



Government Response
to the Procedure Committee
Report on Parliamentary
Questions (HC 622)

October 2002

Cm 5628

£6.00



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*Presented to Parliament by the President of the Council and Leader of the
House of Commons by Command of Her Majesty
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1. The Government welcome the Procedure Committee's comprehensive and balanced report and is grateful that the Committee accepts many of the points made in the Memorandum to the Committee last year.
2. The Government **agree** that questions are a highly effective means of holding the Executive to account. A well-aimed question can benefit a Member simply by enabling them to obtain information. It can also benefit the Government, perhaps by requiring attention to a detail, which had been insufficiently considered, perhaps by allowing the Government to put its case across.
3. However, the Government reject the accusation that Ministers are in the habit of giving "evasive and unhelpful replies" to oral questions¹. Ministers take the answering of parliamentary questions extremely seriously. As the Minister of State in the Cabinet Office made clear in a debate in Westminster Hall earlier this session, "It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful answers to Parliament"².
4. As the historical survey at the beginning of the Committee's report demonstrates, there has been a long standing tension between quantity of questions tabled and the system's ability to deal with them. This is not the first report to seek a re-balancing in favour of quality. Questions are not cost free. On average, they cost the Government over £6 million per session, and they also impose considerable costs on the House. Scrutiny requires resources, and costs to improve the Government through effective scrutiny are justified. The Government appreciate the balanced approach taken by the Procedure Committee, and its recognition that the system will be overburdened if named day questions are used inappropriately or if tabling a question becomes an alternative to simple research.
5. As the Committee recognises, the Government have already made changes to its procedures to improve the handling of questions. The most recent example is the introduction of answering parliamentary questions during a recess³ and their publication in a special edition of the Official Report.
6. There are some recommendations in the report which the Government do not accept, but the Government agree with the main thrust of the Committee's proposals and, where necessary, will put Standing Order changes before the House which, if accepted, will secure the Committee's main aims. New procedures should rebalance the questions system in favour of back bench Members by increasing the topicality of oral questions, and the ease which questions can be tabled, while limiting the burden on the Government that such reforms will bring.

¹ Third Report from the Procedure Committee Session 2001-02, *Parliamentary Questions*, (HC 622) para 48

² *Official Report*, 21 March 2002, col 179WH

³ *Official Report*, 15 November 2001, col 871W

7. If the House accepts them, it will be agreeing to a radical reform of both oral and written questions. The Committee has proposed that Mr Speaker be given power to review many aspects of these changes, and to make adjustments to some of the new arrangements. The Government consider that these powers of review are a key part of the package, and will co-operate with Mr Speaker in any such review. The Government would recommend that such a review is initiated within months rather than years of the changes.
8. The Committee has undertaken to keep any reformed system of questions under review; the Government trust the Committee will continue to take a balanced view. The Government's views on detailed recommendations follow:

ORAL QUESTIONS

- (a) **The present notice period required for oral questions has become a major barrier to the effective operation of questions. (paragraph 34)**
9. The Government agree that oral questions are a key way in which the Executive is held to account. Their effectiveness has been obviously lessened because the maximum notice for tabling oral questions has perversely become standard. The Government will put forward standing order changes to ensure that questions can raise issues that are current and important on the day they are answered rather than issues which were current and important two weeks earlier.
 - (b) **The period of notice required for oral questions to departmental Ministers should be reduced from ten sitting days to three sitting days. We believe that this will enable Question Time to become much more topical and relevant, while allowing a reasonable period (in effect, two whole working days) for departments to prepare briefing for their Ministers. (paragraph 38)**
 - (c) **This change should be accompanied by three other modifications of the existing rules. The first is that Members should be allowed to table oral questions on any day after their last Question Time and before the minimum notice period – that is, generally, up to a period of four weeks before the day for answer. (paragraph 39)**
 - (d) **The timing of the shuffle should be brought forward from 6.30 p.m. to 4 p.m. (paragraph 41)**
 - (e) **The number of Questions per department in each daily slot should be reduced. (paragraph 42)**

(f) The following new quotas should be adopted:

<i>Oral questions slot</i>	<i>Questions printed (maximum)</i>
55 minutes	25
50 minutes	20
45 minutes	20
30 minutes	15
15 minutes	10
10 minutes	8.

