

## Motion to civilize the House in limbo

### Question period 'a serious and sad spectacle' five months after vote

By Mark Kennedy, Postmedia News March 8, 2011

Five months after MPs overwhelmingly voted to elevate the decorum of question period, the initiative is stuck in limbo.

The parliamentary committee that was tasked with examining the motion by Conservative MP Michael Chong has held only one public hearing and heard testimony from just one witness - Chong himself.

Moreover, time is running short. The committee is required to report back to the House of Commons by April 6.

It might not even get that far, with the possibility that Parliament could be dissolved later this month so that a federal election can be held.

If that happens, Chong's motion will die and the next Parliament won't have to deal with the issue unless another similar resolution comes forward.

In an interview with Postmedia News, Chong said he has been making regular inquiries to the committee about when it plans to hold public hearings to hear from parliamentary experts and review the various specific reform proposals he has put forward.

"At this point, I'm cautiously optimistic," said Chong, who noted the procedure and House affairs committee includes senior members of the parties' caucuses.

"It's up to them to take their cue from the vote in the House," said Chong. "If they don't get the work done and they don't propose substantive reforms to question period, the problem remains. And the problem is simple. There is a growing gap between Canadians and their Parliament. And if the people in this town don't get that, then that's something we're going to have to address another time."

Conservative MP Joe Preston, the committee's chair, said he realizes there is a "looming" deadline for the report, but the committee has been busy working on other issues.

For instance, he said that when there are motions of privilege that come from the Commons for his committee's consideration -as has happened when the finance committee's report was leaked -those issues take precedence.

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Preston also said the committee is examining recommendations from the chief electoral officer.

"Personally, I'd like to reform question period," he said. "We've called for the witness list from all of the parties and we're ready to go the minute what we have before us clears up.

"It's something I want to see happen. It's not going to fall off the table. It may get pushed back slightly, but it won't fall off the table."

Preston said if necessary, the committee can ask for an extension of its April 6 deadline, but admitted there's nothing that can be done if an election is called before then.

Last fall, a poll found that 66 per cent of Canadians believe the parliamentary question period has become a forum for MPs to just "grandstand" for the media and score "cheap political points."

David Mitchell, president of the Public Policy Forum, which commissioned the poll, said Monday he's concerned at how MPs are moving so slowly on Chong's motion.

"Question period has been a serious and sad spectacle that has served to make Canadians more cynical about politics and it's really a pox on all their houses," said Mitchell.

"Civility in the House and the kind of behaviour we witness on a day-to-day basis continues to be bemoaned by all the party leaders, including the prime minister. If party leaders are serious about this, they will ensure that their members who are members of the committee overseeing this matter will move more expeditiously."

Last fall, it appeared Chong's efforts had momentum. On Oct. 6, MPs voted 235-44 to pass his motion and pass it on to the committee for a review.

It had the support of MPs from three parties: the governing Conservatives, the opposition Liberals and the New Democrats.

The front benches of the government's cabinet turned out to support the motion, although Prime Minister Stephen Harper was absent.

The Bloc Québécois voted against the motion.

On Oct. 28, Chong appeared before the parliamentary committee for two hours. He was asked for the names of possible witnesses for future hearings and suggested former Conservative prime minister Joe Clark, former Reform leader Preston Manning, and former NDP leader Ed Broadbent.

## RULES FOR GOOD BEHAVIOUR IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

The motion put forward by Conservative MP Michael Chong to raise the level of decorum during question period includes the following proposals:

Give the Speaker a stronger mandate to impose discipline on MPs who behave badly.

Lengthen the time limit for questions and answers.

Require ministers, if they are in the House, to answer questions directed at them (recently, for instance, International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda has been shielded from answering questions about the document-doctoring affair by Government House Leader John Baird).

Allocate half the questions each day to MPs who are randomly selected.

The prime minister would appear in question period only one day a week -Wednesday -but would handle all the questions that day.

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<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Motion+civilize+House+limbo/4400023/story.html#ixzz1G1FoQPGm>