



# CHEERING OR JEERING?

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MEMBERS OF  
PARLIAMENT OPEN  
UP ABOUT CIVILITY  
IN THE HOUSE OF  
COMMONS

SAMARA'S DEMOCRACY 360: LEADERSHIP

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the spring of 2015, Samara surveyed Members of the 41st Parliament on their experiences with heckling in the House of Commons.

*“It is nastier and less witty and intelligent than I expected.”*

### KEY FINDINGS

Of Members of Parliament surveyed, 69% believe heckling is a problem in the House of Commons—and yet 72% of MPs admit to heckling.

Many MPs commented that heckling contributes to Canadians’ perception that politics is irrelevant and dysfunctional.

Members say they heckle for three reasons:

- 1.** to correct omissions, respond to perceived untruths or to point out partisan rhetoric
- 2.** to get their opposition on the record in Hansard or in the media
- 3.** to support their “team”

MPs primarily report hearing heckles on the subject being debated, their ideological positions, and their party. But women MPs also report hearing heckles about gender, age, language, religion and even their appearance.

Heckling can affect the work done in the House: 20% of respondents, especially those who are female, reported that heckling not only affects their job performance in the House but even reduces their willingness to participate at all.

The beginning of a new Parliament is an opportunity to set a new tone in the House, and for all MPs to recognize their responsibility to make Parliament a more respectful and effective workplace. Over half of the 42nd Parliament is comprised of Members of Parliament who are new to the House of Commons and haven’t yet made heckling a habit.

A shift in behaviour can and should be supported by new rules and structures—both preventative and disciplinary in scope. For example, better orientation, greater collegiality, reduced partisan rhetoric and reforming Question Period can all reduce the likelihood and severity of heckling. “Naming and shaming” hecklers or penalizing parties further enforce the values of a respectful politics.

This isn’t about taking the passion out of politics. Debates in Parliament can and should ignite our emotions. Canada’s future is on the agenda after all. But this passion can happen without personal insults or partisan tirades.

*“I believe that heckling is a symptom of the deep democratic malaise at the heart of our parliamentary institutions.”*



## INTRODUCTION:

### What we talk about when we talk about heckling

If you've been to the House of Commons, or watched Question Period (QP) on TV or online, you've heard it. It booms off the walls. It interrupts both important speeches and partisan rhetoric. It causes the orator to stumble. It forces the Speaker of the House to intervene.

It's heckling.

It is as crass and simple—and as effective—as yelling over a colleague. It's a tactic that is rarely used in any workplace but politics. Yet it's used across party lines and in many parliaments and legislatures in Canada and around the world. It is one of the most obvious, and oft-cited examples of a lack of civility and respect in the House.

In the House of Commons, MPs hold the government to account; debate and vote on issues; and represent the views of their constituents and political party. It's logical to expect that an excessive amount of heckling, harassment and noise can prevent good work from happening.

Additionally, how MPs behave and interact with one another in the House of Commons contributes greatly to how Canadians perceive that work. Public opinion research suggests that the majority (56%) of Canadians think less of Canada's system of government when they watch Question Period. Two-thirds of Canadians feel that it "needs to be reformed and improved."<sup>1</sup> MPs' behaviour in this public-facing outlet risks exacerbating Canadians' already negative evaluations of MPs' work and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Samara researchers wanted to find out more about how MPs themselves felt about heckling.

## THE HECKLING SURVEY

In the spring of 2015, Samara Canada surveyed the Members of the 41st Parliament about their experience with heckling. The survey explored whether MPs heckled, what they heard in the House and whether they'd been affected by others' heckling. All MPs were promised anonymity for their responses.

The survey was delivered to the 305 MPs who were serving at the time. In addition to a variety of closed-ended questions, the survey was structured to allow MPs to respond in their own words. In total, 29 out of the 305 MPs responded. While this reflects only 10% of the House, it nevertheless allows a glimpse into how MPs viewed the nature of heckling in the 41st Parliament and how MPs felt it affected their work. (For more information on the methods, please see the Methodology.)

*"Your nose is growing."*

### HECKLING:

To call out in the chamber of the House of Commons without being recognized by the Speaker.

