

Questions to the Prime Minister: A Comparative Study of PMQs from Thatcher to Cameron

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This article provides a comparative analysis of the opening sessions of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) for the last five Prime Ministers in order to test a general perception that PMQs has become increasingly a focal point for shallow political point scoring rather than serious prime ministerial scrutiny. Our data appear to confirm that PMQs has become both rowdier and increasingly dominated by the main party leaders. It also indicates that Prime Ministers are increasingly expected to be able to respond to a wider range of questions, female MPs are as likely to ask helpful questions but less likely to ask unanswerable questions than male counterparts, and MPs are less likely to ask helpful questions and more likely to ask unanswerable questions the longer their parliamentary tenure. More surprisingly perhaps, our findings also suggest that, at the beginning of their premierships at least, Thatcher and Brown appear the most accomplished in terms of the fullness of their answers, and Blair and Cameron the least accomplished.

The Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, complained in 2010 about the 'character, conduct, content and culture' of 'the shop window of the House of Commons': Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). Bercow argued that PMQs was dominated by questions from the Leader of the Opposition (LO) to the exclusion of backbench questions, that Members of Parliament treat the Prime Minister (PM) as though he or she were 'a President in sole control of the entire British Government', and that MPs 'yell and heckle in a thoroughly unbecoming manner' providing 'scrutiny by screech' (Bercow, 2010). Similarly, according to Simon Hoggart (2011): 'prime minister's questions is increasingly like an unpleasant football match, in which the game played publicly is accompanied by all sorts of secret grudge matches, settlement of scores and covert fouls

committed when the players hope the ref is not looking.' Despite some instances of praise for PMQs as a (potential) forum for serious, relevant debate and accountability (see, for example, [Sedgemore, 1980](#); [The Guardian, 2010](#)), there appears to be a general opinion among commentators, bloggers and viewers that PMQs has turned, from a relatively 'civilised' parliamentary session into something of a rowdy, mud-slinging spectacle catered more towards shallow political point scoring than serious scrutiny of prime ministerial activity.

Complaints such as these are not new, although perhaps the prominence and force of them are. [Thomas \(2006\)](#) reports the view that PMQs are a 'ritual, virtually meaningless, confrontation which contributes much more heat than light to the process of holding the PM and his government to account (and so the low point of the week rather than the reverse)' (p. 13). In the 1990s, journalist Michael White believed that 'little more enlightenment emerges from PMQs than from the average pub fight', Paddy Ashdown, then leader of the Liberal Democrats thought PMQs had 'an air of unreality, somewhere between farce and fantasy' (both cited in [Franks and Vandermark, 1995](#), p. 69), and Lord [Hurd \(1997\)](#), a senior minister in both the Thatcher and Major governments, believed 'in serious Parliamentary terms, it is a disaster' (p. 3). Complaints from before this time can also be found. Mr Speaker Weatherill was 'appalled' in 1987 to hear the noises from PMQs that were broadcast on the radio (cited in [Irwin, 1988](#), p. 82) and an earlier Speaker, Selwyn [Lloyd \(1976\)](#), believed that PMQs in the 1970–1974 Parliament, was marred by personal hostility between Edward Heath and Harold Wilson (p. 150). However, according to Tam Dalyell, a Labour MP from 1962 (the year after PMQs took on its modern format) to 2005, PMQs were 'a serious matter' until the 29 of April 1975 (2000, p. 11). It was on this date that Labour MP, John Goulding asked a question 'To ask the Prime Minister if he would state his official engagements for April 29th'. According to [Dalyell \(2000\)](#):

By asking a purely formal question, acceptable to the Table Office and the stringent rules of Parliamentary order, John Goulding had outflanked the vetting system on questions to the Prime Minister and gained the opportunity to put a supplementary question on almost any aspect of policy which might be on his mind.

The genie was out of the bottle. Pandora's Box was opened. From now on MPs could ask the Prime Minister about virtually anything under the political sun (p. 12).

The results of this, according to Dalyell, were that there was the expectation that PMs would be able to answer any question and that, consequently, PMs enquired into the affairs of Ministerial Departments to a much greater degree

than previously, and the PM's office became a much larger and more powerful entity (2000, p. 12).¹

The modern format of PMQs was adopted in 1961. Before this, the process surrounding questioning the PM had often developed in a piecemeal manner. As Jones states:

Before the 1880s questions to the Prime Minister were treated no differently from questions to other ministers. They were asked, without notice, on any day when ministers were present to answer, normally Monday, Tuesday, Thursdays and Fridays, and in whatever order members rose to ask them (1973, p. 260).

