Parliamentary Questions: recent issues

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Contents

Summary

This Briefing Paper explains the operation of the system of Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons. It also provides background material on recent developments and the history of the Questions system.

1. The system of Parliamentary Questions

1.1 What are Parliamentary Questions?

Parliamentary questions (PQs) are one of the principal methods by which Members of Parliament hold the Government to account. They can be sub-divided into several categories:

Oral Questions:

- Prime Minister's Questions;
- Ministerial Question Time;
- Topical Questions;
- Urgent Questions.

Written Questions:

- Ordinary written questions;
- Named Day questions;
- Oral questions not reached in debate.

Parliamentary Questions are asked in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. This note deals with the system in the House of Commons. Brief details of Parliamentary Questions in the House of Lords can be found in the House of Lords' Guide to Procedure and Practice, pages 5-6. The systems in use in the two Houses are similar, but not identical.

Further details of the rules and procedure governing the use of Parliamentary Questions can be found in the resources set out at the end of this note.

1.2 Oral questions

Ministerial Question Time

Government departments are allocated specific days when their Minister answers oral questions in the Chamber of the House of Commons. These are answered in the first hour of business from Monday to Thursday, under Standing Order No. 21. In a typical question time session, 25 oral questions and 10 topical questions will appear on the Order Paper (listing the day's business), to be addressed to the Minister. Each department has a question time approximately every five weeks, with Prime Minister's Questions taking place every week on Wednesdays.[1]

The questions are selected randomly via the 'shuffle' (see below). Government departments may decide to 'group' questions on very similar matters. Members tabling a question may ask one supplementary question after they have received the initial answer: the supplementary must be related to their original question. They do not read out their

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[1]   The current list can be found at 'Order of Oral Questions' on the House of Commons business pages.

initial question in full, instead saying, for instance, "Number one, Mr Speaker". Additional Members may be called after the questioner's first supplementary is answered: the relevant Opposition spokespersons can expect to be called at some point in the session. It is for the Speaker to decide which Members to call: s/he must balance the need for as many questions as possible to be asked with the aim to scrutinise Ministers effectively.

Oral questions are (for most departments) timetabled for one hour, a quarter of which is set aside for Topical Questions (see below). Some smaller departments have shorter sessions. Not every question listed on the Order Paper may be reached in the questioning session. These questions are automatically converted to written questions (see below) and answered in due course.

Topical Questions

The final quarter of each oral question session is set aside for Topical Questions. Members are selected to ask Topical Questions via a separate shuffle. They are not required to submit their question in advance, allowing questions to reflect recent developments. Topical Questions take the form of a question to the Minister "if [s]he will make a statement on his/her departmental responsibilities". This question may be followed by a supplementary on any matter within the department's responsibility. The Minister answers the 'responsibilities' question only on the first occasion that it is asked; for the remainder of the session, the supplementary question (i.e. the 'real' question) is the only one asked by the questioner. The answering department briefs its Minister on all likely supplementaries for both oral and topical questions, so that s/he has information at hand on most matters that are raised.

Topical questions were introduced from the 2007-08 session, with the first session on 12 November 2007. This took place in response to the perception that the Parliamentary Question process was unable to react to events happening on the day of the PQ or directly before it. The change followed a recommendation in the Modernisation Committee's 2007 report *Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back-bench member.*[2]

Prime Minister's Questions

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) takes place on Wednesdays at 12 noon for 30 minutes. Selection of Members to ask questions takes place via the shuffle. In most cases they ask the Prime Minister to list his engagements for the coming week, similar to the practice in Topical Questions.[3] This allows them to ask a supplementary on any matter whatsoever, without prior notice of the subject. As with Topical Questions, the Prime Minister answers the 'engagements' question only on the first occasion that it is asked; for the remainder of the session, the supplementary question (i.e. the 'real' question) is the only one

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[2]   House of Commons Modernisation Committee, Revitalising the Chamber: the role of the back-bencher, HC-337, 2006-07, p.28

[3]   Though this is the norm, it is not obligatory to ask questions in this way. A substantive ("closed") question, with a related supplementary, can be asked at PMQs.

