



**Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Victoria**

Fact Sheet B2

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 all members are in the Chamber at the same time. The media and general public show great interest, with all galleries usually full, and others watching the webcast. This fact sheet explains who takes part, the procedures and what you can see in the Chamber.

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Purpose and history of question time

Officially known as questions without notice, question time allows members to ask ministers about government administration.

It is a relatively new procedure. The first question was asked in the Legislative Assembly on 30 April 1969. Since then it has become one of the most well known

parts of a sitting day. Question time highlights topical issues and ministers come under scrutiny in a very public environment.

When is question time?

In the Legislative Assembly question time begins at 2.00 pm each sitting day. Question time lasts for a maximum of 30 minutes, or until ministers have answered 10 questions, whichever is longer. Usually it lasts at least 45 minutes. Ministers have up to four minutes to answer each question.

Almost all members attend

As question time is a very important part of the sitting day, all members usually attend, although it is not compulsory. However, ministers are expected to attend.

A minister who cannot attend tells the Speaker in advance, and explains which minister will answer questions for them. The Speaker announces the arrangements at the start of question time.

The Speaker's role during question time

The Speaker is in charge of the sittings of the Legislative Assembly, and sits in the chair at the top of the Chamber. He or she maintains order in the Chamber and ensures correct parliamentary procedures and practices are followed. The Speaker must remain impartial and treat all members of the Assembly equally.

Question time can be very disorderly. Members usually raise many points of order, and interject across the Chamber. It is a very demanding time for the Speaker.

The Speaker can suspend any member for disorderly conduct for up to an hour and a half. This happens relatively frequently during question time, often because a member repeatedly interjects, despite warnings from the Speaker.

Find out more: *Fact Sheet H2: The Speaker*.

Where members sit

Government members sit to the right of the Speaker. Depending on how many government members there are, some may also sit to the left of the Speaker. Opposition members (currently the Liberals and The Nationals in coalition) and independent members sit to the left of the Speaker.

Ministers sit in the front row on the Speaker's right, and answer questions at the table. Opposition shadow ministers sit in the front row on the left of the Speaker, and ask questions from the table. The Leaders and Deputy Leaders of the parties sit at the table.

The clerks' role

The three clerks wear black gowns and sit at the table in front of the Speaker. They advise the Speaker and members on parliamentary procedures and practices. The clerks keep books on the table for reference, including standing orders (rules) and records of rulings made by Speakers.

Find out more: *Fact Sheet H3: The Clerk*.

The table and the mace

The green folders along the table are a complete set of the Victorian statutes (laws). The rosewood despatch boxes on the table were gifts from the House of Commons

to celebrate 100 years of government in Victoria. They contain parliamentary procedure manuals and documents.

The gold plated mace sits on the end of the table and is a symbol of the Speaker's authority in the Legislative Assembly. It is carried into the Chamber each sitting day by the Serjeant-at-Arms and must remain on the table while the Assembly is sitting. Find out more: *Fact Sheet H4: The Serjeant-at-Arms*.

Viewing galleries

The area above the Speaker's chair is the press gallery. Newspaper, radio and television reporters watch and take notes from this gallery.

The public galleries are at the opposite end of the Chamber, both upstairs and downstairs. The front rows of the downstairs galleries are reserved for guests of the Speaker, and members of the Legislative Council. The public galleries are often full during question time.

Filming and webcasting question time

Debate in the Legislative Assembly, including question time, is broadcast through Parliament's website. Also, a television camera is usually filming question time, taking footage for news bulletins.

Strict guidelines determine when and how the Assembly and its members can be filmed. Among other rules, the camera must focus on the member who is speaking, and operators cannot broadcast footage of the public and press galleries.

Record of question time and debates

Hansard is the official printed report of the debates in the Legislative Assembly. Its name comes from Thomas Curson Hansard, who first compiled and published reports of the debates for the United Kingdom House of Commons.

Parliament employs Hansard reporters to record the debates in the Assembly using either a Stenotype shorthand machine, or audiodigital recording. They sit in the corner of the Chamber to the Speaker's left. Because of the pace of question time and production deadlines, they alternate every seven to 10 minutes.

Asking questions

At the beginning of question time, the Speaker says 'Questions without notice — Are there any questions?'. Members from both sides of the Chamber stand up, to let the Speaker know they want to speak.

The Speaker decides who gets to speak, which is known as having the call. The Speaker gives the first call to the opposition, often the Leader of the Opposition. The call then alternates between government and non-government speakers.

Content of questions

Question time is a spontaneous time, as ministers have no prior notice of the questions non-government members ask them. Opposition members are tempted to emphasise matters which could embarrass the government.

Government backbench members often ask arranged questions to show the government in a good light, or to publicise their policies and initiatives. Ministers know about these questions in advance. They are known as 'Dorothy Dix' questions.

Members can ask ministers questions about government business within their individual areas of responsibility. Members may also ask questions about portfolios of ministers in the Legislative Council. A Legislative Assembly minister answers questions on behalf of the Council minister.

Language of questions and answers

The Speaker can tell a member to change the language of a question. He or she does so if the wording is unbecoming, or breaks the standing orders (rules) and conventions of the Legislative Assembly.

Members are not allowed to give an opinion, or state any facts, except those necessary to explain the question. Ministers are not allowed to debate the question in their answers, nor may they introduce new information, irrelevant to the question.

Behaviour in the gallery

Visitors are welcome in the public gallery. Reservations are not available, so you should arrive at least 15 minutes before question time to get a seat.

When in the gallery, you must not interject, attempt to communicate with members, display signs or cause a disturbance. You are not allowed to take photographs or film the proceedings.

You should wear neat clothing, and footwear is essential. Your clothing must not display any messages designed to interfere with the business of the Legislative Assembly. We do not allow hats, other than religious headwear.

You cannot eat, drink or smoke in the gallery.

Taking notes in the gallery

You can take notes while in the public gallery. This has only been allowed since 2000. Before then it was not allowed, following House of Commons' practice going back to the seventeenth century. Taking notes was banned there to keep debates secret from the monarch.

Do not publish any notes you take as they are not legally protected. Hansard is the only official version of the debates in the Legislative Assembly.

Issued by the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, December 2010

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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