

BRIEFING

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

September 2023
Meg Russell and Lisa James

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](#)

Constitution Unit Briefings

This series of briefings is produced by the Constitution Unit, a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. We conduct timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions, and work closely with other expert research organisations such as those named above. The briefings in this series form part of an ongoing project titled '[Constitutional Principles and the Health of Democracy](#)', and can be found on the project page.

Contact us: +44(0)20 7679 4977 | constitution@ucl.ac.uk

Subscribe: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/get-involved/subscribe>