

Symbol vs. Substance: Political Career Paths in Canada

By Kelly Blidook

*Paper to be presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference
June 1-3, 2010, Montreal QC*

I would like to thank Matthew Byrne and Rodney Doody for research assistance. This research was conducted in part with the James R. Mallory Research Grant provided by the Canadian Study of Parliament Group.

On Saturday, October 24, 2009, *The Globe and Mail* newspaper advertised that it would be enhancing its online content with Jane Taber's Ottawa Notebook. Among the selling features of this content was: "Question Period summaries" (A9).

"More Question Period?" I thought.

A few days earlier, a Parliamentary Secretary with the governing Conservatives had said to me: "Nothing gets accomplished in Question Period, that's fair."

As the interview was finishing, he stated: "I have to go and prepare for Question Period. The minister is away ... so I'm a hopper."

Question Period would be starting in approximately 2 hours.

Much of politics is adversarial and symbolic. Beyond simply the need for policies to be debated, there is also the need for scrutiny, opposition, and of course communication of the process to the public. The mass media play a very significant role in all these aspects, in acting as "search lights" upon the workings of government. What often results, however, is that minor issues are made into major issues, politicians distort the actions of their competitors, and attention-seeking, even unruly, behaviour is often engaged in.

One point of focus where much of this is evident is in both the nature and media coverage of Question Period (QP).

QP holds a long history in Canada, and many would suggest it plays some important functions. It is seen as an opportunity for the legislature to hold government to account by questioning and scrutinizing its actions (Franks 1987; Docherty 1997, 2005; outside Canada, see also Chester and Bowring 1962; Franklin and Norton 1993). It is believed to play some role in policy-making, (e.g., Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking 1996; Howlett 1998), and has also been shown to play a substantive representational role both of partisan and constituency interests (Penner et al 2006; Soroka et al 2009). QP may also be a venue where MPs showcase their abilities for their political masters (Atkinson 1978).

QP is also likely the most common means by which citizens access their parliament, as it is the most common part of that institution that receives media coverage (Smith 2007; Soroka 2002a, 2002b).

Nevertheless, many have criticized QP. As the focus of the parliamentary day for the media, it appears to have become "guerilla theatre" (Smith 2007). Some have argued that attempts to make the forum more civil and policy focused have been met with charges of naiveté, with decreased media attention for these "offenders" of QPs presumed incivility (Manning 2010).

The question that this paper asks is whether MPs are guided by an incentive structure that prioritizes symbolic behaviour – and perhaps even behaviour that they themselves find of little value – over substantive behaviour. It is focused upon the parliamentary venues and behaviours that MPs themselves identify as important to gaining promotion within one's parliamentary party. It aims to explore and understand the degree to which MPs perceive themselves and their colleagues as being rewarded for being *actors* in the "guerilla theatre" as opposed to being *parliamentarians* or *policy makers*.

This research question is important for a number of reasons. First, promotions are one form of gaining influence. Certainly holding a portfolio (critic or cabinet/PS) does not, on its own, mean that an MP holds influence, but holding such positions usually signifies greater influence than a lack of position. Critics in opposition often find themselves in Cabinet if their party achieves that status. So on one hand, the question asks if the Canadian parliamentary system values symbol over substance in the distribution of influence.

Second, the question matters as one of public trust in government. Trust in government is in decline in most western democracies and certainly in Canada (Pharr and Putnam 2000). There is evidence that increased negativity in the communications of political actors plays a role in this decline (Anscombe and Iyengar 1997). While there is debate about whether decreased trust is a function of societal change as opposed to institutional failure, there is reason to believe that symbolic, and certainly negative and adversarial behaviour in politics, plays some role in citizen trust in government.

Third, the question is important for its implications upon the job satisfaction and in turn the voluntary turnover of MPs. This is a culture that, according to recent research, appears to turn away those who enter office hoping to affect policy in favour of those with party-oriented motivations (Kerby & Blidook N.d.). It is possible that if some policy-oriented MPs feel their parliamentary roles are relegated to symbolic partisan politics, then they will increasingly feel out of place in the institution. This likely exacerbates voluntary turnover, and arguably turns away the type of MPs whom the institution would do well to attract.

After outlining the broad reasons for symbolic and adversarial behaviour and some of the problems it presents to democratic governance, the paper then explores the views of MPs in Canada regarding the nature of parliamentary behaviour and the incentive structure that leads to promotion with Canada's parliament.

