



Prime Minister's Questions

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Parliamentary questions can be used by Members of Parliament to seek information, to press for action and to hold the Government to account. Questions for oral answer are directed to Ministers in the Chamber of the House of Commons.¹

This note looks at the history of the Prime Minister facing questions in the Chamber of the House of Commons, the changes to Prime Minister's Questions, and the current situation. The procedures for the tabling of questions for and answering of questions at Prime Minister's Question Time are also described.

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¹ House of Commons Information Office, [Parliamentary Questions](#), Factsheet P1, December 2008

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1 Historical background

Before the 1880s questions to the Prime Minister were treated no differently from questions to other Ministers.

Until then questions were asked of ministers, without notice, on days on which ministers were present (usually Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays), in whatever order Members rose to ask them. Public business could not commence until all questions had been answered. Changes were made in 1881 that affected questions to the Prime Minister, “when as a courtesy to Mr Gladstone, then aged 72, questions to the prime minister were placed last on the day’s list to allow him to come in late”.²

Since July 1961, a fixed amount of time each week has been allocated for Questions to the Prime Minister. In his review “The Prime Minister and Parliamentary Questions”, GW Jones outlined those early procedures and explained how questions to the Prime Minister changed before weekly two fifteen minute slots of questions to the Prime Minister was first established in 1961.³

1.1 Pre-1961

In 1902, 40 minutes was allowed for questions. This increased to 55 minutes in 1906. However, increasing numbers of questions and the asking of more supplementary questions meant that questions to the Prime Minister were rarely reached. In March 1904, they were placed to begin no later than question number 51. But still only about half the questions to the Prime Minister were reached, so from June 1904, they began no later than question number 45. This continued until 1953.⁴

GW Jones then explains why Prime Ministers Questions became restricted to Tuesdays and Thursdays:

From 1953, the ailing Sir Winston Churchill normally answered only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and what was accepted as a mark of respect to him became a convention continued by Sir Anthony Eden and Mr Macmillan. Questions continued to be put to the Prime Minister for Mondays and Wednesdays and, if number 45 was reached they were usually taken by the Lord President of the Council.⁵

In 1959, the Procedure Committee recommended that Prime Minister’s Questions should be taken during a fixed quarter of an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on other days, questions to the Prime Minister would continue to begin at question number 45.

1.2 1961 changes

In February 1960, the House of Commons accepted a proposal from RA Butler, Home Secretary and the Leader of the House of Commons, to begin Prime Minister’s Question at number 40 (rather than number 45), in place of the Procedure Committee’s recommendation. But GW Jones commented that “it was still not early enough, and in July 1961 the House accepted the committee’s recommendation”.⁶

² GW Jones, “The Prime Minister and Parliamentary Questions”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 26, 1972-73, pp260-273

³ *Ibid*

⁴ In a brief interlude from 1919 to 1922, questions to the Prime Minister began not later than question number 25

⁵ GW Jones, *op cit*, p261

⁶ *Ibid*

The Speaker introduced the first occasion on which Prime Minister's Questions were taken at 3.15pm on Tuesday 18 July 1961 in the following way:

The House will have observed that the Order Paper today indicates that the Prime Minister will answer his Questions at 3.15 p.m. The Prime Minister has informed me that he is at the service of the House in this matter and is willing to try this experiment for the remainder of the Session, if that be the wish of the House, as I understand it is.⁷

On 25 October 1961, *The Times* reported that the arrangement was to be made permanent.⁸ It reported the Speaker's statement of the previous day:

When on 18th July I announced new arrangements for dealing with Questions to the Prime Minister, I told the House that the Prime Minister was willing to try the experiment of answering his Questions on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 3.15 p.m.

