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OPINION

Put the spotlight on bad behaviour in the House

More video angles could curb heckling.



This scene is all CPAC viewers could see of Conservative MP Blake Richards being kicked out of the House for excessive heckling on Nov. 30. House Speaker Geoff Regan, pictured in the Speaker's chair, asked the sergeant-at-arms to remove Mr. Richards, who is out of camera view. *Screenshot courtesy of CPAC*

By JANE HILDERMAN, MIKE MORDEN (<http://www.hilltimes.com/author-stories/?author=Jane Hilderman, Mike Morden>)

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Two weeks ago, Conservative Member of Parliament Blake Richards was “named” by the House Speaker and ejected for excessive heckling. It was the first time an MP has been ejected from the House in 15 years.

Speaker Geoff Regan has shown a willingness to keep a tighter leash on the debate, which has been worsening this fall. But this was the first time he felt compelled to remove a Member, one of the harshest punishments available to him. Obviously something dramatic happened. Why did the Speaker decide Richards had gone too far?

We'll never know.

Unlike in hockey, the instant replay doesn't give us insight into what happened "on the ice." The details are obscured to anyone who wasn't on the floor of the House of Commons at the time. There is a video record, of course, but all that it captures is the Speaker's icy gaze and repeated requests for order, plus some muffled offstage commotion.



In late October, Samara Canada published the results of a survey of MPs on heckling in the House of Commons, in a report called [No One Is Listening](http://www.samaracanada.com/research/political-leadership/no-one-is-listening) (<http://www.samaracanada.com/research/political-leadership/no-one-is-listening>). In it we offered ideas for fostering a more civil, substantive, and dynamic debate in hopes that it would curb the MPs' desires to heckle.

One of the suggestions we put forward was to offer more video angles on the House.

Since the time when cameras were first introduced to the House at the end of the 1970s, our ability to see inside the House has remained unchanged. While technology has evolved to allow us to watch and even speak to our dogs at doggie daycare, during Question Period CPAC is only able to broadcast the recognized speaker, or the House Speaker, and nothing else (despite the fact that there are live cameras capturing action throughout the chamber).

This is where parliamentary broadcasting has been stalled for four decades. Members of the public can watch the proceedings—but not *all* of the proceedings. Other than what would be recorded in Hansard, they have no idea who said what, or whether lines were crossed.



This lack of transparency contributes to a decorum problem. In the absence of public scrutiny, there are hard limits on the extent that the Speaker, alone, is able to enforce good behaviour. When Samara interviewed Speaker Regan, he told us that, ultimately, MPs mostly care about what their constituents think of their conduct.

The best way for constituents to see what their representatives are doing is a more complete broadcasting of the House. This could be accomplished a number of ways—through cutaways and reaction shots, or wide-angle live feeds available on the CPAC website, for example.

A comprehensive broadcast should offer a better set of incentives for good behaviour. This is a measure that would only affect the problematic heckling: boring, repetitive, disruptive, and offensive. Witty repartee or real passion would be, if anything, rewarded.

Of course, it's always possible that more cameras will just mean worse, sillier, bigger performances. It's possible that some MPs need to be saved from themselves, sort of as how sports broadcasts demurely cut away when a fan runs onto the field, so as not to encourage future hijinks.



Ultimately the effects of such a change, in the context of the Canadian House of Commons, are unknowable until it is tried. So Samara is proposing a pilot. The Board of Internal Economy should agree to try out some short-term changes to the management of Question Period, including how it is broadcast, and to examine the effects.

This is, in fact, what was originally intended, when cameras were first introduced to Parliament 40 years ago this fall. Then-Speaker James Jerome had this to say: “We will need to experiment with our capacity to use this very powerful medium to record our proceedings, for indeed there are many questions about the manner in which these cameras ought to be directed and controlled. The only way to resolve these questions is to experiment with them.”

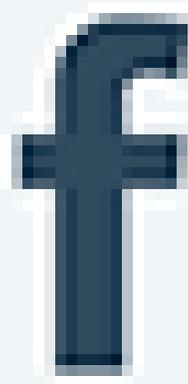
It’s good advice, and Parliament should take it.

Jane Hilderman is the executive director and Mike Morden is the research director at Samara Canada, a national charity that generates research to encourage a stronger democracy.

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