

BRIEFING

PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Government accountability to parliament is central to our democratic system. To facilitate this, various kinds of parliamentary scrutiny take place in both the Commons and the Lords, on the floor as well as in committees.

2. Parliamentary questions and government statements

- Written and oral [questions](#) in both chambers put ministers on the spot about policy. Aside from scheduled questions, more ad hoc [urgent questions](#) allow sustained questioning on a topic, and their use has grown in recent years. Voluntary [government statements](#) take a similar form – and when not offered on key topics may trigger an urgent question.
- [Prime Minister's Questions](#) (PMQs) are the highest profile forum and have long been subject to criticism for their 'bearpit' and adversarial nature. They attract attention, but are unrepresentative of most forms of questioning, which can be more constructive but are lower profile. There are [regular calls to reform](#) PMQs but even they may have important 'anticipated reactions' functions.
- The [Cabinet Manual](#) states that 'the most important announcements of government policy should, in the first instance, be made to Parliament', but there have been many recent complaints about ministers flouting this rule. This again occurred particularly frequently [during](#)

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wider debates, and having an ‘anticipated reactions’ effect – through forcing ministers to consider policy carefully, because they know they may have to publicly explain it to committees later.

- In the Commons, select committee structures are routinely changed when government departments are reorganised. This can cause concerns – for example most recently when the [abolition of the International Trade Committee](#) left little opportunity for scrutiny by MPs of important international agreements (though such scrutiny remains in the Lords).

There have been some welcome changes to mechanisms for parliamentary scrutiny in relatively recent years, such as the election of House of Commons select committee members and chairs (since 2010), and introduction of evidence-taking by Commons public bill committees (in 2006).

But this briefing has mentioned various weaknesses in parliamentary scrutiny processes, and recent concerns about decline – for example through primary legislation being rushed or subject to late government amendments, and an overreliance on delegated legislation. [Recent polling](#) shows that

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