

**Lights, Camera, Inaction:
The Effect of Cameras on Legislative Debate**

by

Evan Akriotis
2011-12 Intern

Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP)
1303A Whitney Block
Queen's Park
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 1A2

Phone: 416-325-0040

evan.akriotis@gmail.com

www.olipinterns.ca

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“There is now no going back to the vacuous pomposities of the closed debating society, where members misinterpret their constituents, spout unchecked prejudice, grovel for promotion and cloak stupidity, ignorance and incompetence in dignity”

- Austin Mitchell, MP 1977-present, UK House of Commons¹

“‘Saw you on telly last week’ is an accolade. The fact that you were part of a ‘doughnut’ designed by frantic whips and sat for thirty dreary minutes at some ungodly hour is immaterial. If you are there, on the screen, you are doing your job in the square public eye [...] We are now in the ‘info-tainment’ business. Watch us perform with increasing desperation as any general election draws near. The cameras are in, the gloves are off. The only victim will be democracy!”

- Roger Gale, MP 1983-present UK House of Commons²

The symbolism on October 14, 1986 was surely palpable. Treasurer and government House Leader Robert Nixon rose in the Ontario Legislature to highlight meaningful renovations that had been undertaken during the summer months. Newly-installed electronically-controlled cameras were now primed to capture every moment, every inflection, every joust and parry of legislative debate, and relay them to television sets across the province, carrying parliamentary activity to the eager eyes of even the most far-flung residents. Nixon explained that “these alterations have been undertaken in the spirit of openness to make the affairs of the Legislature more accessible to the people of Ontario.”³

Debate over cameras had swirled for years prior to their introduction, both in Ontario and in other jurisdictions. While advocates highlighted transparency and accountability, skeptics suggested that cameras by their very presence would modify debate. While some continue to laud the opportunity to observe our representatives at work from anywhere in the province, others bemoan the ability to watch our representatives increasingly grandstand, misbehave, and pander.

Nixon highlighted another architectural novelty in his statement: an enhanced lighting system to accommodate broadcasting’s very particular demands. Television lighting required that the blinds on the Legislature’s large, south-facing windows be forever drawn, eliminating natural light and the view down University Avenue.⁴ The windows of the Legislature were shuttered as the walls became transparent. A proud step forward was accompanied by a deleterious side effect. The camera’s conflicted effects had physically manifested themselves. Surely, the symbolism was palpable.

The debate persists even decades later. While all appreciate the value of accessibility, some fear that cameras have degraded debate, offering Ontarians expanded access to a Legislature that is a sorry shadow of its former self. Scholarship on the effect of cameras on legislative debate is plentiful, and can

¹ Mitchell, “Televising the Commons,” 98.

² Gale, “A sceptic’s judgement,” 107.

³ Ontario, *Hansard*, October 14, 1986.

⁴ Deborah Deller, interview, May 8, 2012.

be drawn from numerous democratic institutions, both nationally and sub-nationally. To simply re-examine a longstanding debate and retread existing arguments would offer little new insights.

Instead, what this paper seeks to do is address a gap in the debate. Arguments on both sides are almost purely drawn from anecdotal evidence, from first-hand accounts of figures both political and apolitical that experienced cameras' effects first-hand. Objective measurement and empirical analysis are virtually absent from the discourse. This paper attempts to quantify the effects of cameras by using a content analysis of Hansard transcripts to track changes in decorum and sophistication of debate both prior to and following the introduction of cameras. Empirical analysis is supplemented with personal interviews and academic research. In this way, a longstanding debate can be redefined and reconsidered.

A new perspective provides new insights. The content analysis herein suggests that, insofar as cameras have modified the quality of legislative debate, they have merely exacerbated existing trends rather than created new and fundamental change, and have done so alongside other facilitating forces. Legislative debate has changed dramatically, and cameras are an easy and obvious target for blame, being one of the most conspicuous changes to legislative function. Their introduction, however, has not *caused* anything, and must be considered in a broader political and procedural context.

THE DEBATE OVER CAMERAS

In November 1984, two years prior to the introduction of cameras, Liberal MPP Jim Bradley introduced a motion calling for an electronic video Hansard, and advocated on its behalf. He spoke to the necessity of freedom-of-information, calling it the most important argument, but not the only one. He claimed that television would allow legislators to communicate directly with their constituents, rather than being mediated by the press. He drew on the federal experience and claims of improved behaviour, and argued that a televised House would be a more courteous and refined House.⁵

Bradley's predictions found traction across the literature on the subject, across legislatures, and across accounts of personal experience.

Hawley Black cited a general feeling of mistrust among Ottawa MPs of the 'gatekeeping' function of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. They resented having their words mediated and screened before reaching the public they served.⁶ As Jeanne Sauvé explained, television would bring the MP directly to his or her electors.⁷

Protecting the institution's relevance emerged as a central theme in the debate, and it was co-opted as an argument by both sides. Televising parliament, advocates suggested, would publicize the proceedings.⁸ Cameras would educate and engage the masses, making the Legislature a more relevant and vibrant institution. Roger Gale, a British MP who voted against the motion to introduce cameras to the House of Commons on an experimental basis in 1988,⁹ appealed to relevance as well, albeit from the other side. Cameras, he feared, would incorporate Parliament into the entertainment industry, trivializing the proceedings and reducing them to "infotainment."¹⁰ Speaking to the perils of "infotainment," broadcaster Gordon Cullingham predicted that television could "be exploited by the theatrically-gifted members and so penalize the serious well-prepared debaters who lacked style."¹¹ Peter Johansen offered an even bleaker prognosis. Drawing from Marshall McLuhan, he argued that cameras and television would make political institutions by their very nature obsolete. Mass involvement in Parliamentary debate defeats its representative reason for being.¹²

⁵ Ontario, *Hansard*, November 15, 1984.

⁶ Black, "Live Commons Broadcasting," 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Franklin, "Televising the British House of Commons," 5.

⁹ Gale, "A sceptic's judgement," 100.

¹⁰ Franklin, "Televising the British House of Commons," 5.

¹¹ Black, "Live Commons Broadcasting," 83.

¹² Johansen, "Televising Parliament," 49.

