NO ONE IS LISTENING
INCIVILITY IN THE 42ND PARLIAMENT, AND HOW TO FIX IT
“I would simply ask all of our colleagues to consider ... that while we debate and engage ... that we listen to one another, despite our strong differences. That is when democracy really happens. That is the challenge that is going on around the world right now. No one is listening. Everyone is just talking at one another. We have to listen to each other. In so doing, we will make this place a stronger place.”

— ARNOLD CHAN, THE LATE MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR SCARBOROUGH-AGINCOURT SPEAKING IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON JUNE 12, 2017
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Executive summary
For years, there have been calls for more civility in the Canadian House of Commons. The 42nd Parliament has witnessed some important changes to reduce heckling and improve decorum, including interventions from the Speaker of the House and public commitments from the party leaders to foster a more respectful debate.

In spring 2017, Samara Canada surveyed Members of Parliament (MPs) to explore the state of decorum from the perspective of those in the House.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY FINDINGS</th>
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<tr>
<td>A majority of MPs (53%) say heckling is a problem.</td>
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<td>Just 16% of MPs see heckling as beneficial, but two thirds of respondents admit to heckling themselves.</td>
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<td>Three quarters of MPs believe the public thinks badly of heckling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>While 72% of MPs say they heckle to correct a perceived untruth, only 15% agree that heckling increases accountability in the House.</td>
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<tr>
<td>36% of MPs see heckling as a form of harassment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rookie MPs dislike heckling most strongly—60% say it’s a problem, and half would abolish it.</td>
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The survey reveals that incivility remains a problem. It also suggests that MPs have mixed feelings about heckling. They don’t like the state of debate in Parliament, but they don’t want to get rid of heckling entirely either, because they recognize that it plays a role in holding each other to account. This is still the case even though they know citizens don’t like it.

This paradox suggests that heckling is deeply embedded in the culture of Parliament. And if MPs have continued heckling despite mounting pressure to stop, there may also be limits to how much the Speaker or party leaders can do to rein in this behaviour. If parliamentarians are serious about achieving a more civil debate, they will need to experiment with new tools and approaches to drive culture change and foster a healthier and more respectful environment for themselves and for future MPs.

EXPERIMENTING FOR CULTURE CHANGE

Introduction

Some Hon. Members: “Oh, oh!”

That’s the gentle, colourless way that Hansard, Parliament’s official written record, has often recorded heckling in the House of Commons for the last 150 years. But “Oh, oh” is an understatement.

Noisy interruptions. Insults shouted across the Chamber. In Question Period, when the Chamber fills and the Government faces its opposition, the heckles can become deafening.

Heckling is one of Parliament’s strangest practices. In an institution defined by
rules and protocol—one that stands for stability and continuity, and is designed to host civil deliberation at the highest level—heckling is chaotic, raw and rude.

Heckling is not new or unique to Canada. But some parliamentary observers argue that the debate has coarsened in recent decades, or that it has failed to keep up with changing norms about what is appropriate in political debate. Most importantly, Canadians do not like the way Parliament sounds. A Pollara-Public Policy Forum poll found that a majority of Canadians think less of our system of government when they watched Question Period and that 65% wanted Question Period reform.

Possibly as a result of public pressure, the 42nd Parliament has seen several significant changes. The new Speaker of the House, the Honourable Geoff Regan, has shown more willingness to intervene in debate and call out hecklers. Newly elected Members of Parliament have also asked for change. After forming the Government, the Liberals, the largest party in Parliament, and one with nearly 80% rookies, reached a caucus decision to make less noise in the House. And leaders from all opposition parties have publicly pledged greater civility and more respect.

In this changing context, Samara researchers wanted to examine whether incivility remains a problem in the 42nd Parliament—and if so, why? Most importantly, what else can be done to correct this feature of Canadian politics that turns citizens off?

This report presents the results of a survey of sitting MPs on incivility and particularly the practice of heckling. Firstly, it looks at what's changed and what remains the same with respect to heckling in the current Parliament. Secondly, it examines three main types of heckling and three main reasons why MPs persist in heckling, despite increased pressure not to. Finally, it makes recommendations about how Parliament can nudge its Members toward the kind of culture change that Canadians want to see—to elevate the debate and foster an environment of dignity and respect.