The “Show” of Politics

This paper presents a negative frame of particular parliamentary behaviours that are thought to be on the increase. However, the reasons for these behaviours may actually not be negative on their own. It is possible that we are experiencing the intersection of two progressive forces in the development of modern political behaviour and representative democracy. First, citizens are both less partisan and less ideological (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Dalton 2004), and their behaviours indicate a greater concern for specific issues and new forms of political activity (Norris 2003). Second, parties – at least on the surface – appear keenly aware of citizen interests. Some research indicates that political actors and governments are clearly interested in understanding – and showing that they share – the interests of the citizens (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; though see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Polling in Canada has increased substantially in recent years and parties and governments make significant use of these to gage public interest (Hoy 1989; Savoie 1999).

Nevertheless there is not only the evolving trend of the decline of deference in Canada (Nevitte 1996), but also a broader trend of distrust that is evident across western democracies. As parties try to increase, maintain and solidify political support, the often negative tactics for doing so appear to erode voter engagement and support for political actors (Anscombe and Iyengar 1997). This is partly a function of citizen skepticism,

and also a result of parties' attempts to capitalize on that skepticism through conflictual relations with political competitors.

As the media tend to prioritize conflictual events, and attempt to simplify the nature of those relations by avoiding significant details of debate (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) political actors in turn construct and shape their behaviours to fit this form of communication. That is, if policy debate is going to be portrayed as simplistic and sensational to the represented, then elected policymakers will place less effort into the details of policy debate and place greater effort into the portrayal of the difference in policy position and, often, the political actors themselves.

In the modern era, political parties are sometimes viewed as little more than campaign machines. Parties in Canada have been noted as being in significant decline for their policy generation (Canada 1991: 13). Franks states: "There is a paradox that at the same time as the parties are so influential and powerful with parliament, they are weak outside it, both in terms of gaining consistent strong allegiances within the electorate and in terms of generating ideas and policy proposals" (1987: 7). Canada has moved increasingly toward leader-centred, rather than party-centred, politics and the discipline imposed by leaders through their parties has increased (Cartt et al 2000; Savoie 1999).

Rewards and punishments for MPs are determined by the MP's party leadership, though the most powerful rewards tend to rest in the hands of the Prime Minister. Rewards and punishments might include promotions to, or demotions from, ministerial positions or committee chairs for government MPs, and critic portfolios for opposition MPs. Punishment at the extreme end can include caucus expulsion. MPs from all parties are held in check because they may risk losing their party's electoral candidacy if they lose favour with the party leader (Docherty 1997; Savoie 1999; Cartt et al. 2000). The result is a form of MP behaviour that rarely deviates from partisan lines, and which may also result in a willingness to engage in any form of behaviour requested or deemed valuable for the party leader – primarily that of gaining political support at the expense of competing parties.¹

Much of this indicates what Manin (1997) has referred to as "audience democracy". Manin points to the cessation of power from the political party to opinion polls, consultants, non-partisan mass media, and political leaders. Audience democracy is seen as involving insecure elites lacking a significant and stable core of support, autonomous voters, and television-mediated leaders. The elites chosen tend to be "media experts" rather than "political activists". In this view, parties are seen merely as election machines (or shows for the audience) and their policy role is minimal, while individual members are simply parts of this machine, (or actors in the show).

Understandably, the basic concept of "audience democracy" should not be an acceptable one to most politicians, as it trivializes their roles and may even suggest a breach of the principles (or at least the ideals) of liberal democratic representation. Nevertheless, there is evidence that this description may apply in cases such as Canada. If it is true that more citizens are willing to change their mind about how to vote, then

¹ Party behaviour itself is not only the result of 'carrots and sticks', though Kam (2001) provides evidence that it is not simply the result of similar interests among all MPs of a given party either; party imposed constraints do matter. Nevertheless, Docherty (1997) suggests that MPs become increasingly favourable toward the institutions of government over time, which suggests that they tend to see greater value in party behaviour the longer that they have sat as an MP.

parties tend to engage in symbolic and short-term attempts to gain and hold political support.

Hall (1996) refers to two types of participants in the US Congress as the “workhorses” and the “showhorses” – the former engaging primarily in policy and legislative accomplishments, the latter being those gaining attention and electioneering. MPs in Canada wishing to gain favour within their political party may view their promotion prospects in much the same way as those of the “showhorses” – that partisan, symbolic actions may serve a greater purpose in an “audience democracy” than engaging in substantive policy action. In Canada’s party dominated legislature, *symbolic* and boldly *partisan* expressions may be viewed as the primary currency of promotion, and those with the skills to engage most effectively in these types of actions may be better positioned.

