
Abstract

Is the minority parliament 2010-12 more aggressive and adversarial than ever before? Many commentators have suggested that this parliament is one of hyper-aggression, personal hostilities and rudeness. But is it? Certainly there are some differences in style and tension in a minority parliament compared to one with a comfortable majority, but how hostile and ferocious is the current parliament compared with its immediate predecessors? This paper examines whether current parliamentary behaviour has allegedly ‘crossed a line’ in terms of outright hostility, personal attacks and disruptive procedural tactics which heighten adversarialism. This paper will examine whether or not the current parliament is worse than previous parliaments, and if so what might explain such differences.

To gauge the behaviour of the current parliament I will attempt to construct a ‘ferocity index’ through which to measure the levels of ferocious politics, aggression, invective, hostility, and tribal adversarialism. No single measure of parliamentary behaviour can indicate the level of aggression and hostility on its own. Rather, a composite index is needed that collates measures ranging from the use of parliamentary procedures (gags, divisions, suspension of standing orders), as well as abusive personal attacks and invective language (withdrawals, censures, naming members, and removals from the chamber). This quantitative evidence will be supplemented with qualitative assessments of the degree of hostility across parliaments. If parliaments are becoming more aggressive then this may have implications for ongoing parliamentary operations, the quality of political debate, the types of people who go into politics, and the public’s perceptions of the performance of parliament.
Introduction: Adversarialism and Westminster Parliaments

A casual glance at a national broadsheet or the nightly news during a sitting week would give the impression that Australia’s parliament is more hyper-aggressive, rude and driven by personal hostilities than ever before. After an unclear election result in 2010 the public was promised a ‘kinder, gentler polity’ (Grattan 2010). Yet, public debate about parliament suggests that the current parliament is neither kind nor gentle. Instead it is imbued with both scandal and paralysis as the troubles of Craig Thompson, Peter Slipper, Sophie Mirrabella and Mary Jo Fisher vie for prominence with the authority crippling merry-go-round of Labor leadership speculation stories. Many MPs, mostly from the government, have stated that that behaviour is worse now than ever before (Emerson 2012; Fitzgibbon 2012; Wong 2012) and a number of MPs have expressed their concerns about the level of negativity and hostility within public debate (Byrne 2012, 355). A selection of experienced commentators has decried question time’s decent in total theatre, if not farce (Keane 2012; Cassidy 2012) and others have called for parliamentary reform (Craven 2012). More broadly, there is regular public complaint that the public discourse in general has sunk to new lows (‘Morals and Politics’ 2012; ‘Manners, miners and the can-do attitude’ 2012; Ackland 2011) and that the public recorded a 33% decline in satisfaction with the Parliament in the last year (Essential Media 2012, 13).

But is our parliament worse than ever before? Many MPs, mostly from the Opposition side claim that it is no worse than previous parliaments (Brandis 2012; Costello 2012) and discussion of low parliamentary standards is not new. Indeed political debate returns to this subject with familiar regularity. In recent memory the suicide of Labor MP Greg Wilton in June 2000 shocked the chamber. MPs reflected that ‘the best thing we could do would be to rededicate ourselves to being kinder and gentler to each other’ (Abbott 2000a, 17574). Yet, only days later parliament descended into uproar when Tony Abbott was
ejected from the House for calling Cheryl Kernot a ‘sanctimonious windbag’ — the first Minister in 30 years (Abbott 2000b, 21705). Abbott was followed by five other MPs, including Kernot, who were also ejected from the Chamber that day (Williams 2000).

Complaints about the behaviour of parliamentarians are as old as the institution itself with reports of ‘pandemonium’ breaking out in parliament as 11 gag orders and 17 divisions occurred in just a few hours (The Canberra Times 1935). Indeed a glance at Hansard post 1975, the early 1940s or the debates surrounding party formation in the first decade of the twentieth century would reveal a rich vein of invective and abuse. It is evident that the parliament has long been home to poor behaviour. Amanda Vanstone (1989) commissioned a review of unparliamentarily language from 1976-1987 in response to a concern about lowering standards. In 1965, Gough Whitlam famously threw a glass of water in Paul Hasluck’s face; who could imagine such a scene in parliament today?

