

Symbol vs. Substance:

*Theatre, Political Career Paths, and
Parliamentary Behaviour in Canada*

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Priorities?

- PS: “Nothing gets accomplished in Question Period...”
- PS: “I have to go and prepare for Question Period. The minister is away
”
... .
- Question Period would be starting in approximately 2 hours.

Research Question:

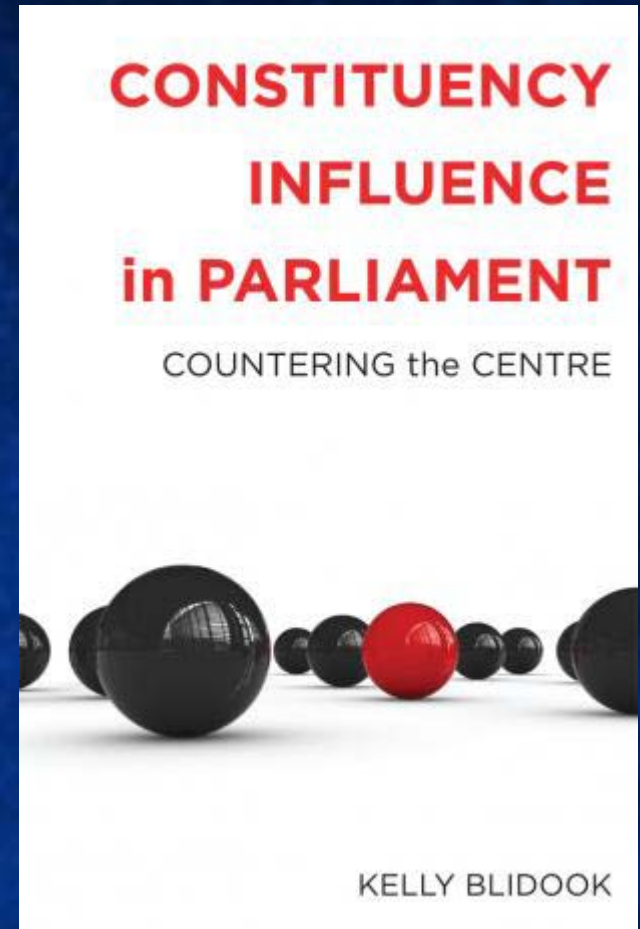
Why do MPs act the way they do?

Do MPs prioritize *symbolic* behaviour over *substantive* behaviour in pursuing promotion?

History

Countering the Centre

- MPs represent constituencies where/when they can
- MPs affect policy



Trajectory



Party Creep

- Recent retrenchment of power by parties at cost of MP autonomy
- Party dictated behaviour has increased reach: both *type* and *venues*.

Why it matters:

- Value of symbol over substance in the distribution of *influence*.
- Concern about negativity and public trust in government.
- Job satisfaction and voluntary turnover of MPs.

Audience democracy?

Citizens: Lack of stable partisans; new forms of political activity.

Party leaders: link to public through polls/consultants, not MPs.

Media: generally independent and non-partisan

- Competitive for audiences
- Focus upon conflict
- Scrutinize everyone (but not much policy)

Role of QP:

- Hold government to account
- Policy-making
- Representation
- MPs showcase abilities



Role of QP:



“guerilla theatre”
(Smith 2007)

- Are MPs rewarded for being *actors* in the “guerilla theatre” as opposed to being *parliamentarians* or *policy makers*?

Data:

- Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews:
- 20 MPs and 1 official BQ leader's office

Interviews:

- (1) How much Parliamentary actions matter,
- (2) Which Parliamentary venues matter,
- (3) What particular actions matter,
- (4) How much symbolic partisan actions matter?

Responses:

- QP matters *a lot* to political parties.
- “tactics meetings” - QP primary focus
- Questions: scripted and rehearsed
- BQ House leader, Pierre Paquette:
 - Half the work day (including staff) focused on QP
 - Substantial involvement of party leader’s office
 - 2 MPs chosen by lottery each week

Critic positions - BQ

KB: 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.

(Official, BQ leader's office)

Media Attention

“Questions are asked but very few answers are given. And then the media says things are adversarial ... but they promote it. ...

Media to blame?

“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.”

(Conservative MP1)

Over-blowing ... imaginary...

“...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.”

Keith Martin (Liberal)

Check mark

“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.’”

(Conservative MP2)

...shouldn't be using ... brains.

“[Conservatives] 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.”

(Liberal MP1)

Tactics (Liberal Party):

“The question 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.

Tactics (Liberal Party):

...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.”

(Liberal MP2)

How much does it matter to promotion?

“It’s two-thirds and one-third I guess. Two-thirds is theatre – the ability to land [the question] – and one-third is substantive.”

(Liberal MP2)

Concern about priorities:

“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.”

Carolyn Bennett (Liberal - talking about Change Commission proposal).

Conclusions:

1. Symbolic adversarial actions = perceived as important to promotion.
2. Media attention primary factor.
3. Some MPs: symbolism is of greater importance than substance.
4. Significant concern by some MPs about debate within parties.

What to do?

Structure of Parliament / QP

Rewards and Punishments ...