

Discussion and activities

1. Questions for answers

In pairs, create the question for each of the 10 answers. For example, for number 1, the question is: What is the name for the extra questions that MPs can ask during question time?

1. *Supplementary questions*
2. *Parliament debates it at length*
3. *Hansard*
4. *Confidence of the House*
5. *Auditor-General*
6. *There were no time limits*
7. *Opposition spokespersons*
8. *Committee of Supply*
9. *The Government must explain and justify its intentions*
10. *Participate in Parliament.*

2. Match the definitions with the words

1. Legislation	a. Lawmaking
2. Expenditure	b. Official record of what is said in Parliament
3. Stonewalling/ Filibustering	c. Deliberately delaying the business of Parliament
4. Accountable	d. The Government's spending plans for the next 12 months
5. Confidence of the House	e. A report of the Government's spending
6. Hansard	f. Over half of the members of Parliament support the Government's decisions
7. Question time	g. Government spending
8. Auditor-General's Report	h. Members of the main opposition party with areas of special interest that match the portfolios of Government Ministers
9. The Budget	i. Can explain its plans and actions and be responsible for them
10. Shadow Ministers	j. Time set aside for members to question Ministers about their work

Try This

Imagine that a Government decided to (and was able to) do away with one or more of these processes and procedures: debates, the Budget, question time, standing committees, general elections. How do you think this change might affect life in Fiji? How might it affect your life in the future?

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DISCOVER Parliament

How is the Government answerable for decisions it makes?

Imagine if the Government could pass laws or spend huge sums of money without having to explain why! Fortunately this cannot happen in Fiji because the Government is accountable to Parliament, and Parliament is accountable to the people. Being accountable means having to explain your actions or decisions and being responsible for what you do. In Fiji all proposed laws and spending have to be looked at and debated by Parliament before they can be approved.



Why is accountability important?

According to the Constitution an election is held every 4 years. The voters of Fiji can decide who should represent them in Parliament and whether the political parties in Government should change. People cast their votes based on how they think the Government and members of Parliament have performed in the previous four years and also on what candidates promise they will do if they are elected. In other words, they hold members of Parliament accountable for their actions and their decisions. This means that people expect MPs to know what is going on, to think things through carefully, and to ask the questions that need to be asked.



Parliamentary processes include a lot of checks and balances to make sure that the Government is also accountable, acts responsibly, and can give explanations for its plans and actions. Parliament can hold the Government to account in a number of ways.

Parliament must make sure that before the Government spends any money or passes any laws, it has the votes of over half of the members of Parliament. If it knows for certain that enough members support it, the Government is said to have "the confidence of Parliament". Without this, it cannot govern. This reflects a basic principle of democracy: "majority rule". Parliament also holds the Government to account for its policies, actions, and spending by having debates, Standing Committee inquiries, and question time.



How does Parliament keep a check on Government spending?

Parliament has a number of ways to make sure that the Government spends only the amount of money it has (its Budget) and spends it only on the things that Parliament approves.

Debating the Budget

Every year, the Government sets out its spending plans for the next 12 months in what is called the Budget. This sets how much the Government wants to spend, where it aims to get the money, and what it will spend it on. As soon as the Minister responsible for Finance has read the Budget to Parliament, Parliament debates it at length. This means that the Government must explain and give reasons for its plans. Because the Budget and the Budget debate are covered in newspapers, on television, and on websites, the public is also informed about the Government's plans.

Committee of Supply

Following the Budget debate, the Estimates for the various areas of spending, such as education and health, go to a committee of the Whole Parliament called the Committee of Supply (C.O.S). Each budgetary allocation is debated on at length and amendments proposed and voted upon before a vote on each Head of spending before the Estimates are approved by Parliament. There are no time limits in C.O.S and Parliament often sits late into the night and even early morning during C.O.S. Estimates are what the Government thinks its spending plans will cost. This means the Estimates are looked at in detail from a range of viewpoints.



Hansard reporter(circled) recording the debate in Parliament

THAT'S INTERESTING

If the Government finds it does not have the support it needs to govern, it can call an early general election and let the people decide if it should continue.

