

60 years of Prime Minister's Questions: seven changes that shaped PMQs



In the light of the 60th anniversary of the introduction of Prime Minister's Questions, [Ruxandra Serban](#) reflects on its history and highlights seven changes that have shaped the procedure we know today.

On 18 July 1961, the House of Commons experimented with setting aside a separate questioning slot for the Prime Minister. The new procedure was formally introduced in November that year and has since become the most well-known parliamentary procedure: Prime Minister's Question Time. But PMQs did not always take the form we see today, and several changes were decisive for its development. Most of these changes were the result of accumulated practice, emerging convention, or concessions from the Prime Minister, rather than of intentional procedural reform, reflecting a pattern that applies more generally to parliamentary reform in the UK.

1. A separate questioning slot for the Prime Minister

A particularity of PMQs is precisely its focus on the Prime Minister. The key change introduced in 1961 was that the PM was going to be questioned separately from ministers. Prior to that, PMs took questions together with ministers during the usual Oral Questions slot. This is still the case in many parliamentary democracies – out of 31 of them I surveyed in a recent [study](#), 26 operate routine questioning of the prime minister. Out of these, 16 – including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium and France – have a collective procedure, where the prime minister is questioned together with ministers, and ten have an individualised procedure, where the prime minister answers questions on their own – such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Providing a slot for parliamentarians to question the head of government in the open forum of the plenary is hence not unique to the UK, but nor is it common. It is a desirable format if the aim is to place focus on the PM, but the individualised nature alone does not determine how well the procedure holds the PM to account.

2. Spontaneous questioning on topical affairs

A key feature of PMQs is the spontaneous, open style of questioning. MPs do not need to submit a question in writing in advance of PMQs: they simply need to submit their name for the random shuffle that takes place on the preceding Thursday, and the names of the selected questioners are printed on the Order Paper. Members may submit a substantive question if they wish, but in practice they rarely do. Other members who wish to ask a question can try to 'catch' the Speaker's eye during the session. This process allows PMQs to press the prime minister on current, topical affairs that come up each week. It also confers PMQs its '[routine check-up](#)' role, as the Prime Minister must stay on top of the issues that are in the news.

The practice of spontaneous questioning [emerged](#) gradually in the 1970s, as backbench members started to ask 'transfer-proof' questions. These were questions such as the 'engagements' question asked at the start of PMQs, asking the PM about their schedule for the rest of the day; or asking them if they plan to visit the member's constituency. Such questions could not be referred by the PM to another minister, and allowed the member to then ask a supplementary question on their actual topic of interest. The open nature of the initial question meant that the supplementary question could address any topic. This practice was formally adopted in [1997](#), when members were finally allowed to ask their intended supplementary questions directly, eliminating the need to ask a generic question first.

3. The Prime Minister answers all the questions addressed to them

The Prime Minister always takes all the questions addressed to them at PMQs. They never transfer a question to a minister on the basis that it falls within the remit of a particular government department, rather than within the prime minister's responsibilities. This [practice](#) started in 1979 with Margaret Thatcher, who decided to take all or most of the questions addressed to her. Prior to that, it was very common for the Prime Minister to avoid particular questions by transferring them to a departmental minister. What was initially an assertion of authority from Thatcher created the expectation that the Prime Minister should be able to answer questions on any topic across government policy, increasing PMQs' scrutiny power.

4. PMQs is broadcast to the public

In November 1989, PMQs started being filmed, and in 1990 it began to be broadcast live. This fundamentally changed the ways in which the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition – the protagonists of PMQs – prepared and delivered their speeches. Advisers on both sides started aiming for short, quotable lines that could make the headlines or the evening news. Appearance and tone started playing a more important role, as PMQs was no longer confined to a parliamentary audience. This paved the way for the influence of social media on PMQs proceedings. It is common now for both sides to prepare quips that can be easily shared on Twitter or Facebook. Increased media exposure hence had a direct influence on the types of questions that were asked, and on the style in which questions were addressed, as well as on how questions were answered.