In an article for *The Parliamentarian* in 1988, Roger Gale offered further dire predictions for a televised British House. While some warned of grandstanding and theatrics, Gale feared that the result of the introduction of cameras would “be stultifying; once-bold Members will [...] seek security in fixed positions and pre-scripted monologues.”¹³ He went on to explain that television would offer a very stilted, narrow view of legislative process; that the visual medium feigns absolute truth, when in reality its perspective is thin. “The work of the House of Commons,” Gale explained, “is [...] carried on as much in the corridors and committees, the tea-rooms and the bars and smoking rooms as in the Chamber. That is the *real* democracy, the discussion among friends across party lines and on both sides of the House, that the television cameras can never capture.”¹⁴ Implicit in this claim is a fear that viewers will be duped into believing that they are offered a complete understanding of parliamentary democracy, when in reality what is before the cameras is grossly incomplete.

British MP Anthony Nelson wrote in favour of cameras in advance of their introduction. He argued that the influence of Parliament would be enhanced, that backbench MPs would have a new, inalienable avenue of exposure and accountability. He responded to fears of misbehaviour by expressing faith that “the character of the Commons would be faithfully reflected and that it would not be damaged by the presence of television cameras;” that behaviour would remain exactly as it was.¹⁵

Several Ontario MPPs, both former and current, provided interviews for this paper, and spoke to their experiences in the debate over the introduction of cameras, and to legislative life in a televised House. Former Speaker David Warner alluded to political interests in the debate over cameras. He explained that there were feelings among the opposition parties that the longstanding Progressive Conservative government was treating Parliament like a club, and very much approved of the privacy they enjoyed therein. When a minority government was elected in 1985, he explained, the opportunity presented itself for change in this regard. Warner refers to initiatives like the installation of cameras as “the miracle of minority government.”¹⁶

Mike Breaugh, former NDP Member for Oshawa, explained that when he arrived at Queen’s Park, “it was a very private place.” Many arrived at the Legislature having come from municipal councils where television coverage was commonplace. The absence of cameras in the provincial Legislature was seen as unusual.¹⁷

Cameras were introduced on the recommendation of the Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs and Agencies, Boards and Commissions. The report released by the committee was logistical in nature, focusing on lighting, installation, distribution, and cost, and included a comparative investigation of broadcasting in the Saskatchewan legislature.¹⁸ Mike Breaugh chaired the committee. He explained that, as Chair, he led by consensus, allowing votes only as a last resort. A focus of the committee, he explained, was to ensure that the MPPs were not forced to work in the equivalent of a television studio. The proceedings were to remain natural, with parliamentary integrity emerging unscathed.

Norm Sterling also sat on the committee, and opposed the introduction of cameras. When interviewed, he explained that he warned the committee that there would be no return from this; that once cameras were introduced, they could never be removed. He feared for the legitimacy of debate, and he was left unconvinced of the committee’s assurances of broadcasting’s financial viability.¹⁹

David Warner, who also sat on the committee, acknowledges the Conservative Members’ concerns regarding cost, and concedes that committee members voiced strongly-held views both for and against cameras, but contends that debate was civil and sophisticated, never acrimonious. In the end, those opposed settled for a recorded vote to ensure that their opposition was adequately noted.

¹³ Gale, “The argument *against*,” 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Nelson, “The argument *for*,” 149.

¹⁶ David Warner, interview, April 30, 2012.

¹⁷ Michael Breaugh, interview, May 14, 2012.

¹⁸ Ontario, Committee, *Television Coverage*.

¹⁹ Norm Sterling, interview, May 7, 2012.

A TELEVISED HOUSE

Following the committee's recommendation, cameras came to Queen's Park, as they had in Ottawa just prior, and as they would in Britain soon after. In all three jurisdictions, arguments both for and against cameras remained, and still remain, remarkably consistent in the aftermath of their introduction, each side finding vindication in the evidence before them.

Jim Bradley argues that he is no less an advocate for cameras in the Legislature today than he was in 1986, even if he acknowledges that the effects have not been wholly positive.²⁰ He argues that prior to cameras, if the public was to seek legislative information, they were forced to rely on the press' understanding of what was important. The press existed as an all-powerful mediator, and cameras, at least partially, wrested that power from them. He also claims that cameras have exposed parliamentary effectiveness, or lack thereof. Bradley claims that when he first arrived, there was a handful of members who were very effective in the constituency, "who slapped the right backs," but were highly ineffective in the Legislature. Of course, their substandard parliamentary work went unnoticed, and their visibility in the constituency was all voters knew until cameras painted a broader picture.

Certain immediate effects were cited in virtually every interview: when Members of Provincial Parliament were before the cameras, they dressed better and they sobered up. Such effects are beyond the reach of a content analysis, but empiricism is hardly necessary. Personal testimony leaves no doubt. Television instilled a fear and a prudence that had not previously existed. Prior to evening sittings, Whips began to monitor any indulgences with greater vigour, ensuring that no inebriated MPPs would be broadcast to the province, embarrassing themselves and the party. Former *Toronto Star* Queen's Park columnist Jim Coyle explained that prior to the introduction of cameras, such behaviour was never documented. With a nod and a wink shared between the Members and the press gallery, it never happened.²¹

When discussing misbehaviour, many of the Members suggest that such allegations are not without warrant, but are somewhat overblown. David Warner and Mike Breaugh argue that there was initially some grandstanding, showboating, and use of props to visually enhance arguments, but the Speaker quickly cracked down and largely eliminated such behaviour. Findings in the British case are largely consistent with these testimonials. A 1992 survey of British MPs found that 71 per cent observed no change in Members' behaviour in a televised House.²²

David Warner goes so far as to suggest that cameras, and their concomitant accountability, improved behaviour in the Legislature. He recalls his time as Speaker, and a particularly vociferous Member who at times could make his job difficult. One day, this Member arrived at the House subdued, quiet, and respectful. Immediately concerned for her well-being, Warner asked the Sergeant-at-Arms if he knew what had befallen the Honourable Member. She had apparently received phone calls from constituents displeased with her behaviour in the House, and demanding that she treat the Speaker with respect. Cameras held the Member responsible for her actions. Former Liberal Minister Sean Conway shared similar sentiments, explaining that, in a broadcasted House, "you never know who's watching."²³

In the untelevised House, Warner continues, Members understood that being thrown out for unparliamentary behaviour would offer a great headline the next day: "Member thrown out defending constituency," or something along those lines. Once before the cameras, however, constituents were able to see the behaviour first-hand, and suddenly ejection in defence of one's constituency became slightly less noble in the eyes of the masses. According to Warner, the strategy faded somewhat.