asked by the questioner. The Speaker will typically allow the Leader of the Opposition to have up to six supplementary questions; this is when the robust exchanges normally associated with Prime Minister's Questions, and shown on television, take place. More details about Prime Minister's Questions are available in the Library briefing paper [Prime Minister's Questions](#) (SN/PC/05183).[4]

Urgent Questions

Urgent Questions are governed by Standing Order No. 21(2).[5] Applications to ask Urgent Questions must be made to the Speaker by a specified time on the day on which they are to be asked: before 11.30am on Monday, 10.00am on Tuesday and Wednesday, 8.15am on Thursday or 8.30am on Friday. Applications must demonstrate that the matter is of urgent and topical importance. The current Speaker has been more willing than his predecessors to grant requests for Urgent Questions (see Appendix).

1.3 Types of written parliamentary question

There are three main types of written parliamentary question:

- **Ordinary written questions**: these do not have to be answered on a specific date, although the convention is that the Member can expect them to be answered within seven days of the question being tabled;[6]
- **'Named Day' questions**: these must receive an answer on the date specified by the Member tabling the question. A Member may only table five Named Day questions per day. The Member must give a minimum of three days' notice for this type of question;
- oral questions which were not reached in the Chamber. These are automatically converted into written questions. Oral questions that are transferred to another department are also converted into written questions.

Written (or oral) questions must be addressed to a specific department of state. Ministers, via their departments, may choose to transfer the question if they think responsibility lies with another department.

1.4 Tabling Parliamentary Questions

Members wishing to give notice of a Parliamentary question are said to 'table' the question at the Table Office in the House of Commons. The Table Office will examine the question to ensure that it meets certain requirements: for instance, it must seek information or press for action, relate to the Department's responsibilities, be neutral in language and

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4   Prior to 2010, when the Liberal Democrats were in opposition, their leader would normally also be allowed at least two questions during PMQs, as they were the second largest opposition party. No such arrangement exists in the 2010-15 Parliament.

5   Urgent Questions were known as Private Notice Questions until 2002.

6   These timings derive from decisions of the House on 18 December 1972. See HC Deb 17 July 2006 c5W.

be concise.[7]   Questions must not seek information which is already readily available, for example in published departmental statistics. Questions which do not meet these requirements are said to be 'disorderly'. The Table Office has been given authority by the Speaker to edit questions to bring them within the rules of order. Most editing is of a minor character, but where there are significant problems with a question, the Member who submitted it will be contacted by the Table Office, in order that the matter can be discussed.[8] The great majority of such discussions lead to the question being tabled in edited form.

Ministers may refuse to answer parliamentary questions on the grounds of national security, disproportionate cost, or commercial confidentiality. The Table Office will not accept questions which have already been answered or blocked in the same parliamentary session, unless there are grounds to believe that the situation has changed. Following a Speaker's ruling in 1999, questions may not be asked concerning matters that are devolved to Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, even regarding matters prior to devolution.[9]

There are no formal appeal rights regarding answers that are considered by Members to be incomplete or otherwise unhelpful. In recent years, a number of Members have raised Points of Order because they have considered the answers they received to be inadequate. The Speaker's responses have referred to the standard routes open to Members: tabling further questions; complaining to the Procedure Committee (see section 2 below); seeking an adjournment debate; and writing to Ministers.[10]

Ministers may refuse to answer a question if the cost of doing so would exceed a certain amount, known as the advisory cost limit. This currently stands at £850.[11] This cost limit was originally aligned with the fees limit for central government departments under FoI, but the latter limit has remained at £600. There is no cost limit for oral questions.

1.5 Finding answers and Will Writes

Answers to written questions are sent both to the Member who asked the question and to the House of Commons Library, which includes them on its database. Complex or lengthy questions may be answered initially with a 'will write' – i.e. a holding answer, with a substantive answer being provided at a later date.

Until 2004, when a 'will write' was used, the substantive answer took the form of a private letter to the Member who had asked the question, and it therefore did not appear in the public record. The then Leader of

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[7]   See Erskine May, 24th edition, 2011, pp. 352-65, for further details regarding the rules of order governing parliamentary questions. The name of the 'Table Office' derives from the historic practice of handing questions to the Clerks at the Table in the Chamber of the House.