Disruption has always been a part of Parliament. In the early years after Confederation, MPs meowed like cats, made music to drown out other Members, and (at least once) set off firecrackers in the House. There is no true golden age of civil, meaningful parliamentary debate to look back on. So why don’t we make this the golden age?

Samara defines heckling as calling out in the Chamber of the House of Commons without having the Speaker’s recognition to speak.
Update from the 42nd Parliament

Two important changes have taken place in the current Parliament. Both could, theoretically, have had a major impact on the state of debate in the House of Commons.

THE SPEAKER HAS CRACKED DOWN

The Speaker of the House of Commons, Geoff Regan, has intervened more frequently in proceedings than other Speakers in the recent past. He has consistently stepped into debate to urge civility and restraint, and more regularly called out individual hecklers. In discussions about improving parliamentary debate, including the recommendations from previous Samara research, emphasis is often placed on the position of the Speaker to enforce existing rules for decorum.

PARTIES HAVE SHOWN LEADERSHIP

The parties themselves have also taken action to reduce heckling, with leaders publicly promising more civil debate. However, while this survey found an almost even split between respondents who had been formally advised by their parties on how to deal with heckling (49%) and those who had not (51%), there was a marked partisan difference here: 81% of Liberals, 50% of New Democrats and 22% of Conservatives report being advised by their parties about heckling. The decision of the Liberal caucus to reduce heckling is most noticeable, as the largest party in Parliament. But other party leaders have also made public commitments for greater civility. At the opening of the new Parliament, interim Conservative leader Rona Ambrose and NDP leader Tom Mulcair both pledged their parties to a greater show of respect. Green Party leader Elizabeth May is a long-standing and outspoken critic of heckling. Andrew Scheer, the new leader of the Official Opposition, is a former Speaker of the House of Commons and has also spoken in the past about the need for civility and decorum.

In other words, the 42nd Parliament has witnessed some of the changes that many have called for in the past. So, what’s the outcome?
The state of heckling

When surveyed, most MPs admitted they do not like heckling, but most MPs heckle. This is the paradox explored in Samara’s previous report “Cheering or Jeering?”, and it holds true here. A little over half of respondents agreed that heckling is “a problem.” Only 16% of respondents said they see heckling as beneficial to the House of Commons. Nevertheless, about two thirds of MPs (65%) admit to having heckled at some point. And it is hardly a rare occurrence; of those who confess to heckling, nearly 60% say they heckle at least once a week. In short, the practice of heckling is alive and well on Parliament Hill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heckling is a problem in the House of Commons</th>
<th>53%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heckling is beneficial to the House of Commons</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, some respondents also described improvement from previous Parliaments. According to one veteran MP: “Heckling was way worse when I was first elected.... It is not as loud or as often today.” Another suggested that in the 42nd Parliament it is, “Somewhat different, but I find that now it is not as bad as it used to be.” But others also noted that things have begun to deteriorate: “Respectful when the House first met for the 42nd Parliament. Getting worse.”
WHICH MPs ANSWERED THE SURVEY?

One fourth of MPs in the House responded to the survey, offering a relatively high response rate. Additionally, the sample offered a good reflection of the House of Commons itself, when it came to party, gender and years in office.
Moreover, the large rookie contingent, who are likely new to the concept of being shouted down in their place of work, expressed surprise, dismay, even horror at the state of debate. One rookie MP explained: “I expected heckling in response to inflammatory remarks, or in response to inanely repeated talking points. I did not expect the level of heckling that we see.” Another painted a particularly bleak picture: “While I am told it is much better than it used to be, I’m afraid it is much worse than I expected. It is soul-destroying.” These new MPs were more likely to see heckling as a problem—63% said as much, compared to just 38% of veteran MPs.

On balance, then, a slim majority of MPs see a problem, despite some suggestion of improvement. But there is also deep partisan difference on this question. Liberal respondents were most likely to view heckling as a problem (79%), compared with 41% of New Democrats and just one Conservative respondent. About one third of respondents (36%) went as far as agreeing that heckling is a form of harassment, but among rookies this number was 45%.

“I’m afraid [heckling] is much worse than I expected.”
HAVE YOU EVER HECKLED?

