

VIBERT: Survey says politicians are behaving badly

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Maintaining decorum in Parliament and the legislatures is an unwelcome, sometimes impossible task that falls to the Speaker. This session the responsibility to Nova Scotian MP Geoff Regan. (SEAN KILPATRICK / CP)

Some years ago a young teacher was herding 30 or 40 kids, likely aged 12 or so, out the doors of Province House when an idle reporter asked how they liked the show.

She wasn't angry; maybe sad, obviously dejected when she answered that she'd brought her students to Province House because they'd been learning Canadian civics. Then, with unconcealed contempt, she said, "and I showed them that." They had observed question period.

She felt she'd let the kids down and possibly invalidated everything she'd taught them about public service. Over the years that idealistic teacher wasn't the only one who left Province House feeling that way.

Little has changed. Politicians still behave badly. They do it primarily in Parliament and legislatures across the land, and most blatantly during daily question period.

A recent survey of members of Parliament suggests they understand that their conduct is unbecoming, but don't seem inclined to change.

In April and May, Samara Canada canvassed MPs, and found that slightly more than half of the respondents believe heckling is a problem in the Commons, yet more than two-thirds actively engage in the behaviour.

The survey is peppered with apparent anomalies like that. There is not only disagreement among MPs as to the appropriate level of decorum, but individual members seem conflicted about what constitutes proper comportment.

Samara, a non-profit organization created in 2009 to increase engagement in Canadian public life, released the survey results Wednesday. SaltWire received an advance copy on an embargoed basis.

The survey shows veteran MPs are more accepting of heckling; women experience it differently than men; Tories are the most forgiving of bad conduct; New Democrats believe they are the most frequent targets; and members from all parties know the public says the conduct is disreputable.

To elevate debate, Samara offered some ideas ranging from the worthwhile to dead-on-arrival.

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Nova Scotia MP Geoff Regan, the current House of Commons Speaker, is credited with improving the dignity of that place and, from observation, Kevin Murphy, Speaker of the Nova Scotia legislature, runs a tight ship.

Long-serving MPs argue that heckling is a mostly harmless parliamentary tradition. In the early years after Confederation, there are parliamentary records of MPs meowing like cats, playing music to drown out other members and, on at least one occasion, setting off firecrackers in the House.

Samara found that half of the rookies in the House — those elected in 2015 — are bothered, even appalled, by some of the antics in their new workplace.

MPs say they heckle to hold government or other MPs accountable, or because their emotions run away with them, or to join the pack, which doesn't bode well for change if the rookies embrace the institutional culture.

Ideas for improving decorum include changing the rules to give more MPs an opportunity to engage legitimately in question period which could reduce their urge to inject uninvited comments.

A ban on written questions and prepared "talking point" responses, and lifting the restrictions on television coverage are two highly desirable proposals.

TV cameras are fixed on the member who has the floor, freeing others to heckle with near impunity. Maybe if the offenders were caught on camera they'd be less inclined to throw verbal spitballs.

Written questions and canned responses are common in legislatures and endemic in Nova Scotia. They turn question period from an exchange of ideas into a choreographed political theatre.

Prepared questions usually include a partisan slight, while prepackaged replies answer questions no one asked. Both are magnets for derisive retort.

The suggestion that seating arrangements be changed so members aren't with their party caucus friends has no chance. It was a favourite tactic of junior high school teachers, rarely worked there, and won't wash in Parliament or legislatures.

The gender gap was obvious in the results, with 67 per cent of women reporting gender-specific slurs, while only 20 per cent of men said they heard them.

In almost 40 years of haunting the Nova Scotia legislature, I've heard heckling that added welcome humour and colour to otherwise tedious proceedings, and nasty, out-of-line comments. You take the bad with the good.

As with so much of our living national political memory, parliamentary persiflage evokes Pierre Trudeau. He once insisted, somewhat facetiously, that he may have said "fuddle duddle" in the Commons, when others heard something quite different.

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