[8]   This process is known as 'carding', from the practice of sending a card to the Member to ask them to contact the Office (in most cases carding is now done through email).

[9]   HCDeb 7 July 1999, c1013

[10]   For an example, see HCDeb 17 July 2006, c38

[11]   HCDeb 8 Feb 2012, c16WS

the House, Peter Hain, made a statement on 21 July 2004 introducing two new practices:

- 'Prorogation answers', stating that the department could not respond before prorogation, but inviting the Member to re-table the question when the House next sat;
- Future responses pursuant to 'will writes' were to be sent to Hansard to be printed in written answers.[12] Longer replies could, alternatively, be deposited with the House of Commons Library.[13]

Answers to written questions – including longer replies and associated documents – are now available in a database on the Parliamentary website.[14] They are identified by a six-digit 'unique identifying number' (UIN). Until 12 September 2014, answers were printed in Hansard, with column numbers in the format '141W': answers given up to that date can still be found in Hansard.

Total numbers of questions appearing on the Order Paper by Parliamentary session are available from the House's Sessional Returns.

1.6 The shuffle

The 'shuffle' is the selection and ordering of questions submitted to the Table Office for oral answer for a particular Question Time. It has taken place by computer since 1989. It selects up to twenty-five questions to appear on the Order Paper. The order of the questions is important, as not all questions may be reached in the time available.

Members may only enter one question for each shuffle. In addition, they may table one topical question to each of the departments which answer topical questions.

Questions to be entered into the shuffle must be tabled at 12.30pm[15] at least three sitting days before the day on which they are to be asked:

Deadline	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
For answer on	Thursday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday

The deadline for questions to the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland Offices (and to the Advocate-General in Scotland) is five days, to allow them time to confer with the relevant devolved institution. Also, different arrangements apply around periods when the House is in recess: guidance is published shortly in advance of each recess in the Order Paper. The schedule of deadlines for questions is available from the Vote Office.

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[12] HCDeb 21 July 2004, c36WS; see also Leader of the House of Commons, Guide to Parliamentary work, 2010, pp. 40-41, 64-65
[13] These are publicly available at http://www.parliament.uk/depositedpapers.
[14] See Written Questions and Answers.
[15] The timing of the shuffle has changed over the years: when it was initiated as a formal part of the questioning process, in 1976 it was known as the 'four-o-clock shuffle'.

2. Further aspects of Parliamentary Questions

2.1 The role of the Procedure Committee (2010-15)

During the 2010-15 Parliament the Procedure Committee has taken on the role of monitoring the performance of Government departments in terms of both the timeliness and accuracy of answers to Parliamentary questions. The Committee has reported on the number of questions answered by each Government department, and published statistics on the percentage of questions answered on time.[16] It has also invited senior officials and ministers to oral evidence sessions to account for poor departmental performance on numerous occasions. This follows commitments made by the Government during 2009.[17] Members had voiced their unhappiness at departments' performance in answering questions on a number of occasions in the 2005-10 Parliament.[18]

The role of monitoring Parliamentary questions was assumed by the Public Administration Select Committee between 2001 and 2005. Their last report on the matter was produced in respect of the 2004-05 session.[19]

2.2 Written Statements

In October 2002, the current system of Written Statements (originally called Written Ministerial Statements) was introduced. Previously, when a Minister wished to make a statement, whips would suggest questions for Members to table, to allow Government announcements to be set out in Hansard. The Parliamentary website includes a page named Today's Written Statements and a database of past written statements. The titles and originating departments of statements are made available at the beginning of each day (and occasionally further in advance) in the House's business papers. The statements themselves arrive at the House throughout the relevant day. There may also be reports or tables linked to the statements, which are sent separately to the House of Commons Library to be indexed, and published online, as Deposited Papers.

