

6. Questions

Questioning ministers is a way senators may obtain information and seek to hold the executive government accountable. This guide deals with questions asked during question time and questions placed on notice.

Provisions relating to questions are contained in [standing order 72 to 74](#). Also see [chapter 19](#) of *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, Relations with the executive government.

Rules for questions

The rules for questions are contained in [standing order 73](#). These rules are interpreted by the chair so as not to restrict unduly the ability of senators to ask questions on a wide variety of subjects. For instance, although questions may not ask for a statement of government policy, it is in order for a question to seek an explanation of government policy or the clarification of a statement made by a minister. A question inviting a minister to comment on opposition policies is strictly out of order, although questions seeking the minister's knowledge of how other policy proposals would affect matters within that minister's responsibility have been ruled in order.

The prohibition on questions containing statements of fact, arguments, inferences, imputations etc. recognises that the purpose of a question is to seek information and not to provide a senator the opportunity to make a statement. This reasoning also underlies a long-standing prohibition on the use of quotations in questions.

In practice, the chair has discretion to allow the inclusion in a question of so much material as is necessary to make the question clear. Even when a question is ruled out of order, the President will generally give the relevant minister an opportunity to address any assertion contained in the question.

Question time

During question time, senators may ask ministers questions relating to their ministerial responsibilities. As most ministers are members of the House of Representatives, questions relating to their portfolios are addressed to the minister that represents the relevant minister in the Senate. A list of the representing arrangements is included at the back of the *Senate Notice Paper*.

Questions are allocated to parties approximately in proportion to the number of seats held by the party in the Senate. The order that questions are asked is determined by the President. In practice, the order of questions is set out in arrangements settled by the parties.

Senators given the call may ask one question (1 minute, with a 2 minute answer) followed by two supplementary questions (30 secs each, with 1 minute answers). Question time starts at 2 pm on each sitting day and continues for approximately 1 hour, ending when the Leader of the Government in the Senate asks "That further questions be placed on notice".

Answers to questions

An answer must be confined to providing the information sought and must be directly relevant to the question (see [standing order 72\(3\)\(c\)](#)). The President may require that ministers' answers be relevant, but cannot tell ministers how they should respond to questions.

Taking questions on notice and providing further answers

Ministers may, in responding to questions during question time, elect to take a question (or part of a question) on notice. This indicates that the minister will seek further information and provide it to the Senate at a later time. It is established practice for ministers at the end of question time to make additional responses to questions taken on notice in this way.

Motions to take note of answers

Following question time each day there is time for senators to debate the answers given during question time. A motion is moved in the form "That the Senate take note of the answer(s) given by...to the question(s) asked by..." Debate must be relevant to the motion moved. By convention, an initial motion is moved by an opposition senator, with the call alternating between the opposition and government for the first 5 speakers. A cross-bench senator is then given the call to either contribute to the initial debate or move a motion to note a different answer.

A senator may speak to such a motion for 5 minutes, with a total time of 30 minutes set aside each day for debate on all such motions ([standing order 72\(4\)](#)).

Questions on notice

Where a senator seeks a detailed answer to a question, particularly where statistical information is sought, that question is more appropriately submitted in written form and placed on notice.

Senators can submit questions on notice to ministers at any time, even when the Senate is not sitting. Such questions are submitted through the Senate Table Office by use of an [online form](#). Questions are examined for conformity with the standing orders before the questions are published on the [Parliament website](#) in the order in which they are received.

Questions placed on notice are forwarded to ministers' offices and departments, allowing for an answer to be prepared.

Answers are lodged with the Table Office, which supplies the senator who asked the question with a copy of the answer and publishes it online.

The 30-day rule

A senator who places a question on notice and does not receive a reply within 30 days may, after question time on any day, seek from the relevant minister in the Senate an explanation of why an answer has not been provided ([standing order 74\(5\)](#)). The Senator may then move a motion without notice to take note of the minister's explanation, or failure to provide an answer or explanation.

It is common practice for a senator to advise a minister informally of their intention to seek an explanation under the 30-day rule, to improve the chances of receiving an answer or a satisfactory explanation.

This process is not available once an answer to the question is provided.

Details of questions that have remained unanswered for more than 30 days are available [online](#) and are also published in the [Notice Paper](#). The 30-day period is counted from the day the question is published.

The same process applies for questions placed on notice during estimates hearings which remain unanswered after the date set by the relevant committee to answer the question.

What happens to questions on notice during an election period

During an election period, the existing session of the Parliament is ended, through a process formally referred to as 'prorogation'. Prorogation has the effect of terminating all business before the Senate so that it does not automatically carry over into the next Parliament.

This includes questions on notice, and senators who have not received an answer to a question on notice before the end of the Parliament must resubmit them in the new Parliament if they still wish to receive an answer. As a large number of unanswered questions on notice are resubmitted in a new Parliament, ministers and departments are advised that they should still answer questions on notice during the election period. Any answers received are forwarded to the questioning senator and published online.

Questions submitted during an election period, as well as any questions resubmitted from the previous Parliament, are published online on the first sitting day of the new Parliament, and the count for the 30-day rule begins on this day.

Need assistance?

For assistance with any of the matters covered by this guide, government senators or their staff should contact the Clerk Assistant (Table) on extension 3020 or ca.table.sen@aph.gov.au; and non-government senators or their staff should contact the Clerk Assistant (Procedure) on extension 3380 or ca.procedure.sen@aph.gov.au.

Questions on notice can be lodged with the Senate Table Office by email (table.questions.sen@aph.gov.au). Inquiries relating to questions on notice should also be directed to the Senate Table Office.

LAST REVIEWED: JUNE 2025