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE HECKLED, HOW OFTEN?
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN HECKLED?

- **MALE**
  - Yes: 85%
  - No: 15%

- **FEMALE**
  - Yes: 89%
  - No: 11%

- **Conservative**
  - Yes: 79%
  - No: 21%

- **Liberal**
  - Yes: 85%
  - No: 15%

- **NDP**
  - Yes: 94%
  - No: 6%

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN HECKLED, HOW OFTEN?

- **Always**
  - Male: 2%
  - Female: 5%
  - Conservative: 0%
  - Liberal: 0%
  - NDP: 5%

- **Occasionally**
  - Male: 12%
  - Female: 15%
  - Conservative: 11%
  - Liberal: 15%
  - NDP: 15%

- **Frequently**
  - Male: 15%
  - Female: 16%
  - Conservative: 26%
  - Liberal: 30%
  - NDP: 35%

- **Rarely**
  - Male: 37%
  - Female: 39%
  - Conservative: 33%
  - Liberal: 37%
  - NDP: 44%

- **Never**
  - Male: 44%
  - Female: 37%
  - Conservative: 32%
  - Liberal: 32%
  - NDP: 56%
### WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF THE HECKLE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substantive</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea, comment, question</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery of the idea, question or comment</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discriminatory</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language or accent</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social or economic class</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race or ethnicity</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province or region</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight or size</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impairment or disability</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
THREE TYPES OF HECKLES

The survey asked MPs about the content of heckles, and their responses suggested three main categories of heckling: substantive, personal and discriminatory.

Substantive
Most commonly, MPs heard colleagues heckled for their idea, comment or question (94%). Most heard MPs heckled for their political party (74%), their ideology (61%) or ethics (58%). Whether or not the heckling itself adds value, these are—broadly speaking—the issues one would expect to attract debate and conflict in Parliament.

Personal
There is a second category of heckling that is more personal. A full 80% of MPs heard Members heckled for their delivery in the House, for example, while 42% of respondents reported having heard an MP’s intelligence heckled. Respondents describe a strategic bullying heckle that zeroes in on perceived weakness and tries to exploit it. This approach is illustrated in an anecdote shared by one respondent: “My seatmate was nervous about speaking in French, and he was rehearsing quietly. (Other parties) saw that he was nervous, and when he got up, they yelled … to throw him off. He paused, got flustered, repeated himself and was not able to complete his statement before being cut off for time as a result. They all laughed and made fun of him for running out of time.”

Geoff Regan, the House Speaker, described a particular distaste for this style of heckling: “You hear a Member once in a while who’s answering a question … saying, ‘Uh, uh,’ and then Members will start saying, ‘Uh! uh!’ You’d think it was Grade Five. I don’t think Grade Fives would do that today. But it’s very juvenile behaviour. It’s obnoxious behaviour to be yelling at somebody because they have paused for a second, or misspoken a word, whatever.”

Discriminatory
There is also a third, less common but more egregious category of heckling content, where MPs are attacked on the basis of the groups to which they belong. More than one in three MPs heard heckling about gender, for example. But notably, there is a huge gender difference in the extent to which this is perceived—with 67% of female MPs versus only 20% of male MPs noticing gendered heckling in the House.
Other identity categories also attracted heckling, in the minds of at least some MPs. One quarter of MPs heard heckling about another Member’s language or accent, or social/economic class. Eighteen percent noted heckling about age, and 14% about ethnicity. Several MPs also volunteered comments about this phenomenon. According to one: “I don’t mind witty heckling, but the quality is often borderline racist and sexist.”

**WHAT EFFECT IS IT HAVING?**

Generally speaking, respondents were reluctant to acknowledge that heckling affected their work as parliamentarians. Nearly 30% of respondents agreed that heckling made them feel unwelcome, but just 16% admitted that heckling causes them to reduce their participation in the House of Commons (this number was higher among women, at 24%).

It’s good news that most MPs do not report that their work in Parliament is affected by heckling. But this finding also deserves some scrutiny. A growing body of research has uncovered just how pronounced the effects of incivility can be on workplace performance. Rudeness reduces our ability to perform both routine and creative tasks. It has a relationship to workplace absenteeism and leaving jobs altogether. Rudeness is a disruptive force even for highly trained professionals doing technical work. Teams of pediatric doctors, assigned a rude team member in a randomized control trial, perform notably worse at their jobs, for example.