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[16] See House of Commons Procedure Committee, Matters for the Procedure Committee in the 2015 Parliament, HC1121 2014-15, March 2015; Procedure Committee, Written Parliamentary Questions: Monitoring Report, HC-1046 2013-14, 2014; Procedure Committee, Monitoring Written Parliamentary Questions, HC 1095 2013-14, May 2013; Procedure Committee, Improving the effectiveness of Parliamentary scrutiny, HC 800 2010-12, 2011; Procedure Committee, Statistics on House of Commons Written Parliamentary Question performance for the 2013-14 Session, 2014; Procedure Committee, performance statistics 2013-14;

[17] Procedure Committee, 2011, p.20-21. See also the commitment to publish statistics from the 2010-12 session onwards: Procedure Committee, 2nd Special Report, HC 1063 2010-12, p.4

[18] See, for instance, HCDeb 28 June 2006 c346; Oral evidence to Procedure Committee 28 March 2007 Q71.

[19] Public Administration Select Committee, Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions, HC 449 2004-05, p.9. See also subsequent debates in the 2005-10 Parliament: HCDeb 4 Dec 2007 c238WH; HCDeb 22 January 2009 c971.

2.3 Electronic tabling

Electronic tabling (e-tabling) of parliamentary questions was introduced in 2003, following the Procedure Committee's 2002 report. E-tabling takes place through a secure system on the Parliamentary intranet. Questions sent by normal e-mail are not accepted by the Table Office. Both take-up of the system, and the percentage of questions e-tabled, were low at first but have since risen. In the 2014-15 session, 553 of 650 Members are registered on the system; and in the 2013-14 session, 84.9% of questions were e-tabled.

The Procedure Committee's report Improving the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny, published in March 2011, recommended limiting the number of questions that could be tabled electronically to five per day, plus a cut-off time of 6.30pm on sitting days. This quota would be lifted on the first sitting day following a recess. The limit was piloted from September to December 2011.

Following the pilot, the Procedure Committee produced another report, E-tabling of Parliamentary Questions for written answer, in February 2012. The report found that there had been little reduction in the overall number of written questions submitted, but that the proportion placed through the e-tabling system had fallen. There was also a fall of 16% in the number of written questions 'carded' (referred back to the tabling Member by the Table Office). Additionally, the quantity of questions received at certain times in the day has shifted, producing a more regular pattern of work for the Table Office.

The Procedure Committee recommended that the changed arrangements continue, and the House approved this recommendation on 16 April 2012.[20] The Committee subsequently revisited the issue, and in December 2012 recommended that the daily limit for e-tabled questions should be raised from five to 20.[21] The House approved the recommendation on 26 March 2013, and the limit was raised with effect from 15 April 2013.

2.4 Volume of questions

There was a marked increase in the number of written questions throughout the 2000s, which caused some concern within the House regarding the resources required to process and answer them. However, numbers have fallen back in the 2010-15 Parliament. Statistics showing numbers of questions per session in recent years can be found in the Appendix. Some Members ask a large number of questions: for instance, in the double-length 2010-12 session, eight Members had more than 1,000 questions answered, whilst the 20 Members with the most answers were responsible for 20% of all questions.[22]

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[20]   HCDeb, 16 April 2012, c142.
[21]   Procedure Committee, Third Report of 2012-13, *E-tabling of Written Questions*, HC775, para 19
[22]   See also figures for 2001-02 in Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics,* 2005, p.115.

2.5 Costs of Parliamentary Questions

The average costs incurred by the Government when answering parliamentary questions have been estimated to be £164 for a written answer and £450 for an oral answer.[23] The latter figure takes account of the additional research and briefing for possible supplementaries. It has been suggested that the marginal cost of each PQ is considerably less, and that a figure including the fixed costs of the system is 'disingenuous'.[24]

Automatic circulation to all Members of the full Question Book was discontinued as of 1 April 2011, with copies available from the Vote Office on request only. An answer to a Parliamentary Question in February 2007 noted that the cost of printing PQs in 2005-06 was approximately £1,464,000.[25]

2.6 Interaction with Freedom of Information

Free speech in Parliament, and the ability of the two Houses to regulate their affairs without the intervention of the Courts, is guaranteed by Article 9 of the Bill of Rights 1689, which provides that 'proceedings in Parliament may not be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament'.[26] However, this also means that proceedings cannot be made subject to the operation of a statutory procedure or route of appeal. Specifically, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 cannot be used to demand answers to Parliamentary questions, as PQs are Parliamentary proceedings, not FoI requests.

