that substantive knowledge and authority with being really good at the cut and thrust. Bob Rae is an example of that.

On the government benches, (C2):

Jason Kenney is now the Immigration Minister. Here is a guy that worked in the ethnic community relentlessly. He would go to a dozen functions each weekend in Toronto, so he just worked his butt off and the PM recognized that by making him the Minister for Immigration. He got to have a really strong understanding of the issues that that committee faced. And when he was the Finance Critic when we were in opposition, he really knew what he was talking about.

Nevertheless, even among Conservatives, there are some who feel the current parliament – the parties and the incentives – does little to encourage meaningful or substantive debate among MPs. A Conservative MP (C3) said:

I don't think there is any more or less rhetoric than there was 10, 20, 30 years ago here. However, what is new to this place is the level of personal attack and personal vitriol that takes place and also I'd say that the partisanship is really much more, much stronger today than it has ever been. There used to be a lot of rhetoric and a lot of substance, but that wasn't consistent across all party lines. It was members. Individual members took it upon themselves to assume those roles. The substance and the rhetoric today is broken down along party lines and that's probably the biggest change that is taking place.

[The House] has become such an empty shell of a legislature and such a weak legislature. It has instead become a giant stage for theatre; it has become a prop. The real decisions of our democracy and government are not taken in the House of Commons any more. They are taken in each of the leader's offices, and in particular for the leader of the majority party – the Prime Minister's Office. The House is an afterthought.

Promotion

Aside from other factors believed to affect promotion (i.e. representational and past experience), most MPs indicated that parliamentary actions matter a good deal to promotions, though a few MPs suggested that what transpires in Parliament matters very little. The latter group tended to point to effectiveness in fundraising and supporting the party leader outside parliament as key elements, suggesting that parliamentary actions are, in the end, a very small factor in the outcome of one's position. Of those suggesting Parliament matters a good deal, however, some began talking about pursuing actions that are not "in parliament" per se – including networking or promoting an issue outside parliament. These respondents, when questioned further, would also indicate parliamentary activities, but obviously these were not what immediately came to mind for some respondents. Nevertheless, on the simple question of how much Parliamentary action matters, the vast majority seemed to imply that it certainly matters, and most of these then spoke about parliamentary actions/venues specifically.

In the interviewing process, MPs are given a number of opportunities to suggest which venues and which activities are most important to their, and their colleagues', future promotions. Question Period often comes up, but many MPs also point more generally to the importance of using media to one's advantage. Understandably, working with the media and promoting issues as well as one's party are valuable skills in politics. Liberal MP Judy Sgro clarifies this:

Your ability to be able to work with the media is important. It is tough to get coverage on issues. And so, recognizing someone's ability to be able to field the media's questions, and to be able to get the media's attention and the media's interest is another skill set that is important. You have to rely on the media very often to get that message out.

What exactly the fine line between symbol and substance is may not always be clear. Most MPs do seem to draw a line between (1) gaining needed attention and (2) theatrics.

Ms. Sgro expresses this, in a manner similar to many of her parliamentary colleagues:

Well, I don't like the theatrics that go with the job and, to me, its phoniness. I don't like that. I like more sincerity on the issues and less drama in that 45 minutes of Question Period. But theatrics play a role in what we do in getting the attention of the media. You wouldn't get any media attention if you didn't do some crazy, ridiculous things or being outlandish in your remarks or whatever, because the media play a part in advancing your career as well by giving you an opportunity. Everything is an opportunity for you to showcase your skills.

MPs are also asked late in the interview if they feel they or their colleagues are rewarded for their "theatrical" or "media-seeking" activities. The following exchange with Judy Wacyclycia-Leis is informative:

JW: You would hope that a leader wasn't making a decision strictly on the basis of who had the most hits on a regular basis, who had the quick turn of phrase and could get the media attention. I think that...

KB: Do you have a sense that that is sometimes the case?

JW: I think that sometimes it's too much that way. And I think that causes lots of feeling of angst on the party caucus members when everything seems to be focused on how good and quick you are on your feet as opposed to how do you substantively deal with an issue. It is often the case, although I go back to my [provincial] experience in terms of being appointed to cabinet way back at the start of my career. I was a new member and had a premier who saw my community connections as important and my commitment ability to work as a team member, and my links to the party – years of building and working that were seen as important. So there are times when leaders make decisions based on – well, usually leaders make decisions based on a whole lot of factors. Sometimes too much emphasis is placed on that star-like positioning ...”.