These new quotas should be subject to regular review, and ... Mr Speaker should have the authority to make any further adjustments, which seem to him desirable. (paragraph 43)

(g) The four recommendations set out in paragraphs 38 to 43 above comprise an integrated package. They are intended to operate in conjunction with each other and we believe it is essential that they should be implemented together. (paragraph 44)

10. The Government **agree** that the notice required for most oral questions should be reduced from ten sitting days to three sitting days. The Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Offices do not themselves hold most of the information on which Ministers need to draw in answering parliamentary questions on issues which are the responsibility of the devolved administrations. While the devolved administrations and other Departments are happy to provide information, the additional time involved means that three days notice is not enough for Ministers to be able to give full answers in the House. The Government therefore suggest that account is taken of this practical constraint by allowing five days notice for oral questions to the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Government also **agree** that oral questions should be tabled on any day after their last Question Time and before the minimum notice period, so as to allow those Members who may be on visits with a Select Committee to table their questions in advance.
11. The Government **agree** to the Procedure Committee package on the basis that the notice period should indeed be three *sitting* days. Fridays are increasingly devoted to constituency work, by Ministers and back-benchers alike. If the House agrees to new sitting hours, there will be few sitting Fridays. It would result in confusion to have variable tabling dates depending on the business to be taken in a particular week. Moreover, the Procedure Committee's proposals would mean that Thursday would be the last tabling day for questions on both Tuesdays and Wednesdays, whereas the last tabling day would never normally fall on a Tuesday. This would be a very uneven pattern. Accordingly, the Government believe Fridays should no longer be counted as sitting days for these purposes, which for much of the time they are not. The pattern of last days for tabling would accordingly be:

<i>Table before Cut Off:</i>	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
<i>For answer on:</i>	Thursday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday

12. The Government **agree** that if these changes are adopted by the House then it would only seem sensible that the timing of the shuffle should be brought forward. However, in order for officials in departments to start researching and preparing draft answers for Ministers, the Government would like to suggest that the shuffle be brought forward from the recommended 4pm to 12.30pm. These changes will not only have an effect on how the House works but also that of Parliamentary Clerks, their staff and officials in their departments. The Government are grateful for the Table Office's stated willingness to co-operate with departments in getting questions to them promptly after the shuffle⁴. It would be extremely helpful if it could be agreed that, once the shuffle was complete, that the Table Office notify departments of the questions immediately via e-mail.
13. The Government **agree** that the number of questions per department in each daily slot should be reduced to the new suggested quotas. The Government support the Committee's view that the new quotas should be subject to regular review by Mr Speaker. The Government would find it helpful to be consulted in any review undertaken, both to give it clear notice of any increase/decrease in number of questions allocated for oral reply and to ensure that the implications of any change for the balance between what is desirable for the House and what is efficient for the Government are thoroughly explored.
14. The Government accordingly **agree** to the integrated package of changes as suggested by the Committee. The Government consider the package will greatly increase the topicality of questions and make the system more convenient for Members. It will impose extra burdens on Ministers and officials, but the reduction in the number of questions printed should go some way to keeping these burdens manageable for most departments.
15. The Government believe that the changes proposed will benefit Members and will be happy to put them to the House.
 - (h) **The House should be invited to decide upon two further proposals aimed at injecting greater topicality into oral questions. These are that:-**
 - (1) **On every Tuesday and Thursday, departmental Question Time should be followed by a further session of up to 30 minutes of questioning on a single subject.**
16. The Government believe the integrated package proposed by the Procedure Committee, with its radically shortened notice period for oral questions, means there is no need to have additional time set aside to question Ministers following their departmental questions, particularly given the current pressures on Parliamentary time.

