

The other problem that arose was on the interpretation of our practice on oral questions. I said there is no part of our procedure about which it is more difficult to arrive at clear decisions which are not susceptible of argument one way or the other.

I have set down my views of the practice very briefly, and I should like to give them to the House at this time.

The Standing Orders (39, 40 and 41) provide only for written questions, to be answered by the tabling of written answers; or, if marked with an asterisk, to be answered orally on Wednesdays within the first hour or on other days after the last order of business. Other oral questions asked upon the calling of the Orders of the Day are sanctioned only by usage.

The following principles have been applied to oral questions:

1. The question should seek information or press for action on a matter relating to public affairs of such immediate urgency that it would be inappropriate to put it on the Order Paper.

2. Both the question and the answer should be concise, factual, and free of opinion and argument or observations which might lead to debate.

That is a rule of procedure that is rather observed in the breach on both sides.

3. Explanation can be sought regarding the intention of the Government, but not an explanation of opinion upon matters of policy. That is citation 178 of Beauchesne's fourth edition.

4. Other detailed limitations, some 40 in number, are set out in citation 171 of Beauchesne's fourth edition which was cited yesterday, and apply to oral questions as well as to written questions.

5. Supplementary questions are matters of grace.

6. The Minister is entitled to notice; an answer cannot be insisted on; nor is it regular to comment on the refusal to answer an oral question.

I may say this relates to oral questions and, perhaps, not to questions on the Order Paper.

In effect, oral questions are a limited supplement to questions which may be put on the Order Paper and are for the purpose of enabling Members to get information on public affairs of urgent importance without delay and to bring such matters to the attention of the Government.

I hope that résumé will be helpful to honourable Members. In reviewing the questions that were asked yesterday, I find that the question asked by the honourable Member for Essex East (Mr. Martin) was wrong in form because, as he put it originally, it asked the Prime Minister (Mr. Diefenbaker) to confirm a newspaper report. Then he himself made some modification of the question and the honourable Member for Trinity (Mr. Hellyer) asked a subsequent question which, in my view, was certainly a proper question for the Order Paper if he had chosen to put it on the Order Paper. It also may be a proper question to be asked orally before the Orders of the Day, depending on the point of view about urgency. I said yesterday that we had just debated that matter, namely the matter to which this question obviously related, at some length on Monday and it did not appear to me to be urgent to find out, before the Orders of the Day, whether or not a certain communication on December 2, 1957, had been received. But that view was taken on the question of urgency. As I say, that is a matter of judgment. I might take a different view today if the same question were asked today.