

To the Standing Committee on Procedure,

I am a Queenslander and constituent in the electorate of Fadden. I am writing to express my despair with, and to seek a concrete resolution to; what I see in Question Time in the House of Representatives. I have regularly watched Question Time for many years now and I was pleased to learn that there was finally an inquiry into the practices and procedures relating to question time. **In a substantive sense I would like to see the necessary conditions for a genuine debate to unfold and for a real competition of fully formed ideas.**

The 'Dorothy Dixier' questions, if they can be called questions, consume a large proportion of what is scarce time which should be used for genuine policy debate. Instead this time is being squandered (and the general public is well aware of this, it has been widely reported in the media for a long while). These questions are so obviously contrived to enable the government of the day to simply talk itself up. Question Time needs to be reformed to be made fit for purpose.

Resolution Point 1: I would like to see 'Dorothy Dixier' questions cease.

Question Time is well overdue for genuine reform. The sitting periods for the House of Representatives are so few. The duration of time allocated for questions without notice is so short. There is little time for any genuine debate. And most people would agree that answers, even to the government of the day's own questions, are marginally relevant at best. The responses are unnecessarily low-winded, repetitive and vapid. The standard for relevance is set so woefully low that the best chance one can hope to get a straight answer is through a series of very narrowly focused questions. Even in this instance, the chances of a straight or clear answer to the question are very very low. This is because a Minister cannot be compelled to answer in a way that most people would consider reasonable. The cross-benchers, nowadays, a more prominent feature of parliament, are very very unlikely to get anything close to a clear answer to their question because they ask so few questions. Additionally, questions regarding conflicts of interest are *highly relevant* to a Minister's decisions and for this very reason should not be disallowed.

Resolution Point 2: I would like to see more time and if necessary greater resources allocated to questions without notice.

Resolution Point 3: I would like to see much more frequent sitting days and if necessary greater resources allocated to questions without notice.

Resolution Point 4a: I would like to see much more stringent standard for what passes for 'relevance'. It is so woeful at present that it fosters a sense of hopelessness.

Resolution Point 4b: I would like to see 'broad brush' responses to questions ceased.

Resolution Point 5: Questions regarding conflicts of interest should be ruled in order specifically because they are *highly relevant* to a Minister's decisions.

Resolution Point 6: I would like to see Ministers compelled to answer questions put to them in a substantive sense.

Greater scrutiny may be uncomfortable. But the issues at hand are nationally, regionally and locally significant. However, Question Time, as it stands, is not fit for purpose. Genuine debate about these very important issues is extremely rare. But when it does very occasionally happen, for a few minutes at most, it gives me a glimmer of hope. It is this rare instance that motivates me to actually make a submission. I imagine so many others are so very disengaged, or unable to engage and/or do not know how to engage to begin with. I have a PhD and yet even I had to go actively looking for how I can engage. Question Time in its current form is simply not conducive genuine debate. It needs to be longer and occur more frequently to give more opportunity to members to articulate and/or defend the virtues of their positions in a way that has substance.

The ‘Dorothy Dixier’ questions are to any objective observer next to useless. Too often the questions from members do not even feign a passionate concern on behalf of their constituents. This is an indication to the general public that the members are not even trying to argue for their constituents. When members do manufacture a passionate concern on behalf of their constituents, the question may not even be a question, but rather take the form of a less than energetically delivered *statement*.

Moreover, these so called ‘questions’ are generally only vaguely tied to their constituents and are generally highly partisan in nature, as though the only constituents the government cares about are the ones that voted for them. However, many of the members’ constituents may not have necessarily voted for the government of the day, yet they should still have representation in parliamentary debate. This is especially true when a government’s majority is far from overwhelming. Otherwise, large swathes of the populace are being legally disenfranchised. This sows the seeds of significant discontent (an understatement), especially among people who are already poorly represented (e.g. the poor, the disadvantaged).

From my observance of Question Time, ‘Dorothy Dixier’ questions could simply be emailed to the relevant Minister or Ministers. This would be much more efficient. Alternatively, and I say this in jest, chatbots could be straightforwardly designed to relieve members of their duty. In all seriousness though, if there is a genuine need for the government of the day to ask questions of itself, this could be done in a separate forum or through one-on-one meetings.

I do not think I am alone in believing that Question Time cannot continue as it is and that it is a contributing factor to a disenchantment with politics among many people. I sincerely hope that the reforms from this inquiry are genuine reforms and are not concocted by the current government simply for the sake of its own partisan interests now and into the future. As a parliamentary committee, this is one sphere where I believe the current government has yet to purposefully dilute the principle of the Separation of Powers. For this reason, especially, I would like be given hope and real reasons to believe that this inquiry does not have a forgone conclusion.

Ultimately, for Question Time to be fit for purpose it should have the ability to hold the government to account in a meaningful way. If this is not possible, it is a waste of resources and worse still, disguises the fact that there are really few checks on the government of the day’s power and influence. In all, I would like the quality of the debate to be improved for the sake of the country today and for successive governments and constituents.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Sincerely,

Dr Christopher L. Ambrey