⁴ QQ280-289

- (2) Once a week, an hour-long session of questioning addressed to a single Minister of State, or two 30-minute sessions addressed successively to two Parliamentary Under-Secretaries, should be held in Westminster Hall (possibly on Thursday mornings). (paragraph 45)
17. As the Committee will be aware, the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons has also proposed that crosscutting questions be taken in Westminster Hall. The Government will put forward revised orders for Westminster Hall, which would permit this.
- (i) We are very concerned about the increasing length both of questions and of Ministerial answers. (paragraph 47)
- (j) We strongly support Mr Speaker in his attempts to restrain the prolixity of some Members. Long, rambling questions are counter-productive, whilst long, rambling answers are an abuse of the time of the House. We would encourage Mr Speaker – and the Deputy Speakers – to interrupt long-winded Members and instruct them to come to the point. We believe that the Chair should take a pro-active role in seeking to change the ‘culture’ of Question Time and foster more incisive, tightly focussed exchanges. (paragraph 47)
18. The Government agree that questions and answers should not be unnecessarily long. It has been practice for some time that the Office of the Leader of the House reminds departments about the length of replies to questions. The Government remain committed to keeping replies short and would support a more pro-active role for the Chair in fostering more incisive exchanges if Mr Speaker considered this desirable.
- (k) We also believe that the balance of power at Question Time between Minister and questioner is at present tilted too far in favour of the former, who can choose to give evasive or unhelpful replies, knowing that questioning will move on and he or she will shortly be ‘off the hook’. We support the proposal by Lord Norton that the Speaker should give the Member who has asked a question the opportunity to ask a second supplementary after all supplementaries from other Members have been called. If this recommendation is implemented, the questioner will have the opportunity of some redress if the Minister has blatantly failed to address the original question. (paragraph 48)
19. The Government completely reject any suggestion that Ministers routinely choose to give “evasive or unhelpful replies, knowing that questioning will move on and he or she will shortly be “off the hook””. This is at odds to the evidence the Leader of the House gave before the Committee⁵ on the amount of briefing and indeed time that is spent briefing Ministers in advance of oral questions.

⁵ HC 622, Minutes of Evidence, page 70 paras 234-236

20. The issue of a follow-up supplementary is not a matter for the Government. If the House is minded to accept this innovation, it may neither be necessary or desirable on every occasion to call the original questioner to ask a closing question. The Government believe that the judgement of, if and when to call a Member to ask a second supplementary, should be left to the discretion of the Chair.

WITHDRAWING QUESTIONS

21. In evidence, the Government expressed concerns about the costs and inconvenience caused when oral questions are withdrawn⁶. The Committee will appreciate that the preparation of draft replies and Ministerial briefing requires effort from departments, and has a cost. This effort will be all the more concentrated if the notice period is dramatically reduced, as is proposed. However, the ability to table questions during an extended period may make Members more likely to put questions down for dates on which they subsequently find they are unable to attend the House. In these circumstances, the Government re-iterate the need for Members to withdraw their applications for questions before the shuffle if they discover they will be unable to attend in good time, and to withdraw their question as early as possible if they discover that they cannot attend after the questions are drawn.
22. The Government believe it would be helpful that on the day of the shuffle, those Members who have been successful in the ballot and are within the top ten questions should be notified immediately by the Table Office so as to provide the Member with the opportunity of withdrawing their question if they are unable to attend.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

- (1) **The distinction between Prime Minister's Questions and departmental Question Time is sufficiently fundamental that special provision for the former would be justified. We recommend that the timing of PMQs ought to be separately specified in the standing orders, so that any future change to it will be open to debate and subject to the formal decision of the House, which will thus be seen to have 'ownership' of its own procedures. (paragraph 55)**
23. The Questions Rota has always been a matter for the Government, in consultation with the usual channels and other interested parties. To set the rota in Standing Orders would be inflexible, and it would not be desirable to single out a particular part of it, no matter how important.

