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AN ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS IN THE QUEENSLAND PARLIAMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Parliamentary questions are an integral part of most Westminster parliamentary systems, serving as a major form of legislative oversight and constituency service (Glassman 2008). There are two types of parliamentary questions, 'questions without notice' and 'questions on notice'. Questions without notice are asked and answered orally during 'Question Time'. Questions on notice are asked in writing and the relevant minister provides the answer in writing. Parliamentary questions provide a mechanism to seek the accountability of the executive on the floor of the House and barely 'any aspect of the executive department's powers and activities can be shielded from questions' (Crick 1964: 237). In terms of media coverage, this practice is the most widely reported legislative device. Therefore, to a casual observer, the working of parliament is synonymous with Question Time.

Despite their importance in the parliamentary system of governance, only a few studies on parliamentary questions in Australia are evident in the literature, as noted by Uhr (1981) and Rasiah (2007). The studies that have been conducted have mostly focused on the national parliament. Uhr's study (1981) on Question Time in the House of Representatives during the thirty-first parliament (the Fraser government) provides an in-depth analysis of parliamentary questions in the federal parliament. The study analysed the Standing Orders applicable to Question Time, statistically analysed the questions raised in this period, and recommended measures to improve the effectiveness of parliamentary questions and answers. It identified weak Standing Orders regarding questions as well as an absence of a well-defined procedure for supplementary questions as major drawbacks within this practice.

In a different study, Hammer (2004: 255) considers questions to be an ineffective parliamentary tool in the Australian House of Representatives, stating that it 'not only provides little information but also does great damage to the image of politics and politicians. ... Both Questions and Answers do not keep the point.' Other studies, such as Coghill and Hunt (1998) and Rasiah (2007), conclude that questions in the House of Representatives are evaded, while McGowan (2008) notes that questions from the Opposition are less likely to be answered.

All the studies mentioned above focus on the federal parliament with the exception of Coghill and Hunt's study. Moreover, the studies analysed oral questions (questions without notice) only. While Coghill and Hunt analysed a sample of questions in the legislative assemblies of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria, their data was limited to a single day in each parliament. Thus, it is evident that there is a gap in the literature regarding parliamentary questions in Australian state parliaments, and little is known about their nature, aim, usage and effectiveness. The present study aims to fill this gap by analysing questions asked (both with and without notice), using the case study of the Queensland Parliament during 1996–1998. In particular, this study aims to explore the nature, aim, usage, and effectiveness of parliamentary questions in the Queensland Parliament and the extent to which questions were effective in ensuring the accountability of the executive.

Functions of parliamentary questions

In a classic study on parliamentary questions, Chester and Bowring (1962: 180) identify their two basic functions: to obtain information from the executive or to press it for action. Other important functions include the ‘criticism of the executive government; bringing to light abuses; ventilating grievances; exposing and thereby preventing the government from exercising arbitrary power’ (Pettifer 1981: 479). However, Franklin and Norton’s empirical study (1993:109), which focuses on the British Parliament, suggests that ministerial accountability is the main motive for asking questions. This factor was followed by the defending or promoting of constituency interests and the influencing of government policy and actions as the second and the third motives respectively. Almost 85% of the members surveyed in the British Parliament in Franklin and Norton’s study confirmed Chester and Bowring’s (1962) theory that personal publicity was also one of the motives for asking questions, as it improved the members’ image—both within their party and their electorate. Despite some debate over the extent of executive accountability secured by parliamentary questions, this mechanism, at the minimum, ensures answerability from the executive to the legislature (Chester and Bowring 1962; McGowan 2008).

DATA AND METHODS

In order to assess the effectiveness of parliamentary questions in the Queensland Parliament, this study adopted some of the features of the previous studies on parliamentary questions in developing a methodological framework, in particular, Chester and Bowring (1962); Franklin and Norton (1993); Rasiah (2007); and Hazama et al (2007). Similar to author’s previous study (Ojha and Mishra, 2009) each parliamentary question was codified according to the name of the questioner; the questioner’s constituency; party affiliation; whether the question was asked with or without notice; the concerned government department to which the question had been posed; the purpose of the question (to seek information/ press for action); the constituency relevance; and the nature of the question (such as highlighting corruption issues, demanding infrastructure development or social welfare).