In parliaments the Opposition can sometimes use the practice of stonewalling or filibustering (speaking on and on) to disrupt the Government's business. That's why there are strict rules that limit the number and length of speeches.

Special procedures for getting more money

If the Government finds that it needs more money than was agreed in the Budget, it must put forward a special Bill to Parliament asking for the release of additional money. When this happens, Parliament must debate the Bill, which is called a **Supplementary Appropriation Bill** and accompanied by Supplementary Estimates. Members who are not part of the Government often use this time to raise other issues that they want the Government to explain.

Financial review

Following the end of each financial year, Government accounts are audited by the Auditor-General. The report of the Auditor-General must then be tabled in Parliament. It looks at how the Government used the money it was allocated and whether correct processes were followed.

In what other ways does Parliament ensure accountability?

No-one wants to wake up in the morning and find that overnight a new law has been passed that is unfair, unreasonable, or unworkable!

For this reason, a proposed new law has to go through many stages in Parliament, from the first reading stage to the President's Assent, before it becomes law. At each stage, the Government has to show why the law is needed and respond to concerns that MPs and the public may have. The Standing Committee process is very important because it allows for public submissions and expert advice to be considered in detail by a small group of MPs.

Here are five other ways that Parliament ensures the Government has to explain its actions.

Asking questions

Every day when Parliament meets, time is put aside for questions. Members of Parliament can ask Ministers questions about their portfolios (areas of responsibility). The Ministers who will answer them are given the questions in writing earlier so they have time to think about them. Each party is also allowed to ask a certain number of extra questions called supplementary questions. They can use these to find out more about one of the main questions. Ministers don't get to see supplementary questions beforehand, and sometimes these questions can be tricky. Question time is often when the Opposition will focus on things they want the Government to explain in more detail. Government members can also ask questions if the Government wants to bring attention to things it feels it is doing well.

General debates

Debates in Parliament require the Government to explain its decisions and actions. There are general debates when the Parliament is in session. These debates give members the opportunity to raise issues and have them discussed. The main opposition party has what are called "Shadow Ministers" for different areas of Government. These people have no decision-making powers in Parliament, but they are expected to learn everything there is to know about their portfolios and lead Opposition debate for their areas of responsibility.

HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED

The first general elections were held in 1972 under the 1970 constitution. The parliament had two houses- the Senate, or Upper House consisted of 22 nominated members, and the House of Representatives, or Lower House.

House of Representative Seat Allocation Under 1970 Constitution					
52 Members					
22 Fijian		22 Indian		8 General	
12 National Roll	10 Communal Roll	12 National Roll	10 Communal Roll	3 National Roll	5 Communal Roll

Cont'd

From 1992-1998 under the 1990 constitution, the senate had 34 nominated members and the House of Representative had 70 members. The House of Representatives had all communal seats- 37 Fijians, 27 Indians, 1 Rotuman, and 5 others.

From 1999-2006 under the 1997 constitution the senate had 32 members and 71 members in the House of Representative.

House of Representative Seat Allocation Under 1997 Constitution				
71 Members				
23 Fijian	19 Indian	1 Rotuman	3 General	25 Open Seats

The current Parliament has only one house, the House of Representative and has 50 members.

Inquiries

Standing Committees can hold inquiries into issues or concerns that are covered by their areas of responsibility, and then report what they find to Parliament. These types of inquiry follow the same pattern as other committee hearings – members of the public and organisations can make submissions and provide information to the committees. The recommendations are then presented to the whole Parliament.

Accurate records

Everything said in the debating chamber is accurately recorded in Hansard, the official record of debates, speeches, and questions and answers. Until some years ago, reporters carefully wrote everything down in shorthand and then typed it up. Now electronic recording equipment is used. The Hansard record is published and is available for anyone to read, including the general public. This means that anyone can know what each MP has said.

See and hear Parliament

The public can watch Parliament sitting on television. Today, people can also watch Parliament on the Internet (livestreaming). If they are in Suva they can also sit in the public gallery of Parliament and watch. It is now easier than ever to know what is going on in Parliament.