MP Keith Martin, who decided to leave federal politics, citing frustration with increased “rabid partisanship” and a lack of policy innovation (Taber 2010a), stated: “If a leader knows that you will go and jump off a cliff for them, that’s an exaggeration, but a ‘political’ cliff, then that’s good enough to do Question Period. That’s the kind of blind loyalty that people are looking for” (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

A Conservative MP (C3) echoed these sentiments in describing the most important aspects for being promoted within one’s party:

The first aspect is: how closely do you follow the wishes of the leader in his office? The second aspect is: how well do you perform? Are you good on your feet? Are you able to perform in both official languages? Are you able to respond spontaneously to different forums in a way that is consistent with the leader’s office and its message?

With regard to the importance of answering questions in Parliament, and having ministers who are capable of it, I asked NDP MP Peter Stoffer about the importance of QP for Ministers, and if they could hold such positions without skills in this particular forum:

No, because of Question Period, if a minister is on his feet with all the media watching, and you can see the meeting gallery there, if he or she screws up, that's not good. That's the face of your party. If he or she says something that shouldn't have been said – like Art Eggleton that one time – you say something and, oops, that's confidential. You see the writers and they are all going nuts and you see the media leave and they get into this scum, and it's like a feeding frenzy. It's like throwing red meat to sharks (Interviewed October 21, 2009).

One Conservative MP (C4) spoke somewhat negatively about those who do fill frontbench positions, stating that many simply fill representational needs (i.e. regional and demographic): “Parliamentary actions matter for about 30-40% of promotions, but this is meaningless without other factors. If those factors work against you, it doesn't matter how good or how smart you are. ...IQs have nothing to do with it” (Interviewed Oct 23, 2010).

With regard to Cabinet, the same MP stated: “Holy Smokes, they're just not smart ... They [the party leadership] can make them minister of state for nothing, and let them sit in the front row.”

One Conservative MP (C5), speaking about promotions more broadly across political parties, responded:

“The scrum matters, of course, because this is where you are seen. This is where you exist. You can do a very good speech in the House but if it is not taken up by the media, then it does not exist. I get back to the example of theatre ... you can act the best Shakespeare of whatever in the little basement of a church somewhere, but if you are not seen on modern media, you don't exist even though you are very good. By all means, when I talk about parliamentarians, I think media had a key role to play in terms of how they got where they are (interviewed April 21, 2010).

Overall, parties and their leaders seem, based on most responses provided, to place a high value on attendance and participation in QP. While some MPs are engaged in attempting to find solutions that would enhance the more substantive aspects of QP, others are engaged in looking for means of placing value on other

activities. Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett explains previous efforts to evaluate MPs on a broader range of criteria, (indicating that many activities are not currently valued). She referred to the construction of an “MP Report Card” that was discussed as part of the Liberal Party’s Change Commission:⁷

It was going to be a score card that isn't just about attendance at committees and Question Period, but about more fully participating in policy and helping in the end. How your ridings is, if you're going online, talking to the grassroots as much as possible, ... being able to harness good ideas from lots of places. ...[Conservative MP] James Moore apparently told somebody, when he was told he would be called to Cabinet, they had a big binder about how many times he had been off message, ... there was a serious tracking of the member's behaviour. I don't think we do that in the same way, but there is a feeling that lots of the things that we do in terms of citizen engagement, grassroots engagement, relationships with stakeholders, harvesting good ideas from outside into the policy process – that those are about being a real representative democracy. ...

[In regard to the MP report card]: we put it out as a suggestion, something that could happen, so just showing up at QP and votes and committee are not the only things that we think of as part of moving our agenda forward – the way we are perceived as parliamentarians or as a party” (Interviewed April 20, 2010).

While Dr. Bennett didn’t state that MPs perceive symbolic behaviours alone as offering value, she did suggest that there are relatively few activities (including QP) that currently take up a lot of focus in an MP’s day. She also, perhaps more importantly, suggests that effective representative democracy requires a focus that is much broader than is currently the case.

