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# Survey finds most MPs think heckling in the House is a problem — and most MPs are guilty of it

According to a new report by Samara Canada, a majority of MPs — 53 per cent — think heckling during question period is a problem.



Conservative MPs bring a cardboard cutout of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau into the Commons earlier this year. According to a new survey, 15 per cent of MPs think heckling increases accountability. (SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO)

By **SABRINA NANJI** Democracy Reporter  
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Civility in question period has reached a point where no one is listening, a new survey of MPs suggests.

“We’ve lost something in terms of what debate should look like, what good accountability can mean in question period,” said Jane Hilderman, executive director at Samara Canada, a non-profit think tank devoted to citizen engagement.

Released Wednesday, Samara’s report found a majority of MPs — 53 per cent — think heckling is a problem, but 65 per cent confessed to making unscheduled outbursts in the House. It’s not a rare occurrence either — of those who admitted to heckling, nearly 60 per cent said they do it at least once a week. Roughly one-quarter of sitting MPs responded to the survey.

Heckling — when a politician speaks out in Parliament without permission from the Speaker, the non-partisan referee — is typically looked down upon by the public because it’s perceived to be rancorous in nature and diminishes meaningful debate.

“It’s like a theatre of artifice,” Hilderman said. “In the past there’s always been theatre (in question period). But a genuine dramatic moment or spontaneity? Now, it’s predictable.”

However it is one of the tools MPs, particularly those on the opposition bench, can use to hold the government to account — the most common reasons MPs reported for heckling was to “respond to perceived untruths,” because “they are overcome by passion” and to support the home team. That said, 15 per cent think heckling actually increases accountability.

While current Speaker Geoff Regan has cracked down on unruly behaviour and the party leaders have committed to being more civil, not all MPs think decorum in the House of Commons is improving.

“It depends on who you ask,” Hilderman said.

For instance, there is “a big gap” between what men and women hear, she said.

Men tend to heckle more — 69 per cent of male MPs admitted to cheering and jeering out of turn compared to 52 per cent of women. Eighty-five per cent of men reported being on the receiving end of heckles, as did 89 per cent of women.

But it’s the content that’s key — calling out about policy is considered fair game, but when heckling turns personal or discriminatory it diminishes meaningful discussion, Hilderman said.

Last year, Tory MP Michelle Rempel wrote an op-ed about the “[everyday sexism](#)” she experienced in the House. That was shortly after former immigration minister John McCallum came under fire for telling Rempel, his critic, to be more “cheerful.”

Women were more likely to pick up on those taunts — 67 per cent of female MPs said they hear heckles based on gender, compared to 20 per cent of men. That trend carried over from Samara’s last report in 2015.

Hilderman also pointed to a research project from U of T's Tanya Whyte that parses Hansard — the official record of Parliament — over the last century and shows women were interrupted more often than men.

“We don't know the intensity of that, but they are more likely to be interrupted — so it's not just in women's heads that they are being heckled differently. What's interesting is men don't even recognize it,” she said.

Rookie MPs were the most opposed to heckling — a relatively fresh experience for the group of 199 who were first elected in 2015. Sixty per cent of rookies said cheering and jeering out of turn is a problem, and half would abolish it, versus 19 per cent of veteran MPs that would.

One newbie politician, unnamed in the report, described the experience to Samara as “soul-destroying.”

Samara makes a handful of recommendations for increasing civility, including fully capturing heckling on camera. Cameras and microphones don't always pick up heckling over the din in the chamber, which means viewers at home hear muffled noise but can't see who caused the kerfuffle. Removing that anonymity could discourage MPs from making offensive or disruptive remarks, the report said.

Hilderman also wants to hear fewer talking points by taking away politicians' prepared notes and clearing the way for genuine debate.

“We've come to a point now where . . . scripted talking points have become *de rigueur*,” Hilderman said. “One inane answer gets a bunch of inane heckles back. There is no listening.”

Reducing the reliance on “party lists,” a roster of MPs scheduled to speak that day given to the Speaker and house leaders in advance, is another way to raise the level of debate. Spontaneously recognizing backbenchers to speak and providing opportunity to weigh in on a whim could reduce the urge to heckle and boost engagement.

The report also recommends extending the 35 seconds allotted for each a question and answer and shaking up the seating arrangement in the chamber.

When broken down along party lines, the Tories were most prone to impromptu outbursts — of those who responded to the survey, 84 per cent admitted to heckling. That compares to 47 per cent of Liberals and 83 per cent of New Democrats.

It seems the NDP can dish it as much as they can take it — 94 per cent of New Democrats said they had been heckled, followed by 85 per cent of Liberals and 79 per cent of Conservatives.

About one-quarter, or 84 out of 338 MPs responded to Samara's survey — the third of its kind — in spring. Fifty-one per cent of respondents were Grits, 25 per cent were Tories and 21 per cent were New Democrats.

## **Brouhahas in the House**

- Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, then in opposition, [called environment minister Peter Kent](#) a “piece of s---” during a December 2011 question period debate over Canada’s withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol.
- Like father, like son? Trudeau senior, Pierre, insisted to reporters in 1971 he mouthed “[fuddle duddle](#)” in the House, and not a profanity beginning with the letter F, as other MPs contended.
- In 1997, after he heard a heckler call him “racist,” Reform MP Darrel Stinson [replied](#), “Do you have the fortitude or the gonads to stand up and come across here and say that to me, you son of a bitch? Come on.”
- According to historian Arthur Milnes, Canada’s first prime minister John A. Macdonald [got into fisticuffs](#) with Oliver Mowat, former Ontario premier, in the legislature. Said Macdonald: “Come back here you damn pup, I’ll smack your chops!”
- The late Jim Fulton, former NDP MP, once [dropped a dead B.C. salmon](#) on former prime minister Brian Mulroney’s desk after raising environmental concerns in question period.
- New Democrat Nathan Cullen and Conservative Peter Van Loan nearly got into fisticuffs in 2012 over the Tory government’s omnibus budget. Their microphones weren’t on but cameras reportedly caught Van Loan cross [the floor and wag his finger](#) at Cullen before he was led away by a caucus mate.
- Last May Prime Minister Trudeau was accused of manhandling NDP MP Ruth Ellen Brosseau ahead of a vote on the government’s assisted-dying legislation. While not heckling per se, the incident that became known as “elbow gate” [raised questions about decorum](#).

**Read more about:** [Justin Trudeau](#)