Clerk of the House Deborah Deller acknowledges a general tempering in the televised House, but does so with a degree of unease, suggesting that debate has become overly risk-averse; that, with every

²⁰ Jim Bradley, interview, May 10, 2012.

²¹ Jim Coyle, interview, May 14.

²² Cumberbatch, Brown, and Skelton, "The implications," 206.

²³ Sean Conway, interview, May 2.

moment captured and scrutinized, Members can no longer be themselves, and parliament may be worse for it.

Norm Sterling, a reluctant entrant into televised proceedings in 1986, rattled off harmful effects when interviewed. Length of debate on previously simple Bills expanded rapidly, with Members fighting to capture and hang on to screen time. All Bills took longer to pass, as the House became occupied with pointless debate, driven purely by the cameras. Sittings became longer, and filibusters became more common. Even Jim Bradley, a tireless and well-established advocate of cameras, acknowledges that speeches are longer and more frequent in a televised House. Charles Kennedy and Caroline Culey highlight similar trends, and suggest an increase in “bogus points of order” in the televised British Parliament, a further effort to capture the cameras, and thus the audience.²⁴

British MP Austin Mitchell argued that cameras have been good for quality of debate, claiming that more preparation goes into speeches when Members are aware that they will be televised.²⁵ He goes on to suggest that party leaders become more active parliamentarians in a televised House; that cameras “force the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition to be more active on home ground, to put in more appearances, to challenge each other in the only forum in which they can do that, and to do their duty to democratic debate.”²⁶ Stephen Frantzich and John Sullivan offer a similar finding regarding the American Congress. They quote Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, who claims that C-SPAN has “improved the quality of deliberations [...] Before there was a sloppiness about what went on the floor. But now they know somebody is watching, so members do more homework.”²⁷ What by Deb Deller is lamented as risk aversion in Ontario is praised as prudence and insight in Washington.

Some dismissed the camera’s effects entirely. Clerk of the House of Commons Alistair Fraser found that the fears surrounding the introduction of cameras simply did not materialize: “The concern over the possible rush of prima donnas anxious to usurp the floor has not occurred. Speeches remain much as they were – neither brighter nor duller. Attendance in the House has not increased or decreased. In general, things remain very much as they were.”²⁸

Sean Conway spoke at length about the degradation of oration and the craft of debate among Members. Conway spoke of a time when oration was a practiced skill, honed through reading, study, and rigorous training; he spoke of the legacy of the proverbial “golden age of politics,” populated by literate, upper-class Brits. He spoke of a time when Members would gather to hear fine debate, when “a good Stephen Lewis speech was never less than an hour.” And he bemoaned current debate, in which, without a prepared speech in their hands, today’s politicians seem lost. Television, he explained, has heightened discipline, increased exposure, and intensified the pace of political action. Lost is the reverence for slow, ponderous insight and debate that sustained the literary, thoughtful parliaments of yore. Norm Sterling yearns for a time when Members read and carefully considered Bills before debating them. Jim Coyle explains that a televised House has a different rhythm: it “favours conflict, action, and pithiness.” David Warner offers similar laments. He explains that debate in the Chamber was once the highlight of the job for many members. Today, debate is far more business than pleasure. The culture has changed. Playing with an ad slogan that called Carnation Condensed Milk the milk of contented cows, Conway argued that pre-electronic politics, literary politics, were the politics of contended politicians.

Deb Deller offers a unique interpretation of the decline of oration. She too suggests that it stems from cameras, but not directly. Rather, Deller argues that cameras in the House allowed Members to follow the proceedings from their offices, and removed the necessity of physical presence in the House. Naturally, attendance suffered, and it is attendance that killed oration. When Members spoke to a full Chamber, debate was an event. Every comment, every speech was an opportunity to hone their craft. Many of the great orators, she argues, did not arrive with the speaking skills for which they are known.

²⁴ Kennedy and Culey, “Televising the Commons,” 121-123.

²⁵ Mitchell, “Televising the Commons,” 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁷ Frantzich and Sullivan, *The C-span revolution*, 264.

²⁸ Fraser, “Televising the Canadian House of Commons,” 70.

Rather, Parliament was a training ground, a most fabulous coliseum in which to develop one's prowess. When the proceedings were televised, the Members fled to their offices, as did the press. Now playing to an uninspiring empty House, oration fizzled. Deller goes so far as to suggest that televisions should be removed from Members' offices, thus forcing them to return to their parliamentary stations.

Interestingly, poor attendance in the televised House seems to be coupled with an increased *expectation* for attendance among viewers. James Bawden, for instance, argues that "TV spreads a common view of absentee MPs neglecting their duties that is hard to dislodge."²⁹ Once viewers could see the House, they expected to see their Members, and were perturbed when they did not. Roger Gale speaks to the demand for attendance at any cost. Even if the Member was crafting revelatory legislation in committee; even if the Member had the most honourable of excuses, he or she was not in the House, and was therefore not doing his or her job.³⁰

Such a development speaks to Gale's initial fear that cameras present a stilted view of the proceedings, but under the ruse of full exposure. There is much that an electronic Hansard does not capture. It is not the unparalleled access for Ontario's viewers that it purports to be, or at the very least that many assume it to be. Jim Coyle explains that storytelling suffered for the press' reclusion into their offices from the gallery. Sitting in the House itself, rather than relying on an electronic Hansard, gives one a better sense of exactly what is going on in there, exactly how people are behaving, exactly what the energy or mood of our parliament is on a given day. Deb Deller agrees, explaining that being in the House is an entirely different experience from watching television coverage, but the two are all too readily equated. Coyle further references the value of the "chain of chance encounters," explaining that stories and insights frequently come from the simple experience of running into someone that you didn't expect to see. When the House was well attended, when Members and journalists were constantly buzzing around, the chain of chance encounters was vital and productive. Confinement to offices and televisions eliminates that valuable journalistic resource.

Collegiality is cited as another casualty of parliamentary cameras. Deller suggests that in an untelevised House, shielded from view, Members could be friendlier across the floor, not having to prove their partisan stripes to demanding viewers. Norm Sterling explains that when he first arrived at Queen's Park, multi-partisan relationships were plentiful and robust, and Members were able to cross party lines to work together for the good of the province. Television thrives on conflict and rhetoric, and has driven parties apart.