From the 1880s onwards, a number of reforms were introduced, often in response to local circumstance, which led up to the modern format in 1961 and which came to standardise and institutionalise questions to the PM. In 1881, questions to the PM were placed last on the list so that Gladstone, then aged 72, could come to the House late (Jones, 1973, p. 260). This reform meant that, despite lengthening the time allocated to questions, it was rare for questions to the PM to be reached. This meant that, from 1904 to 1953, questions to the PM began no later than question number 45 (Jones, 1973; Coe and Kelly, 2009). In 1953, PMQs was limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays, due to the ailing health of Winston Churchill. As Jones (1973) Notes, 'what was accepted as a mark of respect to [Churchill] became a convention continued by Sir Anthony Eden and Mr Macmillan' (p. 261). A Select Committee on Procedure report in 1959 recommended that 'Prime Minister's questions should be answered at 3.15 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the hope that more [MPs] would receive oral answers' (Wiseman, 1958, p. 252). Instead of adopting these recommendations, other minor reforms, proposed by R.A. Butler, were introduced to try and increase the number of questions to the PM but with little success. Thus, in the end, the Committee's recommendations were adopted on a trial basis in July 1961 and made permanent in October 1961 with the Speaker of the House stating:

I am told that this arrangement has worked for the general convenience of the House and that in these circumstances the Prime Minister is willing that it should be continued. I am also told that it has been further agreed that it would be reasonable to implement the rest of

¹Although, as Irwin *et al.* note (1993, p. 55), it was from this point that engagement questions became a regular feature of PMQs, Dalyell is incorrect to believe that this was the first use of the open, non-transferable question. Open, non-transferable questions had been posed since the 1963–1964 session and, in 1972, the Select Committee on Parliamentary Questions had considered the use of 'meaningless' open questions (see Irwin *et al.* 1993, pp. 54–56).

the relevant recommendation of the Select Committee on Procedure, namely, that Questions to the Prime Minister should be limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays. I therefore propose that we should continue the arrangement with this limitation (cited in [Coe and Kelly 2009](#), p. 4).²

Yet, despite both the centrality of PMQs as a parliamentary institution and the prominence of debates surrounding it, most comment is anecdotal and there is little academic literature concerning, or relevant to, this parliamentary institution. [Dunleavy et al. \(1990, 1993\)](#) did undertake long-run quantitative analyses of prime ministerial activity in the House of Commons which shows the long-term trends concerning prime ministerial activity and that, mainly because of PMQs, answering questions has become more than four times as common as other modes of parliamentary intervention. However, this research tells us little, if anything, about the nature of the answers given and, indeed, the questions posed. [Giddings and Irwin \(2005\)](#) also tended to focus on issues of quantity, rather than quality. They compared the number of questions on Commons Order Papers during a week in 1964 and 2004 and found that, for PMQs, the number of questions receiving an oral answer in 2004 was less than half that in 1964, and that, whereas in 1964 it was a time for backbenchers, PMQs in 2004 was dominated by party leaders and was ‘a significant part of the battle between the two main parties’ (2005, p. 73). Although Giddings and Irwin do refer to the introduction and increasing use of ‘syndication’,³ there is again little analysis of the content of questions and answers. Similarly, in their study of the evolving rules of parliamentary questions, Irwin *et al.* undertake a comparison of the number of questions tabled for PMQs in 1982 and 1989 and found a sharp increase in the number of oral questions tabled but a sharp decrease in the percentage of these which were substantive, rather than open questions (1993, pp. 57–58). This finding was supported by evidence provided to the Procedure Committee in 1989–1990 that showed that the average number of questions on the Order Paper to the PM had moved from 16.5 in 1971 to ~200 in 1988–1989 (cited in [Borthwick, 1993](#), p. 87). Moreover, in research that does analyse the type of questions posed and/or the quality of the answer provided, there is little or no comparison over time to ascertain any longer term trends. For

²For fuller overviews of the development of PMQs, see [Wiseman \(1958, 1959\)](#), [Jones \(1973\)](#), [Franklin and Norton \(1993\)](#), [Borthwick \(1979\)](#) and [Coe and Kelly \(2009\)](#). For an historical overview of the role of questions and Question Times in Parliament, see [Howarth \(1956\)](#), and [Chester and Bowring \(1962\)](#).