The poor behaviour of parliamentarians seems to belie the ostensible reasons why citizens elect representatives. Instead, the public regularly sees parliament through the prism of partisan jeering and discord. Yet, this view of the institution overly limits the many roles of parliament which include deliberation and debate, the presentation of alternative ideas and, importantly, partisan competition and theatre (Wanna and Uhr 2000, 13). The public’s engagement with politics through television (Grattan 1996, 224-5) and increasingly, social media, has elevated the sensationalism of theatrics and stunts in political communication (Tanner 2011). While the gravitas of parliamentary chambers has decreased in recent decades, the visibility of the chamber — particularly during question time — has increased meaning that the visibility of MPs throwing ‘sand in the face of the other child in the sandpit’ (Jenkins 2012) is driving dissatisfaction with the behaviour of parliamentarians in the community.
Despite the general decline of parliament as the premier political arena, parliament is still crucial for interactions between political actors and is a critical apprenticeship institution for the development of political parliamentary skills and Australia’s political culture. Winston Churchill reflected the influence of the chamber’s architecture has on adversarial politics: ‘we shape our buildings and our buildings shape us’ (cited in Rush 2005, 141). The opposition is fundamentally dependent on Parliament both to hold the government to account and to place the government under pressure (Reid and Forrest 1989, 320). Yet, in Australia, oppositions in the lower house have only procedural and conventional opportunities to hold the government to account and no actual powers (Kaiser 2008, 23). For oppositions with few resources, parliamentary tactics, manoeuvres and theatre become important tools in their armoury. As Uhr (1980, 20; 2009, 71) noted, Irish parliamentarians in the 1880s pioneered the use of procedural obstruction and parliamentary questions which remain some of the hallmarks of ‘Westminster’ today. For oppositions, parliament is a platform to discredit the government and engage in psychological battle. The use of tactics to challenge, obstruct or undermine governments is an important strategic decision for oppositions and a critical first step to building momentum for their side of politics.

Additionally, the aggression fostered by the physical context and the political organisation of the chamber which pits government against alternative government has had an important impact on the political culture of Westminster systems. Australia’s parliament shares many features with her Westminster cousins, most notably the degree of partisan conflict in parliament (Norton 1998, 23) and the importance of this ‘gladiatorial battle’ to the broader political contest (Griffith, Ryle and Wheeler-Booth 1989, 354-356) especially during question time. Westminster parliaments are environments in which aggressive and provocative behaviour is both sanctioned and rewarded, factors which shape the way in which political actors interact (Bull and Wells 2012; Harris 2001).
However, there are some important differences between Australia and other jurisdictions. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister’s Question Time occurs once a week and only for half an hour. In New Zealand, the parliament is now elected on a proportional basis altering the highly aggressive character of the chamber. Additionally, question time is held only three times during the sitting week and allows a high number of supplementary questions (Salmond 2004, 77) again altering the dynamic of debate in the chamber with questions allocated by the percentage of vote hold. Canada’s question period is more frequent than in Australia but only proceeds for 45 minutes and supplementary questions are permitted (Bédard 2011). The Canadian tradition of rapping on the tables makes for a rowdy session and regular media complaints about the level of invective suggest that Canada’s question period is closest to our own (Niagara Falls Review 2005; Broadbent, 2010). Yet when foreign observers from Westminster and non-Westminster systems come to Australia they are regularly shocked by our parliament (Brooks, 1986; Toronto Star, 1989; Associated Press, 1993). In 2010, British journalist Matthew Engel declared Australia’s House of representatives ‘the worst’ because ‘these curs only snarl as instructed’ (Engle 2010).

There are a number of factors which exacerbated conflict in the Australian Parliament. First the small size of the Australian parliament has exaggerated the dominance and discipline of major parties. Second, the expanding size of the executive has meant that chances of an MP rising to executive level is very high further, reinforcing discipline. Third, the increasing professionalisation of the political class has reduced the number of genuine ‘characters’ entering the parliament. Over time, these factors have bled almost all spontaneity out of institution that once provided moments of comedy and levity. This is particularly evident when contrasted with the British Parliament which has maintained its emphasis on gentlemanly debate and the importance of wit. Additionally, the absence of an independent Speaker is another factor contributing to the level of partisan conflict in the Australian parliamentary chamber.
Last, Australia has the second highest rate of leadership turnover of any Western democracy, which suggests that aggression and political uncertainty are features of our polity (Bynander and ‘t Hart 2007, 61).

This paper seeks to test these assertions and to measure if the level of ferocity has in fact increased over time. I argue that level of partisan ferocity and aggressive culture in Australian politics and parliament has evolved rather than changed dramatically over time. I also suspect that the level of partisan ferocity increases over the life of a government, with low levels of ferocity in parliaments with a new government and higher levels at the end of a government’s life. Last, that the intensity of conflict in the chamber has increased as a result of the minority government. The discussion above leads to three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: That the level of ferocity has increased over time.
Hypothesis 2: That the level of ferocity increases over the life of a government.
Hypothesis 3: That the level of ferocity has increased with the minority parliament.

