



September 13, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

As an Australian citizen, I wish to comment on Parliamentary Question Time via the *Inquiry into the practices and procedures relating to question time*. My submission basically states that the current standard of Question Time is woeful, and it utterly fails to represent the people. It requires a comprehensive overhaul.

I think the concept of Question Time is admirable. It requires all members of Parliament to show up, pay attention, act and speak respectfully, represent their constituents, ask intelligent questions and give actual answers in order to thoughtfully interrogate government policies and practice.

So is this what actually happens in Question Time? No; our Parliament is nowhere near this ideal. It is very evident that Question Time has been thoroughly hijacked by politicians purely to serve themselves and their partisan purposes. It is Tribal Time.

When watching Question Time on television I see many highly paid people behaving extremely badly. Instead of thoughtfully and respectfully debating policies, MPs use Question Time as a political fight club: shouting at each other, being aggressive, bullying, name calling, mocking others, sledging and generally being abusive. Those who aren't shouting are fiddling around on their phones; not paying attention at all. Then there is the appalling standard of questions and answers. Instead of asking intelligent and probing questions on behalf of their constituents, the whole exercise has been dumbed down and 'weaponised' in order to score points. To 'answer' a question from the Opposition, the respondent stands up and yells something nasty for three minutes. When not screaming an attack, 'answers' consist of irrelevant waffling and sycophantic flattery of colleagues. For 'questions', apparently ministers write 'Dorothy Dixers' for their colleagues to ask! So these are not real questions at all; their purpose is solely to flatter the government. Sometimes real questions from the opposition that would probe dubious government practice are simply ruled 'out of order' by a partisan Speaker, the result being that scrutiny is entirely avoided.

Shamefully, we have 151 people being paid enormous wages by the taxpayer to behave disgracefully and use the guise of 'questions' and 'answers' purely to attack one another. Real questions and answers are avoided at all costs. A model that should be serving the people has been subverted to only serve politicians and their partisan goals. The needs of constituents are completely disregarded. What a massive waste of time and money! Why do I have to pay for this rubbish?

Before moving to suggestions, I wish to stress that no other workplace in Australia would allow workers to behave abusively for an hour each day whilst wilfully ignoring their work responsibilities. They would be sacked.

My suggestions to improve Question Time are:

1. Firstly, face up to just how bad the situation is. Do not try to excuse the nasty behaviour and work avoidance by saying, “Oh well, it’s just robust debate.” (That’s code for “It’s OK to be abusive.”) Instead, consider Question Time as a workplace (it is) and aim to make it a safe and productive workplace.
2. Be brave with your inquiry. Please undertake a sweeping overhaul and make radical changes. ‘Tinkering’ with small changes will not be enough to save such a broken model.
3. Examine every rule of Question Time. Ask yourself: “Is this rule actually working in the interests of constituents?” and “Is this rule being abused by politicians for tribal purposes?” Modify each rule to make Question Time benefit the public (not the politicians).
4. Change the standing orders to use time more efficiently. Currently Question Time seems to run between 60 - 90 minutes. Cut this to 45 minutes. This could easily be done by only taking questions from the Opposition and crossbenchers. Also cut the time for answers from three minutes to two minutes. Less time would encourage more direct and succinct answers.
5. Change the standing orders to improve the purpose of the question. Require that it serves the public interest, not the party. The best way to do this would be to get rid of government questions (Dorothy Dixer’s). Only have questions from the Opposition and/or crossbenchers. Also it would be great to have questions from constituents (such as on the ABC show *Q and A*). Why not have some questions from the school students in the gallery? This would be a great experience for the students, and surely MPs would not dare to scream abusively at them.
6. Change the standing orders to improve the quality of the answer. Insist on relevance. As already outlined, reduce the time given per answer. Have more Questions with Notice so that the answer could be more considered (and also more relevant as it is required to be written). And have a system of monetary fines for political parties if MPs misuse their ‘answer time’ to make partisan attacks on other MPs or parties (see point 7).
7. Change the rules regarding conduct in Question Time in order to improve behaviour. Raise the standards with a Code of Conduct (most workplaces have one). Ensure that only politicians who sign the Code of Conduct can attend Question Time. And introduce some real penalties for poor conduct. Instead of having offenders removed from the house, have their pay severely docked for each infraction. This could work in a similar way to the fines for abusing parliamentary entitlements. This could be an individual fine, or a fine to the party, or both. A hefty monetary fine would soon clear up bad behaviour.
8. Broaden the definition of unparliamentary language and change the ridiculous rules allowing an MP to hurl any vile abuse and then simply say “I withdraw”. This has allowed some disgusting language in our Parliament. Make any attack on another MP ‘unparliamentary’. As I have already suggested in point 7, have a sizeable monetary fine applied to the offending MP, their party, or both.
9. Improve the moderation of Question Time by having an independent Speaker. Appointing the Speaker from the Government’s side simply invites partisan bias and subsequent corruption of Question Time. Bronwyn Bishop as Speaker showed just how destructive this could be. Why can’t one of the parliamentary clerks do this?

In closing, I ask that as a committee you make a real effort to put aside your partisan politics and truly act in the public interest. I'm amazed I have to remind you of your responsibility to do this, but very recently we have had Parliamentary Inquiries completely abused and politicised, such as the *Inquiry into the implications of removing refundable franking credits* chaired by Tim Wilson. That was a sham and a disgrace, and Mr Wilson's flagrant misuse of a parliamentary process was meekly excused by an obviously partisan Speaker.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on question time via the *Inquiry into the practices and procedures relating to question time*. I look forward to watching Question Time in the future and actually seeing politicians ask intelligent questions and give honest answers on behalf of their constituents.

Yours sincerely

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