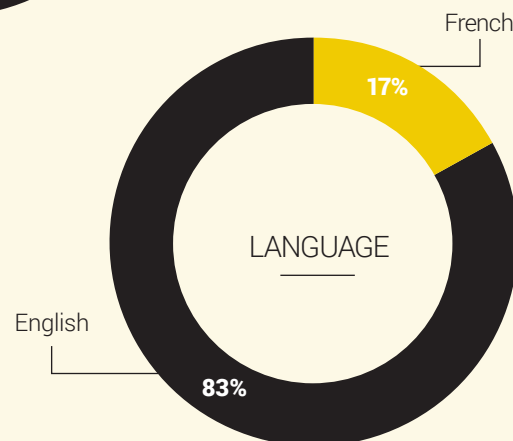
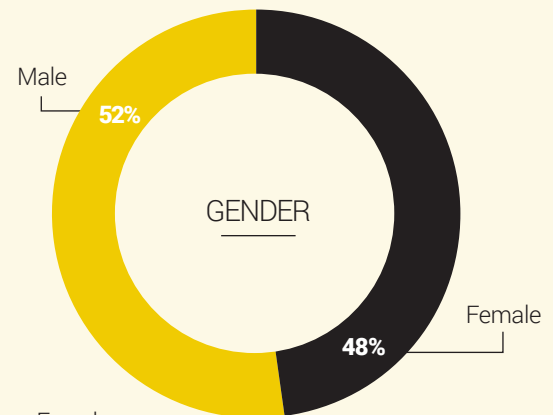
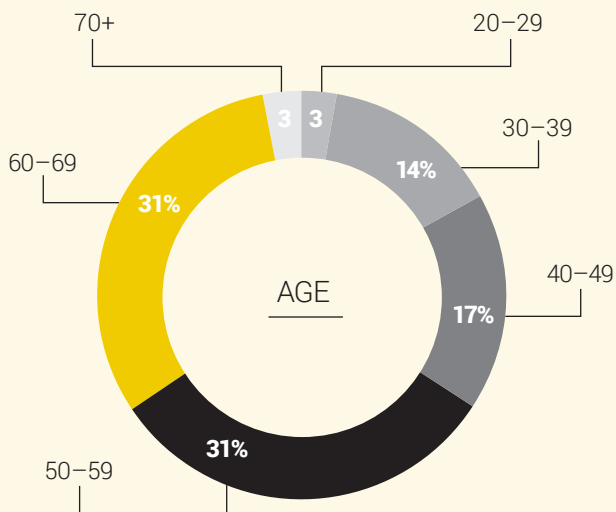
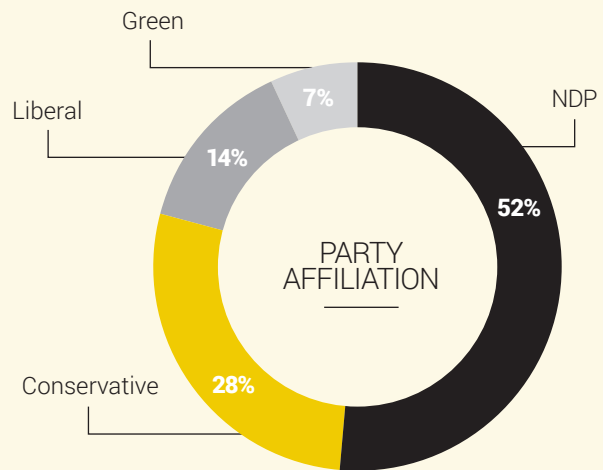
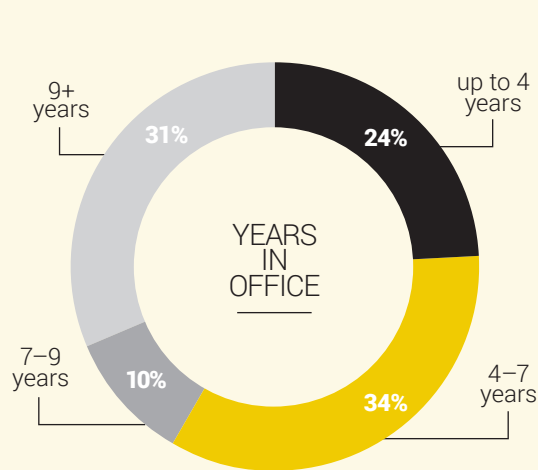
### QUESTION PERIOD (QP):

The daily 45-minute session in which MPs are permitted to ask questions of the Prime Minister and government ministers, in order to request information from the government and hold it to account.

