

Firstly, thank you to the committee for your time, effort, energy and interest in this matter. It is not every Parliamentary session that gets the fun and excitement of reimaging the traditions of our Democratic institutions! I wish each Member the very best in considering new ways to refresh Question Time.

Below I have two suggestions for consideration for improving Question Time.

1: Change the seating plan (if only for Question Time) - the Westminster Parliamentary seating plan is unnecessarily confrontational and combative. Having the Government of the day sitting face on to the Opposition invites the bitter, petty displays that we are (unfortunately) used to by now. In contrast, most other democratic nations have built parliaments in which all elected members sit together, facing a single, central point - typically a flag or emblem that demonstrates elected members' responsibilities to their constituents and the nation as a whole. Realising that it is beyond the scope of this Committee to change the architecture of Parliament, I would invite the Committee to consider different seating arrangements for Question Time.

My suggestion would be to empty the Opposition executive benches for Question time, and invite Members' who have Questions without notice to form a line along this bench. The Sergeant at Arms could assist the Speaker by ordering alternating members. As Members' questions are asked, they may then leave the line and allow the other Members to shuffle down - if nothing else this can help reduce the stiffness of sitting for too long! Ministers should also answer questions from the position currently taken by the Clerk/Deputy Clerk - after all Ministers are addressing the whole of Parliament with matters affecting all Australians.

I believe these changes would make it harder for Ministers to deliver aggressive, combative answers towards the Opposition - firstly because such 'Opposition' would be dispersed, and secondly because the optics of a Minister angrily gesticulating at their own Party members (interspersed on the opposition bench) are not good.

Whatever the configuration, the key elements of a seating change should follow these principles: 1) break up the pack mentality of a Minister having their 'team' behind them, 2) reinvoking a more egalitarian, collegial spirit among backbenchers by making all backbenchers come together for Question Time, irrespective of Party allegiance.

2: Questions Should Be Categorised - one of the problems with Questions without Notice is that it is built on a tradition of debating in which either an adjudicator is marking, or a Judge is helping to critically assess a matter of law. In both cases there are strict parameters on what is relevant or not, and going off topic risks your side losing, either a debate or a court case. I would posit that such a model is not suited for current Parliamentary accountability; no topic should be off limits for a Parliament, and the only marks given to Governments and Members are at elections. Until we have a radically different model of holding the Government to account, the Questions themselves must set out the parameters by which a Ministers response will be judged to have adequately answered the question.

Each time a Member rises to ask a Question without notice, the Speaker should ask of the Member on what basis they make their inquiry - for example, on a matter of Constituency (for specific issues local to the corresponding Member's electorate), on a matter of Policy response, a matter of Public Interest (specifically for issues that are unfolding where the Government may not yet have made a legislative response), or a constituent submitted question. The Minister's response can then be measured as relevant based both on the subject matter and on whether it fits the parameters of the question.

The above parameters are only a suggestion, and clearly ones that needs further refinement, clarification and fleshing out. However I do believe that by increasing focus on form, we can improve content.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to seeing what ideas the Committee are able to put forward,

John Casey