In short, it’s possible that most MPs are unaffected in their work by the hurled insults and elaborate performances of disrespect—but this would make MPs rather exceptional. It could also suggest a reason why Canadians may be reluctant to seek political office.

**THREE REASONS FOR HECKLING**

While a majority of MPs regard heckling in the 42nd Parliament as a problem, they actually express rather nuanced and mixed feelings toward the practice generally. Only 38% would see it abolished outright—although here rookies and veterans part ways once again. Fully half of rookies favour abolishing, versus only 19% of veterans.
Nevertheless, the fact that MPs, on balance, would keep heckling is intriguing, given the negative views of heckling that many express elsewhere in the survey. It is even more interesting given that MPs do not dispute the fact that their heckling may be turning citizens off. When asked how they thought the public regarded heckling, about three quarters of respondents described a negative perception. According to one MP: “The public take a dim view of hecklers and want to see it eliminated.” Another said, “I believe it lowers the perception Canadians have about the value of debate in the House of Commons.”

Why, then, do most MPs defend the practice (at least in principle)? Why do most MPs—including fully half of the respondents who described heckling as problematic—do it themselves?

MPs highlighted three major reasons for heckling: 1) to hold the Government or other MPs to account; 2) because of emotion, or to inject passion into debate; 3) for social reasons.

ARE FEMALE MPs TARGETED?
It is often suggested that female MPs get heckled more frequently or forcefully than male MPs. On the basis of self-reporting, the survey did not find a strong gendered disparity in who was the victim of heckles. But given open-ended opportunities to describe heckling, numerous respondents argued that women were disproportionately targeted. One MP said: “When women Cabinet Ministers or Parliamentary Secretaries stand to answer questions, they are shouted down with much more regularity than their male colleagues.” Another expressed surprise in this regard: “I did not expect the target at women MPs.” Given anecdotal observations of gender-targeted heckling, more research would be valuable to examine not just the frequency, but also the quality and volume of heckling—as well as other changes in Members’ behaviour when female MPs speak.*

*An early version of this report cited a working paper that found women statistically more likely to be interrupted than men, based on Hansard data. After later additional robustness tests, the authors retracted the finding.
### WHY DO MPs HECKLE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respond to perceived untruths</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct a false statement</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out partisan rhetoric</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get their opposition on record</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are overcome by passion</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enliven debate in the House of Commons</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support their “team”</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone else is doing it</td>
<td>27%</td>
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**Holding to account**

Much of the rationale for heckling has to do with one of the critical roles we expect our parliamentarians to play: enforcing accountability. MPs’ most commonly cited reason for heckling was “to respond to perceived untruths” (72%). About half of respondents also said MPs heckle “to correct a false statement” or point out partisan rhetoric. Some MPs fiercely defended heckling in service of this purpose. In their account, heckling is the natural and necessary result of dishonesty on the other side of the House. One MP stated simply: “Until accountability and truthfulness are restored, I don’t think it will stop”. Another respondent agreed: “There is a lot of lying going on, and the public has no way of figuring out what is true. Heckling highlights questionable answers.”

But there is another paradox here. Accountability is a primary reason why MPs claim to heckle, but very few MPs think it is actually working. Only 15% of respondents agreed that “heckling increases accountability in the House of Commons.”
Passion in the House

The second most common reason for heckling was that MPs are simply overcome by passion, with 58% of MPs agreeing. Outbursts and interjections are often seen as staged, but a majority of MPs remind us that real emotion plays a role as well. One MP pushed back against heckling’s critics, explaining: “The House is not a church or school. Some outbursts are reflective of genuine outrage, and [it’s] a mild rule to break.” Another 37% also acknowledge that heckling is meant to enliven debate.

A social act

Additionally, 40% of respondents offer another, simpler explanation: MPs heckle to support their side. It is worth noting that heckling is particularly a phenomenon of Question Period, which is when whole caucuses assemble “two swords’ lengths” from each other.