³Syndication is a practice whereby parties on all sides of the House hand out suggested questions and supplementary questions to their backbenchers. According to Norton, this practice began in the 1970s and burgeoned in the 1980s (1993, p. 15).

example, both Harris (2001) and Bull and Wells (2012) concentrate on a limited time period in their research on detailed linguistic analysis of questions and responses in PMQs. Harris (2001) analyses 12 sessions of PMQs between March and November 2000 in her work on extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse, while Bull and Wells (2012) analyse 18 sessions of PMQs (9 with Blair and 9 with Brown) in their article on the way in which adversarial discourse is performed within the constraints imposed by parliamentary rules concerning behaviour and language. In his speech to the Centre for Parliamentary Studies (2010), John Bercow drew attention to a survey of all PMQs posed in 2009 that 'concluded that the Prime Minister had answered only 56 per cent of all questions asked of him' but 'that only 56 per cent of the questions asked of him were actually genuine questions in the first place'. Although interesting, this survey tells us nothing of whether 2009 was part of a longer term trend, a temporary blip, or a radical change in the nature of PMQs. Similarly, in their study of John Major's parliamentary activity, Burnham *et al.* (1995) argue that the quality of parliamentary accounting declined during his premiership because, while Major started PMQs answering MPs seriously and politely, this was quickly set aside and a different, more combative, discursive and sometimes insulting style adopted. While Burnham *et al.* show this trend clearly, aside from some comparisons between Major and Thatcher, there is no systematic analysis of Major's style of answering questions compared with other PMs.

This article attempts to both broaden and deepen existing research on PMQs and start to fill in some of the gaps that exist. As such, it provides a comparative analysis of both the questions posed by backbenchers and Leaders of the Opposition and the answers provided in the (equivalent of the) first 10 sessions of PMQs for each of the last five PMs. This then allows comparisons to be made both across time as to the changing nature of PMQs and between aspects of the performance of different PMs at the same time in their premierships. In this way, the article, although a substantive piece of research in its own right, can also act as an exploratory piece of research which can inform or act as a basis for more in-depth investigations into this parliamentary institution and the performances of PMs throughout different stages of their premiership and the electoral cycle. As such, we hope that the article can contribute in an informed way to the current debate on PMQs that is taking place within and outwith Parliament. The article is structured in three main sections. We first outline our methodology before going on to present and discuss our findings in the second and third sections, respectively.

1. Methodology

The start of each premiership was chosen so that a comparison could be made of the questions asked and the answers given at PMQs at the same stage of each PM's premiership.⁴ Under the premierships of Thatcher and Major, PMQs were twice weekly affairs with each session lasting 15 minutes; since the changes introduced at the beginning of Blair's premiership, PMQs has switched to a weekly, 30-minute format. When carrying out the research, two 15-minute sessions were equated with one 30-minute session. Thus, overall, the first 20 sessions for both Thatcher and Major and the first 10 sessions for Blair, Brown and Cameron were analysed.⁵ Although the introduction of a new format to PMQs proved to be somewhat controversial among MPs, especially Conservative ones [see, for example, Alan Clark (Hansard, HC Deb, 11-6-97, vol.295, col. 1140)], we felt justified in structuring our analysis in this way simply because the changes introduced did not affect the length of time dedicated to PMQs each week. These five PMs were chosen for two reasons. First, as alluded to earlier, it was only after James Callaghan had become PM that the open, non-transferable question became the norm (see also Norton, 1996). Second, as Dunleavy *et al.* state, it was from the mid-1970s onwards that PMQs became the absolutely dominant form of prime ministerial activity in Parliament (1990, p. 123) and, indeed, from 1978 and the introduction of sound broadcasting, the highest profile parliamentary event bar none (Riddell, 1998, pp. 166–167).⁶ As such, an analysis of the first 10 weeks of PMQs for the last 5 PMs allow comparisons to be made across what is, with the exception of the number of sessions per week, a relatively stable institution in terms of both its rules and procedures⁷ and its central scrutinising position in both the public⁸ and the parliamentary mind.