**Method**

**Quantitative measures**

While no single measurement alone is able to act as an indicator for an increased level of partisan ferocity and aggression inside the Parliament, the combination of multiple measures will be able to tell us if levels of partisan ferocity inside the parliament are higher, reflected by the increased level of disruptive parliamentary tactics. More importantly, while these measures cannot say definitively if a parliament was more ferocious or aggressive it can highlight specific time periods in the history of
the parliament where further investigation may be warranted.

All the empirical data was collected using a complete parliamentary sitting from the House of Representatives which means that the whole range of behaviours within the parliamentary chamber can be examined — rather than just selecting question time — which is both highly theatrical and the institution in parliament that is the most combative. The empirical data was collected in two ways. The first data set collected all incidents of suspensions of standing orders; expulsions form the chamber under standing order 94(a) and prior to November 2004, 304A; the naming of members; and censures from 1996 till July 28 2012. These measures represent ‘exceptional’ occurrences. Either circumstances more important than all other business before the parliament, such as suspension of the standing orders or censure motions, or they represent disciplinary action by the House of sufficient seriousness, such as expulsions from the chamber.

The second data set was collected by using a randomised sample of sitting days of the House of Representatives; 12 data points were selected for each parliamentary sitting in the period 1996-2012. These measures include: calls for order by the speaker, interjections recorded by Hansard, warnings issued by the speaker and requests for withdrawals by MPs. These measures are reflective of the tone and quality of interaction between political actors in the chamber. Last, calls for order and warnings by the speaker can be an indicator of the general rowdiness and noise level in the chamber but they are also reflective of the personal style of individual speakers.

Qualitative Interviews of Elite Observations

Eleven Interviews with senior parliamentary gallery journalists were conducted between July 17 2012 and July 24 2012. Interviewees were selected on the basis of time spent in the gallery (preferably over
twenty years) and the level of seniority because the organisation of newsrooms means that senior journalists are more likely to regularly attend parliament as a regular part of their working day. Eight out of eleven journalists interviewed, have served in the gallery for more than 20 years, of these two had served in excess of 25 years and two in excess of 30 years. Of the remaining journalists, one entered in 1994 and two entered during the Howard government one having served as a political staffer since the early 1990s and the other having covered state politics since the late 1980s. As long serving members of the gallery their collective observations cover the tenures of eight prime ministers and sixteen opposition leaders (not including multiple tenures). Their observations are a vital qualitative component as the empirical evidence which can only say so much about the human and personal tone of interaction within the chamber.

However, it is important to acknowledge that interviews have their limitations. Self-selection bias is a recurrent problem of interviews, but in this study no journalist approached declined to be interviewed. Another problem is that data obtained from interviews can be subject to selectivity, faulty memory, nostalgia and ‘presentism’. However with journalists, who can work closely and intimately with the political actors they observe, it is important to acknowledge that their observations can also be subject to post-hoc or self-justification as they also have an important role to play in how politicians are portrayed. Importantly, only one journalists declined to be identified, giving the interviews added weight as they can be fully assessed by readers.

Results
Journalists all responded that the current parliament was ‘raucous, theatrical, [and] adversarial’ (Hartcher 2012). Yet, despite current perceptions most respondents felt that compared with previous parliaments, behaviour it was ‘about the same’ (Atkins 2012) and ‘just as rude as in the past’ (Taylor, 2012). Michelle Grattan (2012) suggests that the parliament today is ‘particularly ferocious’ but cautions that ‘historical comparisons can be a bit misleading ... because what tends to happen is that
you get intense phases of political conflict and the parliamentary behaviour can reflect the phase rather than going from very good in the past to very bad in the present’. Others felt that while the parliament was ‘essentially as noisy as previous ones … the tone of the joint, the degree of nastiness involved… there is a clear unfriendliness across the table’ not seen since the early 1990s (Farr 2012).