### THE SPEAKER OR DEPUTY SPEAKER:

An elected MP, chosen in a secret ballot by his or her MP colleagues, who is responsible for maintaining order in the House, interpreting its rules to guide the flow of parliamentary business and upholding the rights of individual Members.

# SURVEY RESPONDENTS



It should be noted that the survey respondents don't mirror the makeup of the House at the time—there are a disproportionately high number of NDP respondents and low number of Conservative respondents. However, respondents included a broad range of MPs, in terms of age, gender and years in office. At the time of this survey, the Conservatives were in government and the NDP were the official opposition.

*\*Due to rounding, totals may not add to 100.*



## CHAPTER 1:

### The results

The 2015 survey of MPs turned up a surprising paradox: The majority of MPs (69%) felt that heckling was a problem in the House of Commons; however, when they were asked whether they themselves heckled, the vast majority of survey respondents (72%) freely admitted that they did.

The quarter (23%) who thought heckling wasn't a problem for the House had explanations for why they like it, such as, "If it is good natured, positive and done at the right time, it livens debate."

One MP summed up the mix of responses fairly well: "Generally, it is an annoyance. But for a particular witty or pithy quip, there is admiration. And I can't see that changing."

In terms of frequency, one quarter of respondents (26%) say that they hear heckling "always," and 56% say "frequently."

Although many think it's a problem, they do it themselves with 63% of MPs saying they heckle "less than once a week." None of them responded that they heckle as frequently as "a few times a day."

The fact that MPs acknowledge heckling is a problem and yet they continue to heckle creates a vicious cycle, which will take efforts on all sides to stop.<sup>3</sup>

*"We are compared unfavourably to schoolchildren."*

#### IS QP THE ONLY TIME IT HAPPENS?

Respondents say that heckling occurs most often in Question Period, but can also occur at any other time in the House, including government orders, statements by Members, and private members' business. MPs said they didn't hear much heckling during routine proceedings and adjournment procedures.

### WHO ARE THE HECKLERS?

The survey respondents identified the most common hecklers as male, veteran MPs who sit on the Conservative backbench (the party which formed government at the time of this survey).



**80%**

reported government more than opposition



**75%**

reported backbenchers more than frontbenchers



**89%**

reported veterans more than rookies



**90%**

reported men more than women



**68%**

reported Conservatives heckle the most, 26% reported Liberals and 5% reported NDP

*\*Note: the respondents were disproportionately NDP MPs.*



## CHAPTER 2:

### What are they saying?

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Watching QP from on screen, Canadians hear only a roar with occasional words coming through. Without context, these heckles may seem like uncontrolled outbursts or generalized party cheering or jeering. But the MPs reported three main reasons why they heckle and what they're trying to accomplish when they do it: to correct "errors and omissions," to get on the record and to cheer on a member of their team when they can't have the floor themselves.

#### CORRECTING ANOTHER PARTY'S "ERRORS AND OMISSIONS"

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MPs reported that their own heckling is often in response to incorrect facts or perceived untruths, listing words like "lies," "shame," or "rubbish," as things they say. Two-thirds of MPs indicated they heckle because they feel the Member is spreading misinformation.

They have an especially hard time *not* heckling when the question or response is exceptionally partisan in nature.

The then-Speaker of the House, the Honourable Andrew Scheer, in a separate interview with a Samara researcher, agreed: "When the Member loads up their preamble with a lot of partisan rhetoric, it elicits a response. When a Minister or Parliamentary Secretary loads up their answer with a lot of that, it elicits a response, too... There are Ministers who answer in a very factual way and there are Members who ask questions in a very factual way, without too much of a preamble, without too much partisan rhetoric in it—and the House is quieter when they do it."

Similarly, heckles sometimes attempt to redirect the person speaking to a more relevant or pressing area or something they feel has been deliberately omitted. One example: "I'll yell out something that they're not addressing. Like a [question] last week on rape kits being out of date, and the [Parliamentary Secretary] was dodging, saying they were doing a great job standing up for victims, I kept yelling out 'Rape Kits. Rape Kits. Rape Kits.'"