Heckling is a social act. And while just 27% of respondents agree that MPs heckle because everyone else is doing it, this may be an undervalued explanation. Recent research tells us something that we have always known intuitively: rudeness is contagious. According to psychologists working in this field, “catching rudeness is like catching a cold”\textsuperscript{16}—and that holds true even for low-level incivility and even for just witnessing rudeness.

And ... a part of our heritage?

A fourth theme illuminated in an open-ended question among heckling’s defenders was that they were merely preserving an important tradition of Westminster parliaments—Parliaments that spring from the British parliamentary tradition, as ours does. One MP waxed poetic: “Keep it clean and respectful ... but let it roll on as a magnificent continuation of our Canadian political history and parliamentary tradition.” Another conceded that heckling was unpopular, but suggested that this was because the public did not fully grasp the history and function: “The public likely doesn’t understand that heckling is a long-standing tradition in parliaments across the world.”

“Until accountability and truthfulness are restored, I don’t think it will stop.”

“The House is not a church or school. Some outbursts are reflective of genuine outrage.”
One MP put a fine point on it: “There are not examples of a Westminster-style parliament where heckling does not occur. If you can’t handle it, you should be looking for another line of work.”

While heckling does have a long history in Canada, there is also a long-standing tradition of not heckling in many national legislatures, including the US Congress and most continental European parliaments. There is also no shortage of Westminster parliaments that are similarly respectful—from New Zealand to the Caribbean, regional parliaments in the UK to territorial legislatures in the Canadian North.

There is no reason to imagine that heckling is natural or inevitable or essential, in other words. And there are also many things that are part of our heritage that we now realize are not appropriate in the 21st century. If this behaviour excludes some people who want to serve their country as representatives but do not want to be shouted at, we should consider how we can change the “line of work” to suit the majority.

**SEPARATE THE GOOD FROM THE BAD AND THE UGLY**

In short, there is important nuance here. MPs are reluctant to ban heckling outright, and some (albeit a minority) offer a full-throated defence. MPs explain this by distinguishing between heckles that serve a purpose, or are genuinely clever, on the one hand, and those that offer nothing, that are disruptive, or that cross a content line, on the other. One respondent expressed a common view: “Singular funny lines can be enjoyable, but angry group shout teams are very disruptive.”

Speaker Regan made the same distinction: “When you have an answer to a question and there’s one person who, for three seconds, says something, and there’s a chuckle—there’s a laugh about that—it isn’t the same as a variety of people heckling so that it’s constant noise as someone is trying to answer a question.”

Parliamentarians’ equivocation about heckling should be taken seriously. It suggests that Parliament may be able to address the most problematic heckling, without removing the opportunity for lively and colourful exchange.
However, it’s very hard to make clear rules in this nuanced situation. Therefore, Samara proposes a different approach.

**Experimenting for culture change**

Heckling remains a problem in the 42nd Parliament for a small majority of MPs. But Parliament is Canada’s House, and what happens there affects all Canadians. Citizens should be able to decide what is appropriate in the House of Commons, and the evidence strongly suggests that Canadians want to see a better quality of debate\(^{17}\), and that uncivil debate between politicians can actually drive down citizens’ trust—in politicians, institutions and governments\(^{18}\).

In the past, much of the responsibility for maintaining civility has been laid at the Speaker’s door because of his ability to recognize, expel or reprimand an MP. Recent Speakers have pushed for higher levels of decorum. Former Speaker Andrew Scheer talked about “try[ing] to establish early on some indications of zero tolerance”\(^{19}\). Speaker Regan has made frequent use of his powers, but he is also forthright about his constraints. In his interview, Regan describes the challenge of not “losing the House”: if the Speaker intervenes too much, they may lose the support of MPs, and therefore lose their ability to exercise control. Behavioural science says something similar: if we rely too much on punishment, sometimes people lose their innate willingness to behave\(^{20}\).

Additionally, he pointed out that a Speaker has to be careful not to inadvertently reward bad behaviour. In some cases, taking serious action against a disruptive MP—like “naming” them and ejecting them from the House—provides that MP with attention from media and supporters: “It’s not much of a deterrent if they experience more success as a result.”
Party leaders, too, have been asked to bring their Members into line, and they have spoken about this publicly. But relying on central party control could also reinforce a different problem in Parliament—individual MPs’ lack of agency and independence. In Samara’s MP exit interview report “It’s My Party”, MPs talk about how excessive party control can inhibit their ability to be representatives and legislators. The change needs to come from within them.

