

Question Time

in Botswana National Assembly

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Introduction

The aim of this analysis is to attempt an assessment of Question Time in the Botswana National Assembly since independence. The assessment will therefore focus on the historical evolution and development of Question Time in Botswana, its nature and character, its function and role in the National Assembly, the statutory environment within which it operates etc.

But in order to place Question Time in Botswana National Assembly, it will be necessary to provide a brief historical background of the evolution and development of Question Time in Britain where the idea of Question Time first developed, and against which Question Time in Botswana could be properly situated.

Thus the first phase of this assessment will deal with a general analysis of the origins, development, character and role of Question Time in Britain.

Many people have contributed to the coming into fruition of this study but I want to express my special gratitude to the Faculty of Social Science, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia for providing computer services free of charge. I would also like to mention that this was a joint study conducted by Dr. James Polhemus, Dean of the School of Social Sciences, Deakin University and myself. The present paper is, however, the product of my own conception. Hence responsibility for any omission, and ideas expressed is mine alone.

General Analysis

A short history of Question Time in Britain

According to Fred Willye,

"Question Time is of comparatively recent origin. The first Question asked in Parliament was asked by Lord Cowper in the House of Lords in 1721....."¹

But it would appear that this practice was not introduced in the House of Commons until after the Reform Act of 1832. Thus in the House of Commons the first question was asked in 1835 when the member for Bolton asked the Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel whether the created boroughs would have corporations.² Generally speaking the practice of asking questions did not become a widespread and recognized it until well into the second half of the 19th century when it was accepted as an integral and necessary part of the Parliamentary business. Initially, the practice was restricted to asking questions concerning the business of the House or the intentions of Government in respect of legislation, although by the time of the Reformed Parliament the right of members to ask questions was already well established and recognized. But even then the asking of questions was not recognized as a procedure in its own right but rather it was seen as an exception to the general rules of parliamentary debate. Members could therefore not address the House except to debate a motion.

But this state of affairs could not persist for a long time. Thus towards the close of the 19th century, the asking of questions was fast becoming a parliamentary procedure in its own right. The remainder of the century saw the beginning of the process whereby the rules of procedure governing the form and content of questions were worked out and their place in the parliamentary proceedings was defined.

This process opened the floodgates as the use of questions became widespread and their number grew rapidly. This rapid growth of

questions was accompanied by the birth of subsidiary or supplementary questions. But the rapid growth of questions brought in its train problems for the other business of the House, for they began to take much of the time that was available in the house to the detriment of other business of the House, especially since the growth of questions was not accompanied by the extension of time and also because questions always preceded the commencement of the business of the day.

This culminated in a number of reforms designed to streamline and improve the asking of questions. The problems which arose as a result of the growth of questions led to the introduction of the Rota System.³

This then is the short history of the evolution and development of the Question Time as a parliamentary procedure in its own right.

The Role and Function Question and Question Time

Perhaps the most important feature of questions and Question Time which characterized the evolution and development of this parliamentary procedural mechanism is not the pangs and problems encountered but rather the role that it began to perform.

In the first place,

"they are very important elements in the doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility and second, they are one of the last procedural devices at the complete disposal of the back-bencher".⁴

The asking of questions by back-benchers enables a minister "on whom parliament has conserved a particular power to be asked by he has exercised it in such and such a way, how he is exercising it or whether he will exercise it in a particular case or manner".⁵

The second function of questions is that it is a weapon completely at the disposal of the back-benchers especially in an era in which

party whips have become the only mechanisms through which back-benchers can participate in the proceedings of the House. Questions, therefore remain exceptions to this development for they are not controlled by the whips nor are they front bench device which depended on the whims and caprices of front benchers.

Question Time in Botswana National Assembly

The history and Evolution of Question Time in Botswana

The history of questions and question Time in Botswana can be traced only as far back as the 1966 Standing Orders of the National Assembly of Botswana adopted by the National Assembly on the 5th October, 1966 and including amendments subsequently made. In fact, the history and notion of questions and question Time are intimately interwoven with the history of the whole system of political organisation which in turn is a product of the Westminster system of political organization. Thus the notion of questions and question Time was inherited together with the Westminster system adopted in Botswana at the inception of independence.