⁷ Chaired by Dr. Bennett as well as two other Liberal party officials, the Change Commission’s purpose was to “focus on long term changes to the Party’s engagement, communications, fundraising, policy, and election-readiness strategies”. See: http://www.liberal.ca/en/newsroom/media-releases/15579_liberals-announce-change-commission

On Dr. Bennett's point regarding parties keeping a list of what MPs have done, other MPs suggested that they feel the same about their own behaviours.

One Conservative MP (C2) stated:

"I think under [my name] somewhere there is a checkmark beside every vote, every vote that I missed, how many of my duty days did I miss, how much time did I spend dicking around instead of doing what I was supposed to do, how many times I answered the call ... that's all part of it. How much that weighs in the whole scheme of things I don't know, but I do think it is part of the mix."

Finally, one Liberal MP (L3) summed up the interview regarding the value of symbolic versus substantive actions in terms of their impact on promotions this way: "It's two-thirds and one-third I guess. Two-thirds is theatre – the ability to land the question [in QP] – and one-third is substantive."

On the Conservative side, responses seem to vary from those of MPs from other parties because being on the government side, and dealing with an opposition, seem to affect the point of view on theatrics in the House. Not all Conservative MPs had positive responses regarding what some see as excessive symbolic partisanship in the House. However, what came up repeatedly was the difficulty that MPs have in contributing to substantive debates on policy issues due to time constraints. This would, of course, be further affected if one doesn't feel that such efforts are highly valued. This MP (C2) stated:

In opposition, you can be pretty effective, you can be briefed by departments on any issue. They are very good with that. If you say 'I want to know', they will come and tell you. So it's really helpful, but a lot of guys don't use that. They just don't bother.

It's easy to get into a routine here, ... most of our MPs are on 2 committees, 4 two hour meetings a week, so that's everyday we will have tied up for 2 hours. It's easy to get a routine, you go to your committee meetings, you go to regional and national caucus on Wednesday, you go to QP every day, you go to the votes, in the evening you go to a reception or 2 and then that's it. So when the hell do you do your due diligence? ...

It's easy to step back and say 'I am doing enough, I am doing my job', and I guess that is your job, but if you are ambitious and you want to move on down the line you have to do more.

Given an ambition to accomplish more or be promoted, however, the indication given was that MPs often prioritize actions that either allow them to participate and perform well in QP, or engage in symbolic adversarial behaviours that emulate QP.

A member of the BQ leader's office (BQ in the exchange below) spoke specifically about the types of factors that go into determining who will hold critic portfolios. While s/he did clearly note that a number of factors go into the decision process, the following exchange does indicate that House performance is a significant factor in MP promotion.

BQ: We'll analyze the performance of MPs each day. Their good moves, their bad moves, whether they have some instincts. When it comes to starting the process, I've got all that data in mind.

KB: So the good points and the bad points - are you able to give them labels? What specifically are you looking for? Do certain things stand out?

BQ: Well, intellectual wit. Sometimes people are sharp and quick. Those are good political qualities."

KB: Are there certain forums that you are paying attention to: QP, committee work, private members business? Of the different parliamentary forums for debating or making policy proposals, are there certain ones that you are really looking for?

BQ: QP, I would say. QP, and also preparation for QP where you can see the performance and the ability to communicate, but there is also venues like QP [morning] meetings [where] MPs can attend if they want to pitch a question. (Interviewed April 21, 2010).

The respect for Question Period performance was also highlighted by the same Parliamentary Secretary (C1) who was quoted earlier.

C1: There is general agreement on who the good performers are on both sides and there is respect on both sides for that.

KB: When you say good performers you mean ...?

C1: I mean people who are sincere and who ask good questions that are not just frivolous. And sometimes it's for people who are just, you know, damn good actors.

KB: Do you get a sense that there are MPs who pursue their careers along these 2 different lines?

C1: Yes.

When asked if one's likelihood of holding a critic or frontbench position depends upon "your ability to act or be theatrical – to play a role," one Conservative MP's (C5) response was "I would say definitely".

Some MPs viewed the characteristics that are valued in a much more negative manner than the above exchanges suggest. When discussing the characteristics that are valued in terms of promotion, Keith Martin responded:

[Some] characteristics that they possess would be to be rabidly partisan, and if the MP has a history of being effective at either finding fault with their political opponents in what they have truly failed to do, or being effective at over-blowing the nature of another party, an opponent's real or imaginary mistakes, then those qualities would be deemed to be valued, and then they would move up the ladder.