Have, most unflatteringly, been described as “trained seals” (Aiken 1974) in their partisanship. The House also depends strongly upon the role of the “The Opposition”, whose normative role it is to check, to prod, and to ultimately replace the government (1966: 191-191a). The democratic function that is served by the “adversarialism” in the House (Hockin 1966, 1979; Franks 1987; Smith 1999) – where the opposition virtually always opposes the government – is not trivial. Nevertheless, it tends to result in party members taking adversarial positions on topics of broad and national significance that the party leadership takes notice of, and, as Hockin notes, often for electoral reasons (1966: 9). More common in the U.S., but increasingly evident in Canada, is negative campaigning – attempts to convince the public, either accurately or inaccurately, that the political opponent is undesirable. MPs also refer to the excess of work and the lack of resources (Docherty 1997). Under such circumstances, information and competence on policy issues must often give way to easier approaches to gaining the sought payoff of political support.

From the public, or media standpoint, there is a belief that politics is observed from a distance and that engagement, as with civic culture, is decreasing. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse state with regard to the U.S.: “vigorous democracy is the last thing people want, and forgetting entirely about politics is precisely what they do want” (2002:232). Thus, if the government-public link is increasingly disengaged, then media “interpretation” becomes more important. Audiences require simplification of stories and conflict in order to connect with, or care about, the information being received. Media, in turn, must provide this form of information to compete in media economy.

At work is the conflict between beliefs in a post-materialist citizen democracy, and the “democratic deficit” (Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005). Some view the autonomous citizen as one that will engage without need for collective behaviours attributed to group associations (such as parties, union, class), while others view this same autonomous citizen as prone to simplistic decisions made with low-level information; an audience member rather than an agent.

If, based on this, much of politics is symbol, as opposed to substance, and some of those in influential or decision-making capacities reach those positions due primarily to symbolic qualifications, then the symbolic must affect substance. If politics is substantially theatre – if MPs are truly actors on a stage – then it is the better actors who are more likely to be rewarded with higher positions of power. While it is almost certainly likely that “good performers” enjoy some electoral rewards, are they also more

likely to affect policy decisions once elected? Are these people more likely to hold portfolios over people with more “substantive” qualifications?

Data for this study were collected through 20 face-to-face interviews with MPs and one official from the BQ leader’s office.² Interviews were semi-structured and were designed to probe: (1) how much Parliamentary actions matter to MP promotions, (2) what Parliamentary venues stand out as the ones that matter, (3) what particular actions stand out as the ones that matter, (4) the degree to which symbolic partisan actions, or theatrical skills, are seen as important to promotion for MPs.

The following sections look at the importance of adversarial symbolic actions based on the perceptions of Canadian MPs. The first section considers the perceived value of such actions (and the venues where they occur) with a primary focus on parliamentary Question Period (QP) and the resources committed to it. The second section looks more closely at how important symbolic actions are perceived in terms of individual promotion.

Value and Cost:³

Aside from other factors believed to affect promotion (i.e. representational and past experience), most MPs indicated that parliamentary actions matter a good deal to promotions, while a few suggested that it matters very little. The latter group tended to point to effectiveness in fundraising and supporting the party leader outside parliament as key elements, suggesting that parliamentary actions are, in the end, a rather tiny factor. Of those suggesting Parliament matters a good deal, however, some began talking about pursuing actions that are not “in parliament” per se – including, influence through talking to a minister, networking, promoting an issue outside parliament were in many cases the sorts of examples the interviewee would immediately turn toward. These respondents, when questioned further, would also indicate parliamentary activities, but obviously these were not what immediately came to mind for some respondents. Nevertheless, on the simple question of how much Parliamentary action matters, the vast majority seemed to imply that it certainly matters, and slightly more than half then spoke about parliament actions/venues specifically.

Many MPs also pointed to the lack of time and resources in terms of what they can accomplish in Parliament. A few made comparisons to U.S. Representatives (perhaps not a fair comparison) and to U.K. MPs (a fair comparison) in terms of their comparative lack of resources and staff. This is an important point, and one that begs the

² Interviews were conducted with 11 Liberal MPs, 5 Conservative MPs, 3 NDP MPs, and 1 BQ MP. 5 were former Cabinet Ministers while another 6 were either current or former Parliamentary Secretaries. Most of these, along with all of the remaining 9, had held critics positions at some point in their career.

