

C-SPAN

Tenth Anniversary

1979-1989

Contact: Gene Grabowski
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FACTS ABOUT THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT

Parliament is the supreme legislative authority in Great Britain. Its three elements, the Queen, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons, are outwardly separate and meet together only on symbolic occasions. As a lawmaking organ of state, however, Parliament is a corporate body and with certain exceptions cannot legislate without concurrence of all its parts.

Because Britain has no written constitution, Parliament is virtually free to legislate as it pleases. It has the authority to make or alter any law. If both houses of Parliament agreed, for example, it could even prolong its own life beyond the normal period of five years without consulting the electorate. That would be as if members of the U.S. Congress had the power to suspend elections and thus continue meeting indefinitely without elections every two years. In practice, Parliament is careful not to abuse its supremacy. Its members adhere to British common law and act in accordance with precedent and tradition.

Parliament is summoned by royal proclamation and is "prorogued" (discontinued until the next session) and "dissolved" (terminated for new elections) by the monarch. At the beginning of each new session, the queen is driven in her horse-drawn carriage to the House of Lords, where both the Lords and Commons assemble to hear her speech outlining the government's policies and legislative program for the next session. Her speech is written by her ministers, who are members of Parliament. Royal assent is required for legislation to take effect, yet that requirement has become a formality in recent years. A British sovereign has not exercised the crown's right to veto since 1707.

Question Time

At about 2:35 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, the House of Commons proceeds to Question Time, one of Parliament's liveliest and most well-known features. It requires a minister of the government who has been called in advance to answer questions on a specific day to stand at the front of the chamber and face inquiries from the members. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the Prime Minister (now Margaret Thatcher) must stand and answer questions. Because members are permitted to jeer or shout supportively during the ensuing exchanges, colorful debates often occur.

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The House speaker sets the process in motion by calling on the member whose question is scheduled to be first that day to speak. The member stands up and announces: "Number one, sir!" Because that first question is always written out and distributed to members in advance, there is no need to state it aloud. The minister who is answering questions that day then reads out the answer he or she has prepared for the question. When ministers of larger departments, such as Environment or Trade & Industry are summoned for Question Time, the Secretary of State accompanies that minister along with several junior ministers who will share the task of answering questions.

After the initial question, further exchanges on its topic are unscripted. The member who asked the first question is normally the first to be called to ask a follow-up question, known as a supplementary. When a supplementary has been answered by the minister, the House Speaker may call other members to ask other supplementaries. The Speaker usually alternates those members asking questions between the Government and Opposition sides of the House.

When the Speaker decides enough supplementaries have been asked, he calls the member who has question number two on the day's schedule. The process begins again and continues until Question Time ends. Any oral question that has not been answered receives a written answer which is printed in a later issue of Hansard, Parliament's version of The Congressional Record.

The History of Question Time

The practice of questioning ministers originated in the early 18th century. Historians seem to agree that the first recorded question was asked in the House of Lords in 1721 by Earl Cowper. He asked the government whether there was any truth in the report that the Chief Cashier of the South Sea Company, Robert Knight, had fled the country and had been arrested in Brussels. A reply providing the facts of the case was given by the Earl of Sunderland, the Prime Minister of that period.

The first recorded ruling about questions asked in Commons was given by Speaker Cornwall in 1783. The Speaker said he wished to inform members of the House that conversations were becoming disorderly, but that any member had the right to put a question to a minister. He also said that he believed that any minister of the government had a right to refuse to answer.

In 1869, Commons began publishing advance notices of one or two questions a day under their own specific heading in Hansard. Since then, the use of Question Time has grown considerably. Today, an average of more than 240 questions are asked daily.

News Release

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