The following recommendations offer a different and complementary approach. Instead of relying strictly on authority and punishment, these changes seek to cultivate an environment that promotes good behaviour.

**TREAT INCIVILITY AS A SYMPTOM, NOT A DISEASE**

Heckling is a function of broader problems in the quality, style and content of parliamentary debate. And it may reflect an even bigger problem: MPs, particularly on the backbenches, lack meaningful opportunities to make themselves heard in Parliament. Truly fixing heckling means thinking about procedural fixes to foster a better debate generally. It also means finding new ways to empower backbench MPs. For example:

**Reduce reliance on party lists**

Currently, party whips and House Leaders give the Speaker a list of MPs to be recognized to speak during Question Period. While some coordination may be necessary, at least some Question Period time could be left for backbench MPs to be recognized spontaneously. If MPs have the opportunity to jump in on their own initiative, they may end up more engaged in the debate and come to see heckling as a less valuable tool.

**Extend time limits on questions and answers**

Currently, questions and answers are limited to 35-seconds during Question Period. MPs must resort to sound bites as a result. If MPs had the time to make their case, or to pin down a perceived falsehood from another Member (for example), then that rationale for heckling disappears. The Speaker has the authority to determine the length of questions and answers, but dropping the 35-second rule would also require support of the House Leaders.
Limit use of written materials

The practice of reading questions and answers from prepared notes eradicates any sense of a real, live exchange of ideas. It creates a staged atmosphere in which heckling feels less out of place. But MPs might find it harder to heckle during a genuine exchange. The Standing Orders could provide clearer rules on the use of written aids, at least during Question Period.

GET IT ON CAMERA

Question Period was first televised in 1977 and is now broadcast daily by the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC). The camera faces directly on either the Member asking or answering a question, or the Speaker of the House, so viewers get an incomplete picture of what’s happening in the House. Those at home hear muffled noise and disruption, but can’t distinguish who is responsible for what is happening off-screen.

Decisions about how to film and broadcast Parliament are made by Parliament itself—specifically by the Board of Internal Economy (a committee that oversees administration of the House of Commons and is chaired by the Speaker). Parliament could consider extending coverage so that more of the debate is captured on camera. This could help resolve disagreements about what was said and by whom. Above all, it would give Canadians a better opportunity to decide, based on the evidence, whether they think heckling adds to or detracts from debate.

That said, many observers blame the introduction of cameras for a less serious, more theatrical debate—and there is evidence that proceedings became more raucous immediately after Parliament was televised in 1977. It’s possible that capturing more on camera could provide more incentive for posturing and performance. This change could—admittedly—bring unintended consequences.

Nevertheless, this approach is worthy of at least a short-term experiment. Cameras will almost certainly not be removed, given 21st-century public expectations for transparency. This is an occasion to think instead about how to make the televised Parliament more effective. Under the current arrangement, Members can shout down or intimidate speakers in relative anonymity (at least to the TV-watching public). Let’s see what’s happening from all angles.

Viewers get an incomplete picture of what’s happening in the House.

A PRECEDENT FOR EXPERIMENTS IN PARLIAMENT?

Parliament should be open to limited-term experiments, to test the value of changes before making them permanent. The introduction of electronic (e-) petitions—one of the most notable recent democratic reforms—is an example of exactly this approach. In 2015, the House introduced provisional Standing Orders, which create a system that allows citizens to submit and sign petitions online. Those rules will be in force until the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs reviews the e-petitions system, after the system has been in operation for two years.
Samara and others have discussed before the possible value of reconfiguring the seating arrangement in the House of Commons. Currently, parties sit together, across from each other, which means most Members are comfortably surrounded by their teammates.

Would MPs be as willing to heckle if they were surrounded by Members from other parties and could not count on a sympathetic response from seatmates? At minimum, they might think twice before unleashing the nastier, more partisan, personal or long-winded heckles.

Having the Government and Opposition frontbench faces each other across the aisle is part of the Westminster tradition. Cabinet is seated together, making the Government distinguishable from other MPs. This seating arrangement is written into the architecture of the building, with Government and Opposition lobbies behind the benches where Government and Official Opposition sit.

