

Submission to the Inquiry into The Practices and Procedures Relating to Question Time

To the Standing Committee on Procedure,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the inquiry. I am a voter in the electorate of Forde, in the state of Queensland.

In Australia today we face a crisis of political apathy and discontent with our politicians and Parliamentary practices, many people don't understand that Question Time is an opportunity for Australians to connect with Ministers, all the Members and the workings of the House of Representatives. Sadly, many people find the proceedings confusing and frustrating which makes the process of engaging in the political process, for most Australians, difficult. I believe a number of reasons contribute to this disconnect. A few changes to the practices and procedures relating to Question Time will help Australians connect with our elected Representatives and understand the Parliamentary process more fully.

DOROTHY DIXERS

Firstly, I'd like to address the issue of what is colloquially known as 'Dorothy Dixers', questions asked by the government back bench Members to government Ministers. In my opinion Question Time is not the time for the government to trumpet their own achievements or lack thereof. It is a time for the Opposition and Crossbench Members to question the government about their efficacy and governance. Furthermore, it allows the general public the opportunity to analyse the responses by government Ministers, their competency, transparency and accountability, or lack thereof. Dorothy Dixers are contrived, and a waste of time given that many Dixers appear to be written by the Minister they are directed to. Answers are predictable, practiced, not spontaneous, and serve only to present the government in a favourable light rather than give an accurate reflection on their performance as a Minister or efficacy of their Department & staff or the government. I would like to see Dixers eliminated from Question Time, removing the opportunity for the government of the day to use this valuable time for self-promotion. Ministers can issue media releases or conduct media interviews if they want to self-promote. I believe Question Time should be exclusively for the Members of the Opposition and Crossbench to question the government's Ministers about their governance.

DOROTHY DIXER TAGLINE 'ARE THERE ANY ALTERNATIVE POLICIES?' or '...ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES'

Secondly, if my preferred option of eliminating Dixers is not a recommendation of this Committee, then, at the very least, Dixers should only be allowed to include the tagline 'are there any alternative policies' or 'are there any alternative approaches' or similar. Answers to Dixers should be limited to information about what the government is actually doing or has done and not prophesizing about what the Opposition or Crossbench Members are doing or if their policies would have a positive or negative effect on Australia if the outcome of previous elections had been different. When a Minister discusses 'alternative approaches' or 'alternative policies' they are simply proselytizing to the audience about possible policies or actions rather than giving an accurate, up-to-date

interpretation of Opposition or Crossbench Members and their policy. The information imparted is biased and based on the interpretation of the government which may or may not be an accurate interpretation of actual policy or performance. The government, by definition, is unlikely to present Opposition or Crossbench policy in a fair or positive light. If Dixers must remain a part of Question Time, then they should be limited to the government only speaking about their own policies and performance and should make no reference to alternative policies of any alternative government, personal attacks on performance of Shadow Ministers, Opposition Members, Crossbench Members or their policies, past or present.

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE, MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS ANNOUNCEMENTS AND EULOGIES

Question Time should be exclusively for Members of the Opposition and Crossbench to ask questions of the government. Question Time should not be a time for Members to request 'Statements on Indulgence', announce Ministerial Arrangements or give eulogies. Ministerial Arrangements should be announced at the beginning of the sitting day. Statements on Indulgence should be reserved for another time during the sitting day and not during Question Time. If a Member wishes to eulogize a deceased person then it should be reserved for another time during the sitting day and not during Question Time. Too often Members of the House of Representatives will pay their respects to eminent Australians or others from abroad then on completion launch into attacks on the Opposition/Crossbench/Government Ministers with lightning speed. I find it disrespectful to go from a sombre, respectful mood to an adversarial mood almost instantly when very often family and/or loved ones of the deceased person are present in the public gallery. It also makes the politicians appear to be very insensitive and is completely at odds with the usual bipartisanship of the sentiments expressed in the eulogy.

AMOUNT OF QUESTION TIME

Question Time should commence from the time The Speaker announces 'Questions Without Notice' for a period of not less than 90 minutes (ninety minutes). Only after 90 minutes of Question Time has elapsed can the Prime Minister then ask for further questions be placed on the Notice Board. No Speaker, Minister or Member should have the power to cut Question Time short to evade questioning or for any other reason.

MOTIONS THAT A MEMBER NO LONGER BE HEARD

During Question Time no Member should be prevented from speaking unless The Speaker determines their behaviour warrants that that Member should leave under 94A. Question Time is designed to hold the government to account and when the government calls for a Member to 'no longer be heard' it defeats the purpose of Question Time and undermines the democratic process of the House of Representatives. Any Australian government should be able to sustain questioning for 90 minutes from the Opposition and Crossbench on any sitting day. If the government cannot do that and attempts to silence their questioners then it reflects their hostility, their desire to withhold information from the public and their inability to be transparent and accountable. Preventing the government, Opposition or Crossbench moving a motion for a Member to be 'no longer heard' should be banned during Question Time. These motions can be moved at other times during the sitting day but not during Question Time.

INFORMATION ABOUT PROCEEDINGS ON PARLIAMENT TV

To help Australians understand the processes and procedures of the House of Representatives I would like to see succinct real-time explanations on the Parliamentary TV footage. Currently, Members are identified, or it is noted on-screen that a 'Division' is in process, etc. I suggest when a Standing Orders are suspended or other Parliamentary machinations are going-on then a simple, clear explanation be written on-screen, so viewers understand what is happening.

POLITICIANS TO WHOM A QUESTION IS DIRECTED MUST ANSWER THE QUESTION

Often the Opposition or Crossbench will ask a question of a Minister or the Prime Minister who then deflects that question to another Member. This defeats the purpose of Question Time and disrespects the questioner. All Ministers should respond to questions asked of them and not make an arbitrary determination about whether they want to answer the question or if it is a question better suited to another Minister. The Minister should answer the question addressed to them truthfully and to the best of their ability. If the questioner finds the answer unsatisfactory or incomplete, they then have the option to ask further questions of the same Minister or another Minister, if time permits.

YELLING & SHOUTING QUESTIONS OR ANSWERS

Ministers and Members should not raise their voice, yell or shout questions or answers in the House of Representatives during Question Time. If Members are interjecting and it is too noisy then the Minister or Member should cease talking until The Speaker brings the House to order, then recommence their question or answer. All Members and Ministers should set an example to all Australians, particularly school children, all over the country about how to argue and debate respectfully. Failure to do this should result in the penalty of expulsion from the House at the conclusion of Question Time for the remainder of the sitting day. This consequence will pre-empt any Member who may choose to yell or shout deliberately in order to be thrown out and thus avoid further questions during Question Time. If their consequence for yelling commences at the conclusion of Question Time, and they are excluded for the remainder of the sitting day, then that may affect any subsequent motions/readings/Bills that the House may vote on. Therefore, if their presence is required in the House in order to vote on motions/readings/Bills then they may temper their yelling and be more respectful to the House and its Members.

Thank you for considering my submission and I hope this Committee uses this opportunity to improve the effectiveness of Question Time for all Australians and to help promote the procedures of Parliament to a wider audience.

Yours sincerely,

Belinda Jones