

More than half of MPs surveyed say heckling a problem, two-thirds admit doing it anyway

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OTTAWA – More than half of Canada's Members of Parliament surveyed think that heckling in the House of Commons is a problem. Though, two thirds of MPs admit to doing it anyway, with the majority of MPs saying it's a way to hold the government to account and highlight "questionable answers."

For its latest report on civility in the House of Commons, civic engagement charity Samara Canada, surveyed MPs and found that 53 per cent of respondents say heckling is a problem, while three quarters of MPs think the public perceives it badly. Approximately 70 per cent of MPs from the three registered parties who responded admit to heckling.

The majority -- [72 per cent of the 84 MPs who took the survey](#) -- say they heckle to respond to "perceived untruths," while 49 per cent of MPs who responded say they do it to correct a false statement, and 48 per cent do so to point out partisan rhetoric.

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Just 15 per cent said they think heckling actually increases accountability.

"There is a lot of lying going on, and the public has no way of figuring out what is true. Heckling highlights questionable answers," one MP is quoted as saying. The identities of the MPs who took the survey were kept confidential.

For the report titled: No One Is Listening: Incivility in the 42nd Parliament, and how to fix it -- Samara Canada surveyed MPs between April and June 2017 with help from the Parliamentary Internship Programme. The breakdown of participants was relatively representative of the demographics in the House: by party, gender, and political experience. The statistics in the report are based off of the number of responses to each question and not the total number of surveys, as not all MPs answered every question.

PHOTOS



The House of Commons is shown on Feb. 27, 2014. (Sean Kilpatrick / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Other reasons for heckling that MPs cited include being "overcome by passion," to liven up the debate, and to support their party.

Heckling -- generally considered to someone speaking up, out of turn -- is recorded in the House transcripts as "Oh, oh!," but the actual comments can range from audible booing or jeers, to fully articulated insults.

Three categories of heckling:

The report classified heckling into three categories: substantive; personal; or discriminatory.

The most common types of substantive heckles were based on the idea, comment, or question being spoken; or based on the political party.

The most common types of personal heckles concerned the delivery of an idea, comment, or question; or referred to intelligence.

The most common types of discriminatory heckles were based on gender; language or accent; social or economic class; and age.

There has been an effort to improve the decorum in the House during this session of Parliament, with House of Commons Speaker Geoff Regan cracking down on heckling MPs by naming them by riding when it happens; and party leaders speaking in support of more respectful debate.

One MP noted in the report, however, that the tone is getting worse over the course of this 42nd Parliament.

Generally, MPs reported mixed feelings about heckling, saying while the state of debate needs improvement, heckling still serves a purpose and is a longstanding part of Parliament Hill culture.

Other findings from the 84 MPs in the report:

- 36 per cent see heckling as a form of harassment
- 67 per cent of female MPs reported gendered heckling, versus 20 per cent of male MPs
- 84 per cent of Conservatives admitted to heckling, and reported doing it the most frequently
- 83 per cent of New Democrats admitted to heckling, and reported doing it a few times a week
- 47 per cent of Liberals admitted to heckling, and reported doing it less than once a week

"None of this is to suggest that the House of Commons should sound like a church or a library. The government must be held to account. But the theatre of accountability should be replaced with real, substantive accountability. There are better ways for MPs to use their voices in the House," the report's conclusion reads.

The report also suggests that Parliamentarians' upcoming move to the new House of Commons in West Block in 2018, when Centre Block closes for construction, would be a good opportunity for MPs to try new approaches to quash heckling.

Among the potential tweaks to House proceedings that Samara Canada offers to improve civility are: longer time limits on speaking slots; using fewer notes when speaking; and better video coverage of the House of Commons, so that MPs besides the person who has the floor can be seen, therefore catching the typically off-camera hecklers in the act.

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