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Imagine a US where presidents are without arrogance of power

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It's no surprise that President Barack Obama's State of the Union address was a snooze: the speech has long been a dull and pompous ritual. But no one was bored two days later when the president showed up to a House Republican confab in Baltimore for a lively, unscripted tussle with his opponents.

Inspired by that exchange, a diverse coalition of political luminaries set up www.demandquestiontime.com, a petition drive aimed at starting "a new American political tradition." The group — which includes lefties David Corn and Katrina vanden Heuvel, and right-wingers Grover Norquist and Glenn Reynolds — wants the parliamentary practice of Prime Minister's Questions, in which the chief executive is regularly grilled by his opponents, brought to the U.S.

They're on to something. An American Question Time might knock our presidents off their pedestals, and force them to grapple with alternative viewpoints.

Left to their own devices, presidents can isolate themselves in a cocoon of sycophants, even putting protesters in "Free-Speech Zones," where their signs can't offend the liege. The regal atmosphere of the office shields presidents from necessary feedback.

That's dangerous, political scientist Bruce Buchanan argued in his under-recognized 1978 classic, "The Presidential Experience," because it feeds the arrogance of power and warps presidential decision making.

One possible solution, Buchanan argued, was to demand Question Time. Adopting the practice "would force the president to expose himself in a setting he did not control."

Obama received fairly gentle treatment in Baltimore, handling his questioners ably and shocking anyone who expected him to be at sea without a teleprompter. The session was generally scored as a win for the president, www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?a...

and maybe that's why so many liberals have signed the petition.

But when Question Time's done right, it's done rude. An American version will only be worth having if it's conducted in the irreverent spirit the Brits bring to it.

Harold Macmillan, British P.M. from '57 to '63, once admitted that the pressure of Question Time used to make him vomit as he waited to face the music. Little wonder: Last May, The New York Times described a session of Prime Minister's Questions that made Gordon Brown seem "more piñata than politician."

"We've got a wasted year with an utterly busted government," Conservative leader David Cameron gleefully declared to Brown's face. "Isn't it clear you're just not up to the job?"

Our presidents rarely get handled that roughly. Maybe that's why President George W. Bush seemed to be the last American to realize that the war in Iraq wasn't going swimmingly, and why Obama has been painfully slow to appreciate that Obamacare has become his Iraq.

Indeed, for all his media ubiquity, Obama prefers venues he controls. He hasn't held a press conference in seven months and rarely takes questions from reporters at public appearances.


If the demanders succeed, presidents won't be able to get away with insulating themselves. Done right, Question Time could force presidents off script, puncture their air of majesty and force them to listen.

It's worth a shot. Besides, what do we have to lose?

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