³ The use of interview data in this paper is not meant, in any way, to degrade the words or actions of the MPs who shared their thoughts with me on this matter. I am extremely thankful to each of them, and I intend to accurately represent – as best as possible – the range of views expressed and at the same time expose possible problems for further debate. Part of my interview process was designed to capture an element of both the MP’s stated views and contrast these with the MP’s actions or those of their parties. Many MPs are very frustrated with Parliament. Others hold ideals that don’t appear to match reality, though they don’t appear to have a high level of frustration. Finally, many don’t appear frustrated at all. Interviews were conducted in October 2009 and April 2010. 21 MPs were interviewed, as was a member of the Leader’s Office of the Bloc Québécois.

question of how time and resources are spent. In this case, the answer is sometimes alarming.

The Parliamentary Secretary whose statements are noted at the start of this paper indicated that approximately the next 2 hours were spent preparing for QP that day⁴, though she/he had only minutes earlier indicated its lack of value. Among the other things he/she noted about QP were that the competitiveness is enjoyable, and that it can provide: “a good shot, a good line, that's great fun.”(interviewed October 22, 2009)

Even if QP is seen as generally providing relatively little substantive value, the MP who must provide responses cannot afford to be ill-prepared. Opposition parties commit a surprisingly large amount of time to this particular forum. BQ House Leader, Pierre Paquette (Interviewed October 21, 2009), along with much of his staff, spends approximately half the work day on QP, with meetings and preparation beginning at 7:00 am through 11:00 am (these also include the leader's office), and rehearsals beginning at 1:00pm, with QP itself at 2:15pm. 2 MPs, chosen by lottery each week, also attend one of these meetings. Anyone who is selected to ask questions is also asked to attend rehearsals.

Similarly, the Liberal Party has what is called a “tactics meeting” each morning, conducted by House Leader Ralph Goodale, attended by a handful of selected MPs, in which one of the main activities is the QP line-up for the day. While I did not speak to Mr. Goodale, the process that was described by other members sounds similar to that of the BQ.

While noting that some individuals can gain a lot of respect for asking important, substantive questions in QP, Liberal Whip Rodger Cuzner stated: “There is a great line from Herb Gray when he was Opposition House Leader ... People would bring a question to the table to get ready for Question Period ... and Herb would say, ‘That's a wonderful question – an important question – but how does it embarrass the government?’ And that's pretty much what QP boils down to” (Interviewed April 22, 2010).

While the process of the NDP's morning tactical meeting were not discussed, the party does have a similar morning session at which MPs can pitch questions that they would like to deliver. NDP MP Dennis Bevington (Interviewed October 22, 2009) indicated that he only pitches one or two each week due to the time involved in choosing a good question, and then the competition involved in getting one chosen.

Overall, it seems that most MPs do spend a portion of their morning on the lookout for questions, though it is likely that they will only pitch these occasionally. In the cases of most backbenchers, they will only be successful once or twice a month.

In the end, the effort can amount to nothing – perhaps even the view that one has wasted the party's time. One MP stated:

There's nothing worse than getting fucked by asking a question when somebody just asked the same question. You have to be very careful with that. It's absolutely useless to you as a backbencher. As a party leader you might get away with it, but not as a backbencher. If you ask the same question as somebody else, you're chasing cars. The issue is going by and you're running after it like a dog chasing a car (laugh).

⁴ The Minister would be away for more than one day. It is not possible to say how many days or hours were spent this way.

Overall, however, the value placed on attendance and participation in QP seems highly apparent in the following quote. Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett explains previous efforts to evaluate MPs on a broader range of criteria, though indicates by doing so that most activities are not currently valued. She refers to construction of an “MP Report Card” that was discussed as part of the Liberal Party’s Change Commission.⁵

It was going to be a score card that isn't just about attendance at committees and Question Period, but about more fully participating in policy and helping in the end. How your ridings is, if you're going online, talking to the grassroots as much as possible, ... being able to harness good ideas from lots of places.

...[Conservative MP] James Moore apparently told somebody, when he was told he would be called to Cabinet, they had a big binder about how many times he had been off message, ... there was a serious tracking of the member's behaviour. I don't think we do that in the same way, but there is a feeling that lots of the things that we do in terms of citizen engagement, grassroots engagement, relationships with stakeholders, harvesting good ideas from outside into the policy process – that those are about being a real representative democracy. ...