Carolyn Bennett's statement on this matter was not quite as negative in tone as Dr. Martin's, though she did indicate a similar view about the messages MPs receive about how to advance their careers.

I worry that here in Canada you end up with the whole 'careerism' stuff that is interpreted as party discipline, when it's really almost paralyzing people; to not be able to do their job in order to be seen as a good little

boy or girl. They will one day end up in cabinet. So I think there are very mixed messages in this.

There is inevitably – and not surprisingly – a partisan difference in how government and opposition members are viewed by each other. One Conservative MP (C2) made a point of saying that even the most adversarial ministers – some that were singled out by opposition MPs as being entirely theatrical and adversarial – show their depth and competence in other forums away from QP. The MP also indicated on one hand, that theatre alone is not enough for an MP to reach a high position, though his statement did suggest it is a significant focus:

The theatrical part is for 45 minutes a day. The rest of the time is pretty good, some of them will get up and give a 10 or 20 minute speech – from whatever party – on the bill that is being debated. There will be 5 or 10 minutes of questions afterward, depending on the length of the speech, and in there you get snapping at each other, but for the most part that doesn't happen. ...

This 45 minutes of screaming at each other most days, there is no point to it. This is QP. Questions are asked but very few answers are given. And then the media says things are adversarial ... but they promote it. They will not print anything unless you are up in the House of Commons screaming at somebody, then you get your face on the news or your name in the paper and so the hard work that goes on behind the scenes very rarely gets any recognition. ...

There is concern that the level of debate has diminished over the years. I think it has only since the cameras were in the House, then it became theatre. ...

You can tell the bombastic ones, you can actually tell they have practiced in front of a full-length mirror some of them.

A number of Liberal MPs indicated a degree of disdain for symbolic adversarial skills, which some suggested were most apparent among the

Conservative benches. Some also indicated that these skills may have played a significant role in the positioning of some Cabinet Ministers. Dr. Bennett's statement, at the same time, diminishes the policy role of current Cabinet Ministers. John Baird (then Transport Minister, now Government House Leader) was one person whose name surfaced on more than one occasion (see also Pearson 2010). Clearly a notable figure in terms of position and profile, Mr. Baird's abilities are viewed quite differently by those on opposite sides of the House. According to Dr. Bennett:

A 'show horse' that has demonstrated to have done very little work is eventually sent out to do certain tasks, but not really trusted ... I am not sure those people get put into cabinet, because it is too important. Though I must say – the current cabinet I'm not sure. But then again the Prime Minister's Office directs everything so what does it matter who the ministers are? ... that's what happened, we believe with the shuffle that put [Transport Minister John Baird] and all the show horses into the top files. It was about spin and messaging and not about coming up with brilliant public policy because the Prime Minister's office does all of that. So you want somebody who is a good communicator on the hot files. That seems to be what he has done, I guess.

Not long after this, John Baird was made the Conservative's Government House Leader. A short time later, the Liberal Party shifted a number of Shadow Cabinet positions. According to the *Globe and Mail's* Jane Taber, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff was seen as putting his "most aggressive" MPs into key positions. New House Leader David McGuinty, "who is pugnacious and known for his heckling skills in the Commons – will be facing off against the new Government House Leader John Baird" (Taber 2010b).

While the *Globe* coverage seems to follow a common approach to covering the House by mass media – that of aggression and conflict between parties – it does appear in this case at least that the Liberal Party wanted this

adopted tone to be part of the story's coverage. According to an official from the Liberal leader's office, quoted in the story:

“We need to send a signal to these guys. They want to play nice, we'll play nice. They want to play tough, they should watch who they wrangle with. The Liberals aren't going to lie down.

“We have been criticized in the past for being passive or being shy or being too timid,” the official said. “Well, if David [McGuinty]'s appointment signals something different than [*sic*] terrific” (Taber 2010b).