The answers were analysed qualitatively according to the questions’ objective and codified into a scale of 1 to 10 (10 was further sub-divided into 10A), as shown in Table 1. If the answer fulfilled the question’s objective, it was allocated to category 10 or 10A; if a minister assured that action would be taken or provided the required information, it was allocated to category 9, and so on. If a minister seemed ignorant of the matter and simply responded that the necessary information was being collected, the answer was marked as the least effective and was allocated category 1. In Table 1, intermediate categories denote partial fulfilment of the question’s objective. The questions and their answers analysed in this study were categorised and compiled with the help of Microsoft Excel Software (v 2003).

Further, seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the former Members of the Queensland Parliament, the Speaker, the party whips and ministers to ascertain their views on the effectiveness of the device of parliamentary questions. The interviews were a particularly valuable source for they supplemented the analysis of documentary material by providing information on those aspects that could have never be obtained in any other way. However, the names of the interviewees have not been mentioned while describing their views to preserve their anonymity.

Table 1: Effectiveness of answers

Category of answers (scale)		Overall government response
1	Information is being collected / No information available	Less effective
2	Matter under consideration	
3	Inquiry pending / report awaited	

4	Answer in negative	
5	Answer evaded	
6	Outside state government jurisdiction	Neutral
7	Not possible due to lack of resources	
8	Related to another department	
9	Assurance given	More effective
10	Action taken	
10 A	Action taken (information required by the question provided)	

Scope of the analysis

The above framework was used to analyse the 5300 questions asked during the second session of the forty-eight parliament (the Borbidge government) between 28 March 1996 and 19 May 1998 (103 sitting days), and the first twenty-two days (27 July 1998 to 19 November 1998) of the first session of the forty-ninth parliament (the Beattie government), as shown in Table 2. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was performed in order to assess the questions' nature, aim, usage, and effectiveness.

The questions with notice (totalling 3604) and those without notice (totalling 1696) were analysed separately because inherent differences were noted between the nature of these questions. Specifically, a high percentage of Dorothy Dix (a favourable question asked of a minister by a member of their own party) questions were found in questions without notice but not in questions with notice, and thus their objective was entirely different. A major problem in the analysis was that these questions were fully answered as a part of the information/publicity strategy of government, therefore had to be equated with answerability. However, to include Dorothy Dix questions in the analysis of questions with notice would have defeated the purpose of the study.

Table 2: Scope of the analysis

Time period	Party in power	Premier	Number of questions without notice	Number of questions with notice	Total questions
Forty-eighth parliament 28 March 1996 – 19 May 1998 (103 sitting days)	National-Liberal coalition	Rob Borbidge	1341	3114	4455
Forty-ninth parliament 27 July 1998 – 19 November 1998 (22 sitting days)	Australian Labor Party	Peter Beattie	355	490	845
(Total 125 sitting days)		Total =>	1696	3604	5300

Rules regarding parliamentary questions

Questions without notice were not allowed in the Queensland Parliament until 1970. However, during the time, this was criticised on the basis that ‘ministers were allowed too oft a life, being able to secure answers to all questions from their departmental officers’ (Hughes 1980:141). From August 1970 questions without notice were permitted under Sessional Orders (QPD 27 August 1970, 254: 375), and were incorporated in Standing Orders in 1983.

According to Standing Order 113, questions without notice can be put to a minister for ‘(a) public affairs with which the Minister is officially connected or to any matter of administration for which the Minister is responsible; or (b) proceedings pending in the Legislative Assembly for which the Minister is responsible’. During Question Time, the Speaker decides which questions are to be placed before parliament for ministerial reply and in which order. The convention is to place alternate questions from the ruling party and the Opposition. In practice, supplementary questions are not permitted by the Speaker in the Queensland Legislative Assembly.

There are no explicit rules in the Standing Orders regarding answers to parliamentary questions. Standing order 118 simply states that an answer should be relevant to the question asked. However, not even the Speaker has the final authority to decide whether or not an answer is relevant to a question. A minister may answer a question the way he or she likes. On one occasion in the parliament a member objected to the answer provided to his question on the basis that the minister who responded referred to a newspaper article in providing their answer. The member objected that he wanted an answer in parliament not from the press, to which the Speaker responded, ‘I have no knowledge of what information the answer to a question will contain, and I have no control over the answer that a minister gives. I point out to the Honourable Member that he cannot demand the answer he thinks he should receive to a question. However, I feel that, having asked a question he should get a fair answer’ (QPD 27 August 1970, 254: 374).

