Role Play:

Question Time in the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales

Introduction

Question Time in the NSW Legislative Assembly is part of the tradition of Westminster-style parliaments and the time when both Opposition and Government members have an opportunity to ask ministers questions relating to their portfolios. These are called 'Questions without Notice' since the Minister may not know beforehand what questions will be asked. [There are also ‘Questions with Notice’ but these are submitted and answered in writing and are only spoken about in the House if the Minister has failed to provide an answer within a certain period.]

Opposition questions during Question Time tend to be about current and controversial issues and are intended to put pressure on or embarrass the Government or reveal more detail about its handling of an issue. Ministers often try to turn the issue back on the Opposition.

Questions asked by Government members are usually intended to give a minister the opportunity to present some positive aspect of government programs. Question Time is the part of the parliamentary day which best illustrates the idea of ‘responsible government’ – that is, that ministers are responsible to, and must answer to, parliament for their actions. Ministers are asked questions about some aspect of their portfolio (the areas of government they are responsible for) and must provide an answer. Ultimately, ministers and governments can only survive if they have the ‘confidence’ (majority support) of the Legislative Assembly. There have been occasions when ministers have resigned, at least partly because of issues raised in Question Time.

Question Time in the Legislative Assembly takes place at about 2:30pm on a sitting day and begins when the Speaker asks if there are any questions without notice. A number of members will jump to their feet to seek the Speaker’s attention. By tradition the Speaker recognises the Opposition first – usually the Leader of the Opposition if they are seeking to ask a question. The chosen member then moves to the table, indicates which minister the question will be to, and then asks the question. The Speaker then calls on the minister to answer and the minister moves to the table and answers. After that answer is given, the Speaker then usually recognises a Government back-bench member who will then ask a question of a minister and receive a reply. The pattern continues for at least 45 minutes with alternate questions from each side (and sometimes from an independent member), until a minimum of 10 questions have been answered.

Question Time is usually the most watched and reported part of the parliamentary day – by both the media and visitors - as it is usually lively and occasionally rowdy or controversial. All members are normally present so the house is very full, adding to its sense of drama. It is important to realise, however, that Question Time – however entertaining or chaotic - is a
very small (though important) part of what happens in parliament and quite unlike most of the rest of the parliamentary day.

The Role Play

There are three elements to the role play.

The Speaker’s Script (a) provides the overall structure.

The Members’ Questions (b) provide instructions and questions for six members (three Opposition and three Government). Of course, more can be added. Each member asks his or her question when acknowledged by the Speaker. Additional questions could be added to extend the role play. The members’ electorates are fictitious.

The Ministers’ Briefing Papers (c) provide instructions and suggested answers to the questions for the six ministers to use. The minister is, of course, able to use or add their responses. In reality, each day at Question Time ministers are given briefing papers prepared by their staff who try to anticipate the sorts of questions the Opposition is likely to ask on that day (the morning media is usually a good indication). However, ministers do not know the actual questions the Opposition will ask.

a) The Speaker’s Script

Speaker: We will now have Questions without Notice. Are there any questions without notice?

(Call on each of the following Members to ask their question without notice. Once they have asked the question and the Minister has answered, call on the next Member to ask their question.)

I call on the honourable member for Northern Beaches to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)

I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: I call on the honourable member for Botany Bay to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)
I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: I call on the honourable member for North Harbour to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)

I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: I call on the honourable member for East Nepean to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)

I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: I call on the honourable member for Hunter to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)

I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: I call on the honourable member for Far West to ask their question without notice.

(After the question has been asked the Speaker calls on the Minister to answer.)

I call on the Minister.

(Minister replies)

Speaker: The time for Questions has elapsed. We will move on to Government Business.
b) Members’ Questions without Notice

1: Member for Northern Beaches

You are the Leader of the Opposition. You will be asking the first question. When the Speaker says ‘We will now have Questions without Notice’ stand and wait for the Speaker to call on you.

When you are called on by the Speaker, go to the table and ask your question to the Premier.

“My question is directed to the Premier and Minister for the Arts.

Why is the government discriminating against low income earners who want to take their families to the Opera House, by making tickets to performances at the Sydney Opera House so expensive?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.

2: Member for Botany Bay

You are a member of the Government. You will be asking Question Number 2. When it is your turn stand up and wait for the Speaker to call on you.

