

QUESTION TIME

Question Time occurs in both the House of Representatives and the Senate and is one of the ways the Parliament scrutinises, or closely examines, the work of the executive government (Prime Minister and ministers).

Purpose

Question Time allows the opposition to ask executive government questions and to critically examine its work. Ministers are called upon to be accountable and explain their decisions and actions in their portfolios (areas of government responsibility). Question Time also provides ministers with an opportunity to present their ideas, their leadership abilities and their political skills.

During Question Time, the opposition also has a chance to present themselves as the alternative government.

Procedure

Question Time begins with the Speaker or President calling for questions without notice and asking 'are there any questions?'. The first question always comes from the opposition. The government and opposition in turn then put questions to the Prime Minister or ministers.

Question Time is recorded for television and in print form.

Question Time can be loud and argumentative, with plenty of lively debate and interjection. Each chamber is full during Question Time and the press gallery is always there to report on proceedings (see *Press Gallery*).

Schedule

Question Time occurs at 2pm every day when Parliament is sitting and usually lasts for about one hour. By custom, the Prime Minister decides how long Question Time will last and indeed if it will be held at all. The Australian Parliament has a long tradition of expecting the government of the day to hold itself accountable during Question Time.



- 1 An opposition member asks the Prime Minister a question
- 2 The Prime Minister answers the opposition member's question
- 3 A government member asks a minister a question
- 4 The minister answers the government member's question

QUESTIONS TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTERS CONTINUE ALTERNATING BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT MEMBERS

Question Time in the House of Representatives

Questions without notice

Ministers do not know the content of questions posed by the opposition during Question Time. These are likely to be tough, designed to test ministers' capacity to answer quickly and confidently. During Question Time, government backbenchers also pose questions to ministers, in order to highlight government policies and achievements. These are prepared prior to Question Time and are known as 'Dorothy Dixers', after a magazine columnist who used to write her own questions and answers.



Question Time in the Senate

- 1 An opposition senator asks a minister a question
- 2 The minister answers the opposition senator's question
- 3 A government senator asks a minister a question
- 4 The minister answers the government senator's question

QUESTIONS TO MINISTERS CONTINUE ALTERNATING BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT SENATORS

Questions on notice

At the conclusion of Question Time, the Prime Minister in the House of Representatives and the Leader of the Government in the Senate will ask *'that further questions be placed on the Notice Paper'*.

Questions on notice are written questions directed to ministers by members of parliament, placed on the Notice Paper (daily agenda) and answered in writing by ministers. These questions are used to obtain more detailed information about government policy and actions on particular issues. Questions and answers are not read out in the chamber, although they are printed in Hansard. Many questions on notice are submitted to the Parliament every year.

History

Question Time has evolved in the Australian Parliament over a long period of time. The first Parliament made provision for questions on notice to be asked and the answers were read to the chamber by the relevant minister. Over time, questions without notice were also put to ministers, particularly in regard to important or urgent matters. The focus in Question Time today is on making the government accountable for its actions and dealing with the political issues of the day.

LINKS

- APH website**
 House of Representatives Infosheet: *Questions*
www.tinyurl.com/Infosheet1
 Senate Brief: *Questions*
www.aph.gov.au/Senate/briefs/brief12