#### GETTING ON THE RECORD

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Heckling is one of the limited ways that backbench MPs have of recording their disagreement with an issue at hand in the House. When the Speaker stands up to ask people who are speaking out-of-turn to quiet down, that official "shushing" comment is recorded in Hansard, the official public record of the House of Commons, and the MPs assert that they have "got on the record."

Sometimes, loud vocalizations are all MPs need to do to feel they've made their point. One MP said the examples of heckling that most stand out for him are "general groaning

"SHAME!"

"RUBBISH!"

"THAT'S CUTE!"

"FAUX! DES MENSONGES."

in order to get on the audio record, and sometimes Hansard, that a remark was controversial. I think that is the most useful and important heckle.”

Even those MPs who are opposed to heckling often revealed that they nevertheless thought it was one of the limited tools to register disagreement, given the way Parliament traditionally operates.

Of course, heckling isn’t the only way that MPs can express their concerns. Disagreement and dissent can be shown in a number of ways: from voting against proposed legislation, to asking for a point of order, speaking out in the media, or even through their work on committees. Yet, parliament after parliament, MPs continue to use heckling as an outlet for disapproval.

At least one MP thinks heckling signals a deeper problem: “I believe that heckling is a symptom of the deep democratic malaise at the heart of our parliamentary institutions.”<sup>4</sup>

## SUPPORTING THEIR TEAM

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MPs often describe federal politics as a team sport. After all, MPs are almost always elected under a party banner and they sit as a block in the Commons together. Heckling becomes a way for MPs to express their encouragement for those on the same side.

MPs overcome many hurdles to get to Parliament—a divisive nomination process, a gruelling campaign—and in many cases they must travel extensively each week from their constituency to Ottawa. But in any 45-minute Question Period, a limited number of MPs will have the floor to speak. For the type of people who choose the life of an MP—community leaders and practiced public speakers, in many cases—it’s tough to sit on the sidelines.

One MP said “Like in an arena... only a few ‘stars’ get to be ‘on the field,’ to get up during QP... The rest are enthusiastic supporters of their side and are a little bit frustrated at not being able to participate directly.”



## CHAPTER 3:

### What are they hearing?

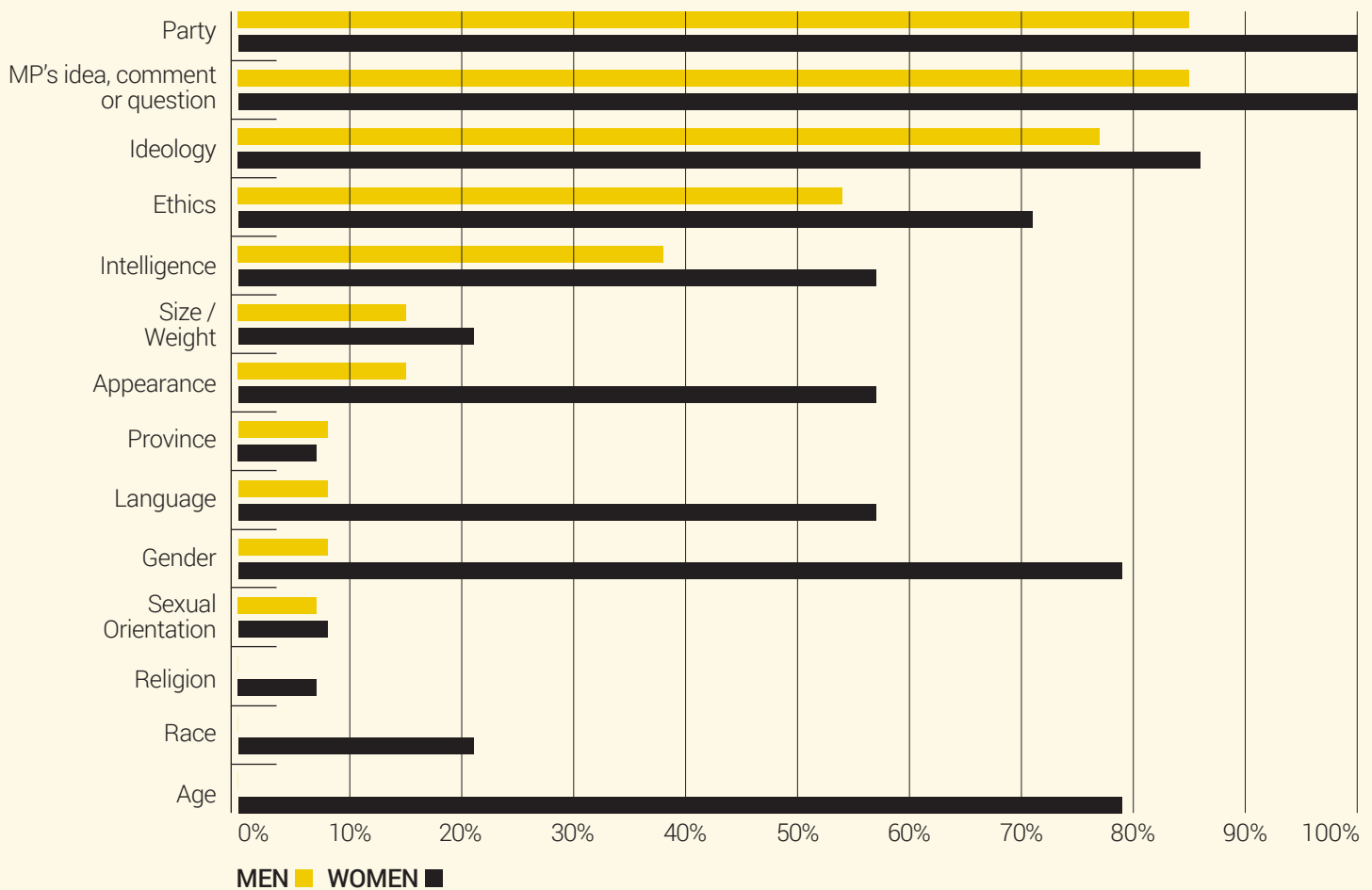
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When it comes to heckling, there is a discrepancy between what MPs report saying, and what many MPs report hearing.

