

**Changing Procedures Isn't Enough:
Structural Change is Needed to Make Parliament Relevant**

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I am happy to participate in this discussion and to answer the question about how to make Parliament more relevant to Canadians. The distinguished Canadian, John Kenneth Galbraith, who worked for President Kennedy, once said that economists answer questions not because they know the answers but because they're asked the question. I would say this also applies to politicians and doubly so to ex-politicians approaching senility. So be warned. I'm answering because I was asked the question.

My short answer is that there are two basic requirements: first, that Parliament should really do what it is meant to do, that is, debate and vote on matters of substance, with clearly articulated options, based on genuine differences of opinion and values, defended with conviction and passion; and second, that these debates should be conducted in conditions of civility and in a spirit of cooperation. These requirements may seem mutually exclusive. The greater the differences of policy, and the deeper the passion with which they are advocated, the harder it would seem to maintain cooperative civility. But I strongly believe that it is the great virtue of a parliamentary system like ours, in fact the whole point of such a system, that it can indeed combine political conviction with civility. Parliament may not be doing a very good job of it now, and I'm going to suggest in a moment that the reasons are at least partly structural, requiring some significant reforms. But first, just a few comments on specific procedural matters.

I will begin with some good ideas put forward by Michael Chong, starting with Question Period. I like the idea of allocating Wednesday to the Prime

Minister and the other three days of the week distributed among other ministers, with the requirement that the PM and the ministers be in attendance on their allocated day. I would add that, if the PM is necessarily away on a Wednesday, to ensure accountability, he or she should replace the designated minister on the subsequent Thursday or Friday. In this context, I also like Mr. Chong's suggestion that the current requirement that the length of questions not exceed 35 seconds be replaced. Up to at least one minute should be permitted. The net effect of these two proposals could be positive. On the one hand, the PM and the other ministers would be obligated to be in the House on their appointed days and, on the other hand, MPs could have time to at least get beyond the usual rhetorical 35 seconds and raise matters of substance in their questions. Such a change would also enable ministers to allocate their time more rationally. They could actually get more effective control of the departments instead of spending so much time every day preparing for Question Period. Incidentally, this was one of the reasons given by Trudeau when he made a similar proposal decades ago.

Without openly acknowledging their view, I believe most of the media would privately describe the probable result of these proposals by Mr. Chong—if they were implemented—as “boring”. Instead of continuing to make mountains out of molehills, as is so often the case now, to fill the alleged requirements of a twenty-four hour news cycle, they might actually consider reporting in some degree of depth on matters of substance that could come out of exchanges from Question Period as well as from the serious debates that do still take place in the House of Commons, which they have long since ignored.

In order to help restore some seriousness and civility to the House, I also would modify the current right of ministers not to answer a question. I would retain for ministers the right not to answer but, if they don't reply, I would take away their right to say much else in response to a question. Consistent with the public interest, there may be perfectly good reasons for not answering a question, in which case a minister might state them or simply say no answer will be given and be prepared to take the political consequences. What the rules should no longer permit is a minister to reply to a question by himself asking a question. Although John Baird might have a fit over such a change, the Speaker should be given the authority in the rules to cut off this form of adolescent game-playing. The public would benefit. And, who knows, high school teachers might no longer be ashamed to bring their students to Question Period.

I will conclude my observations on Mr. Chong's thoughtful proposals with one dissenting observation—and this will bring me back to my main point about how Parliament can and should combine conviction and civility and achieve greater relevance. Mr. Chong has remarked that the decorum and language he expects in the House of Commons should be similar in tone to that of a family conversation around the kitchen table. I don't agree. Surely in democratic political life, and notably in the House of Commons, matters should be different. While Members should respect the inherent human dignity of their opponents, open, rational and passionate debate should be expected. There should be respect for other Members but not necessarily for their views. On the contrary, with neither contumely nor any form of personal insult, debates about such

matters as war and peace, poverty, growing inequality, and continuing environmental degradation should at times rattle the chandeliers.