The parliamentary sitting data examining calls for order, interjections, warnings by the speaker and numbers of withdrawn comments can give us historical insights into the level of ferocity and the tone of partisan conflict inside the House of Representatives chamber. The number of calls for order (Fig. 1) is

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**Fig. 1 Calls for order 1996-2012**

Randomised sample

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* Data collected up to 28 July 2012

one measure of the level of noise in the chamber. The sample is negatively skewed suggesting an increase over time. The median number of calls for order is 192 and 50 per cent of the data lies between 114 ($Q_1$) and 230($Q_3$) with a standard deviation of 68. The increase in calls for order is evident after 2006 with four out of seven years exceeding 230($Q_3$). In 2011, the highest year, the Speaker called for
order 317 times, a figure more than two standard deviations above the mean (180 calls for order). In 2012, the number to June was 230, which is likely to overtake 2011 by year’s end.

Interjections are a measure of both noise in the chamber and the level of partisan conflict because they are signifiers of disagreement and contempt by one side of the house with the other. The number of Interjections (Fig. 2) shows a modest negative skew which suggests that interjections are a regular feature of parliamentary behaviour; unlikely to be noticeably worse from year to year and thereby confirming the feeling of the journalists interviewed that parliament is much the same. The average number of interjections per year is 248 and the range is between 223 (Q₁) and 273(Q₃) with a standard

* Data collected up to 28 July 2012

deviation of 73.72. Interjections in the thirty-eighth parliament (1996-1998) are all lower than 223 (Q₁) and the years which fall above 273 (Q₃ ) were 2001, 2007, 2009 and 2011. Again, 2011 is two standard deviations above the mean (248.12). Both 2001 and 2011 show a very high number of interjections.
During both years, the government was performing poorly and under sustained pressure from the opposition in the chamber. More detailed investigation would be required to better understand this phenomenon.

The number of warnings given to the Speaker by unruly members (Fig. 3), however, reveals a less conclusive picture. The data is broadly symmetrical. The average number of warnings given is 50 with a range of 33 (Q₁) and 63 (Q₃). The data is highly variable from year to year suggesting that the personal style of the Speaker has a large effect on the number of warnings given. For example, the numbers of warnings given from 2005 - 2007 sit on 63 (Q₃) or well above during the speakership of David Hawker

* Data collected up to 28 July 2012

compared with the tenure of Harry Jenkins before the minority government whose parliaments sit below 33 (Q₁). These same figures also suggest that the parliaments are most benign at the beginning of
a government’s life and most ferocious towards the end. The low numbers from 1996 to 1998 further support this argument, sitting at the bottom end of the interquartile range (the middle 50 per cent) however, this conclusion would be stronger if data prior to 1996 were available.

* Data collected up to 28 July 2012

An examination of all three figures across parliaments (Fig. 4) shows a marked increase in the number of calls for order and interjections during the forty-first parliaments. The small decrease in numbers between the forty-first and forty-second parliaments suggest that the parliament did not remain quiet for very long compared with the start of the Howard government. The data shows that the parliament is aggressive, but that some are more hectoring (1998-2001 and 2004-2007) while others are more disruptive and ill-disciplined (2010-2012).

Yet, the number of withdrawals (Fig. 5) is negatively skewed. Withdrawals are requested when an MP is offended by remarks made, and if in dispute, ruled on by the Speaker (Standing Orders 2010, 46).
MPs are required to withdraw unconditionally, but disputes about whether comments are offensive or untrue are common, increasing the level of partisan conflict in the chamber. In rare cases MPs refuse to withdraw which is normally proceeded by naming the MP. The median number of calls for withdrawal is 22 and 15 for withdrawals given. For calls for withdrawal the range is 16 (Q1) and 29 (Q3) and for withdrawals given 10 (Q1) and 20(Q3). The sample for 2012 is almost two standard deviations (12.71) above the mean (23.8). This suggests that parliamentarians are either twice as offensive, twice as sensitive or a combination, in 2012. Importantly, the gap between requests for withdrawal and withdrawals actually given is large in 1997, 2003, 2009, 2011 and 2012. The data suggests that accusations and character attacks are a regular feature of the parliament, but that it has

* Data collected up to 28 July 2012
increased during the minority government. The personal nature of conflict in the minority parliament is particularly evident that given, on the other measures on the index, the years 2005-2007 are usually high, but are low for this measure.

Fig. 6 MPs named and disciplined by the House 1996-2012

The number of MPs disciplined by the chamber (Fig. 6) shows high levels of disorder in the House between 2005 and 2007 and again from 2011 to mid-2012, which reflects the highly partisan tone of politics today. MPs are disciplined by the House at the discretion of the speaker in cases of wilfully obstructive or persistently disorderly behaviour (Standing Orders 2010, 45). The member is ejected for one hour under standing order 94(a) (and prior to November 2004, under 304A). In cases deemed more serious, the MP is named which is confirmed by a division. The member is usually suspended for 24
hours, but suspensions from the House may be up to seven days (Standing Orders, 46). The median number of one hour suspensions (94(a)) is 37 with a range of 25 (Q1) to 49(Q3). This means that 1996, 2000 and 2002 were particularly low conflict years and 2006, 2007, 2011 and 2012 high conflict. In fact 2011 is almost two standard deviations (18.58) above the mean (38.53). At the time of writing only half the sitting days in 2012 have occurred, meaning that the total for this year may exceed 2011.

