



Does Question Time fulfil its role of ensuring accountability?

Parameswary Rasiah

University of Western Australia

Discussion Paper 12/06 (April 2006)

My argument is that Question Time (i.e. Questions Without Notice) does not fulfill its role of ensuring the government is held accountable for its actions, based on three premises. Firstly, ministers do evade answering questions, specifically those asked by opposition MPs; secondly, the speaker's inaction or rulings when evasion occurs and thirdly, 'Dorothy Dixers' (friendly questions) are widely used by the government to evade accountability.

Evasion

The popularly held belief that ministers frequently evade answering questions during Question Time is supported by empirical evidence. My study is based on an analytical framework derived from works by others¹ in the field of evasion (or equivocation) in political news interviews. It involved the classification of responses as 'answers' (direct or indirect), 'intermediate responses' (such as not having the information at hand or pointing out incorrect information in the question), and 'evasions' based on specific criteria.

The data were Hansard transcripts of the House of Representatives' Questions Without Notice in February 2003 dealing only with questions and responses on the topic of Iraq. This topic was chosen because it was and still is a relevant topic of discussion today especially in terms of whether the Iraqi regime posed a sufficient enough threat to justify military action by Australia the following month (March 2003) as part of the 'coalition of the willing'. There were 41 such questions which represented approximately one third of all questions on Iraq for the whole of that year. Of the 41 questions, the majority (66 per cent) came from the opposition party, through its Leader whilst the balance (34 per cent) was asked by government MPs.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of questions asked by government and opposition MPs and summarises the numbers of questions: answered, provided with intermediate responses; or, evaded.

¹ Peter Bull and Kate Mayer, 1993, 'How Not to Answer Questions in Political Interviews', *Political Psychology*, 14 (4); 651-666; Steven Clayman, 2001, 'Answers and evasions', *Language in Society*, [Online] 30 (3); pp. 403-442. Available from: <http://journals.cambridge.org/bin/bladerunner>; Sandra Harris, 1991, 'Evasive Action: How Politicians Respond to Questions in Political Interviews', in P. Scannell (ed.) *Broadcast talk* ed. P. Scannell, London, Sage, pp. 76-99.

	Government	Opposition
Answers	14	5
Intermediate Responses	0	14
Evaded	0	8
Total	14	27

Table 1: Questions answered, given intermediate responses or evaded

Analysis of the data revealed that only five of the questions from opposition party MPs were answered whereas all 14 questions from government party MPs were answered. Since only opposition questions could be construed as pursuing accountability, the fact that most were not answered and instead were either evaded or given an intermediate response, diminishes the effectiveness of Question Time in ensuring accountability. However, it should be noted that some of opposition questions were ‘hostile’ in nature and designed more to *attack* the government than to seek information or pursue accountability. Analysis of such questions, which are almost impossible to answer directly, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Analysis of evasive responses by ministers showed that most of the evasions involved a few prominent shifts in topic, or ‘agenda-shifts’, made by ministers. As expected, and widely noted by other political commentators², the most prominent agenda shift was to attack the opposition. Almost all responses to opposition questions, and surprisingly to a number of Dorothy Dixers, were characterized by this shift. Another interesting shift was to praise authority figures who agreed with the government’s views, such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the United States’ former Secretary of State Colin Powell and the United Nations’ Secretary General Kofi Annan.

A peculiar agenda shift, possibly unique to the Australian Question Time context, was an attempt to draw the attention of the House to a visitor in the gallery, praising him while at the same time attacking the opposition. This shift was perpetrated by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in response to a Dorothy Dixer, asking him about the ‘state of human rights in Iraq’. The following is part of his response:

Downer: I am delighted to see in the gallery William Hague, the former leader of the Conservative Party - a seriously good man. Just the presence of him and his charming wife there remind me of the strength of the British parliamentary - in particular the British Prime Minister and the opposition in Britain - on this question of Iraq. I notice with a great deal of interest that in all the critiques from the Leader of the Opposition on this issue of Iraq he never mentions

² John Uhr, 2005, ‘How Democratic is Parliament? A case study in auditing the performances of parliaments’, *Democratic Audit of Australia*, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>

the name 'Tony Blair'. He always criticises George Bush and John Howard but he never criticises Tony Blair, Iain Duncan Smith or William Hague.

(House of Representatives Hansard 5 February 2003, p. 10946)

In the above instance, the speaker did not prevent the shift taking place, not intervening to reprimand the Minister on any grounds.

The Speaker

In the UK, the Speaker resigns from his party on appointment. This is not the case in Australia. The speaker is nominated by the government, and remains a member of the ruling party, which has given rise to various criticisms³ and counter-criticisms⁴. It has serious implications because the Speaker presides over Question Time and is responsible for deciding whether there are breaches of the rules regarding the form and content of questions and whether answers are relevant.