Arguments for and against are long-standing, abundant, and vigorously defended, providing an anecdotal foundation upon which a quantitative analysis can be built.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical analysis herein is derived from a content analysis of Hansard transcripts of the Ontario Legislature from 1969 to 2009. It is by no means intended to be definitive or authoritative, but rather to supplement a debate defined and limited by anecdotal evidence. The coding scheme is drawn in part from the Question Period Monitoring and Analysis Project (QPMAP), a project of the McMaster Communication Metrics Laboratory (COMM-Lab) directed by Dr. Alexandre Sévigny and Dr. Philip Savage. Using broadcast coverage of federal Question Period, QPMAP monitors levels of civility by tracking indicators including demeanour, background noise, and rhetorical questions.³¹

My project differs from that of the McMaster COMM-Lab in several key respects, however, the most notable of which being that my analysis is longitudinal, tracking changes in civility over time, whereas theirs is distinctly focused on the present day. QPMAP uses broadcast recordings as its primary source, offering a broad range of indicators to code. Since my analysis extends to a pre-electronic House, I am not afforded access to the many visual and auditory cues that broadcast coverage provides. For

²⁹ Bawden, "Is Parliament Good Television?" 16.

³⁰ Gale, "A sceptic's judgement," 107.

³¹ For more information, visit COMM-Lab's website: http://commlab.mcmaster.ca/~commlab/project/?page_id=5

instance, demeanor, ambient noise, applause, and heckling are far more readily observable in video coverage than in a written transcript. Relying solely on Hansard, my analysis was restricted in its reach.

In total, eleven indicators of quality of legislative debate were tracked and recorded. Friendly questions posed by government backbenchers were excluded from the results, because even though they provide all of the indicators of quality debate – they are consistently information-seeking, are positive in tone, and are never deflected by the Minister responding – they are not genuine examples of sophisticated, civilized debate. These questions do not accurately reflect the quality of debate, and their inclusion would have artificially inflated the results for the years since their introduction to Question Period. An explanation of the coding scheme, as well as the complete data, can be found in the appendix.

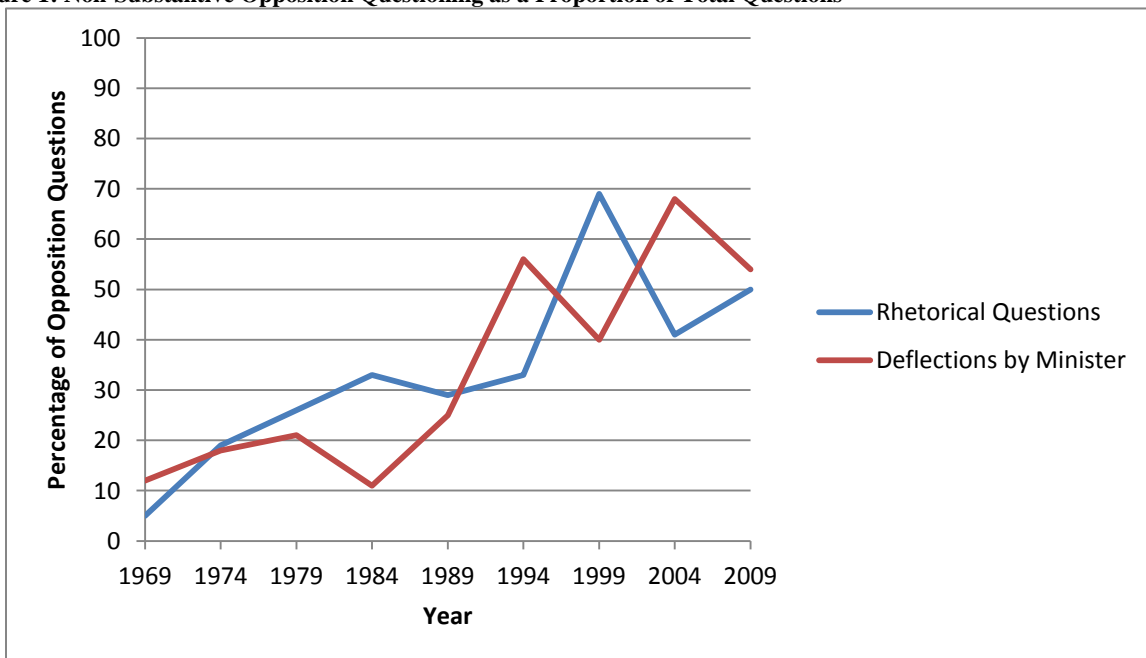
The focus of the analysis is on Question period, both because it is the most high-profile portion of legislative proceedings, and because its duration, frequency, and content are consistent and predictable. In a given year, every other Monday's Oral Questions were subject to analysis, beginning with the first Monday of the calendar year, to a maximum of five. The process was repeated in five year increments, extending five increments outwards in both directions from the introduction of cameras in October 1986. A 2.5 year buffer on either side of that critical date was included to ensure that overcompensation immediately following the introduction of cameras, or experimental camera trials prior to their official introduction, would not skew the data. The year 1964 was omitted because no questions were posed on any of the first five Mondays of the calendar year. As such, the years under analysis are 1969, 1974, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, and 2009, with five Question Periods surveyed in each. The sample size is admittedly small, but it is adequate to demonstrate distinct trends. An average of 159 questions were coded in each of the nine years analysed.

OBSERVATIONS

Almost all indicators of incivility or non-substantive debate increase markedly from the beginning of the study period to the end.