⁶ HC 622, Minutes of Evidence, page 67 paras 38-39

- (m) We very much welcome the Prime Minister's willingness to appear before the Liaison Committee, which we believe will lead to a significant increase in Government accountability to Parliament, as well as an enhanced recognition of the importance of the select committee system within Parliament. ... It may be that in due course the principle of questioning the Prime Minister in committee could usefully be extended, with more frequent committee appearances, perhaps every six to eight weeks. Such evidence sessions might be held in Westminster Hall. (paragraph 60)
24. The Prime Minister has already agreed to appear in front of the Liaison Committee twice a year to discuss a range of public policy issues, including foreign affairs. This gives MPs an opportunity to question the Prime Minister in depth on a range of issues. The Prime Minister already answers questions more frequently than any other Minister in the House at Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesdays. The Government note the Committee's recommendation but there are no plans to change the current arrangements.
- (n) Our proposal to reduce the period of notice for oral questions from ten to three sitting days, if implemented, will reduce some of the perceived disadvantage to Members of tabling closed questions to the Prime Minister, by making it easier for such questions to be relevant and topical. We hope this will encourage Members to make greater use of closed questions. In addition, any future extension of the practice of questioning the Prime Minister in committee might provide an opportunity to experiment with greater use of closed questions. (paragraph 61)
25. The proposal to make greater use of closed questions to the Prime Minister is a matter for individual Members.
- (o) The text of 'engagements' questions to the Prime Minister should no longer be set out in full. Instead, the names of Members successful in the ballot should be listed under a rubric indicating that, unless a question is printed under their name, they will ask an open question. (paragraph 62)
26. This is a matter for the House but the proposal seems helpful.

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

- (p) We trust that the Select Committee on Public Administration will address these and similar concerns [raised in evidence] in their continuing inquiry into the quality of ministerial answers. We recommend that they give consideration in particular to the need for the Government, in cases where it does not give a full and satisfactory answer to a question, to state the reasons why this has not been possible. (paragraph 65)

27. The Government regret any occasion when administrative error makes the replies received to written questions outdated or unhelpful. The Government welcome the observation made by the Public Administration Committee in its most recent report on Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions:

*“At a time when the number of questions to departments is rising and complaints from Members are growing, each Member must consider the need to ask so many questions. We share the Procedure Committee’s view that it is the right of Members to ask questions, but if Members, quite rightly, require quality responses, they must understand the demands they are placing on departments.”*⁷

(q) We also take the opportunity of reminding the Government of the importance of adhering to the 1997 Resolution of the House on ministerial responsibility. (paragraph 66)

28. The Government note the Committee’s reminder of the importance of the 1997 Resolution of the House and attach great importance to it. The terms of the 1997 Resolution are incorporated into Section 1 of the Ministerial Code⁸.

(r) The House should impose a daily quota per Member of five named-day questions (that is, five per day relating to *all* named days, not just the earliest named day). We expect that this measure, by relieving the pressure on departments, will lead to a significant reduction in the number of holding replies. (paragraph 73)

(s) The ration [of named-day questions per Member per day] must be fixed and non-negotiable. (paragraph 74)

(t) We reject the Government’s further proposal that, in addition to a daily ration of named-day questions, the minimum period for a reply to a named-day question should be extended from three to four working days. (paragraph 76)

29. The Government noted in its Memorandum the need for change in the number of named-day questions, which were being tabled, and the Leader of the House elaborated this in his oral evidence to the Committee. The previous Procedure Committee’s hopes that any overload of the system would be self correcting have failed both because departments make great efforts to answer in the time specified, and because Members have regarded failure to answer in the time required as evidence of departmental unhelpfulness or inefficiency, rather than considering that they themselves might be using named day questions inappropriately. The Government are grateful to the Procedure Committee for its recognition that it is unlikely that half of all written questions can be urgent, and that the system is overloaded.

