



Officials leave 4441 questions unanswered

EXCLUSIVE

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The Coalition is accusing Bill Shorten of “treating Australians like fools” after his department, Services Australia, failed to answer any of the 362 questions asked of it by deadline during the latest round of Senate estimates.

As of Wednesday, there were 4441 questions still to be answered by the Albanese government from the supplementary budget estimates in October, triggering claims from manager of opposition business Paul Fletcher that Labor was “ducking for cover and doing everything it can to avoid transparency and scrutiny”.

The attack was fiercely rejected by Mr Shorten, who said he had a “strong feeling” the Coalition was using ChatGPT to

draft its questions due to the volume of “frivolous” questions being asked.

Across other portfolios, there were 193 questions asked of Tanya Plibersek and Chris Bowen’s department that had gone unanswered, as well as 244 questions asked of Tony Burke, Michelle Rowland and Catherine King’s department, 84 questions asked of Mark Dreyfus’s department and 154 questions asked of Penny Wong and Don Farrell’s department with no responses.

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, whose ministers include Anthony Albanese, Katy Gallagher and Linda Burney, still had 171 questions to answer. The Department of Health and Aged Care had 327 overdue questions and the Department of Education had 229 unanswered questions.

“For the fourth time in a row, Government Services Minister

Bill Shorten has failed to return hundreds of questions on notice asked of him and his agency, Services Australia, during Senate estimates by the due date,” Mr Fletcher said.

“Mr Shorten is treating Australians like fools. Services Australia is an embattled agency and the least he can do is offer answers to questions that are in the public interest. There’s no excuse – complying with parliamentary processes and deadlines is not optional. Ignoring them undermines the community’s confidence in our institutions.”

The community affairs committee that asks Senate estimates questions of many departments, including Services Australia, ordered that answers to questions on notice be returned by December 15.

Government sources told The Australian all 362 answers had been lodged on Wednesday

morning, but it was unclear when they’d be published online.

Mr Shorten labelled Mr Fletcher a “Christmas clown” and said the government was answering his “fair dinkum” questions in real time, as he requested.

“He knows we are neck deep in natural disasters and relief for victims. Flood and storm victims in Mossman need us prioritising them over university debating games from overgrown student politicians,” the former opposition leader said.

According to data compiled by Mr Fletcher’s office, Services Australia had 165 overdue questions in the October-November estimates period in 2022, another 347 questions were overdue in the February estimates period this year and 275 questions were overdue in the June estimates period.

Labor sources accused the opposition of drowning the government in administrative work.