[In regard to the MP report card]: we put it out as a suggestion, something that could happen, so just showing up at QP and votes and committee aren't the only things that we think of as part of moving our agenda forward – the way we are perceived as parliamentarians or as a party” (Interviewed April 20, 2010).

While Bennett doesn’t state that only symbolic behaviours currently matter in terms of MPs perceptions, she does suggest that there are relatively few activities (including QP) that currently take up a lot of focus. She, perhaps more importantly, suggests that effective representative democracy requires a focus that is much broader than is currently the case.

Finally, one Liberal MP summed up the interview regarding the value of symbolic versus substantive actions this way: “Its two-thirds and one-third I guess. Two-thirds is theatre – the ability to land [the question in QP] – and one-third is substantive” (Interviewed April 20, 2010)

On the Conservative side, responses varied somewhat because the view of having been an effective opposition to now having to deal with an opposition seems to affect the point of view on theatrics in the House. Not all Conservative MPs had positive responses regarding what some see as excessive symbolic partisanship in the House. However, one MP suggested that the balance between symbol and substance leads to reasonably effective debate in the current Parliament. Again noting that time and resources for MPs is very limited, this MP stated:

In opposition, you can be pretty effective, you can be briefed by departments on any issue, they are very good with that. If you say I want to know ... they will come and tell you. So it's really helpful, but a lot of guys don't use that. They

⁵ Chaired by Dr. Bennet as well as 2 other Liberal party officials, the Change Commission’s purpose was to “focus on long term changes to the Party’s engagement, communications, fundraising, policy, and election-readiness strategies”. (See http://www.liberal.ca/en/newsroom/media-releases/15579_liberals-announce-change-commission)

just don't bother. It's easy to get into a routine here, ... most of our MPs are on 2 committees, 4 two hour meetings a week, so that's everyday we will have tied up for 2 hours, it's easy to get a routine, you go to your committee meetings, you go to regional and national caucus on Wednesday, you go to QP every day, you go to the votes, in the evening you go to a reception or 2 and then that's it. So when the hell do you do your due diligence? ... It's easy to step back and say 'I am doing enough, I am doing my job', and I guess that is your job, but if you are ambitious and you want to move on down the line you have to do more. (Interviewed April 20, 2010).

The general story regarding time allocation indicated that parties place an extremely high priority and a large amount of time and resources upon QP preparation and upon MP participation in QP. Clearly each political party, including members of the governing party, spends a good deal of time, and that of at least a few of its MPs and a large number of its staff members. The primary value highlighted by MPs is that this forum is covered by the media, and even this tended to be explained in a negative manner.

Given this focus, however, the indication given was that MPs often prioritize actions that either allow them to participate and perform well in QP, or engage in symbolic adversarial behaviours that emulate QP. The next section looks more closely at how MPs perceive this form of behaviour in terms of promotions within parties.

Symbolism and Promotion

Aside from the value that certain parliamentary forums or behaviours may have generally is the role that symbolic actions play in individual promotion specifically. A member of the BQ leader's office (BQ below) spoke specifically about the types of factors that go into determining who will hold critic portfolios.

BQ: We'll analyze the performance of MPs each day. Their good moves, their bad moves, whether they have some instincts. When it comes to starting the process, I've got all that data in mind.

KB: So the good points and the bad points - are you able to give them labels? What specifically are you looking for? Do certain things stand out?

BQ: Well, intellectual wit. Sometimes people are sharp and quick. Those are good political qualities."

KB: Are there certain forums that you are paying attention to: QP, committee work, private members business? Of the different parliamentary forums for debating or making policy proposals, are there certain ones that you are really looking for?

BQ: QP, I would say. QP, and also preparation for QP where you can see the performance and the ability to communicate, but there is also venues like QP [morning] meetings [where] MPs can attend if they want to pitch a question. (Interviewed April 21, 2010).

The respect for Question Period performance was also highlighted by the same Parliamentary Secretary quoted above (PS below).

PS: There is general agreement on who the good performers are on both sides and there is respect on both sides for that.

KB: When you say good performers you mean ...?

PS: I mean people who are sincere and who ask good questions that are not just frivolous. And sometimes it's for people who are just, you know, damn good actors.

KB: Do you get a sense that there are MPs who pursue their careers along these 2 different lines?

PS: Yes.