I am told that this arrangement has worked for the general convenience of the House and that in these circumstances the Prime Minister is willing that it should be continued. I am also told that it has been further agreed that it would be reasonable to implement the rest of the relevant recommendation of the Select Committee on Procedure, namely, that Questions to the Prime Minister should be limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays. I therefore propose that we should continue the arrangement with this limitation.⁹

1.3 1961-1997

The twice-weekly sessions of Prime Minister's Questions continued until 1997, however, some changes were made in the intervening period. Philip Norton provided a brief review of these developments:

Initially questions tabled to the Prime Minister covered substantive issues, especially foreign affairs. In the 1970s, the practice developed of asking 'open' questions. These did not ask about a specific policy but rather asked the Prime Minister if he would pay an official visit to a particular area or when he last met representatives of a particular body. These were tabled because they were 'transfer proof'. That is they could not be transferred to another departmental minister. The opportunity to ask a supplementary question allowed the questioner to raise a substantive issue ... Since the latter half of the 1970s, the standard open question has been the 'engagements' question, asking the Prime Minister to list his engagements for the day.¹⁰

Committees reviewed the operation of Prime Minister's Questions in 1971-72; 1976-77; 1990-91; 1994-95 and 2001-02.¹¹

On 12 May 1977, James Callaghan, the then Prime Minister, referred to the recommendations of the 1976-77 report, *Questions to the Prime Minister*, when he made the following statement about how he would respond to questions tabled for him to answer:

⁷ HC Deb 18 July 1961 c1052

⁸ "Prime Minister willing – Commons to keep reply times", *Times*, 25 October 1961

⁹ HC Deb 24 October 1961 c740

¹⁰ Philip Norton, "Calling Time on Questions", *Parliamentary Review*, June 1996

¹¹ The reviews were listed in the Procedure Committee's 1995 report:

"Select Committee on Parliamentary Questions 1971-72 HC393; Fifth Report from the Procedure Committee 1976-77 HC320; 1984-85 (subject inquired into but no evidence published or report made: Minutes of Proceedings 14 May 1985); Third Report from the Procedure Committee 1990-91 HC178"

Source: Procedure Committee, *Prime Minister's questions*, June 1995, HC 555 1994-95, para 1n

With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a brief statement about the Fifth Report of the Sessional Committee on Procedure, on Questions to the Prime Minister. I should like to thank the Committee for its speedy and constructive report.

The report makes four recommendations. I have proposed to the Committee that, for an experimental period, I should retain for answer by myself more Oral Questions on important matters, even if they fall within the responsibilities of another Minister. That proposal—the full details of which are spelled out in the first annex to the report—is made as the first recommendation by the Committee. I accept it and will apply it immediately and until the end of the Session, when I will review the matter in the light of experience.

The second recommendation of the Committee is directed at the House itself: it recommends that Members should table fewer Questions of an "indirect" kind—think of what I might have been spared this afternoon—such as official visit and engagement Questions, and more Questions of the kind that I have indicated that I am prepared to retain.

The third recommendation of the Committee is directed to the practice on grouping Questions: it suggests that indirect Questions should not be grouped for answer with identical Questions on the Paper for that day. The purpose of this recommendation is to break up blocks of syndicated Questions. I accept that recommendation and will apply it henceforth; I will review it, along with the first recommendation, at the end of the Session.

The fourth recommendation, Mr. Speaker, relates to your practice.

I hope that adoption of these recommendations will assist the House and improve Question Time.¹²

In fact very few questions were transferred and similar undertakings were given (and adhered to) by Mrs Thatcher shortly after taking office, on 12 July 1979.¹³

The Procedure Committee's 1995 report on *Prime Minister's Questions* recommended that Members asking the Prime Minister balloted "open" questions should only ask their supplementary question.¹⁴ This procedure was adopted in 1997. On 21 May 1997, the Speaker made the following statement:

Madam Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), I remind the House of the new method of handling engagements questions. The Member with the first such question should call out the number of his or her question in the normal way. After the Prime Minister has described his engagements, that Member will be asked to put a supplementary question. For the second and subsequent engagements questions, the Members who tabled the question should not call out the number of the question but simply put their supplementary question as soon as I call their name. Members with substantive questions on the Order Paper should, of course, continue to call the number of the question.¹⁵

The Procedure Committee also made the following recommendations, which were not adopted:

CONCLUSION

¹² HC Deb 12 May 1977 cc1550-1551

¹³ HC Deb 12 July 1979 c663ff

¹⁴ Procedure Committee, *Prime Minister's questions*, June 1995, HC 555 1994-95, para 29

We understand that there are Members who do not wish to see any limitation of the open-ended question and are content with Prime Minister's questions as it is (and this view is reflected among Members of the Committee). We have received little evidence arguing for maintenance of the current arrangements. The matter therefore needs to be debated by the House. The Committee, after considerable study has come to the conclusion that an experiment with an alternative arrangement is the best way forward. It rests with the House to make the final decision on whether such an experiment should be conducted.

If it is felt by the House that there is need for a change, then **we recommend that, for an experimental period, Prime Minister's questions on Thursdays be conducted so that:**

Members should give notice ten sitting days in advance of their intention to ask a question to the Prime Minister

The ten Members successful in the ballot would have up to noon on the Wednesday prior to PM's Questions to table a substantive question – open questions which do not disclose a real subject would not be in order

supplementary questions would be confined to the subject of the original question.

On Tuesdays we propose no change ...¹⁶

2 1997 onwards

2.1 Changes

Since 1997, Prime Ministers have continued to answer questions but, only once a week, on Wednesdays for half an hour. The change from the twice-weekly format was announced by the Prime Minister, as noted in the first question that he received, from Ian Taylor:

I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to his role of answering questions and I am grateful to him for finding the time in his diary to do so. At some point he might consult the House about these changes.¹⁷

The only other change to affect Prime Minister's Questions since 1997 is that the amount of notice a Member needs to give of a question has been reduced to three sitting days, following a recommendation to that effect from the Procedure Committee in 2001-02,¹⁸ which was agreed by the House on 29 October 2002.

In addition, since July 2002, the Prime Minister has given oral evidence to the Liaison Committee, on two occasions a year.

2.2 Criticism

Criticism of the 1997 changes has continued, and on 1 July 2009, Eric Martlew questioned the Prime Minister about reverting to holding Prime Minister's Questions on Tuesdays and

¹⁵ HC Deb 21 May 1997 c702

¹⁶ Procedure Committee, *Prime Minister's questions*, June 1995, HC 555 1994-95, paras 60-62

¹⁷ HC Deb 21 May 1997 c703

¹⁸ Procedure Committee, *Parliamentary Questions*, 26 June 2002, HC 622 2001-02, para 38. There is a useful summary of developments in Prime Minister's Questions in paras 49-62

Thursdays;¹⁹ and Diane Abbot tabled the following Early Day Motion, entitled Prime Minister's Questions:

That this House regrets the fact that in 1997 Prime Minister's Questions was moved from twice a week to once a week; notes that there was no proper consultation about this step; further notes that this has made it more difficult for back-benchers to ask topical questions; further notes that consequently the House is less effective in holding the Government to account; and calls on the Government to restore Prime Minister's Questions to Tuesdays and Thursdays.²⁰

3 Historical comparison

A paragraph from Philip Giddings and Helen Irwin's chapter "Objects and Questions", in *The Future of Parliament*, contrasts Prime Minister's Questions in 1964 and more recently:

In 2004 the number of questions receiving an oral answer was less than half that in 1964, mainly because answers, and crucially, supplementary questions were much briefer in 1964 and the Speaker only very infrequently called opposition frontbenchers to ask supplementary questions, something that is now routine at every Question Time. This applied even to questions to the Prime Minister: during that week in 1964 the Leader of the Opposition (Harold Wilson) was called only once, on the Thursday. In 1964 Prime Minister's question time took place twice in the week, for fifteen minutes each Tuesday and Thursday. Since 1997 the Prime Minister has answered once each week, for half an hour on Wednesdays and it has become the pattern that during that half hour the Leader of the Opposition is called to put up to six questions to the Prime Minister, all without notice. The Leader of the Liberal Democrats gets two questions and if they are present, leaders of other parties may get called too.²¹

4 Current procedure

Currently, the Prime Minister answers questions in the Chamber of the House of Commons on every sitting Wednesday, from midday, for half an hour.

