

We cannot deny that it is an important check on potential abuse of government power; or deny that it is an important vehicle for members to bring forward the concerns of their constituents. But we cannot deny that the manner in which we conduct Question Period brings disrepute on all of us. It is more theatre than exchange of information. We adopted it from the United Kingdom, the mother of all Parliaments.

To give an example of the difference, twice a week for 15 minutes each day, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom must be in the House. On average, in that 15 minute period, 20 questions are asked and answered.

In the first 20 minutes today—and I was looking at the clock—there were five questions, many of them lead questions from the Official Opposition.

That is not a total measurement or the be all and end all of what Question Period should be. However, the House Leader of the Official Opposition, on a point of order, raised the question of whether we could not improve the efficiency of Question Period by reducing—he referred primarily to the length of the answers, but acknowledged that, perhaps, the length of the questions might be examined as well. At that point, I did say I would welcome that discussion. I would welcome the opportunity to have some appropriate discussions. Maybe I would want witnesses the next time we get together to discuss rule changes in private. Perhaps a committee of this House could look at the rules of Question Period to see whether we could not make it more effective than it is. That is something that could be done.

I dispute absolutely the accusations made that somehow we are less than democratic because we might have 20 less Question Periods a year. The suggestion by some that 20 less Question Periods a year makes us less democratic is just absurd. You wonder if they could be watching Question Period. I can understand, from some journalist's point of view, that Question Period is pretty useful. A journalist can get up, go to the office, clean off his or her desk, come over and watch the show for a while, get the story, go back and write it up and be back in the press club having a beer and the day's work is done.

If the journalist doesn't have Question Period, he or she is going to have to dig for a story. So I can understand some objections. But I do not understand anybody who says in all sincerity that we are well served

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by the way our Question Period operates, and that somehow we are more democratic.

If a person is ultra-partisan, yes maybe; but if he or she is really looking at the respect the institution should have if it is going to guide this country into the next century, I don't think anybody in all sincerity would say that we couldn't look at some changes. I hesitate to add that these rule changes do not affect Question Period in any of the ways that I have been talking about; that is something that we will need to consider later.

There are rules to improve debates; allowing more speakers by reducing time limit on 20-minute speeches after five hours versus eight hours. Now we have half-hour speeches, or 20 and 10 for the first eight hours. The new rules will be for the first five hours and then we will switch to 10-minute speeches. It is going to force a longer speaking list and more concise arguments; it will be a better quality and more lively debate.

The fact that this place empties out after Question Period and nobody pays much attention to the debate ought to be a cause of concern to all of us. Anything we can do to sharpen up the debate should be welcomed.

It is interesting to look at other legislatures and what they do to sharpen up debate. There are some interesting lessons that we could learn.

This change allows the Whips of each party to split the time allotted so that they can accommodate the members within their own caucus in a better way than is possible now. It promotes the objectives of the McGrath commission report, such as the question and comment period we added last time, as well as the committee changes, the five envelopes to develop expertise in the membership in each envelope, and to allow members to focus on their own area of expertise.

There is a clear distinction between legislative and standing committees. The intent of the McGrath commission report was that legislative committees would be different from standing committees. They would exist temporarily to handle legislation. However, they have become a kind of duplicate of the standing committee and have gone off on national tours and what have you with legislation. That was not the intent. In a sense, it is a contempt of Parliament when they do that, because when legislation passes at second reading in this House it has received approval in principle—the principle is approved. The role of the committee is not to debate again whether the legislation is appropriate in principle, by touring the country and hearing from groups about the principle, but rather to look at all the details.