Nevertheless, the impression that certain members such as Baird are simply aggressive debaters is not shared by all MPs. According to one Conservative MP (C2):

“So John Baird, he didn't get up and fire at anybody or anything. He just has a gift. He doesn't often make sense and sometimes it's just inflammatory, but he can stand up and go toe to toe with anybody in the House of Commons in a confrontational manner, so does that make him a better Transport Minister? No, I don't think so. Is he the Minister of Transportation because of that? I think he is the Minister of Transportation because he is a good communicator and he is very competent. He is one of the ministers if you write him a letter and say ‘I have an issue’, he sets up a little meeting, he has been briefed and he has backup documentation on that issue to sit down and talk to you. If he doesn't want any further input from you, he knows what my concern is so he gives a response. He is amazing. ... So I think the competence and the ability to run the ministry or whatever it is becomes pretty clear pretty early to the PM that this guy can really do it.”

Ms. Jennings made some comparisons regarding various political leaders she has seen during her years in Parliament, and indicated that different leaders prioritize certain types of skills differently than others – in this case referring to the choice of Conservative Justice Minister Vic Toews. She also referred to the campaign tactics using “10-percenters” – which any MP can send to 10 per cent

of the households in any riding (not simply their own). Rules have recently changed regarding the purposes that these can be used for, in part due to charges that they were being over-used for partisan purposes in previous years.

MJ: You know, if I have worked alongside a member of another party for 5 years on various committees and we have had a respectful, collegial relationship though we have differed on things, and then a 10-percenter comes into my riding under that MP's signature and has completely taken statements I have made out of context in order to attack me, my attitude towards that individual and his party changes substantially. So clearly, a leader for whom someone's hard work, someone's values, interpersonal skills is not high on their checklist, but what is high on their checklist is someone who is prepared to do whatever it takes in order to score points and to take down opponents, then those individuals are going to score high. It is no accident that Vic Toews is a minister. Vic Toews is one of the worst offenders.

KB: Would you say then that adversarial politics are, or adversarial behaviour is rewarded, at least within the Conservative party?

MJ: It definitely is.

KB: And that would play a role in terms of who is promoted.

MJ: Definitely. (Interviewed April 21, 2010)

Not all MPs agreed with this assessment however, and it was not simply a matter of partisanship guiding views on this matter. Rodger Cuzner saw adversarialism as primarily important to opposition parties, and even indicated that the Liberal Party may need more MPs who are stronger at the skills required to be effective at it.

RC: Simply how aggressive and how partisan you are – I don't think it necessarily lends itself to, or opens the door for responsibilities once you take government. I don't believe that.”

KB: But it may play a role in getting to the frontbench in opposition.

RC: Yes.

Thus, there are clearly some differences in terms of perception on this issue. MPs take slightly different viewpoints, in part, based on their view of opposing parties, which may indeed be based upon different past experiences with certain individuals. MPs do seem on the whole to perceive aggressive or adversarial behaviour as a qualification in promotions within the opposition, but again some view this differently based upon the party in question. Some also see such behaviours as lending themselves to promotions within the government, but insofar as this view is held, it seems to relate to the current Conservative government based on the interview evidence. What seems clearly apparent with most interviewees, however, is that they see significant prioritization of symbolic behaviour by at least one of the parliamentary parties, whether it is their own or another.

Conclusion

The views expressed provide a number of important responses to the research question, which asked whether MPs are guided by an incentive structure that prioritizes symbolic behaviour. First, symbolic adversarial actions are viewed as important and are clearly prioritized by many MPs, though a few MPs suggest that these do not have a high degree of value. Second, and more importantly perhaps, some MPs suggest that symbolism is of greater importance than substance, or that the focus of MPs is upon symbolic actions to the detriment of other aspects of parliamentary governance and representation. This was, of course, not universal among MPs. Many indicated that there is a balance between the two, and some indicated that MPs cannot go far on their acting skills alone.

Most MPs indicate that theatre is important to the advancement of political careers, and while this was sometimes suggested in rather partisan terms, some also suggested that it was a consideration for themselves and other MPs within their parties. Again, this view was not expressed by all interviewees, and it is one where there is a fair bit of variance among the types of responses. What was striking, however, was the simple fact of resource allocation to Question Period, which appears rather extensive for this single House forum.

