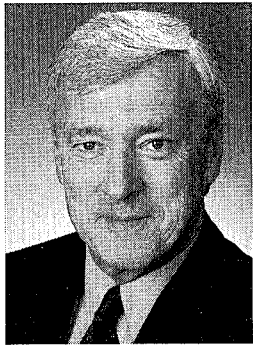


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09/11/06



7 November 2006

Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Peter Andren M.P.
Federal Member for Calare

Dear Chair,

RE: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PROCEDURE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO QUESTION TIME PROCEDURES

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Procedures Committee's review of the standing orders relating to Question Time.

I will deal with the standing orders in sequence:

97: No comment.

98: The inability of MPs to question Parliamentary Secretaries is a direct denial of proper executive scrutiny. Combined with the growing incidence of truncated debate in the House, debate on bills before inquiry outcomes or bills digests are available, such restrictions on members' ability to question junior ministers (which is what parliamentary secretary's are) is to be deplored.

Parliamentary Secretaries receive significant extra tax-payer funded benefits, especially staff and other resources, yet are unanswerable in the House to members or the broader electorate. A prime example of this comes with the appointment of the Honourable Member for Wentworth to a crucial policy role, yet he is protected from accountability in the parliament for these responsibilities. Any process that offers extra personal and political reward yet protects from scrutiny is deliberately anti-democratic and an affront to proper accountability.

There should also be provision for supplementary questions.

Questions should be limited to, say 30 seconds (with Speaker discretion) which should be expressed in words (90 words) so members can properly prepare a written question, or time their ad lib question.

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Ministerial (and parliamentary secretary) answers should also be limited to 2 minutes (360 words).

Supplementary questions and answers should be half the length of the primary question and answer limits.

98d(ii): This sub-section of the standing order is crucial. While questions should not ask ministers to announce government policy, the minister's answer should not be used to 'announce' government policy. It can and should be used to *explain* government policy. A Speaker could and should immediately require a Minister to make arrangements for a Ministerial Statement if Question Time is being used for the delivery of new policy.

99: No comment.

100: *100(d)(i)*: Many times members have been pulled up by various Speakers for naming constituents in a question. It is important to name constituents in certain circumstances (with their permission) and it would seem the standing order provides for this.

101: This standing order is not a problem if interpreted as printed, but supplementary questions do not seem to be allowed under any circumstances in the House of Representatives under recent Speakers.

104: If an answer must be relevant to the question I would invite members of the committee to closely examine many of the answers from ministers which are clearly not relevant, except in the most general of terms. The Speaker should in my opinion far more often bring the minister back to the relevance of the answer, and permit the questioner to fully detail in a point of order where relevance has been avoided.

General Comments

It would be useful for the committee to examine the paper by Parameswary Rasiah of the University of Western Australia on the Democratic Audit of Australia website: www.democratic.audit.anu.edu.au.

The paper is entitled: *Does Question Time fulfil its role of ensuring accountability?*

The writer refers to the practice of drawing attention to a visitor to the gallery (in this case the former UK Conservative Leader William Haig to bolster an answer on Iraq and to attack the Opposition Leader). Such inclusion of *strangers* into the parliamentary debating or questioning process should simply not be allowed.

I also agree with the comment by the writer on the role of the Speaker. The impartiality of the Speaker is often raised within and without the parliament, and serious consideration should be given by the relevant committees of this

parliament to the need for a process similar to the UK where at the very least the Speaker resigns from his or her party on appointment.

Dorothy Dixers: The Democratic Audit article clearly details the abuse of Question Time by the practice described as 'dorothy dixers'. They may have been part of our system for decades, but that doesn't excuse their irrelevance to a proper accounting of government policy and process. I suggest such questions belittle the questioner, most often being hand-outs from the Government Whip, with a space left for the member's electorate. The robust questioning of the UK Prime Minister in his question time by members from all sides of the chamber stands in stark contrast to the poor 'questioning' process in our House of Representatives. Indeed it is pathetic to see a minister removing a pre-prepared answer from his or her file to answer such 'questions without notice'.

Again the habit of asking such pre-arranged questions calling on the minister to 'update the house on the latest unemployment figures/Iraq situation/education spending' and such is simply an invitation for a ministerial statement and should be disallowed.

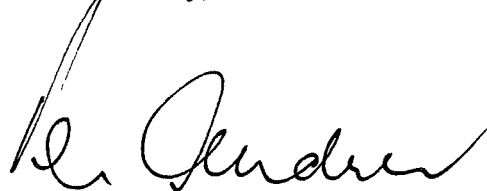
Similarly, the practice of adding "and does the minister know of any alternate [sic] policies?" is simply an invitation for an attack on the Opposition.

Under the current House of Representatives Question Time processes the 'advantage' is heavily in the hands of the government of the day. The length of answers and their often lack of relevance provides the government of the day with a media-soaked opportunity to largely avoid scrutiny when it should be the time when the government of the day, its ministers and junior ministers are under intense cross-examination.

Any wonder I regard Question Time as largely a waste of my time and a sad reflection on what should be a key part of our democratic processes. Although questions from independent members usually elicit reasonable answers, the most thorough and useful answers under our current arrangements will always come from Questions on Notice where evasion can be minimised and clarity provided.

The reforms I have suggested would make it far more relevant to its MPs and dare I suggest it, the constituents we serve.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Andren', written in a cursive style.

PETER ANDREN
Federal Member for Calare