Members cannot therefore pursue Parliamentary answers which they perceive as inadequate through FoI processes, nor can the Information Commissioner be involved. Members *may* make an equivalent, but separate, request under the Act, and use public access rights under FoI to request information. The legislation creates a right to information, subject to a number of exemptions, and a public interest test. Reasons for doing this include:

- to clarify that any papers not released are covered by a specified exemption;[27]
- to obtain access to an independent system of appeal;
- to ensure that the 20-day statutory deadline is used as a benchmark for a response.

A High Court case in 2008 confirmed the distinction between PQs and FoI requests. Mark Oaten MP had challenged a refusal to answer, and, as both he and the answering department were happy for his question to become an FoI request, he appealed to the Information Commissioner. The Information Commissioner refused jurisdiction over the original PQ, but ordered disclosure of the information requested. The judgment indicated that there should have been greater clarity

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23   HCDeb. 8 Feb 2012 c16WS
24   Memorandum from Oliver Heald, March 2007.
25   HCDeb 5 Feb 2007 c572
26   For background see the Library briefing paper Parliamentary Privilege: Current Issues.
27   For example, select committees have been denied access on occasion to information on the grounds of commercial confidentiality.

about the status of Mr Oaten's challenge, and also criticised the use of a select committee report by the information tribunal:

> There are also difficulties in the basis on which the Commissioner accepted jurisdiction in relation to Mr Oaten's request. The review requested by Mr Oaten necessarily challenged the correctness of the Ministerial answer to his Parliamentary question, and such a challenge cannot be the subject of judicial decision. It is irrelevant that the Minister of the Treasury agreed that the request for a review should be treated as if made under the Act, since Parliamentary privilege cannot be waived, at least by the Executive, other than as authorised by section 13 of the Defamation Act 1996.[28]

The Public Administration Select Committee's report of 2004-5 on *Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions* was concerned that Members should not be disadvantaged compared to other citizens.[29] The Government response to the PASC report reiterated that, if PQs are properly handled, FoI requests should not reveal information that has been refused by PQs:

> A Code of Practice providing guidance to all public authorities (as required by Section 45 of the Act) will include advice on procedures for dealing with complaints about the handling of requests for information. This will make clear that there should be no inconsistencies between the provision of information in answer to Parliamentary Questions and information given to citizens under the Act.[30]

However, Members indicated before the Procedure Committee's 2006 inquiry that they had experience of FoI requests being more successful than Parliamentary Questions at obtaining the information they sought.[31] A particular concern was that the commencement of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 had led to the abandonment of the Government's previous practice of citing reasons for refusal to answer a PQ.

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[28]   Office of Government Commerce v Information Commissioner (Rev 1) 2008 EWHC 737 (Admin), 11 April 2008; paragraph 54.
[29]   Public Administration Select Committee, Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions, HC 355 2003-04
[30]   Public Administration Select Committee, First Special Report, HC 1262 2003-04, p.2
[31]   Memorandum from Oliver Heald MP, March 2007

3. The history of parliamentary questions

On 26 June 2002, the Procedure Committee published a report on *Parliamentary Questions*. In its report, the Committee briefly traced the evolution of questions procedure. It noted:

> The first recorded parliamentary question to a Minister was put in the House of Lords in 1721. Questions in the Commons were first printed in 1835, and first appeared on the Order Paper in 1849. In the early days notice was often given orally, but a Resolution of the House in 1886 required that it be given in writing, and this was converted into a Standing Order (the first to deal with questions) in 1888. Originally a Member could ask any number of oral questions, but in 1909 a limit of eight per day was imposed; this was reduced to four in 1919 and to three in 1920, at which level it remained till the 1960s. Questions for written answer were introduced in 1902, and have never been limited. The time allotted to oral questions was also originally unlimited, but in 1902, in response to a steep increase in the number of questions (from 200 or 300 a year in the 1850s to 4,000 or 5,000 in the 1890s) a Question Time of 40 minutes was established; in 1906 this was increased to a maximum of 55 minutes. Also in 1902, a minimum of two days' notice was laid down for questions for oral answer (previously a question might be put on the paper for answer on the following day). A formal rota of answering departments was first established in the 1920s. Notice of questions in writing was originally handed in to the Clerks at the Table, but as a result of the continuing increase in the number of questions this became impracticable, and in 1940 the Table Office was created in order to provide a convenient venue for tabling.[32]

In their history of Parliamentary Questions, Norman Chester and Nona Browning made the following observations on the origins and development of questions:

> … Questions in anything like their modern usage are largely a development of the nineteenth century, particularly of the period after 1830.