⁷ Ninth Report of Session 2001-02 (HC 1086) para 48

⁸ Ministerial Code: A Code of Conduct and Guidance on Procedures for Ministers Cabinet Office, July 2001

30. The Government **agree** that there should be a fixed and non-negotiable daily quota per Member of five named-day questions per day, which cannot be transferred from one Member to another. This should help alleviate the current increase in the number of named-day questions being tabled. If agreed by the House, the new system will need to be effectively policed so as to avoid abuse of the system. The Government also welcome the Committee's willingness to keep the quota under review and hopes if the numbers of named-day questions remain high, or if it appears that their inappropriate use remains frequent, the Committee will be willing to recommend a reduction in the quota.
31. The Government **agree** for the present that the current minimum period for a reply to a named-day question should remain at three working days rather than the four as suggested in our Memorandum. The effect of this cannot be predicted, but if the number of named-day questions remains considerable, it will be a continuing burden on the Government. The Government trust that those reviewing questions in future will take this burden into account.
- (u) **The Principal Clerk, Table Office, suggested to us that if there were to be a ration of named-day questions, a Member who did not receive a substantive answer to such a question on the due date could be given priority in a forthcoming ballot for adjournment debates, perhaps in Westminster Hall. The Principal Clerk argued that "such a penalty might discourage excessive use by Ministers of holding replies". We understand the attraction of this proposal, but consider that it would be best to see whether our reform, if implemented, is successful in significantly reducing the number of holding replies before deciding whether it would be desirable to introduce sanctions of this kind. We may return to this proposal in a future report. (paragraph 77)**
32. The Government do not agree that Members who receive holding replies to named-day questions should receive priority in adjournment debates.
33. As the Committee recognises, the number of holding replies currently issued is a consequence of the number of named-day questions tabled. It would be inappropriate to consider disincentives for holding replies until that number was sufficiently reduced. Even then, there are likely to be cases when a named-day question seeks information, which simply cannot be gathered in the time available. If implemented, this recommendation would give departments an incentive to produce an inadequate reply simply to avoid a holding reply even though that would ultimately produce fuller information. Moreover, priority in adjournment debates should surely go to those whose replies were unjustifiably delayed, but it is hard to conceive a mechanism for distinguishing "deserving" from "undeserving" holding replies that would be universally accepted.
- (v) **We do not propose that any limit be placed on the number of ordinary written questions a Member can table, and indeed believe that it would be wrong in principle to do so. (paragraph 78)**

34. The Government **agree** with the Committee that there should be no quota on the number of ordinary written questions. The changes suggested by both the Committee and the Government should help alleviate the number of holding replies issued by Ministers. Members should however, recognise that the number of ordinary written questions tabled may affect the timeliness and efficiency with which they can be answered.

SOURCING INFORMATION

- (w) We urge all Members of the House, and their staff, to develop greater awareness of alternative sources of information, especially via the Internet, and to seek information by means of parliamentary questions only if those alternative sources have been explored and found wanting. Members must ensure that their staff do not draft PQs as a first resort when researching a particular issue. Members must take direct responsibility for all questions tabled in their name. (paragraph 79)
35. The Government wholeheartedly **agree** with the Committee that Members must “take direct responsibility for all the questions tabled in their name” and to seek information through alternative sources of information⁹. There is a tendency to consider that a fact produced as the answer to a parliamentary question has greater validity than the same fact listed in an official document issued by the Government or the House. Although it can be helpful to use the Official Report to disseminate statistics, it imposes costs both on the Government and the House.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

- (x) We welcome the Government’s proposal that the time for answering written questions should be brought forward. We recommend that it be implemented. However, we note the concerns expressed by the Table Office and the Official Report. ... The Government should give an undertaking that departments will use their best endeavours to answer questions *at 9.30 am rather than in batches during the day, and that (other than in exceptional circumstances) all questions will be answered by 7 p.m.* (paragraph 81)
36. The Government **agree** the proposal (contained in our Memorandum) that departments will now use their best endeavours to answer questions earlier in the day and that (other than in exceptional circumstances) all questions will be answered by 7 pm. However, it is not possible to undertake to answer all questions *at 9.30 am*, as proposed particularly since deadlines remain short. The Government will be happy to consult the Official Report on specific times when batches of questions can be delivered most conveniently.