The partiality of the Speaker's actions, or inactions, frequently came into question, especially when ministers' responses were patently irrelevant. It was exemplified when ministers shifted agendas and the Speaker was not recorded as intervening until, in response to interjections, the interjectors rather than the agenda-shifting respondents were reprimanded. Such prominent failures, which were frequently observed in this study, seriously compromise Question Time's ability to ensure accountability of the government since the only formal rule governing answers in House of Representatives' Question Time is Standing Order 145, which requires that answers be relevant.

In one glaring example, it was noted that even when the minister's response was obviously totally irrelevant the Speaker did not reprimand the minister concerned. This occurred when the then Opposition Leader asked Prime Minister Howard for the precise date that the government first held 'discussions with the US about the role of Australia in the event of a US led military strike against Iraq' without the backing of the United Nations. Howard did not answer the question but shifted the agenda and when the *evasion* was pointed out by the questioner ('Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. If the Prime Minister is not seeking to disguise it, why won't he tell the Australian people the date'), the Speaker ruled that the answer

³ Ken Coghill, 2005, 'The Speaker rules, or does he?', *Democratic Audit of Australia*, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>

⁴ Ian Harris, 2006, 'Question time, impartial Speakers and dissent from rulings: some comments on the House of Representatives' experience', *Democratic Audit of Australia*, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>

was relevant ('The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. There is no point of order. The Prime Minister's reply was relevant to the question asked'). Howard then proceeded to state that there was 'a whole range of discussions with a close ally' before giving an intermediate response to the question 'I certainly do not carry in my mind the precise date, and I will undertake to see if I can further enlighten the Leader of the Opposition'.⁵ This shows that the earlier part of Howard's response was irrelevant, but the speaker, even when reminded that the answer had not been given, chose not to uphold the point of order and instead specifically ruled that the response was relevant. With the speaker's actions so favouring the Prime Minister, it is unreasonable to contend that accountability can be pursued effectively through Question Time.

Dorothy Dixers

Apart from evasion and the effect of the Speaker's actions and inactions in advantaging the government, the popular use of Dorothy Dixers has an adverse effect on Question Time's ability to ensure government accountability. The study revealed that every government MP's question was a Dorothy Dixer that displayed the following characteristics: they were mainly structured ('Would the Minister inform/update the House ...?'); they were mainly questions which required general information (for example, 'Would the Acting Prime Minister update the House on the latest situation in relation to Iraq?'); the amount of detail provided in the answers provided compelling evidence that the questions had been pre-arranged; they appeared to have been used mainly for propaganda purposes (with the main topics being the then Iraqi President and his *evil* regime and weapons of mass destruction); and they were usually responded to with a note of appreciation and praise, especially those questions directed towards Downer.

The fact that in Question Time about half of all questions come from government MPs and that these questions appear to be pre-arranged Dorothy Dixers clearly implies that (for this reason alone) the accountability potential of the forum can immediately be reduced by 50 per cent. Dorothy Dixers have serious implications on evasion as a whole because they waste time such that less time is available for additional questioning from the opposition. In other words, Dorothy Dixers significantly restrict the ability of the opposition to pursue government accountability.

⁵ House of Representatives Hansard, 6 February 2003, p. 11132

Conclusion

This study supports the conclusion that Question Time (Question Without Notice) in the Australian House of Representatives is neither a forum in which the government provides much in the way of information nor an effective means of holding the government accountable for its actions. Evasion does occur, especially in responses to opposition questions that pursue accountability. The Speaker's continuing membership of the government creates a perception of loyalty and partiality towards the government. The government is permitted to ask questions of itself and Dorothy Dixers are rife. Given the circumstances, accountability is a highly unlikely outcome of Question Time. It has, as noted by Coghill⁶, 'degenerated almost to a farce'; a view not shared by Ian Harris, Clerk of the House of Representatives. Citing the fact that Question Time enjoys 'continuing public and media interest', Harris asks whether 'so many people would waste their time so wantonly?'⁷ In response, I refer to his second paragraph (p. 1), 'question time is now seen as a vehicle for testing the performance of Ministers and Shadow Ministers ...' and argue that Question Time is more about 'performance' than the pursuit of accountability. Both questioners and their respondents *perform* for the 'overhearing audience', a view shared by other analysts of parliamentary discourse. In Prime Minister's Question Time in the UK, it has been observed that 'sanctioned impoliteness' towards the prime minister during Question Time is both interesting and entertaining to the overhearing audience⁸.

Perhaps accountability is an incidental by-product of Question Time as opposition members ask questions on highly contentious issues, the media highlights them and the government is kept on its toes, aware that its actions are being scrutinized by the voting public. As Uhr puts it, 'one has to acknowledge the raw power of Question Time to put the fear of (if not God) public scorn into a government'⁹.

⁶ Ken Coghill, 2002, 'Question Time: Questionable questioning with few answers', *Democratic Audit of Australia*, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>, p.1.

⁷ Harris, 'Question time', p. 7.

⁸ Sandra Harris, 2001, 'Being politically impolite: extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse', *Discourse and Society* 12 (4); 451-472.

⁹ John Uhr, 2005, '*Ministerial Responsibility in Australia: 2005*', 2005 Constitutional Law Conference, UNSW Sydney, p. 9.