Some MPs viewed the characteristics that are valued in a much more negative manner than the above 2 exchanges suggest. When discussing the characteristics that are valued in terms of promotion, Liberal MP Keith Martin responded:

[Some] characteristics that they possess would be to be rabidly partisan, and if the MP has a history of being effective at either finding fault with their political opponents in what they have truly failed to do, or being effective at over-blowing the nature of another party, an opponent's real or imaginary mistakes, then those qualities would be deemed to be valued, and then they would move up the ladder. (Interviewed October 22, 2009).

Bennett's statement on this matter was not quite as negative in tone as Martin's, though she did indicate a similar view about the messages MPs receive about how to advance their careers.

I worry that here in Canada you end up with the whole 'careerism' stuff that is interpreted as party discipline, when it's really almost paralyzing people; to not be able to do their job in order to be seen as a good little boy or girl. They will one day end up in cabinet. So I think there are very mixed messages in this.

There is inevitably – and not surprisingly – a partisan difference in how government and opposition members are viewed by each other. The Conservative MP noted above made a point of saying that even the most adversarial ministers – some that were singled out by opposition MPs as being entirely theatrical and adversarial – show their depth and competence in other forums away from QP. The MP also indicated on one hand, that theatre alone is not enough for an MP to reach a high position, though his statement did suggest it is a significant focus:

The theatrical part is for 45 minutes a day. The rest of the time is pretty good, some of them will get up and give a 10 or 20 minute speech, from whatever party on the bill that's been debated, there will be 5 or 10 minutes of questions after depending on the length of the speech and in there, there you get snapping at each other, but for the most part that doesn't happen. ... This 45 minutes of screaming at each other most days, there is no point to it. This is QP.

Questions are asked but very few answers are given. And then the media says things are adversarial ... but they promote it. They will not print anything unless you are up in the House of Commons screaming at somebody, then you get your face on the news or your name in the paper and so the hard work that

goes on behind the scenes very rarely gets any recognition. ... There is concern that the level of debate has diminished over the years. I think it has only since the cameras were in the House, then it became theatre. ... You can tell the bombastic ones, you can actually tell they have practiced in front of a full length mirror some of them.

While opposition MPs are able to pitch questions, the ones who are successful in being given opportunities must show particular skills in question delivery. When the Question Period line-up is being constructed in tactical meetings, one Liberal MP, noted above, stated:

The question always is: *can they land the question?* ... Can you get a clip in the media, can you deliver the line, or do you agree to a line in a script in the rehearsal and then change it at the last minute and don't tell anybody? ... [What matters is] your ability to inflict damage. If it's not adversarial and aggressive and hard hitting, you are not going to get up at Question Period. So people who want to ask thoughtful questions ... if you ask a question to which there is an answer then you shouldn't be in Question Period, right? '*What is it, is the government incompetent or dishonest?*' That's the question that you are going to get, and if you deliver it with great indignation, then you'll get those spots.

Both Carolyn Bennett and Liberal MP Marlene Jennings indicated a degree of disdain for symbolic adversarial skills, but also indicated that these skills may have played a significant role in the positioning of some Cabinet Ministers. Bennett's statement, at the same time, diminishes the policy role of Cabinet Ministers:

A 'show horse' that has demonstrated to have done very little work is eventually sent out to do certain tasks, but not really trusted ... I am not sure those people get put into cabinet, because it is too important. Though I must say – the current cabinet I'm not sure, but then again the Prime Minister's office directs everything so what does it matter who the ministers are? ... that's what happened, we believe with the shuffle that put [Transport Minister John Baird] and all the show horses into the top files. It was about spin and messaging and not about coming up with brilliant public policy because the Prime Minister's office does all of that. So you want somebody who is a good communicator on the hot files. That seems to be what he has done, I guess.

Jennings made some comparisons regarding various political leaders she has seen during her years in Parliament, and indicated that different leaders prioritize certain types of skills differently than others.

MJ: You know, if I have worked alongside a member of another party for 5 years on various committees and we have had a respectful, collegial relationship though we have differed on things and then a 10-percenter comes into my riding under that MP's signature and has completely taken statements I have made out of context in order to attack me, my attitude towards that individual changes substantially and towards his party. So the clearly, a leader for whom someone's hard work, someone's values, interpersonal skills is not high on their list their checklist, but what is high on their checklist is someone who has prepared to do

whatever it takes in order to score points and to take down opponents, then those individuals are going to score high. It's no accident that Vic Toews is a minister. Vic Toews is one of the worst offenders.

KB: Would you say then that adversarial politics are, or adversarial behaviour is rewarded, at least within the Conservative party?

MJ: It definitely is.