Procedures and Rules Governing questions and Question Time

According to the standing orders,

"Any private Member may address a question to a Minister relating to a public matter for which he is responsible, and either seeking information on such matter, or asking for official action with regard to it." ⁶

Although every member has a right to ask a question he can, however, only ask such a question if and when notice of such a question has been give. There is, however, an exception to this rule and, that is,

"If a Member asks the permission of the Speaker to ask a question for oral answer without notice on the ground that it is of an urgent character and relates to a member of public importance or to the arrangement of business,

the speaker may permit the question to be asked without notice if he is satisfied that it is of that nature, and that sufficient private notice of the question has been or is to be given by the Member to the Minister concerned to enable the question to be answered".⁷

This is the only exception, otherwise notice must be given to all questions to be answered. All notices, with the exception of the above mentioned - exception, must be handed by the Member to the Clerk of the National Assembly. When the Assembly is sitting or left at or sent to his office at least three days in advance. This is to enable the Minister responsible sufficient to prepare an answer. If a Member wants an oral answer to his question, he must indicate to that effect by an asterisk. This enables the question to be put down for a day to be appointed by the Member and this must not be a day earlier than three days after the notice has been recorded in the Order Book. An unmarked question may be put down for the next sitting day of the Assembly and the answer given is circulated with the minutes of the proceedings. All questions to be put, whether for oral written answer are numbered serially in each session and the number given to each question is shown against on the order paper. This is to avoid unnecessary repetitions of questions.

This also helps to save time for the Member only calls the number of the question for answer to his question.

They shall also not be directed to debates or answer in the current session, or proceedings in a committee before that committee has made a report to the Assembly.

Finally questions shall not refer to hearsay, statements in the press or radio or hypothetical or abstract issues.

The Utilization of Questions and Question Time Since Independence 1966-80

The main focus here will be an attempt to assess the utilization of Questions and question Time not only by MPs but also by parties.

In other words the assessment will involve the classification of the utilization of Questions and question Time according to MPs political parties, Questions dealing with an MP's constituency, National issues, international issues and self-interest.

Participation in question Time and the utilization of questions will therefore be discussed according to the above classifications. The idea is to determine clearly how frequently and widespread have questions and Question Time been used as a form of participation in decision making and law-making by MP's in Botswana and for what purpose? Which party or individual MP uses Questions and question Time more frequently? What is the attitude of MPs and parties towards question Time and Questions?

The Utilization of Questions and Question Time Since Independence by MPs

From an analysis of the data at our disposal, i.e. regarding Questions and question Time between 1966 and 1980, it is clear that the use or utilization of Questions and question Time as a form of participation by MPs in law-making is not yet a widespread practice in Botswana.

Thus for instance our data indicate that only 751 Questions were asked between 1966 and 1980, ^{a)} 134 (18%) of these were asked during the first parliament and 617 (82%) during the third parliament. SEE TABLE 1.

Comparatively speaking, however, there has been a quantitative increase in the utilization of questions and question Time as the data indicate, i.e. from 134 during the first parliament to 617 during the

TABLE 1

ADJ CUM				ADJ CUM				ADJ CUM			
Code	Freq.	%	%	Code	Freq.	%	%	Code	Freq.	%	%
1	134	18	18	3	617	82	100				

Valid Cases 751

Missins Cases 0

This shows that our sample includes 751 questions, 134 (18%) from the first Parliament and 617 (82%) from the third.

Since we do not have data on all questions asked during both parliaments, it does not mean much, then those in describing the sample.

SOURCE : HANSARD

third parliament. But in general, however, as already mentioned, there is a limited use of questions especially since Question time is a useful platform from which back-benchers, i.e. MPs are not only able to maximally air their public grievances but are also able to criticize Government policies. This is especially so for opposition parties which because of their parliamentary weakness are unable to say block Government legislation which they do not agree with.

Question Time therefore provides them with a platform from which they can assail Government policies especially since discussion on any piece of legislation before parliament is normally severely restricted, i.e. the time allotted to each MP is restricted. For those who enjoy the glare of publicity and attention of the public ear Question Time is the best platform. question Time should therefore be attractive and captivating for Opposition Members than for the Government Members but in reality however this seems to be the direct opposite in Botswana as we shall see later.

One would have expected Government Members to be more reluctant than Opposition members to ask Questions for questions asked in parliament may sometimes prove disastrous for the Government for they may be directed to issues, such as national security, which the Government considers sensitive, which may place Government in an awkward position. One would also have expected greater utilization of Question time for it also allows a Member to reassure his constituency that he is not only part of the parliamentary audience but also an active member of the political 'troupe' enacting the parliamentary show especially if he asks questions relating to his constituency.

