

Halton Hills Papers Parliament Hill Report

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Canadian politics needs more civility and restraint. Over the last few months decorum in the House of Commons has declined from already abysmally low levels, as has the level of public comment made by elected officials outside of the House. All political parties are culpable in this regard, mine included. And this all contributes to public cynicism about politicians and does nothing to further debate.

I am not suggesting that we ban the occasional witty barb thrown across the aisle or that we prohibit the occasional standing ovation. These are part of our parliamentary conventions and traditions, and they can be devastatingly effective. What I am talking about is the yelling and screaming, the incessant clapping, the ubiquitous standing ovations for each question and answer, and the personal insults.

To be fair, the House typically sits for about nine hours a day, and for most of these nine hours day this bawdy behaviour is not the norm. However, for the 45 minutes a day that is Question Period, the place turns into a Roman stadium, as gladiators compete with each other as to who can bray the loudest and who can hurl the biggest insults. This is all done in the hope of getting a 3 second clip on the nightly news. There is no doubt in my mind that Question Period is broken.

Here is what we can do to fix this problem. More time should be given to ask questions, and more time given to answer questions (currently 35 seconds each). A certain number of substantive questions should be submitted 24 or 48 hours before, so that Ministers have time to prepare real answers; rhetorical questions get rhetorical answers. The Speaker should rigorously enforce decorum; he should name members that step out of line, so that they are expelled from the House. Those expelled can explain to the media and their constituents why they were removed and suffer the consequences. Finally, the media can get their 3 second clips for the nightly news from the scrums outside the House after Question Period.

I am also not suggesting that we as opposition shouldn't be vigilant or hard-hitting. There is a difference being tough and pointed, as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is supposed to be, and descending into the kind of personal insult and bawdiness we have seen recently from both sides of the House. While I and many of my colleagues do not engage in this kind of behaviour, many do. They've got to clean up their act.

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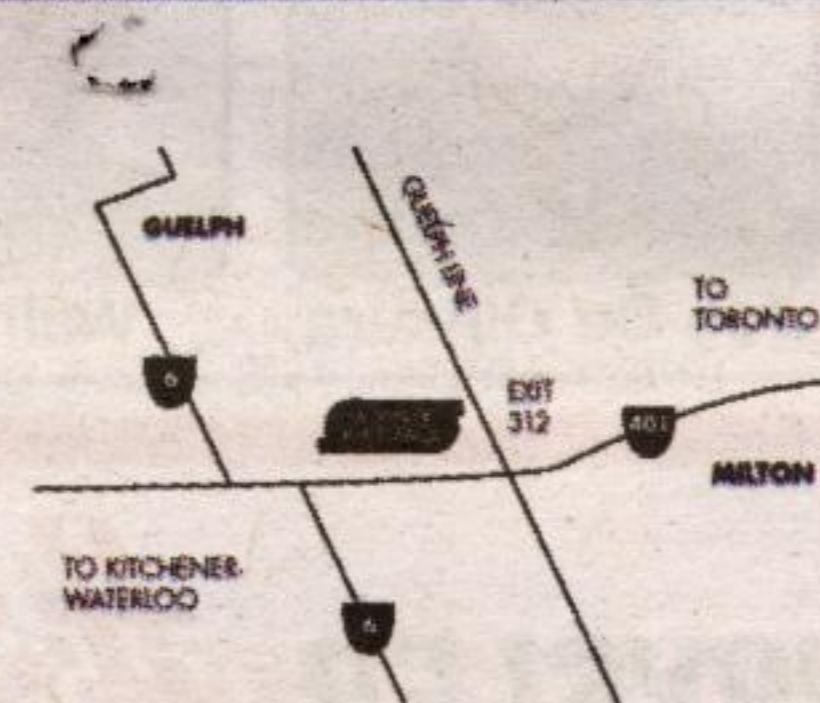


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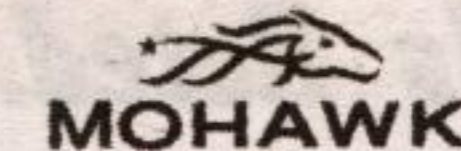


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