I have quoted the above example to illustrate the limited authority the Speaker in the Queensland Parliament has with regards to the relevance of ministerial replies during Question Time. The Speaker’s only powers regarding questions, which are mentioned in the Standing Orders, are that the Speaker may direct the language of a question to be changed if it is deemed un-parliamentary or does not conform to Standing Orders, Sessional Orders, or House practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the questions analysed: Questions without notice

The content analysis of the 1696 questions without notice suggested that this device was not used in accordance with its intended functions (that is, to seek information and to press for action).

Approximately 91% and 93% of the questions from the Borbidge and the Beattie governments respectively were Dorothy Dix. These questions were not aimed to account for government actions and policies; rather, they gave ministers an opportunity to announce government policies and good work. For example, a government member put a question to the Minister for Health in order to inform the House of the improvements the government had made to the elective surgery waiting-list time. The minister then detailed how the government had reduced the waiting time for surgeries through a planned, well- managed and organised program (QPD 10 July 1997, 343: 2648).

Interestingly, this trend was not limited to any one party, as a high proportion of Dorothy Dix questions were present in almost equal proportions during the coalition and the Labor governments, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Percentage of Dorothy Dix questions during the coalition and the Labor governments*

Party in power	Percentage of Dorothy Dix questions
National Liberal coalition	91%
Australian Labor Party	93%

*during the period examined

Dorothy Dix questions were constructed in a way that ministers could criticise the Opposition's policy on a particular matter. One example is a question which was asked to the Minister for Education to inform the House of the Opposition's policy on commercial activities in schools (QPD 14 May 1998, 346: 1198). Similarly, a government backbencher asked the Minister for Health to outline the former government's financial mismanagement of the Health portfolio (QPD 19 May 1998, 346: 1301). Questions such as these were not related to the minister's tenure nor was there a genuine interest to seek information or press for actions for public welfare.

Interestingly, answers to provocative questions began in the same manner; for example, 'I thank the member for a wise/excellent /sensible and timely question. It is about time a bit of truth was told about this issue, but of course the Leader of the Opposition/ the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has a bit of difficulty telling the truth . . .', and the subsequent answer would provoke a cross-debate from both sides, causing Question Time to be likened to a 'State of Origin match' (QPD 4 December 1996, 340: 4864). Content analyses of the Hansard transcripts confirmed that these debates were totally irrelevant to the issue in most of the cases. Therefore, such questions and answers were a waste of parliamentary time and resources as they were not aimed at influencing or scrutinising the executive. Rather, Question Time was used by the ruling party for building the government's image and tarnishing that of the Opposition.

The objective of parliamentary questions without notice was rendered ineffective not only by members of the ruling party but also by members from the Opposition. About 24% of the total questions from the Opposition Labor party during the coalition government were aimed at 'providing information' rather than 'seeking information', with the sole aim to criticise the government. The analysis confirmed that the purpose of the questions was to raise the most scandalous issues of the day and embarrass ministers. For example, a question was asked by the then Opposition Leader concerning the Pacific Highway's traffic problems, but he continued to dedicate the question to highlighting the Premier's misuse of the government helicopter, using it for personal visits (QPD 16 April 1996, 336: 465).

Standing Order 115(b) in the Queensland Assembly clearly states that while asking questions no argument or opinion shall be offered, or any fact stated, except so far as is necessary to explain the question. However, this was violated in the case of questions without notice. Several examples were found in Hansard, where questions established debating points, involved speculations, and asked for ministers' opinions. In many questions, the aim was not so much to seek information but to impart it. Questions beginning with the preface, 'Is the Minister aware that . . .' confirm this proposal.

