

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Procedure
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into the practices and procedures relating to Question Time

I am delighted to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry. As a retiree I have the time to quite regularly watch Question Time and can certainly see there is scope to make improvements. There has been sufficient commentary in the media over a period of time to establish that many others share my view and it is fair to say that there is sufficient negative commentary to demonstrate that the reputation of the parliament is done no favours by the way Question Time is conducted and the rules that currently underpin its operation.

My comments deal specifically with the House of Representatives' live Questions Without Notice and I will leave debate on Questions in Writing to others.

Principles that should be observed in the conduct of Question Time

1. Given the key roles played by the government parties and the Opposition the principal goal is to hold the government accountable.

The way that Question Time currently operates ministers have three minutes to answer a question that must take no more than 30 seconds to deliver. Overwhelmingly, questions from the government side are Dorothy Dixers. They are set up to enable ministers to grandstand by delivering fulsome (in the true meaning of the word) accounts of the government's policies and achievements. The measure of the flaccidity of the questions and their lack of genuine enquiry is the eagerness of the Ministers to present to the Despatch Box. This is no earnest exploration of politically sensitive issues and matters of public importance warranting honest explanation – this is performance.

What follows is almost invariably a nauseous rendition, oozing self-satisfaction and conveying the impression that the government has achieved perfection. It is predictable and unseemly in its staged presentation and its naked self-interest.

My other comment as a regular observer is my gradually acquired habit of saying to myself "I don't want to hear the answer to a question they want to be asked" and muting the television during the "answer". I am not proud of this and I will no doubt miss out on some information about policies that may be of interest to me – presented in the most favourable light – but I find myself sickened by the one-sidedness and unreality of the process.

My other issue is the abuse flung across the chamber at the Opposition. It is often shouted in a blustering fashion that presents as out-and-out bullying. Very unedifying. Three minutes of this in response to Dorothy Dixer after Dorothy Dixer is hard to listen to. In the present parliament there is a cast of ministers who perform repeatedly in this role one session after another. When the regular, selected shock troops present you always know what is coming. I have observed both major parties operate in this way and it is a poor example to the people they represent, particularly any younger people happening to be watching. Count them on one hand - but still!

Answers to Opposition questions, which are usually designed to put the government on the spot, at least have the virtue of challenging the government's policies and identifying politically relevant weaknesses. But do they get straight answers? The Speaker does his best to at least appear to be putting some test of relevance on the answers but he is stuck with rules that are full of holes and open to different interpretations. And one can have a situation where the Speaker is biased and partisan in disciplining members.

The present Speaker demonstrates a welcome change in at least attempting to be fair and balanced but when the government ministers ignore the spirit and letter of the rules there is a limit to what can be achieved. There is often blatant disregard of the actual question asked with resort to more abuse, both general and personal, and point scoring.

2. Provide information on policies that will have a bearing on the wellbeing of the Australian people and require ministers to address the substance of questions.

Given what I have described above, information on policy changes does find its way into answers to questions but overwhelmingly this is during Dorothy Dixers. The tone in which they are delivered can best be described as condescending and smug. "We are the government and what we say goes." But at least detailed information is put out there for the public and media to absorb and factor in. This is not to say that this is the best way to get policy detail into the public domain but it is still an avenue which has official weight and pays some respect to the voters.

I prefer a model where ministers will feel a tension in their gut when standing up to answer a question about which they have no prior knowledge. An Opposition or crossbencher question in the main. As a minister if you know you are going to find yourself in this situation you are going to put more effort into being across your departmental brief and in-depth detail about broader policy issues. Two minutes should suffice per question. At present ministers seem duty-bound to fill out the full three minutes. I prefer the Senate practice of permitting

supplementary questions. It would add to the theatre of the occasion by permitting the questioner to point out the gaps in the reply and, hopefully, embarrass anyone ducking, weaving, evading or misleading.

3. Other issues.

(1) Questions from constituents

In a true democracy, the rights of citizens to hold parliament accountable would be enhanced by putting questions to ministers by constituents that are answered on the record and in full public view. It may be that this could be implemented by using local members as an avenue and, to a degree, a filter. It would enable local members to play a role in assisting constituents to navigate the system and possibly limit the chances that inflammatory or nonsensical questions found their way to the parliament. One can immediately see the scope for local members to inject their political leanings into such a project but it may be possible to look at other countries' systems to look for models that would work. And serve the purpose for which it was intended.

(2) Limit questions to those from Opposition or independent members

One need only look at current practice to know what to expect if government members can ask questions. They will, except in exceptional circumstances, toe the party line. You know what you will get – tame questions that present a platform for partisan spouting of the government's infallibility. Dorothy Dix should be retired.