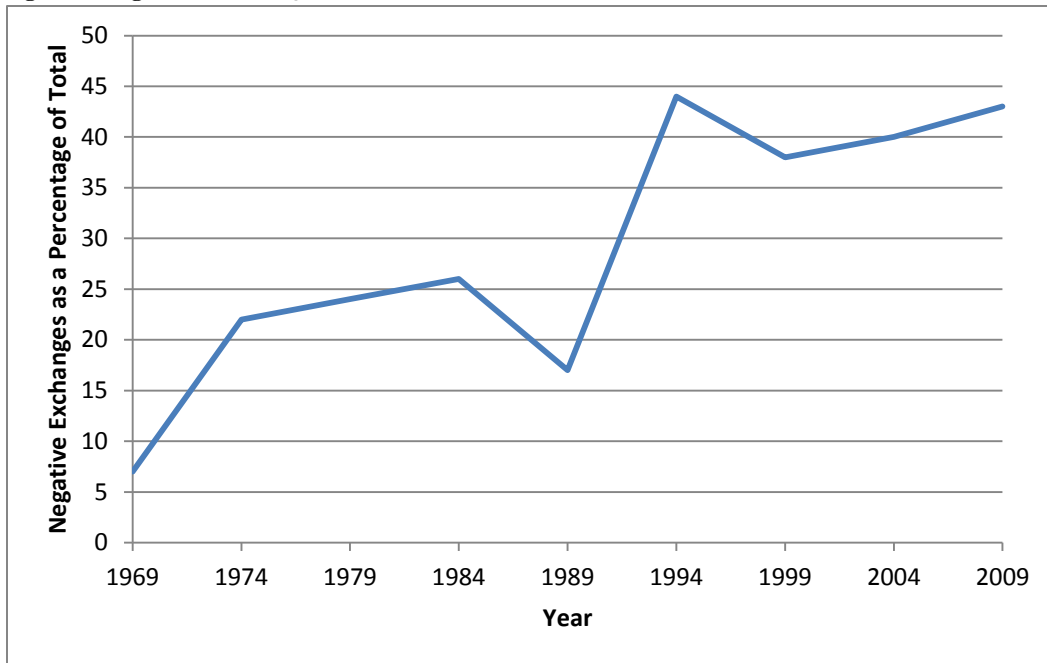
Both rhetorical questions and Ministerial deflections increase steadily over the four decades under observation, with an acceleration beginning in 1989. The two indicators seem to react inversely to one another. This is not a coincidence. Rather, it is because information-seeking questions lend themselves to deflected answers, while rhetorical questions are easy to address even broadly, because what they ask of the Minister is ill-defined. If an opposition Member were to ask "How can this government justify ignoring *x*," it is quite easy for the Minister to respond by saying "We have done no such thing," and listing the government investments in said program, thus essentially answering the question posed. As such, if rhetorical questions increase, deflections decrease, and vice versa.

Figure 1: Non-Substantive Opposition Questioning as a Proportion of Total Questions



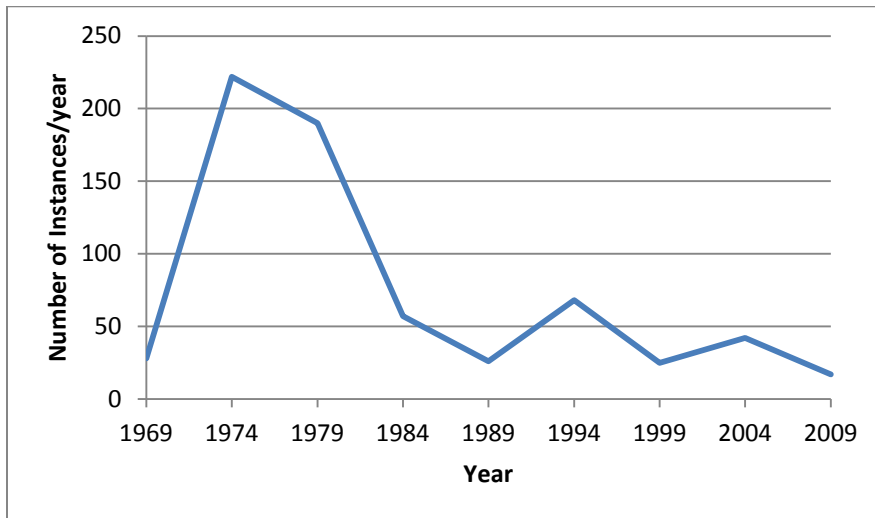
The prevailing tone of the questions and answers offers a similar upward trend. Between 1989 and 1994, the figures become somewhat erratic. This can be interpreted in several different ways. It could suggest two separate plateaus separated by the introduction of cameras, with post-camera debate hovering around 40 percent negative, while pre-camera sits closer to 20 percent. A more likely possibility, however, is that those two years are simply outliers, either because of unique Parliaments with distinctive behaviour, or because of crude measurement. Were the findings for those two years to be disregarded, one would find a consistent, gradual increase between 1984 and 1999 comparable to the increase before 1984 and after 1999, suggesting a gradual shift slightly at odds with the graph's erraticism.

Figure 2: Negative Tone in Question Period



Certain indicators of decorum were more useful than others. Some were hindered by methodological constraints, while others were at the mercy of too many variables. The findings for interjections, for instance, are far more likely a reflection of changing transcription techniques than of changing parliamentary culture. The year 2009 being the most civil parliament in the study period, with 10 percent of the interjections recorded the 1979 parliament, is somewhat hard to reconcile with my personal observations. Interjections in the 2012 parliament are plentiful and lively, but few make it to Hansard. I would suggest that far too much relies on the effect of transcription technique to use recorded interjections as any kind of meaningful indicator of civility in the House.

Figure 3: Frequency of Interjections



Calls to order must also be used warily as a longitudinally consistent measure of civility, since the numbers are so dependent on the nature and personal peculiarities of the Speaker at the time. David Warner, for instance, would frequently call for order if a Member had exceeded their allotted time for a question or answer, or was taking too long to put the question. In this respect, he is unique, and the numbers for 1994 are suitably inflated. Every Speaker brings personal techniques and dynamics to their role, and as such any indicator dependent on Speaker behaviour is bound to be inconsistent. The Speaker is not a constant against which parliamentary behaviour can be judged. It is entirely unclear whether an increase in calls to order reflects a more unruly House or a more active Speaker. For that reason, these figures carry little analytical weight.

Other indicators of decorum are more demonstrative. Personal attacks, for instance, show no great increase in a televised House. Withdrawals, however, do seem to increase. Beginning in 1994, no year goes by without at least one withdrawal. Instances of unparliamentary language requiring withdrawals remain infrequent throughout the period under study, but the increase is worth noting.

The frequency of points of order and privilege remain relatively constant over the course of the sample period, with little noticeable change in their validity. Most are erroneous in 1969 just as most are erroneous in 2009. Even before bright lights and wide broadcasts, points of order were a valuable and oft utilized means of grabbing attention.

Coding for partisanship produces pronounced effects. References to parties are quite clearly bisected, with one plateau prior to the introduction of cameras, and a significant leap to a second, higher plateau beginning in 1989.

