

## The House of Representatives

### Parliamentary Questions

#### Parliamentary questions: a means of political information

One of the roles of the House is to control the government. In order to be able to fulfil this task it is essential for the members of Parliament to be properly informed of the policy of the government and its ministers.

The parliamentary question is one of the means that members of Parliaments have at their disposal to collect some political information. The right to ask questions is not explicitly provided by the Constitution but it is contained in the principle of ministerial accountability to the House. The technique of the parliamentary question was introduced in 1897. It is inspired by the system used in the United Kingdom. The first parliamentary question was asked almost by accident in upper House in 1727. An independent parliamentary procedure resulted from it.

Parliamentary questions form a large source of information for members of Parliament as well as for the press and the public.

#### The parliamentary question is not an interpellation

Parliamentary questions differ fundamentally from interpellations. The question is not put to the government but to a particular minister.

The answer to a parliamentary question cannot give rise to the submission of a motion or a vote. The parliamentary question thus does not end up in the question of confidence in the government or a minister and should not in principle lead to the resignation of the minister or government.

##### Questions jointes de

- Josy Arens à Georges Gilkinet (VPM Mobilité) sur “L’adaptation des horaires de la SNCB en période de congés scolaires” (55042277C)
- Olivier Vajda à Georges Gilkinet (VPM Mobilité) sur “L’impact des congés scolaires sur l’offre de trains” (55042330C)

04.01 **Josy Arens** (Les Engagés): La SNCB aurait adapté ses horaires la semaine du 5 avril, qui n’était pas une semaine de congés scolaires pour tout le pays. Le confirmez-vous? Les voyageurs avaient-ils été prévenus? La SNCB se fonde-t-elle sur son expérience pour prendre une telle décision? Prévoit-on ce genre d’adaptations à chaque congé scolaire?

04.02 **Olivier Vajda** (Ecolo-Groen): Les calendriers scolaires entre le nord et le sud du pays n’étant plus harmonisés, la SNCB doit s’adapter. Elle aurait réduit ses trains dans l’ensemble du pays début avril alors que l’enseignement obligatoire francophone tournait à plein régime. Confirmez-vous que la SNCB a modifié ses horaires début avril? Comment a-t-elle anticipé la différence des rythmes scolaires?

Transport committee - 17/04/2024

#### The conditions that the questions must satisfy

The Standing Orders stipulate that the questions must be precise, concise and limited to the terms essential for their understanding.

The Standing Orders also stipulate that the following questions are inadmissible:

- Questions relating to a private interest or personal affair
- Questions aimed at obtaining information purely of a statistical nature
- Questions that constitute requests for documentation
- Questions whose sole purpose is to gain advice of a legal nature
- Questions whose subject is the same as a request for an interpellation or a Bill or Private Member's Bill previously submitted.

## Types of questions

### » Written questions and answers

Members ask thousands of written questions each session. From October 2023 till May 2024, 2 620 written questions were asked to the ministers of the Federal Government.

The written question is signed by its author and submitted to the President of the House who then sends it to the minister concerned through the legislative departments of the House. The minister must return his reply to the President or to the legislative departments within a period of twenty working days.

The written questions and answers are published in French and Dutch on the House's website.

We also mention the questions that the ministers did not reply on time.

### » Oral questions and answers in plenary session

The members may generally question ministers on Thursday afternoon from 14:15 (Question Time). The oral questions must be submitted to the President of the House on Thursday before 11:00. The President appreciates their admissibility. In order to keep the debate brief and lively, the speakers must draft their questions and answers without using any documents. The opposition and the majority alternately have the floor. The overall speaking time for setting out a question and a reply may not exceed five minutes. This technique was introduced in 1979, following the example of "question time" in the British Parliament. The oral questions must be of a general interest and topical nature.

536 oral questions were asked from October 2023 till May 2024.

### » The topical debate

When several questions relate to a topical subject, on the unanimous opinion of the presidents of the political groups, or on the advice of the conference of presidents, the President of the House may group these questions together to be dealt with in the form of a topical debate which is also preferably held on Thursday afternoon.

A topical debate may not give rise to the submission of motions. With the introduction of the question time and the topical debate, the House wanted to make parliamentary proceedings more accessible to the public and the press. The oral questions asked in plenary sitting together with the replies thereto, as well as the topical debates, are published in the Verbatim Report and in the Summary Report.

### » Oral questions in committees

Once a week, at the start of a committee meeting, the members of the standing and special committees are entitled to put questions to one or more ministers.

The questions must be topical and refer to current events of general interest.

The President of the House of Representatives appreciates their admissibility. If at least three questions concerning the same issue are put, the President of the committee can organize a topical debate in committee.

From October 2023 till May 2024, 2 360 oral questions were put in committees.

The questions and the replies thereto in committee are published in a verbatim report and a bilingual summary report.