The House of Commons is not an officers' mess, a gentlemen's club nor a kitchen table. It is our preeminent democratic forum, where deeply held beliefs should be rationally and passionately expressed. Canadians are understandably annoyed with much of the flim flam that goes on in Parliament, especially in Question Period. They do and should expect improvements to make it more civil and functional. Proposals made by Mr. Chong and others can help, and many should be implemented. Tougher rulings by the Speaker can also help. While we should keep in mind that there were notable uncivil debates both in Canada and at Westminster in the 19th century, it's also worth noting that in neither place do rules any longer tolerate religious bigotry, anti-semitism, gay bashing or misogyny. I believe these improvements—some very recent—reflect changes that first took place in society outside Parliament. I think it's also probable that part of the reason for the recent rise in the coarseness and insulting nature of many exchanges in the House is a by-product of life outside. That having been said, we cannot rule out the role and the interplay of personalities. When I first became leader of my party, Pierre Trudeau was the PM and Bob Stanfield was leader of the Progressive Conservatives. We certainly had our faults. But, while our differences on policy were often very vigorously expressed, if my memory does not deceive, there was never an accusation by any one of us that one of the others was lying, nor did our arguments contain personal invective. Toughness, reason, passion and civility prevailed—grounded, I think, on the respect each

had for the dignity of the other. In short, the personalities of leaders matter in setting the tone and level of civility. Personalities mattered then and they matter now.

But structures matter too. The question, then, is how our parliamentary system can be improved so that it simultaneously encourages both debates of deep conviction and political cooperation. What makes both of these possible in principle is, and we should never forget this, that we have a system of party government. Yes, individual MPs matter. But once we set aside their important ombudsman role for their constituents, they matter most as members of a party caucus. Whether it's in the House or in committees, on almost all the big issues, it's parties that determine the input and outcomes in the House of Commons.

Parliament acts as a transmission belt through which citizens convey their ideas and policies they like or dislike. They do this through political parties which they create or participate in or simply vote for or against. The parties in turn have at least an ethical obligation to attempt to get Parliament to adopt the agenda they campaigned on. As much as individual MPs may decry the fact, we have a system of party government in which in the main their individual wills are subordinated to the views and priorities of their parties. The evidence is overwhelming. Canadians, like other democratic citizens, vote for or against parties they want or don't want. When they vote they indicate they want or don't want a Conservative, a Liberal or a New Democrat—not that they want or don't want Velma Cornish, Jacques Belanger or Nester Pidwerbecki, who happen to bear the party labels. In the past election, only 38% voted for the governing

Conservative Party and a substantial majority voted for parties now in opposition. In most democracies, this would be regarded as a democratic deficit.

I believe we can make changes that will enable our parties to better reflect the regions, values and interests of Canadians, with genuine and clearly articulated choices, and, on the other hand, encourage the parties to behave in a more mature and civilized manner with each other in the House of Commons.

Think about it. Canada's Conservatives have many thousands of votes in our three largest cities—Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver—yet not a single MP. Where is the voice of urban Canada at the heart of the government? In Toronto alone they should have at least six MPs. Liberals have thousands of votes throughout Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta but scarcely an MP. Where's the prairie voice at their weekly caucus meeting? In Quebec, the federal parties regularly get over 60% of the votes, but it's the Bloc Quebecois that gets a large majority of the seats. Is it any surprise that so many other Canadians believe most Quebecers are "separatists"? The NDP, with almost 20% of the vote across Canada, normally has about half the seats it deserves, and today, it, a federalist party, not the Bloc, should be the third largest party with the third largest number of Questions in the House of Commons. The Green Party, with almost a million votes, should be represented in the House of Commons—as it now is in the large majority in Europe.

With our electoral system, literally millions of Canadians, representing all parties and spread across all regions, are effectively disenfranchised. With the sole, and perhaps temporary, exception of the UK, nowhere in the dozens of

democracies in Western Europe—nor in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia—is there such a distortion of a democratic vote as there is in Canada. Nowhere else could a party with only 40% or even less of the vote claim it has a “democratic mandate”.

Like the vast majority of modern democracies, we Canadians will continue to have four or five credible political parties. It is time our electoral system reflected this democratic reality. By having a significant number of Members elected to the House on the basis of their party’s percentage of the vote, we would establish the foundation for democratic consensus building by parties willing to acknowledge that Canadians in all regions want a plurality of voices. Continental European experience has shown that parties who know after an election that they must cooperate with one another to form government are less likely to be wildly abusive about each other during a campaign. Stable agreements or coalitions are negotiated and put in place. A higher level of civility is achieved. Such working arrangements in establishing a government would have a much greater likelihood of reflecting 50% of the votes than does our outmoded first past the post system, which was designed in the UK when only two parties were the norm. With such a change in our electoral system, all the caucuses would have regional representation. And knowing that every vote would actually matter and the probability that all parties would give an equal place to women candidates on their lists would also increase voter turnout and the likelihood of gender balance in the House of Commons. Electoral reform,

long overdue is the best step in the direction of increasing the relevance of Parliament to Canadians.