But surprisingly enough, they are MPs from both sides of the house who have used question Time very sparingly instead of exhaustively as we shall show later. It therefore seems that Members do not seem to appreciate that Question Time is a forum where they, as elected representatives of the people, show their right to debate critically the actions of the Government for in reality Question Time and Questions are another forum of debate despite the contrary definition of Questions, for the orthodox view is that a questioner should not debate the issue or issues raised in the question but in practice, however, questions are another forum of a debate especially since the questioner can persist with his question in the forum of a supplementary question or by asking his fellow members to raise supplementary questions.

If questions are another forum of a debate, as we tried to argue it is therefore surprising that in general questions and Question Time as another forum not only for debates but also for parliamentary participation by Members do not enjoy widespread use in Botswana.

51 Questions between 1966 and 1980 is indeed a very small number considering not only the value of Questions but also the fact that this covers three parliaments and an appreciable number of sessions per each parliament and sittings per each session.¹⁰

One reason why the use of questions and Question Time is not widespread in Botswana might be that Members do not research issues and as such wait for information to be fed to them by the public.

The Individual member and Questions and Question Time in Botswana Parliament

Our aim here is to assess the use of Questions and Question Time by each individual member. In other words it is to assess the total number of questions and percentage of questions asked by each individual member and so as to determine the level of each member's participation in question Time.¹¹

Our data indicate clearly that some members rarely utilize question Time as another and very important form of participation in the national decision-making of questions by member i.e. number of questions asked by each member between 1966 and 1980. As table 2 clearly indicated only Mr. B. Gaseitsiwe and the Hon. Assistant Minister Mr. Chilume are the only two Members who have so far utilized Questions and question Time as a form of participation in decision-making and law-making processes than all other Members.

TABLE 2

	Count Row Col	% %	Own Consti- tuency Interest	National Interest	Other Consti- tuency Interest	Individual Interest	Interminate	Row Total
			1.:	2.:	3.:	4.:	5.:	
Blackbeard	2.		2 33.3 0.9 0.3	4 66.7 1.0 0.5	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	
Chibana	3.		0 0.0 0.0 0.0	18 100.0 4.5 2.4	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	18 2.4
Chilume	5.		26.1 7.9 2.4	58.0 10.0 5.3	14.5 10.1 1.3	1 1.4 8.3 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	69 9.2
Gaseitsiwe	8.		4 4.5 1.8 0.5	73.0 16.2 8.7	21.3 19.2 2.5	1 1.1 8.3 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	89 11.9
Jankie	9.		52.8 8.3 2.5	47.2 4.2 2.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	36 4.8
Kgabo	10.		14 45.2 6.1 1.9	10 32.3 2.5 1.3	3 9.7 3.0 0.4	4 12.9 33.3 0.5	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	31 4.1
Kgari	11.		1 16.7 0.4 0.1	5 83.3 1.2 0.7	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	6 6.8
Kobue	13.		9 81.8 3.9 1.2	2 18.2 0.5 0.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	11 1.5
Koma	14.		12 41.4 5.3 1.6	15 51.7 3.7 2.0	2 6.9 2.0 0.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	29 3.9
Kwerepe			7 87.5 3.1 0.9	1 12.5 0.2 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	8 1.1

Reokweng	37.	7 77.8 3.1 0.9	2 22.2 0.5 0.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	9 1.2
Ruele	38.	2 12.5 0.9 0.3	12 75.0 3.0 1.6	2 12.5 2.0 0.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	16 2.1
Sebeso	40.	9 32.1 3.9 1.2	13 46.4 3.2 1.7	6 21.4 6.1 0.8	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	28 3.7
Seboni	41.	3 16.7 1.3 0.4	13 72.2 3.2 1.7	2 11.1 2.0 0.3	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	18 2.4
Sebotho	42.	1 20.0 0.4 0.1	4 80.0 1.0 0.5	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	5 0.7
Segokgo	43.	1 100.0 0.4 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	1 0.1
Sekgwa	44.	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	1 100.0 0.2 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	1 0.1
Sikinyana	46.	10 47.6 4.4 1.3	7 33.3 1.7 0.9	4 19.0 4.0 0.5	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	21 2.8
Steinberg	47.	3 33.3 1.3 0.4	5 55.6 1.2 0.7	1 11.1 1.0 0.1	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	9 1.2
Thema	48.	11 42.3 4.8 1.5	15 57.7 3.7 2.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	26 3.5
Thobega	49.	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	3 100.0 0.7 0.4	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	3 0.4
Yane	53.	3 15.0 1.3 0.4	14 70.0 3.5 1.9	3 15.0 3.0 0.4	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	20 2.7

Between them they have asked about 158 of all the Questions between 1966 and 1990. This is certainly a remarkable achievement in the context of Botswana in which some Members have so far asked about one question between 1960 and 1980. The other active participants in the question Time are Messrs Monwela and Mpho who each asked 73 and 48 questions respectively during the same period. This means that they asked about 121 questions between them, which means about 15% of all the questions asked.