Before a three-minute time limit was imposed on answers during the Beattie government (QPD 30 July 1998, 347:1508), answers tended to be very long-winded and irrelevant to the question asked. In his first address to the Parliament, Premier Beattie announced that his government was committed to accountability and the ministers would not waste time during Question Time (QPD 28 July 1998, 347: 1336). However, an analysis of Question Time during Beattie's tenure found that, while the answers' speed improved, their level of quality did not. Due to the time limits, more questions were asked—an average of nineteen questions per session, as compared to the previous average of twelve—but no substantial change was noted in the nature, content, and quality of questions and answers.

The analysis noted several point-scoring habits across political parties during Question Time. Whenever the Opposition raised questions related to lapses in government policies or any corruption issues, the government members responded by asking Dorothy Dix questions related to similar issues when their opponents were in government. For example, when one Opposition member expressed concern over efforts by a government organisation to raise funds by selling lollies, a government member asked the Premier to advise the House of other fundraising schemes adopted by the previous government (QPD 19 March 1998, 346: 526). On one occasion, the Leader of the Opposition raised a matter in the Parliament that several ministers had failed in answering questions on notice within thirty days. The same day during Question Time, a ruling party member asked the Premier to compare it with the former government's record. This gave the Premier the opportunity to criticise the double standards raised by the Leader of the Opposition and he detailed the previous government's bad record of not answering questions in time, listing numerous instances of such (in) activity (QPD 15 May 1996, 337: 1097).

From the above description, it can be concluded that Question Time in the Queensland Parliament is used for political point-scoring, almost as a gladiatorial contest. In terms of seeking the executive accountability on the floor of the House, it is an ineffective parliamentary instrument.

Findings from the questions analysed: Questions on notice

Unlike questions without notice, where political parties control the nature and content of questions, questions on notice can be used by a member's own initiative. Due to the asynchronous nature of questions and answers, this parliamentary tool has greater potential to influence and hold the executive to account because there is less partisan publicity and media attention attached to it. Furthermore, a minister has time to probe the issue in detail before replying.

The analyses of the 3604 questions on notice indicated that 98% and 91% of the total questions were asked by the main Opposition parties during the Borbidge and the Beattie governments respectively (as shown in Table 4). The data indicates that questions on notice are barely asked by members of the ruling party, and therefore the Opposition is virtually alone in using them to influence and scrutinise the executive. One may conclude that party solidarity does not allow ruling party members to account for government actions and policies through questions on notice. Furthermore, they may find party channels to influence the executive for constituency-related work.

Table 4: Use of questions on notice by political parties during 1996–1998

Party	Borbidge government	Beattie government
ALP	3047 (97.8%)	14 (2.8%)
Independent	53 (1.7%)	32 (6.5%)
National-Liberal coalition	14 (0.5%)	403 (82.2%)
One Nation Party	N/A	41 (8.3%)
Total	3114	490

By analysing these questions' subject matter, it was revealed that members do not perceive their main role as championing the constituency interests in the parliament. As Table 5 indicates, an overwhelming percentage of the questions on notice were not related to members' constituencies.

Table 5: Distribution of questions related to members' constituencies

	Borbidge government	Beattie government
Questions not related to members' constituency	2204 (71%)	396 (81%)
Questions related to members' constituency	910 (29%)	94 (19%)

Total	3114	490
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Table 6 indicates that 53% of the questions are related to policy matters compared to 47% of the questions related to local matters in the Borbidge period. Similarly, 71% of the questions are related to policy matters compared to 29% of the questions related to local matters in the Beattie period.

Table 6: Distribution of questions related to local matters and policy matters during 1996–1998

	Borbidge period	Beattie period
Questions related to local matters	1473 (47%)	141 (29%)
Questions related to policy matters	1641 (53%)	349 (71%)
Total	3114	490

As Table 7 shows, the analysis proved that questions on notice are asked mainly by the Opposition to seek information. Pressing the executive to take action is less important.

Table 7: A comparison of those questions seeking information with those pressing for action

	Borbidge period	Beattie period
Questions seeking information	2740 (88%)	403 (82%)
Questions pressing for action	343 (11%)	83 (17%)
Questions seeking information and also pressing for action	31 (1%)	4 (1%)
Total	3114	490

Findings from the answers

Using the scale discussed earlier, whereby answers were ranked from 1 to 10A, the analysis showed that, respectively, 70% and 71% of the questions on notice were effective during the Borbidge and Beattie governments. In other words, for these questions the executive provided the required information, took action, or assured the questioner to take the necessary action. An important finding is the non-partisan attitude of the executive in answering these questions. The proportion of ‘effective’ answers was in the range of 70–80% for the Opposition, independents, and ruling party members (Table 8 and 9).