KB: And that would play a role in terms of who is promoted.

MJ: Definitely. (Interviewed April 21, 2010)

Not all MPs agreed with this assessment however, and it was not simply a matter of partisanship guiding views on this matter. Liberal Whip, Rodger Cuzner saw adversarialism as primarily important to opposition parties, and even indicated that the Liberal Party may need more MPs who are stronger at the skills required to be effective at it.

RC: Simply how aggressive and how partisan you are – I don't think it necessarily lends itself to, or opens the door for responsibilities once you take government. I don't believe that.”

KB: But it may play a role in getting to the frontbench in opposition.

RC: Yes. (Interviewed April 22, 2010)

Cuzner still pointed to the effectiveness of exaggeration and media messaging in framing government actions from a opposing point of view:

We play a little bit different. The Conservatives by nature are more ruthless than any of the other parties ... The way that they will attack an individual and we saw Judy Sgro, we saw it on Stephane Dion and Michael Ignatieff. They were pretty vicious on Jane Stewart and the ‘billion dollar boondoggle’ ... which was a brand and they repeated it and repeated it and repeated it, until it continues to be part of our lexicon of terms. ‘The billion dollar boondoggle,’ when in fact there was no billion dollar boondoggle, probably \$190,000 that wasn't accounted for. ... it was just great branding by Preston Manning ... you just continue to repeat the message and we don't do a very good job at that.

This interview took place shortly after a QP session in which virtually every question posed by the Liberal party in QP contained the phrase “culture of deceit” in reference to the Conservative government: “We are trying to get it done on this ‘culture of deceit’. It is the first time we tried it, the first thing that really made sense.”

There is clearly a balance that some Liberal MPs feel the party should not cross in this regard however, though there is pressure to adopt an increasingly negative and sensational approach.

MJ: If you would look at how the question is framed by the different parties over the last say 25 years, I think that you will see that there has been a real shift. I mean I sat on the other side and I listened to Reform MPs on some issues and it was like, my God. We are on the other side now and we wouldn't do that because we don't feel comfortable. We literally don't feel comfortable doing that. ...

KB: There is at least an increased pressure on all parties to ...?

MJ: All parties to stoop to that.

KB: Your impression is that with the Liberals there is a strong voice to not allow that?

MJ: A very strong voice.

Nevertheless, while Cuzner was not advocating purely symbolic actions, or personal and diversionary attacks, he seemed to feel that aggressive, adversarial questioning is an important element of opposition that the current Liberal party is not currently strong enough at.

RC: We've got maybe 5 or 6 people that fit into that category. Ours are substantive people too, ... if there is a particular issue at a committee that we think needs a little more horsepower we'll pull out one of the members of that committee and put in one of our heavy hitters and Tories did that last time, some of the ones on Public Accounts that weren't that aggressive they would pull in Peter MacKay when they were in opposition who was a former prosecutor. They would bring in Vic Toews and those guys will question and question hard ...

KB: ... Your impression is that this is one area where your party is weak.

RC: With aggressive personality? Yes, we are not strong. We are not strong. But we will be.

KB: It would be an area that perhaps you would be more successful if ... ?

RC: We have had to work hard at becoming a good opposition. And I'll tell you, the first year that we were in opposition, as bad as the government was at being the government, we were just as bad at being an opposition. It takes a while to transition, but we're getting better at being an opposition.

Conclusion

The views expressed provide a number of important responses to the research question, which asked whether MPs are guided by an incentive structure that prioritizes symbolic behaviour. First, symbolic adversarial actions are viewed as important and are clearly prioritized by many, even though some MPs suggest that these do not have a significant value. Second, and more importantly perhaps, some MPs suggest that symbolism is of greater importance than substance, or that the focus of MPs is upon symbolic actions to the detriment of other aspects of parliamentary governance and representation. This was, of course, not universal among MPs. Many indicated that there is a balance between the two, and that MPs cannot go far on their acting skills alone.

Most MPs very clearly indicate that theatre is important to the advancement of political careers, and while some suggested this in either partisan terms, or only in terms of the opposition front benches, some also suggested that it is clearly a role in why some people hold cabinet positions. Again, this view was not expressed by all interviewees.

In general, and not included in the quotations above, MPs were also mixed in responses as to whether symbolic adversarialism, especially negative attacks, is on the rise or if it is a particular problem. It is noteworthy that many MPs still say that getting into the media is necessary to gain a profile, and most suggest that the more adversarial

and negative one is, the more likely they are to accomplish that. Some expressed views that the minority status has an impact on the degree of negativity and adversarialism, while others indicated that any increase in this form of symbolic politics was due to the role of specific parties or leaders (in each case, not one's own). However, some said that little has changed in this regard, at least in recent years.

