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Reconstruction Bills to the private senator's bill on the labelling of palm oil.

Typically the time available for inquiries into bills is very short. Committees have responded conscientiously to the challenge of these references, and have worked hard to discharge these new responsibilities without jeopardising their commitments to more traditional subject matter inquiries.

The reform agreement also recognised criticisms long made of Question Time. Under the reforms time limits were introduced – questions were limited to 45 seconds and answers to four minutes. The Opposition Leader or a nominee is permitted to ask one supplementary

question each Question Time, and a requirement has been introduced that answers must be directly relevant. The introduction of time limits and an agreement that Question Time will not extend beyond 3.30 pm have meant that the period moves along in a more business-like manner, but it remains a most testing time for the Speaker.

Question Time remains the most high profile part of each sitting day. Despite the new rules, it is also the most frequently criticised. The Procedure Committee, a multi-party committee chaired by Julie Owens (Parramatta, NSW), has been tasked with monitoring the operation of the new arrangements. In relation

to Question Time the committee has agreed with Speaker Harry Jenkins that changes to the standing orders alone are not enough, and that cultural change is necessary to reduce the combative nature of this part of parliamentary proceedings.

The Procedure Committee will continue to monitor the new arrangements. It has already made two reports – a preliminary report on the whole suite of reforms (April 2011) and a second on the referral of bills to committees (June 2011). Each report has recommended some fine-tuning of the arrangements (see [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc)).

## Question Time

### De quorum in da House

#### Question

What is a quorum for the House of Representatives?

#### Answer

A quorum is the minimum number of members that must be present in the chamber of the House of Representatives to formally constitute a meeting of the House.

Under the rules that govern proceedings (standing orders), one-fifth of the 150 members (ie 30 MPs) are required to attend.

If a member advises the Speaker that there is fewer than 30 members in the chamber, bells are rung for four minutes to call in more members. If at the end of those four minutes 30 members are not present, the Speaker may suspend the House for a short period while more members arrive or adjourn the House until the next day.



TAKE YOUR SEATS: Lack of MPs in the House can result in a quorum call

Customarily MPs have allowed parliamentary proceedings to continue with only a few members present. This allows MPs to attend meetings and go about their work elsewhere in Parliament House while discussions continue in the chamber.

But recently the quorum call has been used more frequently as a tactic to disrupt MPs' speeches and delay parliamentary proceedings.

In about four hours on the evening of 21 June 2011, MPs drew the Speaker's attention to the lack of numbers (known as 'calling for quorum') no fewer than 12 times. The House had to stop on each occasion to wait for more MPs to enter the chamber.

Scott Buchholz (Wright, Qld) had his speech interrupted three times by quorum calls.

With the numbers finely balanced in the House, parliamentary tactics have taken on additional significance. But the tactical manoeuvres are not always welcomed.

"I would ask those who are responsible for the tactics within this chamber on both sides to reflect on today's activities," Speaker Harry Jenkins said in response to the constant quorum calls.

"When I have people who are whips for their political parties coming in to indicate to me that the tactic of calling quorums by either side would continue for weeks of parliamentary sittings, I think things have gone a bit too far." ●

### Do you have a question?

If you have a question about the House of Representatives email [news@aph.gov.au](mailto:news@aph.gov.au) or write to About the House, International and Community Relations Office, PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600. Questions published in *About the House* will receive our history pack *A House for the Nation* on the first 100 years of the House of Representatives.