The data shows a modest increase in the level of conflict from 1996 to 2012, suggesting that conflict ebbs and flows according to an almost cyclic pattern. While the government and the opposition manage the House collectively, it is in the government’s interest that in run smoothly, but this assumption is not automatic for the opposition. Although much of the literature on oppositions discusses the need for opposition to be constructive rather than destructive (Jennings 1966, 90) as Uhr notes (2010, 65-66), this concept is paradoxical, particularly given that the Westminster model is a negative model of opposition. More importantly, constructive opposition is often in conflict with the interests of successful oppositions— to discredit and replace the government. Indeed, the most lucrative way to advance a career in opposition is to tear down a minister (Chaney 1996, 52).

Another important factor is that the dynamics in the house are entirely different from those in the Senate because as Kaiser rightly notes, members in the chamber have almost no capacity to give leadership, gain concessions or impact decisions (Kaiser 2008, 21-3), though this is less so in the current parliament due to the revival of the committee system and the unprecedented power of the crossbenchers. The relationship between the two Houses also has a huge impact on the level of ferocity in the House of Representatives. If the government is unable to pass legislation through the Senate, especially if it is the opposition blocking it, then the House too will become a focal point for partisan conflict and the frustrations of both government and opposition will bleed back into the House. The
minority government only heightens these factors because the opposition is perpetually within reach of power but constantly falling short. The data suggest that the parliamentary reforms have not had an impact on the level of ferocity in the chamber, indeed the ‘qualitative feel of the debate ... [is] just as angry as it was five years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago’ (Hartcher 2012). Indeed repeated disputes over pairing arrangements (Sydney Morning Herald, 2011) reveal that even managing the House has become contested and the politics more petty than ever.

*Parliamentary tactics*

The journalists interviewed all agreed that parliamentary tactics were more important in the minority government. The government is careful about calling on votes because they ‘don’t want to lose’ (Atkins, 2012) and the opposition aims to make images of question time on the nightly news appear chaotic and dysfunctional to complement their broader narrative of a government in chaos (Cassidy 2012). With the numbers finely balanced, management of the House on an hourly basis is important. For example, the Gillard government kept debate on the Malaysia solution active for days in the hope that it could build the numbers in order to secure a successful vote.

In the period studied, there has been an important shift in parliamentary tactics. Since 1996, there has been a steady decline in the number of censure motions (Fig. 7). The average is 7.11 and the interquartile range is between 3(Q1) and 8(Q3). High numbers of censures occurred in 1999, 2003 and 2006 which coincide with large differences between the two major parties on policy; the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST); the Iraq War and the Australian Wheat Board (AWB) scandal and introduction of WorkChoices. The data also suggests that leadership style may also be
reflected, as censures plummet in 2004 after Mark Latham becomes leader of the opposition. Latham, not a Minister in the Hawke-Keating government, belonged to the next generation of Labor leaders and brought a new style to the job in parliament. Kevin Rudd, who became leader in 2007, also did not seek to use censures very often. The use of censure was only revived by the Liberal Opposition in significant numbers in 2011, during the minority government. Significantly, the Rudd and Gillard governments have been remarkably free of ministerial scandals and this is a further explanation for the low number of censures used between 2008 and 2010.

More importantly, suspensions of the standing orders has become a more significant tactical tool used by the conservative oppositions. The average number of suspensions is 18 and the range is between 10($Q_1$) and 27($Q_3$). The data for suspensions of standing orders by the opposition (including suspensions to bring on a censure motion) (Fig. 8) shows that a similar pattern exists in terms of the tactical choice.
used by the opposition. A low number of suspensions are recorded during Latham (2004) and Rudd’s (2007) tenure as opposition leader and high numbers are recorded in 2003 and 2006, though not 1999. While the data shows a modest negative skew, the data is not consistent across the years.

