

‘Shame!’: Stamping out heckling in the House of Commons

By Monique Scotti National Online Journalist, Politics Global News

WATCH: Dr. Michael Morden, research director of Samara Canada, tells Vassy Kapelos that heckling in question period has negative impact and offers recommendations including the way QP is broadcast to show hecklers as a possible way to regain some civility in the house.

A non-profit think tank devoted to citizen engagement says it’s time to consider some changes in the House of Commons to that help stamp out the great Parliamentary scourge known as heckling.

In an interview with *The West Block’s* Vassy Kapelos, Samara Canada’s research director, Michael Morden, suggested that longer time allocations for questions and answers, less reliance on written notes and even a loosening of the rules surrounding where TV cameras can point during Question Period could help reduce the hooting and hollering.

“There’s a lot of openness to trying some new things, which is great,” Morden said.

Samara recently released its latest survey on heckling in the House, which revealed that even our elected representatives are getting sick of the excessive outbursts that have become the norm.

“There’s a central paradox there,” noted Morden. “MPs don’t seem to like heckling that much, but overwhelmingly they do it.”

WATCH: Carolyn Bennett is heckled in Question Period

The non-compulsory survey (filled out by about a quarter of sitting MPs) found a majority of members — 53 per cent — think heckling is a problem, but 65 per cent confessed to participating. Men were more likely to be confirmed offenders than their female counterparts.

“Overwhelmingly MPs says they heckle to hold one another accountable ... but only about 15 per cent actually think heckling increases accountability in the House,” Morden said, adding that the behaviour can actually have a negative effect on Canadian democracy as a whole.

“There’s good research evidence to suggest, for example, that just watching politicians behaved rudely to one another drives down our trust in not just those politicians, but in government and our institutions.”

This past week has provided several prime examples. On Thursday, Finance Minister Bill Morneau could barely be heard above the din from the Opposition benches as he dodged questions about his personal finances.

WATCH: University of Alberta student makes impassioned speech about Islamophobia in House of Commons

And on Monday, Green leader Elizabeth May found herself the subject of loud guffaws after Transport Minister Marc Garner answered her question in the House and referenced “spending all night with my honourable colleague.”

May called the reaction “schoolyard bullying,” pointing out that Garneau was talking about an all-night voting session they had both attended.

On Wednesday outside the House of Commons, Conservative MP Gérard Deltell openly admitted to heckling, but he said it’s usually out of frustration when the government refuses to give straightforward answers.

“The only way to be upset and to prove that we are upset is to heckle,” Deltell told reporters.

“That’s not the best way, I do recognize that. And I think that we do too much. Maybe I’m not the loudest, but I do play in that movie, so I don’t want to hide what I’m doing.”

But MPs can hide, thanks to a rule that only allows TV cameras to point at the person addressing the House at that moment. Cutting away to a red-faced Conservative, Liberal or NDP backbencher screaming “shame!” is a no-no.

Morden said that with nearly 200 rookie MPs in Parliament, now might be the perfect time to change the rules.

“We’ve been doing it a certain way for 40 years,” he said. “We think if we capture more of that behaviour on camera, it might be a really strong disincentive.”

— *Watch the full interview with Samara Canada research director Michael Morden above.*

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