

# Parliamentary Monitor III

In previous issues of the *Bulletin*, Runnymede has examined the workings of the committee system and how bills are debated and enacted. Some of the bills examined in the past, including the Criminal Justice, Courts and Equality bills, have moved forward and their progress can be found on the government website [www.parliament.uk]. In this article **Omar Khan** addresses another important aspect of parliamentary procedure, namely parliamentary questions.

While the public cannot intervene by questioning the government directly, constituency MPs often present specific and local concerns in the form of a parliamentary question. The role of questions is to seek information or press for action from the government, and though Prime Minister's question time is the most closely watched, oral and written questions are directed at all departments of the government. It is therefore important to understand the rules and conventions governing the form, content and selection of such questions.

Although they were relatively rare until the 19th century, parliamentary questions are now an important aspect of British democracy, evidenced by the 40,000 put to the government every year. These are usually referred to a specific department, providing both the questioner and the government with an opportunity to present quite detailed information. According to the government factsheet (located on the above website), parliamentary questions can be divided into four categories:

1. Questions for Oral Answer
2. Urgent Questions
3. Cross-cutting Questions
4. Questions for Written Answer

## Oral Questions

Answered directly in the Chamber, Oral Questions probably represent the most vivid picture of parliamentary debate as they usually provide the opportunity for a response in the form of one or more 'supplementary' questions.

Government ministers debating with members of the opposition or their own backbenchers is perhaps one of the most enduring images of democracy. For reasons of time, however, only a relatively small proportion of all questions can be asked and responded to in this manner, roughly 8%, though this usually amounts to over 3000 questions per year. The political role of these questions is well summarised in the factsheet:

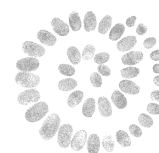
*Oral Questions give departments much work since they have to provide not only an answer to the Question itself, but also full background briefing on which the Minister can base his answers to supplementary Questions. Supplementaries can vary from the factual to the highly political, so that the briefing must anticipate every ramification of the original Question. While some Questions are genuinely seeking information or action, others will be designed to highlight the alleged shortcomings of the Minister's department or the merits of an alternative policy. But not all Questions are hostile. Many, especially those 'inspired' by the Minister or otherwise put down by party colleagues, will enable popular decisions to be announced and government successes to be advertised.*

As noted in the March *Bulletin*, government bills occupy the vast majority of parliamentary time. Question time is reserved for the

first hour of business every day from Monday to Thursday, meaning that 4 hours are reserved per week for ministers to respond. Of course not all questions can be asked, and therefore a random computer shuffle has been instituted to select a certain number. However, first a member of parliament must table their question to a specific department and if it is selected he or she will receive an answer in the Chamber on a day specified in the Order Paper, also printed on the government website. Ministers are usually given 3 days to respond unless the matter deals with Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, in which case the consultation period is extended to 5 days.

In order to respond to the diversity of questions, the government establishes a rota whereby the various departments are allotted specific days on which to answer questions, with larger departments receiving more time than smaller ones, though all Departments answer roughly once a month. While questions related to race, like those on all matters, are often influenced by popular and/or media concerns, they do emerge somewhat independently from time to time. For example, Michael Fabricant (Conservative, Lichfield) posed this question in the Home Office slot on Monday 16 June, asking the Home Secretary: 'What steps he is taking to minimise racial and religious hatred; and if he will make a statement.'

Members may not ask any question they please and are specifically prevented from asking about matters of opinion, matters



GOVERNMENT

Among the new ministers joining the Home Office team as part of the mid-June reshuffle are Baroness Scotland QC as Minister of State for the criminal justice system and law reform, and Fiona Mactaggart as Parl. Under-Sec. for race equality, community policy and civic renewal. Beverley Hughes remains Minister of State for citizenship and immigration, and will deputise for the Home Secretary on civil renewal, terrorism and resilience.



not related to the minister's remit, questions of law or where the information is readily available elsewhere. These restrictions are interpreted by the Clerks of the House, but the final authority rests with the Speaker. In fact, the Speaker has substantial leeway in the matter of questions, as evidenced by the following quote from the government's factsheet:

*The Speaker controls the pace of Question Time; if he calls too many supplementaries the Minister will be put under close scrutiny on a few Questions, but the total number of Questions answered orally will be quite small. However, if he calls too few supplementaries, more Questions will be answered orally, but the Minister may be given too easy a passage. A balance has to be struck; and it is likely to be struck differently by different Speakers.*

*Currently 15 to 20 Questions are answered orally on an average day.*

For an example of the length and form of a question, supplementary and response, consider the exchange recorded in Hansard for Tuesday 20 May (see below).

Prime Minister's Questions are a form of Oral Questions, now answered on Wednesdays for 30 minutes. The same rules apply as above, but since the prime minister has overall responsibility on government policy, he can be asked a question on nearly any aspect, except for those (few in number) that relate to issues of national security and other areas. While Prime Minister's Questions thus presents a difficulty for the government and prime minister in being appropriately briefed on any question whatsoever, the nature and diversity of the questions and supplementaries often result in a somewhat diffuse debate. On the other hand, as witnessed

by many observers, the spectacle is not only highly entertaining, but also a unique arena in which official government reaction and opinion is asserted and recorded.

### **Urgent Questions**

These sorts of questions are fairly self-explanatory, though at times highly significant. Whenever an issue must be addressed immediately, a member must submit the Question to the Speaker before noon on the day he seeks a response. The Speaker decides on the relevance of the Question and it is sent immediately to the relevant Department. Two basic requirements must be met in order for a question to be judged 'urgent': first, it must in fact be urgent; second, it must be a matter of public importance. If accepted, these Questions are asked at the end of the Oral Question time period, and the same rules and procedures apply as specified above.

### **Parliamentary Oral Question/Supplementary/Response, Tuesday 20 May 2003 (Hansard)**

[Original Oral Question] **Kali Mountford (Colne Valley)**: [on] What assistance the Department is giving to support family and personal relationships in ethnic minority communities.

[Reply] **The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton)**: This year, the Department made available £5 million to the marriage and relationship support grant programme. Out of the total grant programme, £800,000 is being spent on work that directly supports family and personal relationships in ethnic minority communities.

[Supplementary] **Kali Mountford**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer and for the close attention that she pays to the issue. She knows that conferences have been held throughout the country, including at the Kirklees domestic violence forum in my area in Huddersfield and in the House last week, when the all-party groups on domestic violence and on children met. At that meeting, the point was again made that ethnic minority women are much less likely to come forward for help, despite their being at least as likely to experience problems. What can my hon. Friend do to help local groups that want to support women in their communities, create new groups and help people through the grant system, which they currently find difficult?

**Ms Winterton**: My hon. Friend is right to ask how we can improve access to the grant fund process. Every year, the Department, through application forms and feedback forms, looks for ways in which to ease the process. I would be more than happy to hear about any difficulties that specific groups, especially from ethnic minorities, have experienced, and about examples of how we can improve the system. My hon. Friend is also right to draw attention to the fact that many people from ethnic minorities will not gain access to all the necessary information on, for example, remedies for domestic violence. We are considering a series of issues and methods of improving matters. Not least, we have translated into many different languages a guide that we recently produced about legal remedies for victims of domestic violence.

**Mr Gary Streeter (South-West Devon)**: Does the Parliamentary Secretary agree that support for family support groups, in focus and funding, does not sit comfortably with the Department's overall functions, and that it is not well done? Is it not time the Government modernised the entire procedure for support for ethnic minority families, and more widely, moved it to a Department that is primarily focused on supporting families in this country and ensuring that the support is properly given?

**Ms Winterton**: I disagree profoundly with the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the delivery of service is poor. I think that, in terms of the number of people who are given adult relationship support, our record is impressive. The hon. Gentleman had a point, however, in saying that our support should be tailored to support for other things such as parenting. I assure him that I work closely with other Departments, particularly the Home Office, to ensure that happens.



