

Self Tests Units 9 and 10

Unit 9

1. How does the management and administration of parliament differ from that of a regular government department?

The development of an answer to this question might commence with a listing of the senior officials in a parliament and a comparison with those in a ministry or department.

Can we place the posts of speaker and minister against each other and compare them? A minister is a policy maker and a member of the government. How would you describe the speaker's role?

The clerk or secretary general is easier to compare with the opposite number in the executive, namely, a ministry secretary (permanent secretary) or a head of department. Both are the chief administrative officers and accounting officers in their fields of responsibility but the clerk in several Commonwealth countries is protected by the constitution from removal from office except by a motion in parliament, a protection that ministry secretaries or heads of departments do not have.

Another way of looking at the question is by beginning from the functions carried out by the officials. The speaker is of course unique but the clerk too is very different from his/her counterparts in ministries in many respects. While responsible for day to day administration and discipline of officials, the clerk's primary responsibility is related to knowledge of procedure and giving advice on it.

The clerk is also required to keep records in a way that departments would not – every word spoken has to be recorded and the greater similarity is with the law courts than with an office like a department of government.

The clerk must ensure that accounts are kept just as in any government office and those will be examined by the auditor general. As for budgeting, theoretically parliament can create any budget it likes for itself but in practice it will negotiate with the treasury as government departments do.

Parliament's relationships with the public and the media are also of a different nature. Ministries will probably deal with the media through press conferences but parliament has lobby correspondents and special correspondents who are supposed to be more familiar with parliamentary ways of work because they have to observe rules laid down by parliament regarding reporting of its work. A journalist can be called to account if they are not obeyed and to report a word or sentence that the speaker wanted expunged from the record will be treated as a very serious matter indeed.

2. List the ways in which the new technologies, as available in your country, may help MPs with their research and information needs.

There are two questions here – what are the research and information needs of MPs and what are the applicable technologies that are available?

First the needs. As participants have commented in their answers and discussion on previous Units of the module, MPs want information and research to support them in discussion of bills or motions in parliament. In today's scenarios MPs like to quote what happened not just in their country but in others, especially comparable ones, and this cannot probably be satisfied by newspapers reports which may be outdated.

They may want to ask a question from a minister and again, knowing how some matter was handled elsewhere could be of great relevance or advantage. They may want to raise an issue in a committee. They may want support in regard to a speech they are making in the house or when they go abroad on a parliamentary matter as a member of the house.

They may need data about salaries paid to MPs in other parliaments or what benefits are given to them in order that they may participate in a well-informed fashion in a debate on how MPs should be recompensed for their time. Or they may simply want to undertake some study of their own on matters relating to their work as MPs.

MPs nowadays find that their constituents have access to information from a wide variety of sources and they will want to show themselves suitably equipped with knowledge too, if only to retain their credibility and the confidence of their voters.

What are the technologies that we would consider 'new' and which would help MPs with these needs?

The answers to this will probably commence with the computer terminal - this may well be the first line of training that an MP is seeking.

From there the MP will probably move to the use of email and then to the wider use of the internet and the whole spectrum of possibilities that is opened up thereby. Nowadays almost everyone in parliament will carry their mobile phone with them and email and text messaging will also be needed.

Even if MPs master these skills for themselves, there will still be a demand for research results to be provided for them.

One matter to note is that there may be restrictions on the use of some of these technologies within the chamber and MPs' orientation programs should ensure that any such rules or restrictions are made known to them.

Unit 10

1. Would you accept that Ministers may be allowed to excuse themselves from giving evidence to parliamentary committees on the grounds that they are always open to question in parliament?

Parliamentary questions are a means of getting a minister to address a specific issue in a focussed manner – they are part of a rapid fire occasion and, subject only to any supplementary questions that the speaker may allow, the discussion then turns to another issue. The importance of parliamentary questions is enormous and cannot be gainsaid but they are very different from an examination of a minister in a committee.

A committee looks more broadly at an issue or issues and a minister who allows himself or herself to be questioned at a committee must be prepared for a longer period of examination than the parliamentary question type of approach would allow.

In some countries ministers readily present themselves at committees that have the responsibility for discussing their ministries (termed departmental or consultative or portfolio committees – the terminology varies) but are more reluctant to attend other types of committee, usually claiming that their time is limited. This reason appears more acceptable in such a situation than it would be if claimed on the grounds that parliamentary question time provides sufficient opportunity for the ministry to be disused.

The argument about lack of time must not be dismissed too lightly. In certain situations there can be considerable merit in it, for instance in small countries where a minister may have responsibility for a number of portfolios and already attends several departmental committees.

As democracies and their parliaments mature, ministers will find greater pressures on them to attend meetings of committees at which their presence is requested. In return committees must ensure that the time that ministers give is utilized to the best effect.