With regard to the substantive analysis of PMQs sessions, transcripts were sourced from the online Hansard database and fed into the qualitative data

⁴Although not, of course, at the same stage of the electoral cycle, as Major and Brown became PM part way through a Parliament.

⁵Sessions of PMQs led by anyone other than the Prime Minister were not included in the analysis. Thus, the twenty 15-minute sessions or ten 30-minute sessions analysed here does not correspond necessarily to the first 20 or 10 sessions after someone became PM.

⁶For example, the viewing figures for the PMQs edition of the Daily Politics show is usually over a third higher than for the average show (Total Politics, 2010).

⁷Some minor changes have taken place since 1979. These include, in 1997, only asking supplementary questions for open questions that have already been posed in that session of PMQs and, in 2002, a reduction in the amount of notice required of an MP when posing a question to three sitting days (Coe and Kelly 2009). See Rogers and Walters (2006) for an overview of how PMQs proceeds currently.

⁸PMQs now even has its own computer game. See <http://pixelpolitics.tumblr.com/post/8047717858/pixel-politics-is-back>.

analysis software programme, Nvivo, for coding. Although Hansard is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings, it was chosen instead of producing transcripts of audio proceedings due to ease of access. Questioners were divided into three groups of parliamentary actors: the LO, opposition backbenchers and government backbenchers. The questions from each of these three groups were coded into three categories, and the answers given by the PM were coded into five categories.

Turning to the answers first, the three main categories employed are ‘full reply’, ‘non-reply’, ‘intermediate reply’. These categories of answers derive in a modified form from Peter Bull’s analysis of political interviews and the identification of different types of questions posed and answers provided (Bull, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2009, Bull and Mayer, 1993). Bull argues that answers should be viewed in terms of a continuum with full and complete responses at one end and complete failures to reply at the other (1994, p. 115). As such, it is too simplistic to use dichotomous categories of ‘replies’ and ‘non-replies’⁹ and a third superordinate category of ‘intermediate replies’ must be introduced (Bull, 1994, p. 127). This intermediate category is itself too broad to capture the nature of particular answers given at PMQs. Thus, taking our cue from the work of Bull (1994), the ‘intermediate reply’ category was subdivided into three sub-categories: ‘partial reply’, ‘deferred reply’ and ‘referred reply’ (see Table 1 for definitions and examples of the different (sub-) categories of answers). Bull (1994) identifies five sub-categories of intermediate replies offered by politicians in political interviews: incomplete answers: partial; incomplete answers: fractional; incomplete answers: half; answers by implication and interrupted. The sub-categories were not suitable for this analysis due to the difference in form between PMQs and media interviews and the different permissible answers in these fora (for example, PMs are almost always allowed to finish their answer—only the Speaker may cut them short—and, thus, interrupted replies is not a suitable category when analysing PMQs). Furthermore, we included what Bull labels ‘answers by implication’—whereby a politician’s views are clear although not stated explicitly—as a ‘full’, rather than an ‘intermediate reply’ if the answer could reasonably be supposed to satisfy the questioner because of the nature of parliamentary language.

Although the structure of questions at PMQs does follow the basic pattern of wh-, polar and disjunctive questions (see Bull, 1994), the literature on identifying different kinds of questions in political interviews was not directly relevant for this research due to the different ‘rules’ guiding interviews and PMQs (regarding partisanship, objectivity, accountability, representation,

⁹Bull and Mayer (1993) coined and used the term ‘non-reply’, rather than ‘evasion’, as it is not satisfactory to label answers to ill-informed or unreasonable questions (what we label ‘unanswerable questions’) as evasions.