Participation in Question Time by Party Affiliation

Our interest here is to ascertain the degree of participation by parties in question Time. In other words we are attempting to classify members according to their respective party affiliations.

Our data indicate that the BDP asked about 560 (75%) of the total questions i.e. 751 questions. Opposition parties on the other hand collectively asked 191 (25%) of the total number of questions asked during the period in question. SEE TABLE 3.

This means that opposition parties, as a group, asked more questions than the BDP considering the smallness of their representation in parliament i.e. 7 seats out of 32 seats in parliament. But among the opposition BIP asked the most questions 48 (6.4%) of the questions considering that it was not represented in the first parliament as well as being represented by one Member, Mr. Mpho.

The BNF came second to the BIP in asking the most questions among the opposition parties and the BPP was the last on the step ladder.

But having said that the opposition parties asked more questions than the ruling BDP we need however, to modify this statement. This modification is necessary for in general however, the utilization of question Time by the ruling BDP and opposition parties was minimal considering, as already stated, that only 571 questions were asked during the lifespan of three parliaments and an appreciable number of sessions and sittings per parliament. Thus they, (opposition parties) have only performed well in comparison to the BDP.

TABLE 3

ADJ CUM				ADJ CUM				ADJ CUM			
Code	Freq.	%	%	Code	Freq.	%	%	Code	Freq.	%	%
BDP	560	75	75	BNF	109	15	95				
BIP	48	6	81	BPP	34	5	100				

Valid Cases 751

Missins Cases 0

Question : Asked by party

Thus, BDP members asked 560 (75%) of the total questions.

This table suggests that opposition members, especially Mpho (who was not in the first parliament), as a group use Question Time more than do the BDP members.

Our data also indicate that 94% of the questions in the first parliament were asked by BDP members and 6% by BPP. This pattern was repeated in the second parliament with minor modifications whilst in the third parliament the situation changed slightly largely due to the increase in the number of parties in parliament.

Thus in the third parliament the BDP asked 70.3% of the questions, BNF 17.7%, BID 7.8% and BPP 4.2% questions. it is obvious here that the BIP asked questions than other parties. The entry of the BNF in parliament was also responsible for increasing the number of questions asked by opposition parties.

Questions Relating to Member's Constituency

Our interest here lies in trying to determine the direction or focus of the questions asked by each Member during the period under consideration i.e. 1966-80. In otherwors we are attempting a break-

down or classification of the questions according to the focus or character of the questions. The assessment will be done in terms of questions a member asked in respect of his constituency, National interest, other constituencies, individual and international interest.

An interesting feature of the questions with regard to their character is that most of them were directed to national issues. Thus about 402 questions asked were directed to national issues which about 228 questions asked by Members related to constituencies.

Questions asked by one Member about another Member's constituency accounted for about 99 and those directed to individual interest were 12 and international issues only accounted for 10 questions. The fact that less questions were asked about constituencies than about national issues raises a number of interesting questions.

If a Member asks less questions about his constituencies, is he fulfilling his constituency mandate? But then what is the mandate of a Member? In other words, is a Member a delegate, a trustee or emissary sent to parliament by his constituency to articulate their interests and dreams? Or is he a representative who has the right, power and authority to use his discretion in parliament? These are fundamental questions for if a Member is a delegate, trustee or an emissary sent by his constituency, then he must surely put the interests of his constituency above national interests. If that is the case, is it possible to satisfy constituency interests outside the context of national interests? But if on the other hand, however, a Member is a representative of his constituency, he has no obligation to act according to the opinion of his constituency because a representative does not have to act according to majority will of his constituency. He uses his judgement when acting in parliament. It is therefore clear that Members face a dilemma when confronted with conflict of interests between national and local issues.

This dilemma may appear artificial but it is in essence a real dilemma for it raises the question that lie at the core of representing democracy i.e. whom does a Member represent? The Nation or his discretion? No attempt will be made here to answer this question for

it is beyond the scope of this analysis. Suffice it to say, however, that in our opinion, a Member should try as far as possible to pay more attention to the views of his constituency than national issues for this is what his constituency elected him for. This is especially so for Members normally if not always promise, during election time, to fight for the interests of their constituencies but once in parliament tend to forget those promises and concentrate on issues that either project their images or promote interests harmonious with theirs. Thus an MP ought to be seen as a delegate or trusted emissary than a free agent who can act according to his discretion which is normally coloured by his class interests.