When you are called on by the Speaker, ask your question to the appropriate Minister.

“Mr / Madam Speaker. My question is directed to the Minister for Ageing.

How is the Government addressing the important health issue of geriatric care?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.

3: Member for North Harbour

You are a member of the Opposition. You will be asking Question Number 3. When it is your turn stand up and wait for the Speaker to call on you.
“Mr / Madam Speaker. My question is directed to the Minister for Industrial Relations.
Why hasn’t the government taken action to get striking nurses back to work?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.

4: Member for East Nepean

You are a member of the Government. You will be asking Question Number 4. When it is your turn stand up and wait for the Speaker to call on you.

When you are called on by the Speaker, ask your question to the appropriate Minister.

“My question is directed to the Treasurer.
What provision will there be in next year’s budget to shorten hospital waiting lists?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.

5: Member for Hunter

You are a member of the Opposition. You will be asking Question Number 5. When it is your turn stand up and wait for the Speaker to call on you.

When you are called on by the Speaker, go to the table and ask your question to the appropriate Minister.

“My / Madam Speaker. My question is directed to the Minister for Planning.
When will the government stop strangling employment opportunities in NSW and approve the plans of Canadian company, International Chemicals, to develop a new industry in the Hunter?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.
6: Member for Far West

You are a member of the Government. You will be asking Question Number 6. When it is your turn stand up and wait for the Speaker to call on you.

When you are called on by the Speaker, ask your question to the appropriate Minister.

“Mr / Madam Speaker. My question is directed to the Minister for Land and Water Conservation.

What is the latest information on the killing of wild dogs in areas of Western NSW?”

Once you have asked your question you should sit down.

c) Ministers’ Briefing Papers

1: Ministerial Briefing Paper:
Premier and Minister for the Arts

You will be asked the following question by the Leader of the Opposition and Member for Northern Beaches:

Why is the government discriminating against low income earners who want to take their families to the Opera House, by making tickets to performances at the Sydney Opera House so expensive?

Below is a suggested answer:

Unlike the previous government, this government is very much in favour of increasing access to performance and cultural events for people throughout Sydney. We have a variety of programs already in place aimed at achieving this such as special family tickets for Sunday matinees and cheaper tickets for young people under 25.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.
2: Ministerial Briefing Paper:
Minister for Ageing

You will be asked the following question by the Member for Botany Bay, a member of the Government:

How is the Government addressing the important health issue of geriatric care?

Below is a suggested answer:

Geriatric care is a very important issue and this government is strongly committed to addressing the community’s concerns in this area. After widespread community consultation we have created a new policy specifically directed at geriatric care. This will be the first policy of its kind in this state and includes licensing requirements for providers of aged care.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.

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3: Ministerial Briefing Paper:
Minister for Industrial Relations

You will be asked the following question by the Member for North Harbour, a member of the Opposition.

Why hasn’t the government taken action to get striking nurses back to work?

Below is a suggested answer:

The government has taken appropriate action. Representatives of the nurses’ federation are meeting with my department as we speak. Our aim is to achieve a lasting solution to the issue and not just to engage in some political point-scoring like the Opposition.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.

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**4: Ministerial Briefing Paper: Treasurer**

You will be asked the following question by the Member for East Nepean, a member of the Government:

*What provision will there be in next years budget to shorten hospital waiting lists?*

Below is a suggested answer:

Due to this government’s effective financial management we will be able to provide for a major increase in hospital allocations for staff and new facilities which will significantly decrease, if not abolish, hospital waiting lists.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.

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**5: Ministerial Briefing Paper: Minister for Planning**

You will be asked the following question by the Member for Hunter, a member of the Opposition:

*When will the government stop strangling employment opportunities in NSW and approve the plans of Canadian company, International Chemicals, to develop a new industry in the Hunter?*

Below is a suggested answer:

The plans submitted by the Canadian company, International Chemicals, are currently under review. No approval can be given until proper environmental impact assessment and other processes are completed.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.

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You will be asked the following question by the Member for Far West, a member of the Government.

What is the latest information on the killing of wild dogs in areas of Western NSW?

Below is a suggested answer:

I have very good news for the people of Western NSW. This government will have eradicated the wild dog problem in Western NSW within three months. An innovative program, that protects native fauna, is now underway.

When you have answered the question you should sit down.