



**Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Victoria**

Fact Sheet 15

Guide for Visitors to Question Time

Question time is often seen as the highlight of a sitting day in Parliament. It can be one of the few occasions when visitors see all the Legislative Assembly members in the House at the one time. It is of great interest to the media, and the public galleries are usually full. This fact sheet is intended to help visitors understand some of the procedures that take place during question time.

Questions Without Notice

Question time allows members to ask ministers for information relating to Government administration.

It is a relatively new procedure, the first question being asked in the House on 30 April 1969. The new practice found considerable popularity with both members and the public because matters of public concern could be raised.

When is Question Time Held?

In the Legislative Assembly it is held at 2.00 pm each sitting day. Questions may be asked for a maximum period of 30 minutes, or until 10 questions have been answered, whichever is the longer.

Who Attends Question Time?

As question time is a very important part of the sitting day, all members of the House usually attend. Ministers are expected to attend. If a minister is unable to be present the Premier will indicate which minister will answer questions on his/her behalf.

The Speaker

The Speaker presides over the sittings of the Legislative Assembly and sits in the chair at the top of the Chamber. Members elect a Speaker at the start of a new Parliament, usually choosing a Government member. The Speaker's role is to maintain order in the House and ensure proper parliamentary procedures and practices of the House are followed. In doing so, the Speaker

must remain impartial and treat all members of the House equally. See *Fact Sheet 23: The Speaker*.

Question time can be very disorderly, with points of order being raised and interjections made back and forward across the House. It is a very demanding time for the Speaker.

Where do Members Sit?

Members of the Government sit to the right of the Speaker as well as on some of the cross benches on the left facing the Speaker. Members of the Opposition, The Nationals and Independent members share the benches to the left of the Speaker.

Ministers sit on the front row of the Government benches and move to the Table to reply to questions. The Opposition shadow ministers sit on the front row of the benches to the left of the Speaker, also moving to the Table to ask questions. The Leaders and Deputy Leaders of the parties sit around the Table.

The Table

The Clerks sit at the Table in front of the Speaker. They advise the Speaker and members on parliamentary procedures and practices. In front of the Clerks are books which they use for reference such as:

- Standing orders (rules of the House)
- Sessional orders (temporary rules of the House for the session)
- Speakers' rulings
- *Erskine May's Parliamentary Practice*.

Also on the Table is a complete set of the Victorian Statutes (all laws of Victoria) and two despatch boxes. On two brackets at the end of the Table sits the Mace, a symbol of the Speaker's authority in the Legislative Assembly. The Mace is carried into the House each sitting day by the Serjeant-at-Arms and must remain on the Table while the House is sitting.

Galleries

Above the Speaker's chair is the press gallery. Representatives from newspapers, radio and television attend, with question time being filmed. At the opposite end of the Chamber, both upstairs and downstairs, are the public galleries. The front rows of the downstairs galleries are reserved for guests of the Speaker and members of the Legislative Council. For question time the public galleries are well attended by various groups and visitors.

Hansard

Hansard is the official printed report of the debates in the House. In England in 1811, Thomas Curson Hansard first compiled and published the reports of the debates for the House of Commons.

Parliament employs Hansard reporters to record the debates in the House using either a Stenotype shorthand machine or audiodigital recording. They sit in the far right hand corner of the Chamber and, because of the pace of question time and production deadlines, they alternate every seven to ten minutes.

Who Gets the Call?

When the Speaker calls ‘Questions without notice — Are there any questions’, members from both sides of the House stand in their places to attract the Speaker’s attention. The call (ie a member’s turn to ask a question) is at the discretion of the Speaker, but a practice is established that the first call is generally given to the Opposition, and is usually the Leader of the Opposition, the question normally being directed to the Premier. The call then normally alternates between speakers on each side of the House.

What Questions can be Asked?

Question time is a very spontaneous time in the House as ministers have no prior notice of the questions being asked by non-Government members. Opposition members are tempted to emphasise matters which could embarrass the Government. Government backbench members often ask arranged questions to make the Government look good or to put forward their policies and initiatives. These are known as ‘Dorothy Dix’ questions.

Questions may be put to ministers relating to public affairs, business of the House or to the administration of their particular portfolio. Members may also ask questions about areas of administration that are the responsibility of a minister in the Legislative Council. A minister in the Legislative Assembly answers the question on behalf of that minister.

Questions and Answers — Language

The Speaker may direct that the language of a question be changed if it seems to be unbecoming or not conforming with the standing orders (rules of the House) and conventions of the House. When members ask questions, they must not give an opinion, or state any facts, except to explain the question if necessary. In answering the question the minister must not debate the matter to which the question refers.

Rules for Visitors in the Gallery

Visitors are always welcome in the public gallery. However, there are certain rules that apply, for example:

- Visitors must not interject, attempt to communicate with members, display notices or cause a disturbance
- Visitors should be appropriately dressed
- Eating, drinking and smoking are not permitted
- Photography, filming and videoing of proceedings are not permitted.

Note Taking for Personal Use in the Gallery

It had been a longstanding practice in the Legislative Assembly of prohibiting note taking in the public gallery. The prohibition stems from rules originally adopted by the House of Commons in the seventeenth century to ensure debates were kept secret from the then monarch.

Because of the demand for a more immediate knowledge of proceedings in Parliament and a wide range of people using the public galleries, on 24 October 2000 the Speaker directed that the taking of notes in the public gallery for personal use is now permitted.

Members of the public should be aware that any notes taken should not be published as they are not legally protected. Hansard is the only official version of the debates in the Legislative Assembly.

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Fact Sheets

The Legislative Assembly Procedure Office has produced a series of Fact Sheets that explain parliamentary procedure and terminology. All Fact Sheets are available on Parliament's website www.parliament.vic.gov.au or through the Procedure Office.

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