But requiring at least some backbench MPs to relocate outside their party group is not unduly radical and would not eliminate the distinction between Government and Opposition. There are, in fact, other national legislatures that disburse party members in their seating arrangements. Both the Swedish Riksdag and the Norwegian Storting position ministers prominently, but otherwise seat members by region rather than party. Those legislatures have also been noticed for their relatively high levels of civility. A former Swedish ambassador to Canada once commented, “There is no heckling in the Riksdag.”

The result could be greater overall collegiality. It would also make it harder to coordinate a sustained group heckle, which respondents single out as especially disruptive. But if MPs have something clever and pithy to say, this presents no obstacle.
Conclusion

Reasonable people can disagree about how much incivility is tolerable in Parliament. But there are some things that simply can’t happen. Heckles that are ugly and bullying, or carry gendered or racial overtones, disgrace the House of Commons. Coordinated group shouts don’t add life or interest; they’re boring and disruptive. None of this is to suggest that the House of Commons should sound like a church or a library. The government must be held to account. But the theatre of accountability should be replaced with real, substantive accountability. There are better ways for MPs to use their voices in the House.

This kind of change is not easy. It requires a high level of cross-party cooperation. Experimentation may be the way forward. Public services have recently begun adopting this approach—to pilot particular fixes, compile evidence and use the evidence to inform decision-making. Before committing to lasting change, MPs could agree to experiment with procedural and technical modifications, and see what kind of debate follows. For example, along with permanent Standing Orders, there are time-limited provisional and Sessional Orders. And indeed, the House of Commons will soon relocate to a temporary assembly, while the regular assembly in Centre Block undergoes renovations. This is the ideal moment to experiment with shaping the Parliament we want.

Methodology

This is the third 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 national news media. Samara, along with Mackenzie Grisdale, decided to take on the topic again in 2015, resulting in the report “Cheering or Jeering?”. The latest survey was conducted from April to June 2017. MPs had the option of answering the survey online or by hard copy. MPs were initially invited to participate by email and then received several reminder emails. Bilingual
emails were sent to the MPs’ public accounts, each containing a link to a Survey Monkey version and PDF copies attached (all bilingual). Hard copies were also mailed to each MP’s office, and in-person follow-ups were conducted at 217 of the 338 MPs’ offices (based on building access and time availability) by Ryan van den Berg, who was then a non-partisan Parliamentary Intern. Select MPs from each recognized party were contacted to promote this survey within their respective parties, although only a Liberal and an NDP MP agreed to take on this role. All MPs were promised anonymity for their responses.

In total, 84 MPs responded to the survey. At the time of the survey, 338 MPs were sitting in the House. The statistics in this report are based on the number of responses to each question and not the total number of surveys, as not every MP answered each question. Additionally, where responses were broken down according to gender and party, some respondents were excluded to safeguard anonymity.

The unweighted data was collected and analyzed in Excel. Due to the limited sample size, advanced statistical analysis was not performed. The MPs’ responses should be considered illuminative, rather than definitive.

The interview with the House of Commons Speaker, the Honourable Geoff Regan, occurred on 20 June 2017 and lasted approximately 20 minutes in the Speaker’s Ottawa office.

Samara and the Parliamentary Internship Programme would like to offer our sincerest thanks to the 84 MPs who shared their views with us, and to their staff who facilitated this research. We are grateful that they have taken the time out of their busy schedules to further inform Canadians of the important work they do in the House.

To see an appendix containing the basic frequencies referred to in this report and the survey sent to Members of Parliament, visit www.samaracanada.com.

For more information about the methodology, please email Research Director Mike Morden at mike.morden@samaracanada.com.


26. Environmental psychology has identified the social benefits that can flow from well-designed seating arrangements. See for example Jerald Greenberg, 1976, "The role of seating position in group interaction: A review, with applications for group trainers," Group and Organization Studies 1(3): 310-328.

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Samara Canada is a Canadian charity dedicated to reconnecting citizens to politics. Samara's research and educational programming shines new light on Canada’s democratic system and encourages greater political participation across the country to build a better political system—and a better Canada—for everyone. To learn more about Samara’s work or to make a charitable donation to support our research, please visit www.samaracanada.com or contact us at 416-960-7926.