

QUESTION PERIOD—DEBATE OR SPECTACLE?

Government and opposition parties spend much time discussing and debating laws in the legislative chamber, in committees, and in the community. Perhaps the best-known of these discussions is the thirty minutes set aside every day for Question Period. Question Period is a forum where the opposition parties question the government on issues of the day.

Question Period was introduced to the Saskatchewan legislature in 1976 on an experimental basis, at about the same time it was introduced in the House of Commons in Ottawa. Following a successful trial period, it was formally made part of routine proceedings on November 22nd of that year.

Because Question Period is sometimes more a performance than a substantial debate, it is sometimes thought of as political theatre. The goal of the opposition is to eventually form government, so their questions in Question Period are often designed to discredit the government and its policies. They try to catch the government off-guard, and point out differences between what the government has said it will do and what it is actually doing. The government has no advance warning of what the questions will be.

Questions are usually based on current events. In preparation for each question period, advisors for the opposition and the government monitor provincial trends, largely through mainstream and social media.

While the questions in Question Period are to the government, like all procedures in the legislature, MLAs must direct statements to the Speaker of the House. In fact, members must not refer to each other by name. Instead, they refer to one-another by title, such as the Minister of Education or the Leader of the Opposition. If the MLA has no title, then they are referred to by their constituency, such as the Member from Cannington. This keeps with parliamentary tradition: it is a sign of respect and helps to avoid personalising debate. We should think of members as representatives of their constituency or of their ministry.

During procedures in the legislature, members are immune from slander or libel laws. This means they are free to make statements about other members without fear of legal repercussions. This does not mean, however, that MLAs can say anything they wish. If MLAs use unparliamentary language—such as swearing or accusing other members of lying—they will be asked by the speaker to retract the statement.

In 2005, a new recording system was installed in the legislature. Shortly after, a microphone picked up the agriculture critic referring to the deputy premier as a “lying s.o.b.” This broke two protocols of parliamentary language: accusing another member of lying, and uttering an obscenity. The speaker asked the agriculture critic to apologise and withdraw his remarks.

Because good humour is not considered unparliamentary, the agriculture critic was able to bring levity to the situation. He began his apology by saying “First of all kudos, Mr. Speaker, to the new sound system in the Assembly and to whoever designed and installed it.”