![Fig. 8 Suspensions of Standing orders with proportion of censures 1996-2012](chart)

*Data collected up to 28 July 2012

However, an examination of suspension of standing orders by the opposition considering who delivered the suspension and the time of day (Fig. 9) does show the development of a new parliamentary tactic. Unlike in previous parliaments, suspensions of standing orders are more likely to occur during question time and often during the televised broadcast between 2pm and 3pm interrupting question time mid-stream. The median number of suspension during question time is 5 with the range between 1(Q₁) and 6(Q₃) with a standard deviation of 6.7. For the broadcasted question time the figures are starker: the median is 1 and the range is between 0(Q₁) and 2(Q₃) with
a standard deviation of 4.3. This means that suspensions during question time in 2011 and 2012 are more than two standard deviations mean (5.9). This figure is higher still for broadcasted question time in 2011 which is more than three standard deviations above the mean (2.5).

In previous parliaments, it has not been uncommon for question time to end after the opposition had moved either a suspension of the standing orders or a motion of censure. The same is true of the minority parliament. The critical difference is that, as the data shows, the Abbott led opposition is choosing to move more suspensions of standing orders during question time rather than at the start of business and much earlier during question time in order for the speech to be televised. This tactic is

*Data collected up to 28 July 2012*
effective because without a majority on the floor of the parliament, the government is unable to gag the opposition. Free of a gag order, the opposition has up to 15 minutes of time in which to attack the government.

This tactic has also produced some highly unusual outcomes. For example, on August 24 2011, the opposition moved a suspension of the standing orders after only one question (Abbott 2011, 9210), and after the debate on the standing orders had concluded question time was closed without further questions put (Gillard 2011, 9216). On March 22 2012, Anthony Albanese, the manager of Government Business in the House, noted that the Coalition’s tactic had wasted ‘27 hours’ of question time and ‘230 questions’ which, Albanese stated is ‘enough time to complete a course in basic Spanish or Italian’ (Albanese 2012, 4020). To date, 34 hours of question time and 375 questions have been lost, the equivalent of 14 whole question times (Leader of the House office, 2012).

The data suggests that tactics have not only become more important in the minority parliament but also, the opposition has changed its behaviour to gain greater media impact. This reflects the general consensus that ‘question time is the hour when you win or lose the day’ (Atkins, 2012). This tactic is also elevated by the high number of suspensions requested by the Leader of the Opposition. When suspensions of standing orders are not high profile events — neither during question time nor during the televised broadcast — it is less important that leaders do this heavy lifting. Previously, leaders were more likely to deliver censure motions against the government. The relationship between suspensions and leaders is significantly weaker for the Labor Party than the Liberal Party which may reflect the emphasis the latter places on the leader to take the fight up to the government. Yet, the decrease in the number requested by Leader of the Opposition in 2012 suggests that either Abbott has grown somewhat weary of the tactic, that criticism that he has
‘overused’ and ‘devalued’ the suspension as a tactic (Yaxley 2012) has moderated his behaviour, or that it is part of Abbott’s party management strategy to share these higher profile opportunities in the chamber with his leadership team.

Discussion

The qualitative evidence from long serving journalists points to the fact that parliament has always had periods of poor behaviour, invective and ferocity but that typically conflict tends to be periodic rather than sustained. But there is also evidence of qualitative difference in the tone of partisan conflict and the nature of interactions with political actors. This is due to cultural changes in both inside and outside the chamber and the nature of reporting in the digital age.

Changing Practices and Nature of the Parliament as an Institution

While the chamber remains a key focus of partisan conflict, the chamber has declined as the major focus of government; it is no longer the place to make announcements of high import (Connolly 1996, 116) and the rise of banal and scripted Dorothy Dixers has reduced the stature of the chamber further (Grattan 1996, 226). More importantly the quality of debate has also declined as backbenchers’ performances have become ‘more pro-forma’ (Grattan, 2012) as the parliament is increasingly dominated by ‘humourless technocrats’ (Connolly 1996, 116) with ‘no imagination’ (Atkins 2012). The importance of parliament has a policy forum has decreased. Today, the debate is ‘less fact based’ (Taylor 2012) and the significance of debate in the chamber is less noteworthy:

I think that there was a time when you had to go to question time in order to understand the latest thinking on policy, or certainly the latest way the parties were engaged in battle over a policy. You’d often get policy announcements in question time. It was unpredictable
and it was compulsory viewing. ... Now I often just listen to it while I’m doing other work. (Taylor 2012).

Instead, much of the quality debate happens in the Federation Chamber which is rarely seen by the public Chamber (Atkins, 2012; Franklin 2012; Kerr 2012).

