Question Time: House of Representatives

During Question Time in the House of Representatives, the Prime Minister and ministers are called upon to answer questions and to explain government decisions and actions. This lesson involves a role-play that helps students understand the purpose of Question Time, in particular how it works to scrutinise (closely examine) the government.

OUTCOMES

By participating in this role-play, students will:

• understand the role of government ministers, the opposition, minor parties and Independents
• explore parliamentary scrutiny and government accountability
• inquire into real and current issues
• practise public speaking, careful listening and quick thinking
• engage in critical thinking.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

What is the purpose of Question Time?
The Parliament uses Question Time to call on the government to explain its decisions and actions. This is referred to as scrutinising the government. The opposition, Independents and members of minor parties also use Question Time to raise important issues.

Who participates in Question Time and what groups do they belong to?
• government backbenchers, the opposition, Independents and members of minor parties, who ask the questions
• government ministers, who answer the questions.

How effective is Question Time in making the government explain its actions?
Question Time can bring to light issues or problems and press the government to take action. It also gives ministers the opportunity to address topical or urgent issues. However, because public and media attention focuses on Question Time, it can be used for political opportunism. The opposition might ask questions that challenge government decisions, while government backbenchers might ask ministers questions that highlight the government’s achievements.
Setting the scene for the role-play

Before the role-play begins, you can set the scene by doing some short activities with the students. For example:

- Watch Question Time in the House of Representatives. You can view replays of Question Time by following this link on the Australian Parliament House website: www.aph.gov.au/athtv
  
  Note: Question Time runs for about 70 minutes, so you may wish to show the class a 10 to 15 minute excerpt of the session.

- Students could also read and discuss the PEO’s Question Time Fact Sheet: www.peo.gov.au/learning/fact-sheets/question-time.html

- After watching Question Time, discuss with the class:
  1. What is the purpose of Question Time?
  2. Was there a difference between the questions asked by the opposition and the government?
  3. How well did it work? For example, did the government explain its actions and how well did the ministers answer the questions?
  4. What was the role of the Speaker?

- Encourage students to get into role as members of the House of Representatives and to understand that they:
  - represent the views of their electorate
  - may belong to the government or opposition so will be working as part of a large team
  - may be an Independent or member of a minor party.

Students can find out more about the roles of people in Parliament by checking the Fact Sheets on the PEO website: www.peo.gov.au/learning/fact-sheets.html

Main activity: Conducting a Question Time role-play

Scripts

The PEO scripts provide a framework for the role-play. The scripts include specific roles that can be assigned to students and indicate what they have to do and say. You can download a full script set or a template, which allows you to write your own script, from the Toolkit.

Preparing questions

Before the role-play can start, students will need questions to ask government ministers. You could use the PEO’s scripted questions and answers provided in the Toolkit. Otherwise your students could prepare their own questions.

During Question Time, members of parliament ask ministers questions about issues that fall within their federal areas of responsibility. Create a list of current issues by either:

- brainstorming topics in the news
- listing areas of concern related to a specific unit of study
- exploring issues of local or school interest.

Once the class has created their list, they can write their questions. Questions are directed at ministers who are responsible for the relevant portfolio. For example, if the government announced a plan to ban homework, the opposition would ask the Minister for Education to explain why.

The members of each team then meet to prepare questions.

- Government backbenchers prepare questions and answers with government ministers.
- Opposition backbenchers and shadow ministers plan tough questions (often on controversial topics) for government ministers.
- Independents and minor party members devise their own questions, either as a group or individually.
Set-up
Transform the classroom into a chamber by arranging chairs and tables into a horseshoe shape as indicated by the seating plan. The seating plan, as well as diagrams of the chamber, can be downloaded from the Toolkit.

Props and costumes
The Clerk will need a bell. You may like to use other props, such as a Mace for the Serjeant-at-Arms and gowns for the Speaker and Clerks. Instructions for making these are in the Toolkit.
Getting into role

- Divide the class into government, opposition, minor parties and Independents. Refer to Parliament NOW on the PEO website for the current numbers in the chambers. Use these to work out the proportions for your parliament. 
- Divide the government into ministers (frontbenchers) and backbenchers.
- Divide the opposition into shadow ministers and backbenchers.
- Select a Speaker – this is a non-debating role and is generally someone from the government who can exercise authority in the room.
- Select a Clerk (pronounced ‘Clark’) and Serjeant-at-Arms – these are parliamentary officers who do not debate or vote. A teacher may take the role of Deputy Clerk. This role does not require active participation, but puts the teacher in a central position in the room so they can assist with the running of the role-play.
- Elect party leaders – the government elects the Prime Minister and the opposition elects the Leader of the Opposition.
- Distribute portfolios (areas of responsibility) to government ministers.
Starting the role-play

1. The Clerk rings the bell and tells the members to stand.
2. The Serjeant-at-Arms, carrying the mace on their right shoulder, leads the Speaker into the chamber.
3. The Serjeant-at-Arms announces the Speaker, places the Mace on the table and moves to their seat.
4. The Speaker tells everyone to sit down and begins the session.
5. The Clerk reads the rules of Question Time.
6. The Speaker calls a member to ask a question and then calls the relevant minister to answer the question. The Speaker repeats this step.

Ending the role-play

7. The Question Time session finishes either when there are no more questions, or when the Prime Minister requests that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.
8. The Serjeant-at-Arms, holding the mace on their right shoulder, leads the Speaker from the chamber.

Debrief

After Question Time, you might like to explore the following questions with your students.

What questions are likely to cause the government concern?
Opposition questions which attempt to highlight government weakness. They often target specific ministers and/or refer to controversial reports in the media. Such questions are usually of interest to the public.

How can ministers defend the government in Question Time?
Ministers need to show they are managing their responsibilities well. Ministers also have to be extremely well-prepared and give clear, positive answers. The government can also prepare questions which focus on its achievements.

What role does the media play in the process of scrutiny?
Media organisations are free to select the news. They publish news to mass audiences and, in doing so, may criticise the actions and decisions of the government. In this way, the media contributes to the scrutiny of the Parliament.

What is the role of Independent and minor party members during Question Time?
Like the opposition, Independents and minor party members ask the government questions; they scrutinise the government and demand accountability.
EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

House of Representatives
To further explore the role of government ministers, conduct a law-making role-play that follows the progress of a bill through the Parliament. To do this, check out the Law-making role-play lesson plans.

Role-play lesson plans on the PEO website: www.peo.gov.au/teaching/role-play-lesson-plans.html