

Question Time

Scrutiny in writing

Question

What are questions in writing and how do they work?

Answer

Most of us are familiar with the spectacle of Question Time in the House, in which ministers answer questions 'without notice' from MPs on the opposition benches and from government backbenchers. But this is not the only opportunity afforded to MPs looking to further scrutinise executive government.

Questions can also be asked of ministers and parliamentary secretaries in writing, or 'with notice'.

MPs must submit their question to the clerk or table office for inclusion on

the notice paper and they must follow various rules outlined in the House's standing orders.

While the Speaker is responsible for applying the rules, in practice this is done under authority of the Speaker by House of Representatives staff.

The rules allow for an MP to do several things: press for a course of action, refer to a statement in the media, seek an explanation, and ask whether a minister's statement to the House is government policy.

But there are also plenty of things that are not allowed, such as questions which contain arguments, imputations, requests for opinion, or for government policy to be announced. An already asked question also cannot be repeated.

And questions must not be critical of the character or conduct of the Royal Family, Governor-General, Speaker or other MPs.

Many of these rules also apply to Question Time on the floor of the

House. However, according to House procedures the rules apply to questions in writing more strictly because of the opportunity to examine them more closely.

Once published on the notice paper, questions remain there until written replies are received and published in Hansard.

Although a minister is not compelled to answer, if he/she has not done so in 60 days a request can be made in the House that the Speaker write to the minister asking why there has been a delay. If a question has not been answered by the time of the next election, it effectively lapses by dropping off the notice paper.

It should also be noted that questions cannot be asked to MPs who are not ministers or parliamentary secretaries. While it has happened on rare occasions, most were disallowed under the standing orders.

A list of unanswered questions can be found at: www.aph.gov.au/qiw •

Do you have a question?

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