Figure 4: Indicators of Decorum in Question Period

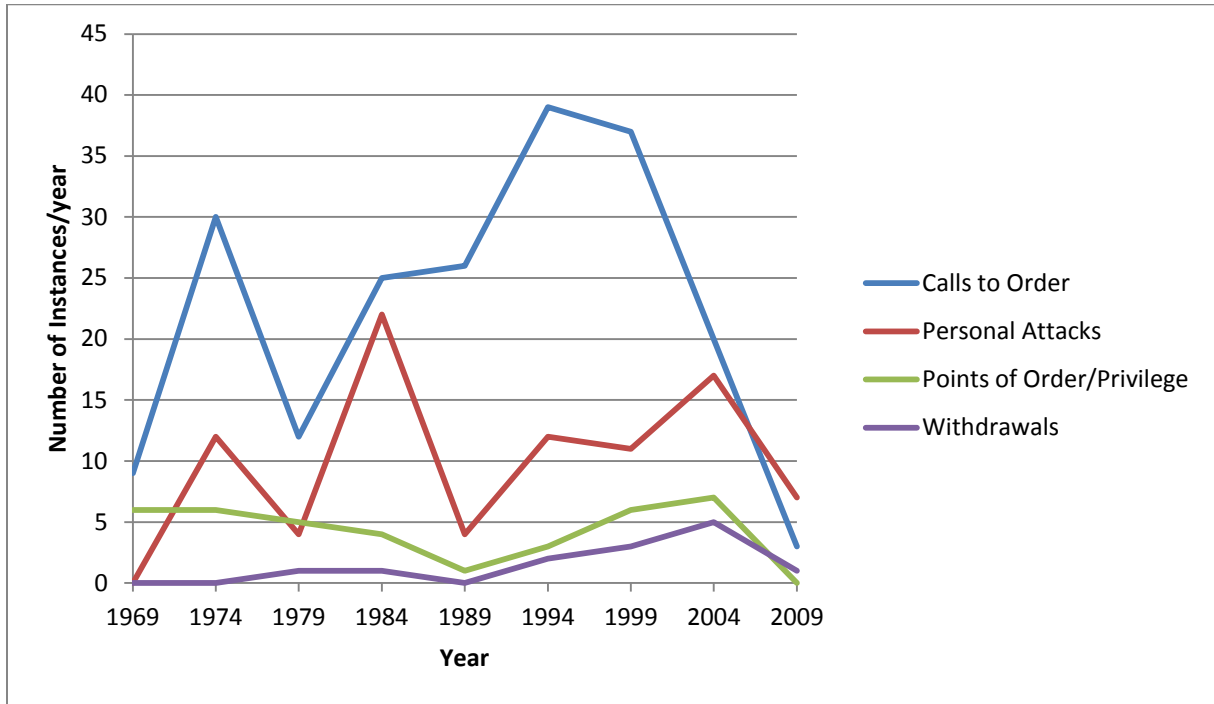
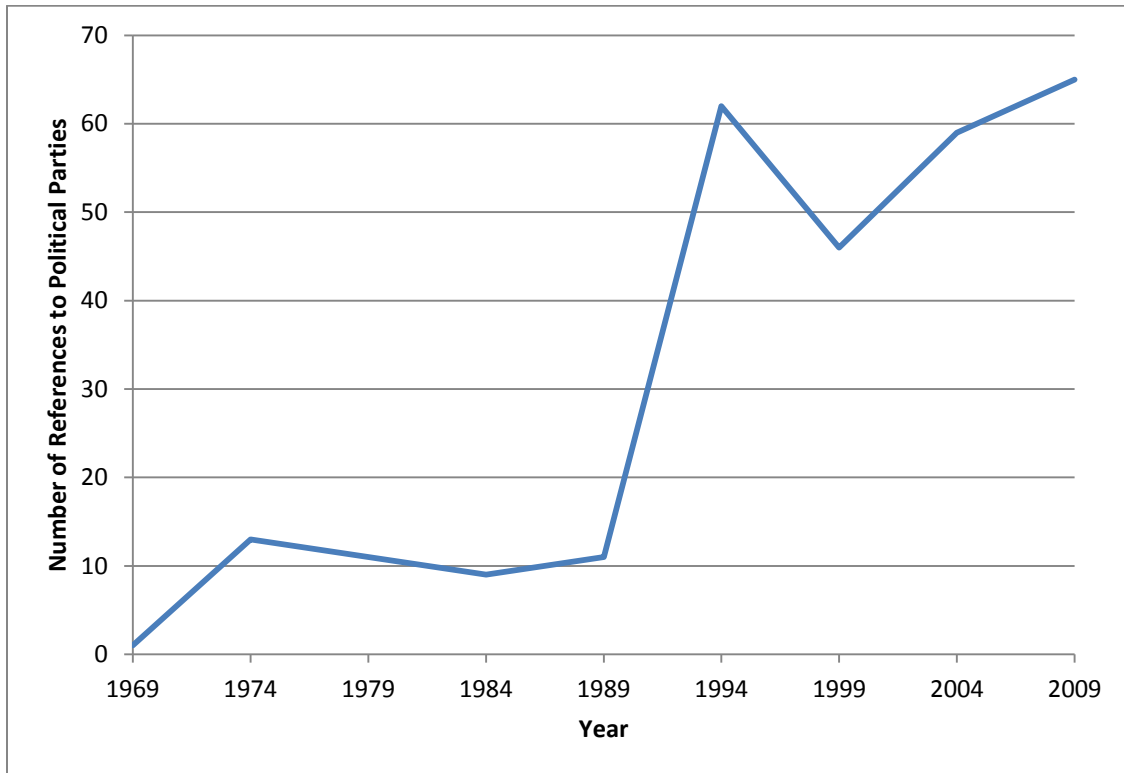


Figure 5: Level of Partisanship in Question Period



ANALYSIS

When parsing this data, it is important to recall that the intent is not to demonstrate declining civility or less meaningful debate. Such findings are only tangentially related to the issue at hand. Few would argue that decorum has deteriorated in recent decades, and the statistics herein do offer further credence to such a claim. Time and again, we see consistent upward trends when tracking indicators of incivility and unproductive rhetoric.

What is being attempted here, however, is something somewhat trickier. What this analysis sets out to do is not only investigate the degradation of debate, but to tie it to a specific event; specifically, 1986 and the introduction of cameras. Viewed from this lens, the statistics are not quite as supportive, but are no less telling.

For cameras to have brought about changes in legislative function and behaviour – for cameras to have precipitated change – one would expect to see no evidence of such changes prior to the introduction of the precipitant. Time and time again, however, across a wide swath of indicators, one sees distinct upward trends prior to the introduction of cameras that simply intensify after 1986. Such observations suggest that cameras did not in and of themselves *cause* much of anything. Rather, they exacerbated pre-existing trends. They were catalyst rather than precipitant.