Thus in our view, it is disappointing to see that in Botswana less questions were asked about Members' own constituencies than those directed towards national issues. There is no intention there, however, to advocate for parochialism on the part of members; but rather to suggest that the interests of the Member's constituency must prevail over the Member's discretion.

Another significant feature of the character of the questions is that international or foreign issues do not play any real role in question time in Botswana, at least between 1966 and 1980. This is shown by the fact that they only account for 10 questions (0.14%) of all the questions asked and more importantly perhaps, the ten questions were asked by two Members, and interesting enough each asked 5 questions.

There is no clear explanation why international or external issues enjoy only minimal interest or attention. There are two possible explanations why external or international issues do not, perhaps, enjoy a high profile among Members.

Firstly the fact that Botswana's foreign policy has always been non-controversial perhaps account for the lack of interest by Members in foreign or international affairs. But if though Botswana's foreign policy is non-controversial one would have expected a higher level of interest in international affairs by Members since the country has been very active in international affairs and its position is respected

internationally. For instance, Botswana is a founder member of SADCC, its foreign minister has been OAU chairman during one of the organisation's turbulent periods etc. In any case the creation and maintenance of department of foreign affairs involves the expenditure of the national resources, surely all these mentioned factors should make Members want to know what is going on in the Department of foreign or External Affairs and how Botswana is performing internationally and why it performs the way it performs. In addition to that the Department of External Affairs is headed by Minister with a high political profile and as such there can be no question of the obscurity of the Department.

This lack of interest in international affairs by Members is perhaps a reflection of their ignorance of external issues. Hence their concentration on local issues i.e. internal issues. If that is the case, then some of them may have to start reading on international affairs, undertake foreign trips or tours to other countries etc. in order to broaden their political horizons. This is important for the knowledge of international affairs by Members is essential since Botswana does not exist outside the orbit of international politics.

What happens internationally has a bearing on Botswana in one way or another. For instance the politics of the international Monetary Fund, World Bank, European Economic Community, etc., are intimately linked to the politics of Botswana just as they are linked with any other country especially the so called third World Countries.

But whatever the character of the reasons, the fact remains that international affairs played an almost non. existence role in question Time in Botswana between 1966 and 1980.

Breakdown of Ministry to Which Questions were Addressed

A breakdown of the distribution of questions according to ministries reveals that the Ministry of Local Government and Lands had more questions addressed to it than any other Ministry. About 147 of all questions asked were addressed to the Ministry, 97 questions to the Ministry of Education, 42 questions to the Ministry of Commerce and

Industry. Other Ministries had less than 20 questions each addressed to them.

The frequency and number of questions directed to the Ministry of Local Government and Lands reflects the significance of the Ministry. This is because the Ministry's activities concern the kernel of people's interests including MPs. These include land allocation, etc.

The fact that the Ministry, through District Councils and Town Councils is responsible, in one way or another, commercial and industrial licencing may also explain why a large number of questions addressed to the Ministry of Local Government and Lands may be the result of the nature and content of the Ministry's activities. These include among others,

"..... the leading role played by the local authorities, as direct and intermediate representatives of the populace, through the existing district development process. the local authorities for which the Ministry of Local Government and Lands has portfolio responsibility are :

District Councils
Town Councils
Land Boards
Tribal Administration and
District Administration ¹²

Footnotes

1. F. Willey, The Honourable Member Sheldon press, London, 1974, p. 91.
2. I bid., p. 91.
3. For a detailed discussion of the reforms, and streamlining of Question Time see S.A. Walkland and M. Ryle (ed.) The Commons in the Seventies, Martin Robertson, London, 1977.
4. S.A. Walkland and M. Ryle, The Commons in the Eighties, Martin Robertson, London, 1977, p. 160.

5. I bid., p. 161.
6. Standing orders p. 11.
7. I bid., p. 11.
8. I bid., p. 13.
9. This is of course allowing for some minor inaccuracies in our data. For instance we have missed some standards.
10. Unfortunately, we have not been able to categorize our data on questions according to sessions and sittings.
11. Our data is certainly not definitive since members do not appear.
12. National Development Plan 1979-85, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1980, p. 83.