The content of the MP’s idea or question, the MP’s party, and the MP’s ideology were the most frequently reported heckles heard (please see chart on the next page: MPs were asked to check a box if they’d heard heckles containing certain subjects). The MPs reported that heckles they heard ranged from “shame,” to groans, to misogynistic language and even “references to Hitler.” Many other comments, considered wildly

*“It is nastier and less witty and intelligent than I expected.”*

## CONTENT OF HECKLES AS REPORTED BY MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT



inappropriate in other workplaces, were often cited as subjects for heckling, including the MP's gender, age, race or sexual orientation—all contrary to the spirit of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Of the respondents, female MPs were more likely than men 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% heard gendered heckles. (It should be noted that this question didn't refer to whether they were the target of the heckles—merely that they heard them.) 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 timeframe.

Women are more likely than men to report that they hear heckles directed at them "frequently" (36% vs. 15%) and "occasionally" (57% vs. 54%). One female Member remembered "being shouted down to the extent that someone sitting beside me had to rise on a point of order as they could not hear what I was saying." Another young Member said that heckling causes her not to pay attention to QP.



One MP summed up the spirit of heckles in the House succinctly: “Some of them are funny, some cruel, most dull. [This mostly] reflects the MP who is heckling.”

## WHAT EFFECT IS IT HAVING ON THEIR WORK?

When asked whether heckling affects their participation in the House of Commons, 16% of MPs say they find heckling encourages them to engage more often in the House.

The majority (64%), however, said that heckling has “no effect on their participation.” But even among that group, some still commented that, while heckling doesn’t stop them from participating, it does affect the quality of their contribution. One MP says, “Heckling is often intended to disrupt a person’s train of thought and impact [their] performance.”

As well, 20%<sup>5</sup> of respondents reported that they participated less at times because of heckling, either by paying less attention or seeking out fewer opportunities to speak. (Four out of five of these MPs were female.) One female MP noted, “[heckling] makes me aware that people are often trying to silence me.” Another said, “This has a serious effect on me....I decided not to listen to Question Period, even if I’m there....”<sup>6</sup> Based on these people’s experiences, some MPs are less able to perform their representative duties in the House, and this effect is more often reported among female MPs.



## CONCLUSION:

### Can the 42nd Parliament be different?

With a new Parliament elected in 2015, especially with a government that has “promised to restore relevance to QP”<sup>7</sup>—where most heckling occurs—there’s an opportunity to have a fresh start and to change the culture in the House. Samara believes that reducing and even eliminating certain kinds of heckling will be a critical part of improving decorum on the Hill and restoring QP’s relevance to Canadians.

