

Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

**Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Additional Estimates Hearings 18 February 2008**



Question: PM29

Outcome 1, Output 4

Topic: Parliamentary Questions on Notice

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Senator Ray asked: Dr Morauta - I think it is 60 days for the Reps and 30 days for the Senate.

Senator ROBERT RAY - Yes, that is right. So it took you 182 days on average. Why was that?

Dr Morauta - I will just seek advice. I am not dead certain about this one...

Senator ROBERT RAY - Yes, but we are not looking at just two or three here, are we? We are looking at almost a majority of the questions taking this long. We are averaging 182 days in the case of the House of Reps and 152 days in terms of the Senate. Is the problem here, again, clearance out of the PMO?...

Senator ROBERT RAY - Can you give me an idea of how many cases?

Ms Belcher - I am sorry, I cannot. I do not know.

Senator ROBERT RAY - You might like to take on notice that question about what the delays have been. Minister, is it not a fact that any other department looking at this performance would not be encouraged to answer questions as required by parliament? These are not capricious deadlines put on...

Senator Chris Evans - Certainly I will undertake to get you a document on notice, setting out the time frames.

Answer: The Standing Orders of both Houses set out the time to respond to Parliamentary Questions on Notice. This is 60 days for the House of Representatives and 30 days for the Senate.

Under the previous government, responses were provided to 174 questions in the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio during 2006-07 compared to 45 in 2003-04, 65 in 2004-05 and 151 in 2005-06.

Time for ministerial clearance is one factor that may have an impact on the average time taken to respond to Questions on Notice. Another significant factor, however, is the time taken to obtain the information necessary to respond to the question. For

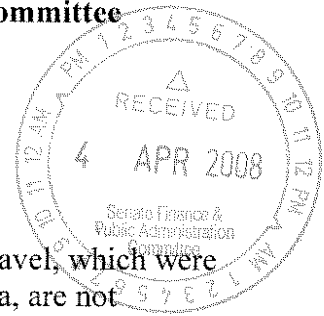
Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

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Additional Estimates Hearings 2004-2005, 14 February 2005



example, questions about the cost of the Prime Minister's overseas travel, which were frequently asked shortly after the Prime Minister returned to Australia, are not answered until all the costs are available, and there can be considerable delays between the date of the travel and advice from overseas posts of the acquittal of the expenditure. A relatively small number of questions of this nature which remain unanswered from the early days of a Government will have a growing impact over the life of the Parliament on the average response time for all questions.

The time taken to answer parliamentary questions on notice can be influenced by a number of other factors:

- the total number of questions addressed to the Prime Minister and to multiple ministers;
- the need to consult other departments or agencies;
- the need to consider complex issues concerning the confidentiality of the information sought; and
- competing priorities of the department, for example, the need for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to respond quickly to shifting priorities means that resources need to be diverted to areas of most urgent need, leading on occasions to delays in the response to questions on notice.

Questions directed to multiple Ministers can take longer for a response. For these questions the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet provides a coordination function in developing options for a whole-of-government approach and providing handling advice to Departments.

Preparation of handling advice can take some time with the process involving a number of steps:

- consideration of the issues within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (with advice sought from policy or operational areas);
- consultation with Departments that have a particular interest;
- preparation of a brief for consideration by the Prime Minister's Office;
- obtaining agreement from the Prime Minister's Office on the coordinated handling strategy; and
- dissemination of handling advice to departments and, where necessary, seeking confirmation from the relevant Department that their Minister will answer on behalf of the Government (and follow-up, as required).