

EMBARGOED until January 20th, 2016

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Survey of MPs highlights frustrating paradox: the majority of MPs think heckling is a problem in the House of Commons... But they do it anyway

Lessons from the 41st Parliament for the return of the 42nd Parliament next week

Toronto, January 20, 2016—In the last session of the 41st Parliament, Samara surveyed sitting MPs about heckling in the House of Commons and uncovered a frustrating paradox: 69% of MPs who responded to the survey believe that heckling is a problem in the House of Commons. And yet 72% freely admitted to heckling.

In the survey's comments, MPs said they were trying to do three main things with their heckling: to correct another person's error/omission, to get on the record as disagreeing, or to support their own party.

MPs report that most heckling occurs during Question Period but that it can happen at other times in the House calendar was well. Since two-thirds of Canadians believe that QP "needs to be reformed and improved"ⁱ eliminating or reducing heckling could be a good place to start.

"With a House of Commons comprised of more than half rookie MPs, next week's start of a new Parliament offers an opportunity for MPs to change the way the House functions to become a more respectful, twenty-first-century workplace," says Samara's Executive Director Jane Hilderman.

The Gender Divide

The survey of MPs showed a more insidious problem with heckling than merely turning Canadians off Parliament: Women were more likely than men to report being heckled "frequently." And while both men and women agree that the content of heckles relates primarily to the subject being debated (ideas, question, ideology, ethics and the party), women respondents also say they heard heckles of a more personal nature. Of the respondents, female MPs were more likely than male to report hearing heckles especially about gender, appearance, age and language. Indeed, 79% of women respondents reported hearing heckles related to age and gender whereas no men reported hearing age-related heckles and only 8% of men heard gendered heckles. The extreme differences between what the male and female respondents heard is striking given that they were working in the same room during the same general time frame.

While the majority of respondents say that heckling has no effect on their participation in the House, a minority of MP respondents (20%) reported that heckling in the House makes them participate less at

times, either by paying less attention or seeking out fewer opportunities to speak. The majority of these respondents were women, a group which is already underrepresented in the House of Commons.

“[Heckling] makes me aware that people are often trying to silence me,” said one female MP.

“This research isn’t about taking the passion out of political debate. It is about ensuring that all MPs regardless of who they are can participate fully in Parliament without feeling disrespected,” says Samara’s Executive Director Jane Hilderman. “It will take more than just the will of the Speaker to change this practice. It will take the work of each MP and party leadership to ensure that harassing heckling stops.”

There is not a single fix that can stop heckling all together, but a combination of preventative and disciplinary measures is likely to be the most effective. To deter the behaviour, MPs must be given positive examples, such as through their orientation process and following the example set by party leaders and whips. When that fails, there should be consequences for offending Members, such as the removal of one of their parties’ allotted questions, or even removing a Member from the House. Together, this “carrots” and “sticks” approach, in combination with effort on all sides of the House to behave in a more civil manner, will ensure culture on the Hill changes to reflect a more positive and effective workplace.

Key Findings

- Of MPs surveyed, 69% believe heckling is a problem in the House of Commons—and yet 72% of Members of Parliament admit to heckling.
- Why do they say they heckle?
 - To correct omissions, respond to perceived untruths or point out partisan rhetoric
 - To record their opposition to a question or comment
 - To show support for their party
- Many MPs believe heckling contributes to Canadians’ perception that politics is irrelevant and dysfunctional.
- MPs primarily report hearing heckles on the subject being debated, their ideological positions, and their party. But female MPs are much more likely to report hearing heckles about gender, age, language, religion, intelligence and even the Member’s weight.
- Heckling can affect the work done in the House: 20% of respondents, especially those who are women, reported that heckling not only affects their job performance in the House but even reduces their willingness to participate at all.

The link to the full report will be available here on January 20th, 2016 at 12 am:

<http://www.samaracanada.com/research/cheering-or-jeering>

La version française de ce rapport sera disponible le 4 février. Nous vous invitons à écrire à info@samaracanada.com pour en obtenir une copie.

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About Samara Canada's survey of MPs

This is only the second time Canadian MPs have been surveyed on their experiences of heckling. The first survey was developed by Mackenzie Grisdale, a member of the non-partisan Parliamentary Internship Programme, in 2011, during the 40th Parliament. The current survey was conducted by Samara and Grisdale from April to May 2015 and included a variety of close-ended questions and allowed for open-ended written responses for all questions. MPs had the option to answer the survey online or on hard copy. Samara sent the surveys in the MPs' preferred language to MP assistants' email accounts and to the main MP accounts, with a link to PDF versions and Survey Monkey links. All MPs were promised anonymity for their responses.

Since only 29 out of 305 sitting MPs responded, this report should be considered illuminative, rather than definitive. The MPs who responded do not reflect the composition of the House by party at the time. For the complete methodology, please see this page (<http://www.samaracanada.com/research/cheering-or-jeering/methodology>).

About Samara Canada

Samara Canada is dedicated to reconnecting citizens to politics. Established as a charity in 2009, we have become Canada's most trusted, non-partisan champion of increased civic engagement and a more positive public life.

Samara Canada's research and educational programming shines new light on Canada's democratic system and encourages greater political participation across the country to build better politics, and a better Canada, for everyone.

A samara is the winged "helicopter" seed that falls from the maple tree. A symbol of Canada, the samara is also a reminder that from small seeds, big ideas can grow.

ⁱ Public Policy Forum, 2010. Pollara National Dialogue Poll. Available at: <https://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/PPF-Pollara%20FINAL%20ENG.pdf>.