5. 30 minutes on Wednesdays at noon

The current 30-minute 12pm slot for PMQs was introduced by Tony Blair in 1997. Prior to that, since 1961, PMQs had been scheduled for 15 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Tony Blair [thought](#) that preparing for two separate questioning sessions was quite time-consuming, and occupied a significant part of his diary in the middle of each week, so a single session would be more efficient. This allowed for a more extended dialogue between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, as well as potentially more time for backbenchers to ask questions. In recent years, PMQs has frequently overrun up to 45 minutes. Speaker John Bercow was quite vocal in [arguing](#) for PMQs to be officially extended to 45 minutes, or even up to an hour, to allow more time for backbenchers.

Weekly questioning of the Prime Minister is another particular feature of the UK. Other parliaments that question the prime minister individually, such as Denmark, Norway or Sweden, do so usually on a monthly basis. The nearest equivalent is the Irish Dáil, which also questions the Taoiseach weekly or twice-weekly at Oral Questions, as well as at Leaders Questions.

6. The Leader of the Opposition asks six questions

The Leader of the Opposition has six questions allocated at PMQs, and the leader of the third largest party has two. Before the introduction of the 30-minute Wednesday slot, Leaders of the Opposition used to have three questions for each Tuesday and Thursday session. But they didn't always take all their allocated questions. Once PMQs moved to a single, half-hour session, Leaders of the Opposition, starting with William Hague, began to take up to the full allocation. This meant that questions could be used in various ways, either taking all six questions at the beginning of the session, as is currently most common, or grouping them as two sets of three, or of four and two. Leaders could use their allocated questions to pursue a single topic in a sustained line of questioning, or to look at multiple issues. The exchange between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition is the most visible, and often the most adversarial part of PMQs, and usually determines the verdict of who 'won' or 'lost'. The move to allocate the Leader six questions, and their decision to use the full set, decisively shaped the form of this exchange.

7. A parallel mechanism: the Liaison Committee

The Prime Minister enjoys great freedom in setting their relationship with Parliament. In 2002, Blair agreed to appear once or twice a year before the Liaison Committee, formed of the chairs of Select Committees in the Commons. He had initially refused the Committee's invitation, invoking the convention that the Prime Minister does not appear before Select Committees. The aim of these sessions was to provide a more [extended scrutiny](#) of the Prime Minister on a few specific topics each session, thus complementing PMQs' focus on topical affairs. Liaison Committee sessions with the Prime Minister have been in place since, and now operate two or three times a year. David Cameron appeared before the Committee 15 times during his two premierships, and Theresa May six times. Their continued functioning, however, depends on the Prime Minister's willingness to participate. At the start of his premiership, and shortly after the 2019 general election, Boris Johnson cancelled his appearance before the Committee three times, creating a strain in the accountability relationship between government and Parliament.

Where to next?

PMQs no doubt has considerable room to improve, particularly in allowing more time for backbenchers, and taking some of the pressure away from the exchange with the Leader of the Opposition. It is also important to see PMQs in context. It is not a mechanism for in-depth, detailed scrutiny. Its main function, as a result of its weekly scheduling and of the spontaneous nature of questioning, is to keep the Prime Minister in the spotlight to answer questions on current affairs. But the quality of this questioning exercise also matters. Criticism about its adversarial, aggressive nature is particularly salient in the current environment, where PMQs risks contributing to a decrease in the quality of political debate and deliberation, and to the spread of misinformation.

PMQs is clearly an evolving procedure – the most recent [changes](#) to it were introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a socially distanced chamber and members able to participate remotely. Most of its procedural features were designed for a parliamentary audience, long before the current fast-paced media environment. Reform proposals should start with a reflection on the functions it currently fulfils for Parliament and for democracy, whether it fulfils them adequately and efficiently, and the functions that it should play in the future.

About the Author



[Ruxandra Serban](#) is an LSE Fellow in Qualitative Methodology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her PhD investigated the relationship between prime ministers and parliaments in 31 countries.

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