Parliamentary Lesson Plan
Transparency: Accountability

Question Time is part of the sitting day in both chambers when ministers are required to explain the decisions and actions made in their portfolio.

In this lesson students use a Question Time role-play to pressure ministers to justify their actions and to investigate accountability in the federal Parliament. Other mechanisms of parliamentary accountability are also explored. For detailed instructions on how to run a Question Time role-play see DIY Role-play in the Classroom: Question Time (link in Useful tools).

Outcomes
Students will:
• review issues of current and national interest
• experience Question Time through role-play
• reflect on the effectiveness of Question Time as a method of public accountability
• consider other mechanisms of accountability.

Focus questions
• What is accountability? (being called to account for one's actions)
• Why is it important that people with power and responsibility be accountable? (so the quality and effectiveness of their decisions and actions can be assessed)
• What are examples of issues of public importance as distinct from issues of personal importance?
• What is Question Time? (a part of the sitting day when the Parliament questions ministers about the administration of their portfolios)

Concept words
Performance • Sitting day • Power and privilege • Responsibility • Scrutiny
Executive government • Questions without notice • Questions on notice • Committee
Ministerial responsibility • Media • Dorothy Dix • Checks and balance • Hansard
Censure motion • Gaffs • Portfolio

USEFUL TOOLS

Definitions
Accountable: liable to be called to account; to explain; responsible to a person or entity for an act.
Responsible: answerable or accountable for something within one's power, management or control.
Questions without notice: questions of which ministers have no foreknowledge.
Censure motion: whereby a chamber declares a lack of confidence in a minister.

Documents and resources
PEO Fact Sheets:
• Question Time
• Parliamentary Committees
• Press Gallery

Role-play lesson plans
• Question Time in the House of representatives
• Question Time in the Senate

Standards of Ministerial Ethics
Parliamentary Lesson Plan  
Accountability

Getting started
1. Commence a discussion about part-time jobs that students hold. Ask ‘How do employers assess employee workplace performance?’ (observation, client evaluation, formal review, indices of success e.g. sales, output etc.)
2. Brainstorm how employers and customers may give performance feedback (praise or reprimand, continued or discontinued patronage, reward or penalty, promotion or demotion etc.)
3. Ask students to apply this concept to government performance. How does the general public assess government action? (scrutiny of government policy, statements and actions—especially through the media)
4. Ask: How does the Parliament scrutinise government performance and call the government to account for its actions? (through the operation of Question Time, parliamentary committees and the public record)
5. Ask: How may the public demonstrate dissatisfaction with government performance? (through change of government at election, demands for resignations, public demonstrations, unflattering editorial comment etc.)

Main activity
Preparing for Question Time in the House of Representatives
1. Ask students to identify issues of national importance that require a solution. (e.g. water salinity, obesity, climate change, youth depression, skill shortages)
2. Explain that the class (as a parliament) will scrutinise executive government’s performance by running a Question Time role-play in the House of Representatives.

Turning your room into a chamber
1. Arrange chairs into a ‘U’ shape with government (majority) facing opposition (minority) and 2 or 3 independents between the two large parties.
2. Select a Speaker and Prime Minister (from government), a Leader of the Opposition (from opposition) and a Clerk and Serjeant-at-Arms (unelected officials).

Holding a party meeting
1. Hold a government party meeting to determine the ministers responsible for each portfolio. (e.g. Minister for Environment, Health and Ageing, Youth Affairs and Employment etc) Hold an opposition party meeting to determine corresponding shadow portfolios. (e.g. Shadow Minister for Environment, Health and Ageing etc.)
2. Use the party meeting to plan questions in secret. Advise government backbenchers to plan friendly questions which highlight positive government activity (Dorothy Dixers). Advise the opposition and independents to plan challenging questions which highlight government weakness.

Running a Question Time role-play
1. Download the Question Time script (DIY role-play link in Useful tools)
2. Run the role-play encouraging the opposition to pressure ministers to account for their actions (e.g. by calling for answers in detail; a censure motion; changes to policy, an apology or resignation etc.)

Debrief
1. Did the government delay, equivocate, side-step, agenda shift or take questions on notice? (commit to providing a written answer at a later date)
2. What (if any) questions should ministers not be required to answer? (questions that do not relate to their portfolio responsibilities)
3. Based on this Question Time performance, which group do you think would win the next federal election?
4. Based on this Question Time role-play, how effective do you think Question Time is in calling the government to account?
Parliamentary context

- Question Time is often the media focus of a sitting day. Why? *(packed chamber, controversial questions, ministers pressured, gaffs anticipated)*
- What effect does media attention have on the dramatic nature of Question Time? *(gains and losses are more extreme with potentially greater consequences)*
- How can the Parliament check that the government is doing what was agreed by the Parliament? *(annual reports, Hansard, budgets and estimates committees)*
- What are the consequences of repeated poor performance in Question Time? *(adverse media comment, poor polling, declining morale, infighting etc.)*
- Imagine Parliament without Question Time. What would be different? *(consider checks and balances)*

Extension activities

- Record via radio, TV or web cast, a session of federal Question Time. Decide whether or not Question Time is an effective form of accountability. Support your answer with examples.
- Regular elections discipline a government. Discuss in 300 words.
- Media commentary provides an accurate record of what happens in the Parliament. Discuss in 300 words with reference to Question Time.