

Members of the Procedure Committee,
The House of Representatives.

I make the following short submission & express my hope for meaningful changes to current practices which have lost the confidence of very many Australians. This subsequently, has a negative impact on citizens' engagement with our democracy especially as most television political news coverage includes snippets of question time (so often at its most combative.)

Current practices which demean question time

As there are no House of Representatives' Estimates Committees, I would argue that question time in that Chamber becomes a critically important opportunity to achieve its stated purpose: to scrutinise the work of executive government & to hold Ministers to account for decisions and actions in their portfolios.

It is my view that the Australian Parliament has moved far away from this focus, especially in the following ways:

- * Excessive use of question time by Ministers to repeat Ministerial statements they have already made (or had the opportunity to make) elsewhere (before Question Time.) Ministers have ample time in any parliamentary day to hold press conferences for announcements. As ministers they will automatically have members of the press present. Ministerial statements, especially those announcing policy or responses to issues deemed topical by the Government should not take up valuable accountability time.

- * The abuse of accountability via "Dorothy Dixers" which are an abuse of the purpose of holding the executive to account. They are questions WITH notice, usually written by the Minister's office. The hapless backbencher reading them out has rarely had input. Their purpose is almost unfailingly to give the Minister an opportunity to make a statement, raise a political issue of the day & then, by invoking "alternative policies" seek to hold the Opposition to account for it! This is a complete perversion of question time's purpose which, while it might have become the norm, is nevertheless, unacceptable to the vast majority of citizens who pay even scant attention to parliamentary events. "Dorothy Dixers" should be abolished as they completely skew opportunities for scrutiny OF the executive to advantages FOR the executive to avoid such scrutiny while attempting to scrutinise the opposition.
The current formulation of Dixers as a thematic mantra for the day/week, with the deliberate repetition of the words & phrases such as "strong & stable government" in every government question is both propagandist & an insult to the intelligence of those citizens watching. As are the contrived devices of "Is the Minister aware of any alternative policies;" "Can the Minister update the House..."

- * The questionably loose interpretation of "direct relevance". Sometimes it seems to be sufficient to simply include one word of the question in the Minister's answer to be judged "relevant." This all adds to the public's identification of evading answers as part of the general untrustworthiness of politicians & the unsatisfactory nature of Question Time. Shorter times for answering might impose a different discipline.

Some suggestions for improvement

*Time limits should be shortened for both questions & answers to allow for more of both. Independents should be bound by the same general time limits. Currently their questions have extremely long preambles which could be edited.

*Supplementary questions (1 min) should be allowed to be asked by the Opposition and Independents. Answers should be confined to 2 or 3 minutes. The UK and Canadian Commons

both allow a series of around three supplementary questions to be asked consecutively by the Opposition Leader to the PM. This can be extended to Shadow Minister asking the relevant Minister in each portfolio. This practice increases the opportunity for scrutiny & accountability in a meaningful, coherent way which viewers/listeners can follow.

*The House of Representatives should adopt the Senate practice (initiated by the Australian Democrats) of “taking note of the answer,” whereby one answer given in Question Time is selected for further debate. 30 minutes are allocated. This could be more meaningful than the predictable, formulaic, “Matters of Public Importance.” This should take place when formal questions have been concluded, but should be considered part of question time & be televised.

An Independent Speaker is a desirable but unlikely outcome of this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Cheryl Kernot

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