Future research into this topic will make use of an extensive dataset on Question Period (see: Penner et al 2006, Soroka et al 2009) in order to provide a quantitative assessment of how question topics and frequency appear to play a role in which backbenchers become frontbenchers.

Bibliography

- Aiken, Gordon. 1974. *The backbencher: trials and tribulations of a Member of Parliament*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Anderson, Cameron D., and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant. 2005. Conceptions of Political Representation in Canada: An Explanation of Public Opinion. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38:1029-1058.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen and Shanto Iyengar. 1997. *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*. New York: The Free Press.
- Atkinson, Michael. 1978. Policy Interests of Provincial Backbenchers and the Effects of Political Ambition. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 3 (4):629-645.
- Canada. 1991. *Reforming electoral democracy : final report*. . 4 vols. Vol. 1, *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*. Ottawa: Government of Canada.
- Capella, Joseph N. and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carty, R. Kenneth, Lisa Young, and William P. Cross. 2000. *Rebuilding Canadian party politics*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Chester, Daniel N. and Nona Bowring. 1962. *Questions in Parliament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Crimmins, James E. and Paul Nesbitt-Larking. 1996. Canadian Prime Ministers in the House of Commons. *Journal of Legislative Studies* 2(3): 145-71.
- Dalton, Russell. 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion in Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J., and Martin P. Wattenberg. 2000. *Parties without partisans: political change in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Docherty, David Campbell. 1997. *Mr. Smith goes to Ottawa : life in the House of Commons*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- . 2005. *Legislatures*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Franklin, Mark N. and Philip Norton (eds.). 1993. *Parliamentary Questions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Franks, C. E. S. 1987. *The Parliament of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hall, Richard L. 1996. *Participation in Congress*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Hibbing, John R. and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hockin, Thomas A. 1966. The Loyal Opposition in Canada: An Introduction to its Ideal Roles and their Practical Implementation for Representative and Responsible

Government, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

- Hockin, Thomas A. 1979. Adversary Politics and Some Functions of the Canadian House of Commons. (3rd Ed).Canadian political process / [compiled by] Richard Schultz, Orest M. Kruhlak, John C. Terry. Toronto : Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1979.
- Howlett, Michael. 1998. Predictable and Unpredictable Policy Windows: Institutional and Exogenous Correlates of Canadian Federal Agenda-Setting. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31(3): 495-524.
- Hoy, Claire. 1989. *Margin of Error: Pollsters and the Manipulation of Canadian Politics*. Toronto: Key Porter Books.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R. and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kerby, Matthew and Kelly Blidook. N.d. It's Not You, It's Me: Determinants of Voluntary Legislative Turnover in Canada. *Currently under review*.
- Kam, Christopher. 2001. Do Ideological Preferences Explain Parliamentary Behavior? Evidence from Great Britain and Canada. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 7 (4):89 - 126.
- King, Anthony. 1997. *Running Scared*. New York: Free Press.
- Manin, Bernard. 1997. *Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manning, Preston. 2010 – The answer to our unruly Question Period? *Globe and Mail*. Friday, May 21 (A13).
- Nevitte, Neil. 1996. *The decline of deference : Canadian value change in cross-national perspective*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2003. *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Penner, Erin, Kelly Blidook and Stuart Soroka. 2006. Legislative priorities and public opinion: representation of partisan agendas in the Canadian House of Commons. *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (7):1006-1020.
- Pharr, Susan and Robert Putnam. Eds. 2000. *Disaffected Democracies: What's troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton University Press.
- Savoie, Donald J. 1999. *Governing from the centre : the concentration of power in Canadian politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, David E. 2007. The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Smith, Jennifer. 1999. Democracy and the Canadian House of Commons at the millennium. *Canadian Public Administration* 42 (4):398-421.

- Soroka, Stuart Neil. 2002a. *Agenda-setting dynamics in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- . 2002b. Issue Attributes and Agenda-Setting by Media, the Public and Policymakers in Canada. *International Journal of a Public Opinion Research* 14(3): 264-285.
- . 2010. *Degrees of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Soroka, Stuart, N., Erin Penner and Kelly Blidook. 2009. Constituency Influence in Parliament. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 42 (3):563-91.