The majority of MPs surveyed recognized that the public views this behaviour negatively, with several Members commenting that they are aware that heckling reflects badly on Members of Parliament in general. The possibility that heckling may reduce the public’s interest in politics because of its hyper-partisan nature came up in several of the responses. And one said, “Disrespectful behaviour reduces public respect for the institution.”

The first week of the new Parliament, in December 2015, showed that decorum is top of mind for the new Speaker, the Honourable Geoff Regan. In his first address to the House as Speaker, he said, “I will not tolerate heckling. We do not need it. We will not tolerate unparliamentary conduct.”<sup>8</sup> However, he can’t change the culture alone: If the House is to be a civil workplace, all parties, leaders and MPs will need to see civility as a priority.

*“Shut up,  
sit down.”*

#### MIXED MESSAGES

Respondents from all parties were divided on whether their party had officially advised them not to heckle: 54% yes, 46% no. The advice MPs reported hearing tended to be similar: don’t do it, don’t respond to it, or ignore it. MPs mentioned the whips and party leaders as having sway over heckling, but there was also some cynicism about party leaders’ efforts, with one MP writing that party leaders might encourage or even script heckling when it serves their purpose.

For Parliament to be relevant to Canadians—no matter what system is used to elect MPs—MPs have to demonstrate that government is a place worth Canadians' time and attention.

The beginning of the 42nd Parliament marks an opportune time to consider changes, small or large, to improve workplace culture on Parliament Hill.

## NEXT STEPS

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Yes, politics involves passion and competing views, but we should, and can, ask for a politics of respect. It's natural to cheer on your teammate and it's natural to be frustrated when you feel someone else is misrepresenting the facts of a situation. However—and it seems odd to have to say this in 2016—personal attacks that make a colleague feel harassed and excluded from the conversation need to stop immediately. MPs need to exhibit a higher level of respect for their colleagues, the democratic institutions of which they are part and the Canadian public they serve. The Honourable Geoff Regan agrees: “We must elevate the tone in the House and restore decorum. Mutual respect, despite our differences, is essential.”<sup>9</sup>

The question of civility in the House is one that many have tried to tackle. Over the years there have been lots of great ideas on how to make Question Period a place where MPs can do their best work and Canadians can see genuine political debates in action. The ideas laid out below have been put forward by numerous academics, journalists, and pundits from across the country. Additionally, some have been tried, in fits and starts, by a few parties and parliaments over the years. Individually, any one idea is unlikely to find success, but some number of these—combined with the will to ensure a civil workplace—has the possibility to transform Parliament into a place of which Canadians can be proud.



## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Party leaders, MPs and citizens can institute these recommended changes to stop heckling before it happens



During orientation for new MPs, parties can explicitly discourage new MPs from heckling and explain to them the other options for disagreeing with colleagues.



Party leaders and the Speaker can encourage greater collegiality among Members from different parties, either by finding ways to socialize with MPs across parties or by implementing a rotating seating plan in the House of Commons. (It's hard to shout down someone you just shared a meal or a small desk with.)



Parties and MPs can reduce the partisan rhetoric by eliminating scripted talking points, and asking direct rather than leading questions and providing substantive answers.



The House could consider providing MPs with more time to ask and answer questions more substantively than the 35 seconds currently allotted during QP.



Canadians should remind the MPs they've elected that they don't consider "witty" 30-second clips during the nightly news to be proof that their MP is being effective in Ottawa.

## DISCIPLINARY MEASURES

Leaders, parties, MPs and citizens can support the Speaker's efforts to maintain order, by allowing him/her to enforce decorum.



The Speaker can "name and shame" hecklers during Question Period.



The Speaker can penalize MPs that heckle by removing one of their political parties' allotted questions during QP.



The Speaker can use his or her right to rule out of order any question he or she deems in contravention of House guidelines, including use of excessively partisan language.



The Speaker can remove Members from the House of Commons or apply a financial fine.



# METHODOLOGY

## HOW THIS RESEARCH BEGAN

The 305 people with seats in the House of Commons at the time of this survey represented a historical record of a certain time and place.

This is only the second time Canadian MPs have been surveyed on the subject 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. At that time, the results were shared in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Samara's blog, and the national news media. Samara, along with Mackenzie Grisdale, decided to take on the topic again as heckling and civility in the House is still relevant to MPs' work.