Broadcasting question time has also had a large impact on behaviour within the chamber. Gerard Henderson argues that if anything the standards of parliament have improved over time but that the difference is that the televising of parliament has provided a visual record of poor behaviour (Henderson 2000). Many MPs, including Paul Keating, essentially agreed that television would not be a positive step and were opposed to broadcasting question time. As an aggressive parliamentary performer, Keating understood that what worked well in the chamber looked bad on the nightly news (Grattan 2012). Yet, it has resulted in other behaviours such as a higher degree of repetition of silly lines or stunts in order to get into the news (Kerr 2012).

Last, the tolerance for more ferocious, less amusing debate has increased over time. The use of humour as a political weapon is rare today. Often ‘the jokes fall flat’ and ‘they’re often over rehearsed’ (Taylor 2012). Dennis Atkins (2012) recalls that accomplished performers such as Keating or Mick Young could ‘bring the house to gales of laughter’ and ‘be able to turn an issue just with one piece of repartee’; today when humor does occur it is ‘so surprising’. In 1987, a study commissioned by Amanda Vanstone found that between 1976 and 1987 the term ‘liar’ and all its grammatical forms (lying, lied) occurred 18 times in an 11 year period. In the forty-third parliament the term ‘liar’ alone occurred 17 times. The minority parliament only seems to exacerbate the tolerance for more ferocious debate because there is a ‘personal investment in the showdowns that normally you don’t see’ (Farr, 2012).
Changing Nature and composition of Parliamentarians

Changes in political culture have had a profound impact on the relationships between MPs and the level of ferocity inside the chamber. The culture of the commonwealth parliament during the 1950s to the 1970s, was very different from today. Canberra in the 1950s was an isolated and underdeveloped place. The culture was overwhelming masculine; booze was both the social grease that nursed friendships between political opponents and the press and it was also the main weapon against boredom. Conflicts that may have erupted in the Chamber were forgotten in the cramptness of non-members bar (Chalmers 2011, 56, 89; Wright 2012). Until 1975 a large proportion of MPs on both sides had served in the armed services. The number was as high as 50 per cent between 1958 and 1972 (Lumb, Bennett and Moremon 2007, 22). This common bond fostered a sense of mateship for many MPs across party lines (Lumb, Bennett and Moremon 2007, 17). This is not to suggest it was ideal, but it was qualitatively different. Moreover, it was an environment which was both more congenial and in which genuine cross party friendships were not uncommon — Jim Killen famously said that his best friendships were with those on the opposite side of the chamber (Killen 2005). For many, interactions across the chamber were ‘spectacular exchanges of insult’ but without ‘malice’ (Killen 1989, 110). In his diaries, Peter Howson, notes that he dropped in on Frank Crean at his home for a drink on a number of occasions (1984, 166; 177) it is difficult to imagine a Liberal Minister dropping in on a senior Labor MP on their way home today.

A change in the typical personnel attracted to politics has contributed to the change in culture in the parliament. The increasing professionalisation since the 1970s has increasingly favoured political staffers, union officials and state legislators (Weller and Fraser 1987; McAllister 1992; Bryant 2012)
not to mention the ‘PC briagade’. Many are lawyers trained in adversarialism of the law and legal argument. Today, the proportion of professional politicians is more than half (Miragliotta and Errington 2012) many of whom are obsessed with point scoring. The skill set of politicians has also changed. The increasing complexity of government demands a different range of skills from contemporary ministers. Even the skills required by backbenchers are different. Speeches in parliament are more likely to be read than spoken off the cuff and they are more likely constructed from a set of talking points crafted centrally by the party and distributed to the wider party; MPs are expected less and less to think for themselves and they are often encouraged not to think at all. Likewise, the campaign style has radically shifted from the regional tour and stump speech to highly organised and centralised media campaigns. There is significantly less emphasis on off the cuff face to face action on the hustings where MPs would be heckled and needed to be witty. Instead the rise of the 24 hour news cycle and campaigning today places a premium on ‘annoucables’, discipline and consistent messaging.