> The procedural significance of Questions lies in the fact that they developed as the exception to one of the basic principles of the rules of debate. The first edition of Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice*, published in 1844, and the next eight editions, treat Questions to Ministers not as a procedure in its own right but as an exception to the general rules of debate.[33]

Chester and Browning suggest that it was not until the mid-1860s that question time became formalised:

> … As Questions became more numerous, and formal notice of intention to ask became usual, Ministers had less excuse for not being present and their presence at a particular time in the day's proceedings set the seal on the development of a Question time. The time was fixed at the earliest that Ministers needed to be

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[32]   Procedure Committee, *Parliamentary Questions*, 26 June 2002, HC 622 2001-02, para 6

[33]   Norman Chester and Nona Browning, *Questions in Parliament*, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp12-13

> present. Dod's *Parliamentary Companion*, published annually since 1832, first mentions the matter in its 1865 edition. 'At half-past four public business begins, when the leading Members of the Government are expected to be in their places to answer the questions of which notice has been given'. As it was customary at this time for Mr Speaker to take the Chair at 4.00pm, this arrangement provided a minimum half-hour for Petitions, Private Business etc. If this preliminary business took longer than 30 minutes, Questions were delayed to that extent: if, however, it took less time, then there was a gap between the end of that business and Questions.[34]

Even now much of the procedure relating to PQs is the result of Speaker's rulings, rather than formal Standing Orders.

Initially questions to any Minister could appear on the Order Paper; and all those that were in order, along with supplementaries, were answered. However, in 1902, as part of a wider reform of the arrangements for business, proposed by Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, the House agreed to limit the time allowed for questions to 40 minutes.[35] This gave rise to the problem of dealing with questions that had not been reached in the allocated time. This was resolved by allowing answers to be printed.

In 1906, the workings of Balfour's reforms were reviewed. A dinner break was removed from the day's sitting and the House agreed to sit from 2.45-11.00pm on four days a week. While this change need not have had any effect on Question Time, it was agreed that it should commence as soon as preliminary business had concluded (previously questions could not be taken until 15 minutes after the House met) and should finish at 3.45pm. So Question Time was extended to nearly an hour, which has been the practice ever since.[36]

Whilst every question was answered, there seemed no reason to organise the order in which they were asked. One concession to this was made in 1881:

> Starting as a matter of courtesy to Mr Gladstone in 1881 when he was aged seventy-two, Questions addressed to the … Prime Minister … were placed last on the day's list.[37]

However, the 1902 changes meant that further thought was given to the order in which Questions were taken. On 2 May 1902, Balfour proposed that "the first fifty starred Questions should, as far as possible 'be so arranged that those which are addressed to the same Minister shall be grouped together'". Any questions beyond No. 50 were not so ordered. However, "quite shortly after this, though no announcement appears to have been made, the grouping was extended to all starred questions on the daily list".[38]

When not all starred Questions were answered, however, the order became increasingly important. As a result of protests about questions

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[34] *Ibid*, p23
[35] *Ibid*, p75-77
[36] *Ibid*, pp84-86
[37] *Ibid*, p128
[38] *Ibid*, p129

not being answered, "during 1905 a first attempt was made to see that Questions to certain Departmental Ministers came early enough in the list to be certain to be answered".[39]

Chester and Browning were unable to find any record of the principles followed by the Clerks in arranging the order of Questions. But they commented that by 1914 the ordering was well-developed (they reproduced the first list of the Order of Questions they could find, which dated from 14 November 1924 – Questions to the Scottish Office came after questions to the Board of Trade and to the War Office on Tuesdays). They also quoted Speaker Lowther, confirming, in 1914, that "the order of Questions 'is a matter which is generally arranged between the Whips of the two parties'".[40] The current edition of Erskine May simply notes that "The order in which Ministers and other Members answer oral questions is determined by the Government".[41]