The tone of exchanges in Question Period consistently deteriorated over the 40 year period under study. If we disregard 1989, which is something of an outlier, the rate of deterioration is quite constant. Rhetorical questions and Ministerial deflections may have become more frequent after 1986, and may have begun to increase at a more rapid rate, but they did not have a growth rate of zero prior to cameras. Far from it; tone was consistently deteriorating decades before the introduction of cameras.

Through all this, partisanship stands as an exception. In the figures for partisan references, cameras do seem to serve as more than catalyst. References to political parties do not demonstrate a clear upward trend in the years prior to the introduction of cameras. Beginning in 1994, however, following the introduction of cameras, the frequency of these references increases substantially and plateaus, demonstrating no further growth. It is figures like these that suggest a single isolated moment reshaping the nature of debate. Why no increase is observed in 1989, slightly over two years after the introduction of cameras, is unclear. It is not until 1994 that the change takes place. Perhaps it is due to a prolonged adjustment period, wherein cameras' effects are delayed as MPPs learn how to understand and best use them. Or perhaps it is due to another inciting factor; perhaps cameras are not the culprit. Regardless, only with partisanship can we observe a distribution over time that suggests a single isolated precipitant.

These findings demand a consideration of the other factors at play. If cameras only exacerbated the effects of pre-existing or complementary forces, what other elements were involved? David Warner highlights changes to the Standing Orders as a particularly powerful force in the degradation of civility and debate. David Peterson's 1985 minority revised the Standing Orders as a component of its accord with the NDP. One such revision eliminated evening sittings of the House.³² Warner argues that this change has been to the detriment of collegiality and a healthy parliamentary culture. There was a time, he explains, when the Speaker would regularly host MPPs for dinner in his apartment. These dinners would be tri-partisan, collegial, and very valuable. Warner distinctly remembers his first dinner: hosted by Speaker Russell Rowe, he met Members from each of the other parties, and was able to put human faces to his opponents. Without the late sitting, Speakers find it very hard to get Members to commit to dinners. Political pressures being what they are, Warner continues, Members are always eager to return to their constituencies.

Further revisions introduced by Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government moved Question Period to a set time each morning, affording Members the opportunity to vacate Queen's Park by the afternoon. Less time at the Legislature means less time in each other's company as colleagues and peers, and the institution has suffered for it. Warner also points to downgraded committee travel as a further blow to

³² McDonald, "Evolution of the Ontario Standing Orders," 34.

multi-partisan collegiality, as Members are spending less time than ever with their colleagues of different stripes. Surely, these many changes accent, reinforce, or even stimulate the effect of cameras.

In 2010, Conservative MP Michael Chong introduced a Private Member's Motion designed to improve the conduct and efficacy of Question Period as a means of empowering the Legislature, holding the government to account, and restoring its influence as a force for shaping public policy. Cameras do not appear in his recommendations. Either Chong acknowledges that they have become an untouchable fixture beyond reproach, or he believes that they are not alone, or even paramount, in parliament's degradation.

Chong chiefly recommends three reforms, each of which speaks to a failing of current procedure, albeit federal procedure. He criticizes Standing Orders that allow only thirty-five seconds for questions and replies. Such a restriction practically invites flippant, shallow, theatrical exchanges. Chong argues that an extension to one minute would allow for more meaningful proceedings.³³ The Ontario experience may suggest otherwise, but regardless, the point is well made, both at Queen's Park and in the House of Commons: time limits tend to degrade quality exchanges.

Chong's second recommendation is for a more rigorous enforcement of decorum by the Speaker.³⁴ Have Ontario's Speakers become more passive? The fact that the frequency of calls to order has remained relatively constant over the past four decades as other indicators of incivility have increased suggest that the allegation may have some merit. The lack of increase in Speaker intervention may actually reflect a decrease in enforcement. Heather MacIvor suggests that such a trend is an effect of the introduction of elected Speakers. MacIvor addresses former federal Speaker Peter Milliken, but her arguments apply readily to Ontario's recent Speakers: "Mr. Milliken knows that his tenure depends on the very people whom he is supposed to discipline for bad behaviour. He is caught between a powerful personal incentive to curry favour, and his official duty to maintain the dignity of Parliament."³⁵ A pressing conflict indeed, and one that may further Chong's concerns.

Chong also recommends "a rotational schedule for the attendance of Ministers in Question Period," similar to the practice at Westminster.³⁶ Requiring each Minister to prepare for and attend Oral Questions every day occupies much of each day's schedule, keeping them from other productive work, even if many will sit through the entire duration of Question Period without answering a single question. Furthermore, having the full Cabinet take questions results in scattered, broad questioning. Frances Ryan suggests that mandatory Ministerial attendance coupled with strict time limits make it "easier and more politically advantageous for an MP to make a political statement or to ask a rhetorical question."³⁷ A more focused line of questioning each day could lead to more fulsome exchanges.

Kelly Blidook suggests a systemic incentive structure in the Legislature that prioritizes symbolic over substantive behaviour. Regardless of the role that cameras play therein, and Blidook does not address parliamentary broadcasting in his paper, a structure of advancement, media demands, and institutional incentives that prize symbolism are bound to produce increases in rhetoric, partisanship, and incivility.³⁸

Gary Levy and Jay Hill speak to the increased authority of party leadership and party strategy in selecting those Members who shall be graced with a question, and the resulting degradation of debate. No longer do Members rise, attempt to catch the Speaker's eye, and take initiative in the House to raise an issue of particular importance. Hill actually credits this change to cameras and the demands of broadcast aesthetics.³⁹ Levy simply laments the resulting decline in civility: "Since most members know in advance

³³ Chong, "Rethinking Question Period," 6.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ MacIvor, "Question Period," 3.

³⁶ Chong, "Rethinking Question Period," 6.

³⁷ Ryan, "Can Question Period be Reformed," 20.

³⁸ Blidook, "Symbol vs. Substance."