### Cross-cutting Questions

Introduced only since January 2003, Cross-cutting Questions are meant to deal with issues that pertain to more than one department, for example youth policy. At present, it is envisaged that four Cross-cutting Question times will be presented in each parliamentary session.

### Questions for Written Answer

These constitute the vast majority of Questions asked in parliament. Written Questions are often more detailed and require comprehensive responses from the departments to which they are addressed. Despite substantial costs to members, several hundred are submitted a day, perhaps evidence that they are considered a suitable and effective way of engaging with Ministers.

There are, in fact, three different kinds of Written Questions, each with slightly different rules:

1. Questions tabled for oral answer that were not answered in Oral Question Time.
2. 'Ordinary' questions, which do not specify a date by which a response is sought. The convention is that Ministers will reply in 7 days, but this is not a binding rule and some questions are left unanswered for over a month. These constitute
3. 'Named Day' or 'Priority' Questions, in which members request a response for a specific day, usually within 3 days of tabling the question. Although Ministers are required to make some sort of response on the given day, it is often merely to state that the question will be answered as soon as possible.

Most questions are in fact of the 'ordinary' variety. Many are focused on the financial and administrative functioning of the government. Another common form is to ask the same question

of a number of departments. The boxed examples indicate the form of the questions, all with specific reference to race equality issues, with the last of them also indicating how Government often responds to such queries.

their written questions by email, and the statistics do suggest a noted increase in questions as this has become more common. Even where questions are framed in a particularly partisan fashion, they are a valuable way of

#### Form in which Questions are asked – recent examples on race equality

6 March 2003: **Mr Patrick McLoughlin** (West Derbyshire): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what the administrative costs were of (a) Active Community Unit grants, (b) Race Equality grants and (c) Refugee Integration Unit grants in the last financial year.

10 April 2003: **Mr Graham Brady** (Altrincham & Sale West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, what estimate he has made of the cost to maintained schools of (a) setting up and (b) maintaining the ethnic monitoring programme required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

5 June 2003. **Angela Eagle**: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in his Department and non-departmental public bodies on implementing the requirements of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000; and if he will publish the results of the monitoring required by the Act.

[this same question also addressed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer]

9 June 2003 written response. **Mr Straw**: The FCO published its Race Equality Scheme, setting out how it would meet the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, in June 2002. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House. The FCO is shortly to issue its report on progress during the first year of the Scheme. This will include the results of the monitoring required by the Act. We will ensure that a copy is sent to my hon. Friend.

**All from Hansard, dates as given.**

### Parliamentary Questions in the 21st century

Parliamentary Questions are not just the most exciting aspect of democracy but also represent an important opportunity to receive information from the government and pressurize for action in areas where developments might be stalled. Although it may seem like a procedural affair whereby the opposition are scoring debating points and the government is simply 'planting' favourable statements, the randomness of the selection of oral questions, the topicality of urgent questions, and the sheer volume of written questions ensures that meaningful public concerns are addressed. Readers should note that members often raise questions important to their constituents and that suggesting such a course of action might be an effective way of increasing the likelihood that the government will respond to specific issues.

Members can now submit

guaranteeing that departments are able to justify and explain their policies. Since the questions and responses are now published in the 'Question Book' and Hansard on the government website, they can be seen as a form of democratic accountability. Whether or not the additional publicity improves the quality of the questions and responses probably depends on how many read these transcripts. □

Omar Khan is a consulting policy researcher to Runnymede while working on his PhD at St Antony's College, Oxford.

#### Postscript: Current Status of the Equality Bill (from the Odyssey Trust Website)

'The Bill has now successfully completed its passage through the House of Lords and has moved to the House of Commons where it is being sponsored by Angela Eagle MP (former Minister for Race Relations) with the support of Vera Baird QC MP and Norman Lamb MP (LibDem Treasury Spokesperson). The Bill has already received a tremendous welcome in the Commons with over 230 MPs signing an Early Day Motion in Support.'

(Odyssey Trust Website: <http://www.odysseustrust.org>)