Thus, from the analysis, it can be concluded that questions with notice are effective in scrutinising the actions and policies of the executive. However, solidarity with the party appears to be very strong among the members of the Queensland Parliament, which prohibits its use among the ruling party members. Particularly, members of the Opposition actively used this device during the study period.

Table 8: Effectiveness of answers (from questions on notice) during the Borbidge government

Answer/Outcome of question	Number of questions per political party				Total	Effectiveness
	ALP	IND	LIB	NP		
1 Information is being* collected / No information	118	0	0	0	118	Not effective 19%
2 Matter under consideration	234	4	1	1	240	
3 Inquiry pending/report awaited	30	1	0	0	31	
4 Answer was evaded	3	0	0	0	3	
5 Answer in negative	191	4	1	0	196	
6 Outside State Government jurisdiction	60	0	0	0	60	Neutral 4%
7 Not possible due to lack of resources	15	0	0	0	15	
8 Related to another department	43	0	0	0	43	
9 Assurance given	69	2	0	0	71	Effective 77%
10 Action taken	211	2	0	0	213	
10A Information given	2072	40	8	3	2123	
Question withdrawn	1	0	0	0	1	
Total	3047	53	10	4	3114	
% of 9,10 and 10A =	70%	75%	80%	75%		

*Questions were not answered if the minister had no knowledge of the matter, it was a misuse of time and resources of government in collating information, or the information was confidential. A large number of questions were also not answered during the Borbidge government before the Parliament was dissolved for the next general election in 1998.

Table 9: Effectiveness of answers (from questions on notice) during the Beattie government

Answer/Outcome	No. of questions	
1 Information is being collected / No information	5	less effective 105 (21.5%)
2 Matter under consideration	40	
3 Inquiry pending/report awaited	3	

4 Answer evaded	0	
5 Answer in negative	57	
6 Outside State Government jurisdiction	21	Neutral 37 (7.5%)
7 Not possible due to lack of resources	4	
8 Related to another department	12	
9 Assurance given	29	effective 348 (71%)
10 Action taken	32	
10A Information given	287	
Grand Total	490	

Findings from the interviews

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with former Members of the Queensland Parliament, the Speaker, the party whips, ministers and the Clerk of the Parliament. Pertinent points expressed by the interviewees in relation to parliamentary questions are described below. The importance of parliamentary questions as a tool to seek the executive accountability was reiterated by interviewees, a former minister in the Beattie government stating:

‘Question Time can be used by the Opposition to focus on issues which make the executive accountable (interview 27 August 2009).’

However, in the context of the Queensland Parliament, a former Speaker during the Beattie period commented that

‘It has lost its purpose. The executive is not answerable to Parliament (interview 9 September 2009).’

A former premier commented,

The standard of Question Time has reduced. It is a fault of both, the executive as well as the Opposition. You need better questions, better strategy in order to be more effective (interview 9 October 2009).’

Almost all the participants agreed that questions on notice are a more effective means to seek the executive accountability than questions without notice. This is due to fact that questions without notice and their answers are politically motivated, rather than driven by a desire to press for action or seek information, thus reducing their impact on the executive accountability. A former Speaker during the Beattie government commented:

Opposition asks hostile questions. Their purpose is not to seek information but to attack on Government [sic]. The process is more political. The current battlefield atmosphere has made Question Time more about testing the performance of ministers and shadow ministers than accountability (interview 9 September 2009).

The interviewee suggested that the high number of Dorothy Dix questions, the hostile and attacking questions posed by the Opposition, and the limited power of the Speaker regarding the relevance of the answer contributed to the ineffectiveness of Question Time. He concluded:

Although there are Standing Orders relating to a question to indicate that an answer must be relevant, succinct and the minister must not debate the issue. However, on too many occasions, ministers fob off questions. It is very difficult to tell ministers what they can or cannot say. This often leads to heated interjections with consequential reprimands to Opposition members and to their 'sin-binning'. The 'Dorothy Dix' asked by government backbenchers regularly become part of the agenda to attack the Opposition. By asking hostile questions, the Opposition is not blameless in what has become the debacle of Question Time. In the battlefield atmosphere of the Parliament there is a distraction from real issues (interview 9 September 2009).