The practice of tabling parliamentary questions has evolved further in the last forty years. In 2004, for example, the number of questions receiving an oral answer was less than half that in 1964, mainly because answers and supplementaries were much briefer, and the Speaker allowed opposition frontbenchers to ask supplementaries only infrequently in those days. Arguably, oral questions have been transformed from a time for backbenchers to a significant part of the battle between major parties.[42]

In a review of the past 40 years, Giddings and Irwin note that the system of parliamentary questions was subject to far less regulation in 1964 than today; in particular, Members could table more than one question for oral answer to a minister and expect an answer, even to questions to the Prime Minister. Questions were listed according to the order they were tabled and a maximum notice period was not introduced until 1965. Ministers answered according to a rota, but several ministers were listed, and reached, each day.[43]

39   *Ibid*, p131
40   *Ibid*, pp132-134
41   Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 24th edition, p355
42   "Objects and Questions" in ed. Philip Giddings, *The Future of Parliament: Issues for a new century,* Study of Parliament Group, 2005
43   Ibid.

4. Resources and further reading

The HCIO produces a brief guide on Parliamentary Questions, aimed at the public.

The publication Business of the House and its Committees contains a section on Parliamentary Questions, at pages 78-86.

Up to date Order Papers and Question Books, plus links to search functions for current oral questions, and the rules of orderliness of questions, can be found on the Parliamentary intranet.

Cabinet Office, Guidance to Officials on drafting answers to parliamentary questions, May 2010. See also paragraph 1.2 of the Ministerial Code.

Leader of the House of Commons, Guide to Parliamentary work, 2010

House of Commons Procedure Committee, Matters for the Procedure Committee in the 2015 Parliament, HC1121 2014-15, March 2015

House of Commons Procedure Committee, *Parliamentary Questions,* HC-622 2001-02, June 2002.

House of Commons Procedure Committee, Written Parliamentary Questions: Monitoring Report, HC-1046 2013-14, 2014;

Procedure Committee, Monitoring Written Parliamentary Questions, HC 1095 2013-14, May 2013;

Procedure Committee, Improving the effectiveness of Parliamentary scrutiny, HC 800 2010-12, 2011

The Public Administration Select Committee produced regular reports on Parliamentary Questions, in 2005-06, 2004-05, 2003-04, 2002-03, 2001-02, and 2000-01.

The following books are available:

"Objects and Questions" in *The Future of Parliament: Issues for a new century,* Philip Giddings (ed.), Study of Parliament Group, London, 2005

D.N. Chester and Nona Browning, *Questions in Parliament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962

Mark Franklin, *Parliamentary Questions*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1993

5. Appendix: statistical data

5.1 Proportion of questions e-tabled

Session	Proportion of questions e-tabled
2013-14	84.9%
2012-13	70.2%
2010-12	78.2%
2009-10	57.8%
2008-09	46.0%
2007-08	38.4%
2006-07	36.0%
2005-06	29.6%
2004-05	20.9%
2003-04	14.9%
2002-03	5.8%

E-tabling was introduced on 1 January 2003: the 2002-03 figure is for 1 January-31 March 2003.

5.2 Average number of written questions per sitting day

The statistics in the following table are taken from the House of Commons's annual Sessional Returns. The figures given are for questions appearing on the Order Paper. The number of questions actually answered in each session may vary.

The table demonstrates that the rate of written questions increased in the latter part of the 2000s before falling back in the 2010-15 Parliament.

Session	WPQs	Sitting days	WPQs per day	Urgent Questions
2013-14	43237	162	267	35
2012-13	42295	143	296	38
2010-12	97753	295	331	73
2009-10	25467	69	369	26
2008-09	56192	139	404	11
2007-08	73357	165	445	4
2006-07	57825	146	396	9
2005-06	95041	208	457	14
2004-05	22292	65	343	4
2003-04	54875	157	350	12
2002-03	55436	162	342	10
2001-02	72905	201	363	10
2000-01	16716	83	201	7