

Submission to the Inquiry into the Practices and Procedures Relating to Question Time in the House of Representatives by the Procedure Committee

Discrediting Democracy

Question Time gives politicians a bad name. It is made up of pathetic Dorothy Dixers, witless and nasty yelling across the chamber and aggressive and irrelevant answers. The claim that it makes government accountable is farcical. The belief that one side or the other wins it is laughable. Politics is the only profession whose practitioners set out day after day to undermine and discredit it because they are more focused on petty victories for their side over the other. The public looks on in dismay and then turns off, not just Question Time itself, but also the important business of democracy. The participants in Question Time show a lack of self-respect, a lack of respect for parliament and a lack of respect for their constituents. No other workplace is so rife with bullying, name-calling and all-round bad behaviour, and that includes contact sport.

In the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom House of Commons is a rowdy place, but it's Prime Minister's Question Time is a far better example of what Question Time should be than any Question Time in the Australian House of Representatives. Government backbenchers there ask real questions. The Prime Minister answers them, not without political point-scoring but with it in its subsidiary place. He or she can get through four of five times the number of questions the Australian House of Representatives does.

Attitudes and Questions

There are changes that can be made to standing orders to improve Question Time, but the fundamental change has to be in the attitude of the MPs themselves. I was contacted by a person seeking a vote in a pre-selection contest some years ago. I asked him if he would refuse to ask any Dorothy Dixers. He wouldn't. I would have because I regard it as the job of an MP to represent his or her constituents not be a hack for his or her party. The Victorian Legislative Assembly has banned Dorothy Dixers and restricted government backbenchers to asking constituency questions. This is not the way to go. Government MPs should have the backbone to hold the government to account as much as Opposition MPs do. Instead the standing orders should be amended to ban Dorothy Dixers by making wording along the lines of "Can the minister tell us how wonderful the government is and how awful the opposition is?" forbidden. The wording of such a standing order would be very difficult and enforcement would come down to the Speaker and the self-respect of MPs. There are no grounds to be optimistic because it is the lack of self-respect that allows MPs to ask Dorothy Dixers in the first place.

Attitudes and Answers

Banning Dorothy Dixers would stop artificial recitation by ministers of government wonders, but we would have gained nothing if as a consequence we just had to endure twice the number of aggressive and irrelevant answers to real questions. Time limits need to be tightened so that ministers cannot go off on tangents. Direct relevance should be strictly required and enforced. I have been to thousands of meetings in my lifetime, including meetings of a political nature. In almost every case, a question asked gets answered. That's how the non-parliamentary world works. If the question cannot be answered because the person asked does not know or to answer would be to breach confidentiality, the person

asked simply says that he or she cannot answer and explains why. It's not hard for 99.997 per cent of the population who are not MPs in a national, state or territory parliament. It should not be hard for the 0.003 per cent who are.

Behaviour

Furthermore, in the non-parliamentary world, answers are generally listened to. The staff meetings, union branches, forums, state conferences, school councils, executives, committees and sub-committees that I have attended in the past 50 years have their interjections, but none of them comes close to parliament for rudeness and disorder. MPs who behave badly should be thrown out. If they are thrown out three times, the people in their constituency should get to vote on keeping them or not.

The Role of the Speaker

A lot depends on the Speaker, whose role is too partisan in Australia. John Bercow, the current Speaker of the United Kingdom's House of Commons, was elected Speaker as a Conservative MP during a Labour government. Betty Boothroyd, a former Speaker, was elected Speaker as a Labour MP during a Conservative government. In the UK, a candidate for Speaker has to be nominated by 12 members of parliament, at least three of whom have to be from a different party to the candidate's own ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker_of_the_House_of_Commons_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker_of_the_House_of_Commons_(United_Kingdom))).

The first Deputy Speaker has to come from a different party from that of the Speaker, and the two further Deputy Speakers have to come from different parties each too. The Australian House of Representatives should adopt this practice, with a modification that the different party can't be in coalition with the candidate's own party. It is not practical with a House of Representatives of only 151 for the Speaker to resign from his or her party and contest future elections as the Speaker with the other parties not opposing him or her as in the UK, but he or she should no longer attend party meetings.

Conclusion

The poor workplace culture of parliament is deeply entrenched. It will be a challenge for existing MPs to lift the standard to that which applies as a matter of law in every other workplace in Australia. If you can't do it, you will just continue the downward trend in the respect the public has for politicians and the democratic process itself.

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