⁹ HC 622, *Parliamentary Questions*, Minutes of Evidence page 75, para 255

- (y) We recommend that [the Government's] proposal to replace planted questions with 'written statements' should be adopted. (paragraph 82)
37. The Government are grateful to the Committee for endorsing this proposal, which should benefit the Government. Members and anyone who wants to identify those Government announcements, which do not need an oral statement quickly and easily.

ELECTRONIC TABLING

- (z) The introduction of a system of electronic tabling is highly desirable and should proceed. (paragraph 90)
- (aa) In the first instance the House should approve the introduction as soon as possible of a system of electronic tabling which is closer to the Scottish or House of Lords model [than to the 'strong authentication' option] (but with some added safeguards which we detail below). This should proceed on an experimental basis. (paragraph 90)
- (bb) The House should confer on Mr Speaker by resolution a reserve power, to be exercised on the basis of advice from the Table Office, either to impose quotas on the number of questions Members may table electronically, or to halt the experiment altogether, if in Mr Speaker's opinion the number of questions increases excessively or other significant abuses are suspected. If necessary, the more expensive and complicated option of commissioning a system based on 'strong' authentication could at this point be pursued. We hope that Members will operate the new system in a responsible manner and this latter option will *not* prove necessary. (paragraph 90)
- (cc) Members who wish to use the new system should be required formally to opt into it, by supplying the Table Office with a signed authority allowing the Office to receive questions sent from specified electronic addresses. (paragraph 91)
- (dd) Questions should only be accepted from addresses within the Parliamentary Data and Video Network. (paragraph 91)
- (ee) Questions should not be accepted via ordinary e-mail. Instead, there should be a Web-based system using a template. (paragraph 91)
- (ff) The development of the template and associated software should be undertaken by the parliamentary IT authorities, in liaison with the Table Office and other interested parties such as the House of Commons Library and the Official Report. The Table Office (subject to the authority of Mr Speaker) should have the final say

as to the contents and configuration of the system. The overall objectives will be to maximise the advantages of automation, by producing a system which is as easy as possible for Members to use, which will capture as much relevant information as possible at the earliest time, and which may, if it proves technically feasible, police any relevant deadlines and quotas. The system will need to be developed within the wider framework of the House's overall strategy for future information services. (paragraph 92)

- (gg) Electronic tabling will be *in addition to*, not *instead of*, the existing methods of tabling. (paragraph 93)
 - (hh) Electronic tabling will be simply the first stage in a longer process of making provision for 'seamless' electronic movement of data relating to parliamentary proceedings. (paragraph 94)
 - (ii) Oral as well as written questions should be submissible electronically. (paragraph 95)
 - (jj) With effect from the introduction of electronic tabling, submission of oral questions by post should be again permitted. (paragraph 95)
 - (kk) Further developments in regard to electronic transmission of information should be reviewed in the light of the experience of introducing electronic tabling and of IT developments such as new arrangements for printing questions and the proposed new information system for the House. (paragraph 96)
38. The use of IT is primarily a matter for the House, but the Government support the use of IT to improve the ease of Government and other business. The Government would like to maximise the benefits of electronic handling of questions, and the Office of the e-Envoy would be happy to work with the House authorities to try to achieve this. In particular, we hope that any electronic systems that are developed are done in consultation with Government users of the system who would like to co-operate to produce changes which could benefit all concerned such as the electronic transmission of parliamentary answers.
39. The Government are however, concerned with the proposal to allow electronic tabling on a system with "weak authentication". The Government believe that any system for tabling questions electronically should be more robust and not open to any abuse. It is important that we protect the fundamental principle that questions should be authorised and signed only by Members and cannot be initiated by staff. Any system which is developed must show that the Member concerned has given specific approval to the question being tabled. The Speaker should be willing to initiate an immediate review for a change in the mechanism for tabling questions if it has given rise to an increase in the volume of questions.