## THE 2015 HECKLING SURVEY

The current survey was conducted from April to May 2015. MPs had the option to answer the survey online or on hard copy. MPs were initially invited to participate by email and then received several reminder emails as well as a reminder phone call to their offices. 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 in the MPs' preferred language). All MPs were promised anonymity for their responses.

In total, 29 MPs responded to the survey. At the time of the survey, 305 MPs were sitting in the House. The statistics in this report are based on the number of responses to each question, not the total number of surveys, as not every MP answered every question. The MPs who responded do not reflect the partisan composition of the House at the time.

Data was collected and analyzed in Excel. Due to the low response rate, advanced statistical analysis was not performed. The MPs' responses should be considered illuminative, rather than definitive. The 2015 report is meant to provide a benchmark and highlight general sentiments expressed among all MPs.

The interview with then-speaker, the Honourable Andrew Scheer, occurred over the phone on May 7th, 2015, and lasted for approximately 13 minutes.

Samara sincerely thanks all the respondents for their honesty and for contributing to an important conversation about civility in the House. The fact that nearly 30 MPs took the time—both to answer the questions and provide detailed comments—demonstrates their desire for citizens to understand what's happening in Canada's Parliament.

Further research should expand the scope of this research with a larger sample of MPs to test this report's findings.

### HELLO...FROM THE OTHER SIDE

As a research-based educational charity, Samara Canada exists to help Canadians understand how Parliament works and what MPs do from day-to-day. In the process of administering the survey, and as a response to the low response rate, we called all the parliamentary offices to follow up. Of the offices where someone answered, twenty-two staff said the MPs had an unofficial but strict policy to decline participation in research generally. We acknowledge that MPs have significant demands on their time. But when we interviewed former Members of Parliament for our Exit Interviews, many of them cited improved civic education as a way to increase Canadians' engagement in democracy. We would suggest that MPs participating in public research is an important way to increase Canadians' understanding of the political system and the work of MPs and encourage them to respond to surveys in the future.

1. Public Policy Forum, 2010. Pollara National Dialogue Poll. Available at: <https://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/PPF-Pollara%20FINAL%20ENG.pdf>.
2. Samara's Democracy 360, 2015. Available at: [www.samaracanada.com](http://www.samaracanada.com).
3. Several MPs have spoken out on heckling in the House of Commons, including Jay Hill and Glen Pearson in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. See Further Reading section for exact citations.
4. Translated from French: "Je crois que le chahutage est un symptôme d'un malaise plus profond de la démocratie au sein de nos institutions parlementaires actuelles."
5. 25 MPs responded to this question.
6. Translated from French: "Cela a un effet grave sur moi...je décide de ne pas écouter la période des questions, même si j'y suis."
7. The Liberals have promised to introduce Prime Minister's Question Period, empower the Speaker of the House to challenge and sanction Members during QP, and allow more time for questions and answers. Available at: <https://www.liberal.ca/files/2015/06/a-fair-and-open-government.pdf>.
8. The Honourable Geoff Regan in the House of Commons, December 3rd 2015. Full transcript available here: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1&DocId=8060901>.
9. Ibid.

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For more reading about civility in the House and ideas for reforming Question Period, check out the articles below. Many of the ideas outlined in the preventative and disciplinary measures were mentioned in the following articles.

Joshua Borden, "Two Sword Lengths Apart: Decorum Within the Ontario Legislative Assembly," Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, June 2013. Available at: <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2013/Borden.pdf>.

Michael Chong; Libby Davies; Marlene Jennings; Mario Laframboise; Tom Lukiwski, "What do to about Question Period: A Roundtable," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol.33(3), 2010. Available at: <http://www.revparl.ca/english/issue.asp?param=199&art=1391>.

Mackenzie Grisdale, "Heckling in the House of Commons," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol.34(3), 2011. Available at: <http://www.revparl.ca/english/issue.asp?param=205&art=1447>.

Jay Hill, "Reflections on Reforming Question Period," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 33(4), 2010. Available at: <http://www.revparl.ca/english/issue.asp?art=1405&param=200>.

Glen Pearson, "Some Personal Thoughts on Question Period," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol.33(4), 2010. Available at: <http://www.revparl.ca/english/issue.asp?param=200&art=1404>.

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