In general, and not included extensively in the quotations above, MPs were also mixed in responses as to whether negativity, especially negative attacks, is on the rise or if it is a particular problem. It is noteworthy that many MPs still say that getting into the media is necessary to gain a profile, and most suggest that the more adversarial and negative one is, the more likely they are to accomplish that. Some expressed views that the minority status (during the 40th Parliament) has an impact on the degree of negativity, while others indicated that any increase in this form of symbolic politics was due to the role of specific parties or leaders (in each case, not one's own). However, some said that little has changed in this regard, at least in recent years. Others see little change in the symbolic, or negative nature, of parliamentary debate, but rather are concerned that all interactions are driven by political parties, and that the initiatives and perspectives brought to the House by MPs are increasingly overshadowed and undervalued due to the scripting of statements by the parties' leaderships.

Not only does it appear as though QP has gained greater attention (as symbol, not as substance) over the years, but there is also the suggestion that media attention and the nature of it enhances the power of party leaders at the expense of other MPs. QP is, primarily, a place where leaders deliver the initial questions, and also control who can ask questions after them. This is yet another means of leader empowerment where MPs must curry favour in order to enhance their profile and influence.

At the same time, there is an appetite for change among many current parliamentarians. As noted earlier, some parties have attempted to alter the behaviour in Canadian QP with little impact. MPs who entered Parliament with the former Reform Party refer to the pressure to conform to a standard of parliamentary behaviour at that time. Current MPs similarly refer to pressure to conform to a lower standard of parliamentary behaviour – which appears to have a degree of irony to it, given that some of these MPs level criticism at former Reform members. Overall, many MPs suggest that there are problems with the current system of debate in the House. With regard to QP specifically, Private Members' Motion 517, introduced in May 2010 by Conservative Michael Chong,

sought to have a parliamentary committee propose means for increasing the substantive effectiveness of QP through:

(i) elevating decorum and fortifying the use of discipline by the Speaker, to strengthen the dignity and authority of the House, (ii) lengthening the amount of time given for each question and each answer, (iii) examining the convention that the Minister questioned need not respond, (iv) allocating half the questions each day for Members, whose names and order of recognition would be randomly selected, (v) dedicating Wednesday exclusively for questions to the Prime Minister, (vi) 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, based on a published schedule that would rotate and that would ensure an equitable distribution of Ministers across the four days (quoted from Chong et al. 2010: 2).

This motion was adopted by the House on October 6, 2010. At that point, the House's Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs was charged with examining these issues and making recommendations regarding changes and their implementation. However, no recommendations were made before the 40th Parliament was dissolved and it is not clear that an examination will continue in the 41st Parliament. While adoption of this motion provides a window into the values of MPs in attempting to bring a more civil and spontaneous form of debate to the House, it is not clear that Parliamentarians will adjust their own rules.

At the start of the 41st Parliament, the first in which the NDP held the post of Official Opposition, NDP leader Jack Layton pledged to restore civility to parliamentary debate, at least within his own party. The pledge certainly provides an interesting frame from which to view Question Period and other parliamentary venues in the near term. Will a strategy that includes more substance in parliamentary questions and a lack of heckling and name-calling be successful politically?

The other players that matter in this process are the media, and by extension, citizens who provide an audience for what happens in the House. One

editorialist has likened the debate over poor parliamentary behaviour to that of fights in hockey – where “Everyone tut-tuts, but everyone watches” (Ibbitson 2010).

If there is a desire to change Parliament, however, then the media do have an important level of responsibility in the process. That is, MPs and parties will be unsuccessful in changing the nature and tone of Parliament if the media continue to reward certain types of behaviour and shun others in a manner that enhances negativity and symbolic debate. According to former Government House Leader Jay Hill:

The media will have to play a role in this as well. Instead of turning those who are thrown out of the House into some sort of folk heroes, they should be castigated as being immature and given a black mark on their career as a politician for their unacceptable behaviour (Hill 2010: 6).

Until MPs are rewarded for asking thoughtful questions, they won't ask them, and the same goes for the responses the government provides. It is difficult to imagine, though, that given trends in mass media organization and coverage that the media itself will lead any change in this regard. It is true that if citizens are not interested in seeing changes to their parliament, then change is much less likely to happen. It is, however, an issue of both citizen engagement and of parliamentary relevance, which is inevitably one like that of the chicken and the egg. If Parliament lacks relevance, then people are unlikely to engage in what it does (or what it may become). At the same time, if people remain unengaged, then elected MPs lack the impetus to push for change. While the beginning months of the 41st Parliament have begun to offer some hope, only time will tell if both Parliamentarians and the media commit to this first step and, if they do, if citizens will respond.

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