

Question time has become a horror movie right there on my TV

Peter Costello



Above the chamber of the House of Representatives in Canberra, there is a special part of the gallery set aside for visiting schoolchildren. As part of their school excursions, they can watch question time – the highlight of the day in the nation's premier political debating forum. Over the 20 years I participated in question time, I often looked at those children and wondered what they made of the spectacle below them.

Sometimes when I met them afterwards I would ask them what they had

learned from the experience. It was rare to get a positive response. Their elected representatives were in fact much better than they seemed, I would reassure them. I did not want those schoolchildren to think that this was the highest standard of debate of which the nation was capable.

It has always been thus. But in some respects, the Parliament is at a lower ebb than in previous times. There used to be genuine humour. There were occasions when our political opponents were genuinely funny – so funny that they made you laugh at yourself. Despite my efforts to suppress it, Paul Keating did this to me on several occasions. There were people who could respond with wit to an interjection. In those days, there were MPs that could crack a joke that had not been written by a staffer!

Whatever will be the ultimate verdict on the current Prime Minister

and Treasurer – earnest, dogged, disciplined – they will not be remembered as entertaining performers. Spending an idle hour listening to question time these days is like having root canal treatment. The best part is when it is over.

Nothing could better illustrate how feeble things have become than when the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, jiggled in the parliamentary courtyard to his own version of the Skyhooks hit song *Horror Movie*. Apparently, it was supposed to be funny. When I saw Emerson pictured with Vladimir Putin on the weekend, I thought, for just a second, that Putin might give him the Pussy Riot treatment. Luckily, the Russian President did not seem to know who he was – a great relief for Australian honour!

When Malcolm Turnbull gave a speech on the coarsening of political debate last week, I think he was onto

something that many of us have noticed and bemoaned. Because it was Turnbull, and because so many in the media want to use him to go after Tony Abbott, it was written up as if he was criticising Abbott. I don't think so. I think he made a genuine point and, what is more, if the standards are slipping in the Parliament it is not the fault of the opposition. The government sets the tone of the chamber and the political debate inside it. There are standards for ministerial behaviour and conduct. The opposition is there to hold the government to them. It is not the point of question time to hold the opposition accountable.

Where Turnbull went wrong was to suggest question time once a week, rather than four times, would improve things. Those of us who were in Parliament when Keating introduced this type of system in 1994 know it did nothing to improve things.

Members of Parliament will lift their game when they think there are rewards for doing so or punishment for not doing so. While the media connives in the underperformance of senior ministers who cannot, or choose not to, answer questions competently, they will continue to do it. And their juniors will continue to ape them.

Unfortunately, media scrutiny is lessening and being replaced by shallow alternatives for people with short attention spans – Twitter and Facebook. Our elected representatives are chasing an audience through these methods. Constant tweeting is, to me, a sign of a hyperactive ego rather than a hyperactive brain. All this activity is no substitute for thinking.

So, we should applaud those MPs who, like Turnbull, go to the trouble of writing a lecture and sustaining an argument rather than turn it into a Malcolm v Tony-type spat.

Last week I took part in a debate for a charity fund-raiser on the topic: "AFL is tough... but is it as tough as rugby?" Apart from me, the other speakers were professional sportsmen and sports writers. The debate was genuinely funny. It's a pity they didn't bring schoolchildren along. They could have seen a high standard of debate that might have inspired them to stretch their own skills at public speaking and communication.

And who knows where such skills could lead them? It could lead to a high calling in public life where such skills are needed and valued – something like sports writing. No self-respecting young person would want to spend their declining years singing clapped out versions of *Horror Movie* in the parliamentary courtyard.

Peter Costello is the former federal treasurer.