In theory, members of parliament are better placed than ordinary citizens in seeking explanations from the executive, exposing wrong doings, and ventilating public grievances through the use of various legislative devices. However, as the opinion below, expressed by another former Speaker during the Beattie government indicates, this is far from the reality of the situation:

The Opposition are very lazy. Their best questions come out of the *Courier-Mail*. They read the *Courier-Mail* and ask questions based on it. That is the best they can do in terms of trying to keep the government accountable but that is very basic. At the same time ministers abuse the privileges by not being open about the operation of their departments (interview 19 October 2009).

The lack of a provision for asking supplementary questions is one of the systemic weaknesses in the Queensland Parliament. However, a former Speaker during the coalition government opined:

I don't think that the provision of supplementary questions will make Question Time more effective. If a minister is not answering the very first question, in the same way he or she can refuse to answer follow-up questions (interview 2 September 2009).

This statement clearly points out the need for sincere, succinct, and direct answers from ministers rather than provision for supplementary questions.

From the interviews it was confirmed that members have conceded Question Time's limitations and consider the media to be in a better position to seek ministerial accountability. A former minister in the Beattie government himself admitted

'A minister who has dodged a question in the Parliament can be pursued through the media (interview 15 October 2009).'

The Clerk of the Parliament summarised the situation as such:

The success of Question Time depends on two factors. Firstly, the ability to ask good questions but the Opposition asks very bad questions. The Opposition tries to make questions political and while doing so it ruins the question. Secondly, it also depends upon the willingness of ministers to answer questions. In the Queensland Parliament, both factors are missing . . . Moreover; there is nothing in the Standing Orders that can force a minister to answer a question. If a question is not answered accurately on the floor of the House, there is no effectiveness (interview 21 October 2009).

CONCLUSION

The executive accountability to parliament and to the people through parliament is a basic tenet of the Westminster system and parliamentary questions, oral and written, provide a mechanism to seek the executive accountability. From the data analysed it can be inferred that questions without notice are not able to assure the executive accountability in the Queensland Parliament due to its members' partisan attitudes. It was confirmed in the interviews that Question Time is primarily used for parties' and individuals' image-building, as their performance is communicated to the electorate through media. The content analysis of questions without notice confirmed that almost all the

questions from the ruling party members and majority of questions from the Opposition were politically motivated either to praise one's own party achievements or to ridicule/attack the opponent party's policies and actions. A high number of Dorothy Dix questions, politically motivated questions from both sides, ambiguous directions in the Standing Orders regarding the relevance of answers, the limited authority of the Speaker to ensure ministerial answerability, and strong party control on the floor of the House are major factors responsible for the ineffectiveness of this device. In addition to these factors, the ruling party gets half of the total time during Question Time, which further diminishes the time available to the Opposition.

Contrary to questions without notice, questions with notice were found to be an effective legislative tool to ensure the executive accountability. It was found that, unlike questions without notice, there was less party control on members in asking questions on notice. Also, the lesser media coverage given to questions with notice enabled members to adopt a non-partisan attitude, which increased its effectiveness as evidenced by the figure that 70% of the questions in the Borbidge period and 71% of the questions in the Beattie period were able to get the desired information or action from the executive.

Questions on notice are a good way to raise electorate issues but a relatively lower number, 29% and 19% of questions in the Borbidge and the Beattie governments respectively related to member's constituency. This suggests that members in the Queensland Parliament do not perceive their primary role as representing constituency interests. The data also shows that, despite questions with notice being an effective parliamentary tool, it was hardly used by members of the ruling party. This indicates the member's preference for using party channels over parliamentary devices and other opportunities to influence the executive.

Overall, the current study, which focuses on the Queensland Parliament, concludes that questions without notice do not serve public interests as the majority of questions and answers were attacks and counter-attacks on party lines both by the ruling party as well as the Opposition. However, written questions did serve public interests as a majority of questions were able to get effective responses from the executive. In this context, the study did not find any substantial differences in the nature and effectiveness of parliamentary questions and answers in different regimes.

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