QUESTIONS DURING RECESSES

- (ll) The current 'closed period' for questions during the summer of nearly three months represents an unacceptable restriction of Members' rights to pursue urgent political and constituency concerns. Equally, ... it is reasonable that there should be a shorter annual break from tabling of questions during the holiday period. We therefore recommend that with effect from 1 September each year, Members should be permitted to table written questions. ... This change should be made irrespective of whether the Government's proposals for September sittings of the House are adopted. (paragraph 101)
 - (mm) During recess periods in September/October, the Table Office should be open every Thursday during specified hours to receive questions, which should be printed after each tabling day in a special issue of the blue notice paper; and ... answers should likewise be printed in a special issue of Hansard to appear on a fixed day once a week (paragraph 102)
 - (nn) During September/October recess periods, named-day questions may only be put down for answer on a day one week ahead of the tabling day. (paragraph 102)
 - (oo) We do not believe that, initially at any rate, quotas should be imposed on the number of questions a Member may table in the recess. (paragraph 103)
40. The Government remain convinced that the House should retain the principle of tabling questions for periods when the House is sitting and Ministers are in attendance to respond to parliamentary scrutiny.
41. The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons has recommended radical changes to the pattern of the Parliamentary year. The Government will put these recommendations to the House. If they are accepted, the long summer "closed period" for questions will end without the need for new arrangements such as those proposed by the Committee
- (pp) The shuffle for a Question Time immediately after the summer recess should be held in the final part of the recess, on the day on which it would be held if the House was not in recess – i.e. if the House were to return on a Monday, the shuffle for Question Time on that Monday would be held (assuming our recommendation about notice is accepted) on the preceding Wednesday. We do not recommend any change to the earliest tabling dates for these questions. This proposal will enable much more topical questions to be tabled for Question Times immediately after the summer recess, and will maximise convenience for Members, whilst still affording the standard notice period for Government departments. (paragraph 104)

42. The Government **agree** that the shuffle for a Question Time immediately after the summer recess should be held in the final part of the recess, and will bring forward Standing Order changes to implement it. If implemented by the House it will end one of the most absurd effects of the current rules, which require some oral questions for the spillover to be tabled months before they are answered.

(qq) We welcome the Government's sensible proposal in relation to questions unanswered at the start of the recess. (paragraph 106)

43. The Government hope that Members have found the new system for dealing with questions unanswered at the start of the recess an improvement. It is grateful to the House authorities for their co-operation. The Government will review the success or otherwise of the system once the House returns after the summer recess.

PRINTING OF QUESTIONS

(rr) We recommend that headings should be inserted in the blue notice paper to reflect the way questions are organised on the paper, in order to make easier for Members and others to find their way around the 'blues'. (paragraph 107)

44. This is not a matter for the Government, but it is a helpful proposal.

IMPLEMENTATION

(ss) We recognise that some of our recommendations – such as those in relation to electronic tabling and tabling in the summer recess – will have resource implications for the House in terms of staff time and printing costs. We believe that the extra resources needed can be more than justified in terms of the gains that will accrue to the House by way of more effective scrutiny of the Executive and greater convenience to Members. We also recognise that our recommendations will impose some extra burdens on the staff of the House. We hope that where necessary the House authorities will take steps to provide more staff resources and to ensure that staff facilities are adequate (for instance, a review of the accommodation available to the Table Office would be desirable). We also wish to take this opportunity of thanking the staff of the House – and especially the Clerks in the Table Office – for the commitment, skill and courtesy with which they administer the system of Parliamentary Questions. (paragraph 108)

45. This is not a matter for Government, but we recognise that effective scrutiny has costs.

(tt) We hope that our recommendations, if approved by the House, will be implemented as soon as possible, preferably with effect from the start of Session 2002-03. We recognise that some recommendations will require the development of computer software, alterations to the POLIS system, or considerable liaison between departments of the House, and that it may not be possible at this stage to impose a firm deadline for their coming into effect. We believe that if such recommendations have been approved in principle by the House, Mr Speaker should have the authority to approve their coming into effect as soon as he is satisfied, on the basis of advice from the House authorities, that the necessary preparatory work has been carried out.
(paragraph 109)

46. The Government intend to put Standing Order changes to the House before the end of the Session, or at the outset of the next session. The Government would be grateful if the House authorities could keep them informed of developments in the implementation of those proposals which do not require Standing Order changes.



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