In addition, veterans of Old Parliament House have argued that the size and scope of New Parliament House has failed to replicate the intimacy of the old building. Eight years after the move, Peter Walsh (cited in Grattan 1996, 222) described the building as segregated and as ‘antiseptic, isolated and impersonal’. The vast distances of the new building injected a new formality into personal interactions (Kitney 2012). After the move in 1988, meetings needed to be arranged, or information which in the old building would have been collected in person, would instead be faxed or emailed (Farr 2012; Atkins 2012). A longer term and subtle change has seen the clustering of political partisans’ offices together, particularly on the House of Representatives side in the years since 1988. (Kitney, 2012).
Last, the size of the building has reduced the sense of collegiality felt between media and politicians in the old building while at the same time increasing the capacity for secrecy as MPs can now hide away in their bunker-like offices (Steketee 1996, 197). However, it is important to remember that the relationship between the press and the parliament has always been unusual in Australia because the gallery was located the same physical space as politicians. In the old building, a journalist or politician could sit in Kings Hall and very likely see and talk to every member and senator over the course of the day. More importantly, the chamber itself was smaller and more intimate. Senior journalist, Geoff Kitney (2012) recalls that the acoustics in the old chamber allowed every comment to be heard. The sense of isolation and segregation has only increased since security changes in the mid-2000s made the building more isolated. Today, cross parliamentary discussion still occurs during committees, overseas travel trips, and on the sports fields of parliament house. While there are still parliamentary drinks on Wednesday evenings on sittings weeks, these events are regularly populated by young journalists and political staffers rather than the politicians themselves. Parliament, in the new building, has less social contact after hours then there had been in the old building.

New Communication means supplanting the Chamber

Just as the demand for pictures to go along with television news reports changed the emphasis and nature of reporting (Grattan 1996, 224-26) so too has the rise of the 24 hour news cycle and the internet. The increased pace of news reporting is reinforced by repetitious media tactics:

A Prime Minister will do, say, four interviews and a doorstop if the pressure is on over something — all of which say the same thing. Whereas years ago maybe they would do a press conference and not a great deal else — perhaps one interview. (Grattan 2012)
Moreover, the rise of ‘shock jocks’ and anonymous comments online have contributed to higher levels of anger and shouting in public debate today, which is reflected by politicians in the chamber. In the era of the sound bite, debate is necessarily less complex and increasingly reported as a short he-said-she-said combative narrative. The media is always looking for new and interesting angles and they do report the ‘sensational stuff’ (Taylor, 2012), at times at the expensive of policy (Tanner 2011).

Last, the rise of the ‘third chamber’ (Kitney, 2012) in the form of the cable news and ‘twitterverse’ has changed the relationships between political actors in the chamber, with the media and the public. Regularly in the offices of both politicians and journalists two television sets will be on; one displaying parliament on muted while the other will display SKY or ABC News 24 at volume (Kitney 2012). The role of technology is radically changing relationships. Text messaging played an important role in accelerating the leadership challenge against Turnbull in the dying days of the 2009 parliamentary sitting year — MPs were texting journalist during question time signalling that a challenge was being planned (Coorey 2009). Today, journalists are now able to communicate with politicians on twitter while in question time (Franklin 2012). The presence of twitter and politics in 140 characters has sped the whole process of political debate yet further.

The result is a parallel digital chamber alongside the parliament which resonates with Wanna and Uhr’s concept of a broader, more inclusive, definition of Parliament (Wanna and Uhr 2000, 11). The lines between actives of political actors are increasingly blurred and as a result so are the rules of engagement. A more professional, media oriented and less collegiate cohort of politicians are apprenticed in politics increasingly in the ‘third chamber’ where the rules of ‘fight club’, as it’s often referred to, apply (Yaxley 2012; Epstein 2012). While the parliament has always been ruckus, today it
is nastier, with fewer moments of levity. The regular contestation of the ‘third chamber’ has also bled into the physical chamber.

Conclusion

The ‘ferocity index’ suggests that parliament is only a little more aggressive than in 1996. The ferocity of the House is periodic and symptomatic of the political and policy context of the day. However, the index shows that the chamber was more ferocious during 2011 (and if 2012 continues, both will be years of high ferocity), and this can account for high levels of public disenchantment with parliament. Conflict in the minority parliament is relentless. Overexposure to parliamentary behaviour through television and digital media, and perhaps a growing discomfiture with bullying in Australian society as the issue of bullying in sport and at work as become more high profile is also contributing to public dissatisfaction.

Another change is that Parliament has become more contrarian and the tactics in the chamber more contested. The parliament has seen the rise of new tactics designed capitalise on media exposure which have little to do with fact based argument. Interestingly, election years do not produce uniform results, suggesting that other factors such as leadership style, the leader’s view of the role of parliament, parliamentary tactics, the incumbent government’s policy agenda, and the decline of the ideological divide between the two major parties play a role shaping behaviour in the house. A much closer study of parliamentary years that matched leaders and policies against behaviour would be able to illicit clearer answers to these questions. Additionally, extending the time period back to the last minority government in 1941 would also be revealing.
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