³⁹ Hill, "Reflections on Reforming Question Period," 5.

that they will not be participating in Question Period but are merely spectators, they behave as spectators do at sporting events – by cheering their favourite team and heckling the opponents.”⁴⁰

The political climate surely also comes to bear in this analysis. Prior to 1985, the Progressive Conservative party had dominated Ontario politics for decades. The 1985 election ushered in a new era of political competition in which changes in government were frequent and decisive, and fundamentally changed the look and behaviour of the Legislature. A tenuous minority government and an opposition that had just lost its firm, seemingly interminable grip on power can lead to very heated exchanges. It certainly could explain the hike in partisanship in the 1980s, wherein all parties were looking to the next election and a legitimate shot at government, branding themselves and highlighting the weaknesses not just of governments or Ministers, but of parties. The governing party was suddenly able and very willing to deflect to past governments’ failings; genuine political competition allowed them to do so. The Bill Davis minorities may very well have had a similar effect, explaining increases in incivility and rhetoric prior to the introduction of cameras.

David Warner suggests a further effect of political dynamism: high turnover among Members. Three governments over ten years, he explains, brought about a deterioration of institutional memory. When Warner was first elected, he was surrounded by experienced members who would rein him in if he ever went too far over the line. One of his more experienced colleagues once had to remind him the “guy you’re attacking, he got here the same way you did.” Warner claims that the guidance, perspective, and civility of experienced Members has declined with high turnover. Furthermore, with rapid and frequent electoral shifts, long-term relationships among colleagues are rarer. These changes are reflected in legislative behaviour, Warner suggests. Turnover is a barrier to collegiality.

The results of the quantitative analysis demand consideration of broader effects, each of which has its own role to play in the changing nature of parliamentary discourse.

CONCLUSION

Cameras represent an easy and obvious scapegoat for changes in the nature and tenor of parliamentary debate. One can isolate the exact day of their introduction, and they were a loud and conspicuous addition. Simply put, cameras are easy to blame. The findings in this paper suggest, however, that to do so is reductive. With the exception of partisanship, there is no trend in the televised Legislature that had not already been on the increase in the decades prior to the camera’s introduction. Cameras may have exacerbated or supplemented, but it is difficult to argue based on the findings herein that they *caused* much of anything observable in today’s Parliament. Stephen Frantzich and John Sullivan put it aptly:

“Technologies and the organizations and individuals they affect interact, rather than exist in a clear cause-and-effect relationship. ‘Technologies do not ‘impact’ on organizations like two ships colliding at sea. Instead, technological innovations are filtered through the organization’s traditions, constraints and resources.”⁴¹

Cameras in the Ontario Legislature have indeed been filtered through new and ever-changing Standing Orders, through newfound political volatility, through changing media effects, through changes in the expectations of an MPP, through changes in attendance, through incentive structures, through Speaker behaviour, through the structural requirements of Question Period, and through the powerful interactions between each of these independently meaningful effects.

An admittedly crude quantification presents cameras as an addition to an already dynamic, evolving House. Frantzich and Sullivan further stress that “technologies do not appear in isolation,” and

⁴⁰ Levy, “Who Killed Parliamentary Government,” 3.

⁴¹ Frantzich and Sullivan, “The C-Span Revolution,” 257,

warn against the dangers of becoming a “technological determinist, associating every change with a particular technology and denying alternative causes.”⁴²

There are and will remain those, like Yaroslav Baran, who argue for the outright removal of cameras, thereby forcing reporters to attend in person and offer fully contextualized accounts and analyses. “This is the kind of reportage we have coming from the Senate and our courts – society’s final camera-free bastions – and both institutions consistently offer immeasurably superior decorum and discourse than the House of Commons,” Baran argues.⁴³ There will be others, like Norm Sterling and Sean Conway, who lament the cameras’ deleterious effects, but concede that they are here to stay.

Perhaps it is true that cameras degraded our province’s highest, most honourable debate. In so doing, however, they are not alone, and are not a precipitant. This paper cannot settle the debate over whether cameras’ benefits outweigh their costs; over whether transparent walls offset shuttered windows. Instead, consider it a caution against laying blame on the most conspicuous culprit in a dynamic, ever-evolving institution.

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⁴² Frantzich and Sullivan, “*The C-Span Revolution*,” 257.

⁴³ Baran and Fox, “Fixing Parliament,” 49.

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APPENDIX

Coding Scheme

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS: A question that is not seeking information, but is rather an argument in itself. If a question can be answered with a succinct piece of information, it is not considered rhetorical for the purposes of this project, even if it may still have been rhetorical in intent.

DEFLECTED QUESTIONS: A Ministerial response that either does not provide the information being sought, or simply disregards the content of the question entirely.

TONE: Tone was catalogued as either negative or not negative (positive questioning is something of a rarity, unless it is coming from the same party), and was gauged based on an entire turn of questioning, including supplementaries. If a given exchange contained a personal attack, sustained interjections, or an intervention by the Speaker, it was classified as negative.

PERSONAL ATTACKS: If, in a question or answer, an individual Member is criticized on a personal level (e.g., incompetence, personality flaws) rather than for his or her policy.

CALLS TO ORDER: Any record of the Speaker calling the House or individual Members to order in the transcript.

INTERJECTIONS: Any statement by a Member that has not been recognized by the Speaker. In Hansard, interjections appear either transcribed in full, or simply as “Interjection.”

POINTS OF ORDER/PRIVILEGE: Every instance of a Member raising a Point of Order or Privilege. Erroneous Points of Order or Privilege are not differentiated from valid ones.

WITHDRAWALS: Any instance where a Member withdraws an unparliamentary statement or word.

WARNINGS: Any instance of a Member being warned by the Speaker for unparliamentary behaviour.

REFERENCES TO PARTIES: Any mention of the name of a political party.

Table 1: Indicators of Civility and Substantive Debate

	1969	1974	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Total Questions	115	252	181	138	139	123	154	157	171
Friendly Questions	//	//	//	//	21	12	38	42	34
Total Opposition Questions	115	252	181	138	118	111	116	115	137
Rhetorical Questions	6	48	48	45	34	37	80	47	69
Deflected Questions	14	45	38	15	30	62	46	78	74
Tone of exchanges(+/-) (exc. friendly questions)	+ 50 - 4	+ 71 - 20	+46 - 15	+ 25 - 9	+ 34 - 7	+ 24 - 19	+ 29 - 18	+ 32 - 21	+ 33 - 25
Personal Attacks	0	12	4	22	4	12	11	17	7
Calls to Order	9	30	12	25	26	39	37	20	3
Interjections	28	222	190	57	26	68	25	42	17
Points of Order/Privilege	6	6	5	4	1	3	6	7	0
Withdrawals	0	0	1	1	0	2	3	5	1
Warnings	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	0
References to Parties	1	13	11	9	11	62	46	59	65