4.1 The shuffle

Each Member may table one question for each session of Prime Minister's Questions. The shuffle is a lottery, randomly choosing 15 Members whose name will go on the Order Paper to ask questions to the Prime Minister. Every Member who has tabled a question before the shuffle is run (usually the Thursday before Prime Minister's Questions) will have their question included in the shuffle. This question can simply be an 'Engagement' question, to ask the Prime Minister about their engagements for the day, which will allow the Member to ask a question without notice on the day; or it could be a direct 'substantive' question, giving the Prime Minister notice of the question they wish to ask. The names of the Members who have been successful in the shuffle are listed in the Order Paper, along with any substantive questions.

4.2 Question time

During the Prime Minister's Question Time, questions are asked in the order shown on the Order Paper, although the Speaker may call other Members not on the Order Paper to ask

¹⁹ HC Deb 1 July 2009 c298

²⁰ Early Day Motion 1791 2008-09

²¹ Philip Giddings and Helen Irwin's, "Objects and Questions", in Philip Giddings (ed), *The Future of Parliament – Issues for a New Century*, 2005, pp72-73

supplementary questions. The House of Commons Information Office Factsheet *Parliamentary Questions* summarises the current procedure:

The first Member on the questions list begins the PMQ's process by saying 'Number One' (to reflect the question's position in the order of business), then asks about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day. The Prime Minister lists his engagements and then the Member asking the question is given the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. Essentially, the original, indirect question is simply a peg on which to hang the actual question which they want to ask. Subsequent Members are called only to ask their supplementary question.²²

The Leader of the Opposition is allowed to ask six supplementary questions and the leader of the next largest opposition party is allocated two.

4.3 Unasked questions

Although 15 Members will have their names printed in the Order Paper to ask a question to the Prime Minister, this number is rarely reached, and the Members who have not had a chance to put their questions to the Prime Minister in the Chamber will get written answers to their questions only if they have given notice of their question (ie it is not an 'Engagements' question), and it is printed on the order paper. Those who have submitted 'Engagements' questions will have no opportunity to put their questions to the Prime Minister on that occasion.

5 Further information

5.1 Absence of a Prime Minister

On the occasions that the Prime Minister cannot be present at Prime Minister's Questions, for whatever reason – most commonly an official engagement – either the Prime Minister's deputy, or another senior minister will stand in to answer questions. In such situations the Leader of the Opposition, and the leader of the third party will not ordinarily put questions to the minister, instead a shadow minister or spokesperson will substitute for the leaders.

Of recent Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher was present on 92.3% of possible occasions, John Major present on 88.2%, Tony Blair on 95% and Gordon Brown, from July 2007 to the beginning of the 2009 Summer Recess, was present on 90% of possible occasions.²³

5.2 Cancellation of Prime Minister's Questions

Although rare, Prime Minister's Questions have not taken place on three occasions in recent years: on 25 February 2009 they were replaced with statements of condolence following the death of David Cameron's son; on 26 January 2000 the whole day's parliamentary business was lost when the previous day's proceedings ran over; and on 12 May 1994 they were cancelled after the death of John Smith, the Leader of the Opposition.

²² House of Commons Information Office, *Parliamentary Questions*, Factsheet P1, December 2008

²³ House of Commons Library Parliamentary Information List, *Absence of a Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time*, SN/PC/4401, 21 July 2009