Table 1 Categories of answers

Category	Definition	Example
Full reply	An answer in which requested information is provided, and/or the PM's views are made clear on the issue in hand	Mr Robertson (Glasgow North West) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware of members of his own party using parliamentary rules to try to undermine the national minimum wage. Can he, here and now, dedicate himself to maintaining the national minimum wage, not only ensuring its support, but ensuring that it increases in line with inflation in the years to come? The Prime Minister [David Cameron]: I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. We support the national minimum wage, we support its regular updating and that is one of the many good things set out in our coalition agreement (HC Deb 14-7-10, vol. 513, col. 948).
Non-reply	An answer in which the specific question is evaded, and/or a completely different question is answered, and/or the requested information is not provided, and/or the PM's views on the topic in hand are withheld	Mr Bidwell (Southall) (Lab): will the right hon. Lady concede that she might have been badly advised about the contemplated changes in the immigration rules, and that if she goes ahead with them after the recess she may be brought before the European Court of Human Rights on the matter of women and families? The Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher]: those changes in the immigration rules were set out in detail in the manifesto. We intend to bring them in after we return from the recess (HC Deb 24-7-79, vol. 971, col. 341-6).
Intermediate reply: partial	An answer in which the requested information is incomplete, and/or the PM responds on his/her own terms, and/or the PM responds to a closely related issue, and/or the PM's views on the topic in hand are ambivalent	Mr Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): do the government intend to limit the amount of time that British fishermen can spend at sea to meet cuts in European quotas, as suggested by the Fisheries Minister? The Prime Minister [Tony Blair]: against a background of negotiations that were not well handled by the

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Category	Definition	Example
Intermediate reply: deferred	An answer in which it is claimed that a full reply in terms of information and/or views can only be given at some point in the future	<p>previous administration, we are trying to secure the best deal for our fishermen on quota hopping and on other issues so that we can put in place a long-term framework to guarantee their future and offer some stability (HC Deb 21-5-97, vol. 294, col. 702-9).</p> <p>Dr. Tonge (Richmond Park) (Lib Dem): in view of recent press reports, which quote government sources, about the inevitability of a fifth terminal at Heathrow airport and in view of the on-going public inquiry, which is costing many millions of pounds, will the Prime Minister tell us the government's position regarding a fifth terminal?</p> <p>The Prime Minister [Tony Blair]: the position is that we have always said that we will await the outcome of the inquiry—[Interruption.] That is not just our position; it was also the position adopted by the previous government. It is really the only sensible thing to do. If an inquiry is established to determine whether planning consent should be given, it is only sensible that one should await the outcome of that inquiry before making a decision. That is not extraordinary; it is plain common sense (HC Deb 25-6-97, vol. 296, col. 843-6).</p>
Intermediate reply: referred	An answer which is referred to the relevant minister	<p>Mr George (Walsall South) (Lab): will the Prime Minister have time to meet the chairman of the Tote to discuss with him the accusation that bets have been placed by a subsidiary of the Tote after the result of a race has been known, whether there is a secret laundering system for these late bets and how many punters have been swindled out of their rightful winnings? Will she arrange for a public inquiry to be</p>

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Category	Definition	Example
		held into the allegations of malpractice at the Tote? The Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher]: I am not very expert at betting. May I therefore pass the buck to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who may know a little more about it? (HC Deb 17-7-79, vol. 970, col. 1295-9.)

etc.). Therefore, after an initial analysis of the first set of PMQs (Thatcher), three broad categories of questions were identified and adopted: 'straight'; 'unanswerable'¹⁰; and 'helpful' (see Table 2 for definitions and examples of the different categories of questions). The questions for all five sets of PMQs were then coded using these categories, as well as the topic (e.g. defence, the economy, education, etc.) of the question. Furthermore, the gender and length of tenure of the questioner were also recorded.

Given the spectral nature of both questions asked and answers provided, an issue that we were forced to consider before coding took place was the subjective nature of the analysis and the possibility of different people placing the same question or answer in different categories (i.e. one person's standard question may be another person's helpful question). To ensure uniformity of analysis as far as possible, the research proceeded as follows: (1) an analysis of the same session of PMQs was undertaken by all four authors once the different categories had been identified; (2) moderation took place to further determine the boundaries between different categories; (3) the same person coded all sessions of PMQs and (4) the other authors carried out an audit of the coded data.

2. Findings

2.1 *Number of questions, conduct of the House and amount of speaking time*

As can be seen in Figure 1, there has been a significant decrease in the number of questions asked at PMQs over the years. The average number of questions per

¹⁰For more on why some questions are unanswerable and on the equivocal responses they provoke, see Bavelas *et al.* (1990), Bull *et al.* (1996) and Bull (2008).

Table 2 Categories of questions

Category	Definition	Example
Standard question	A question which is straightforward to answer	Mr Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): can the Prime Minister confirm that he will retain the winter fuel allowance without any changes to the criteria? (HC Deb 13-10-10, vol. 516, col. 326)
Unanswerable question	A question which either appears to be designed deliberately to provoke discomfort and/or evasion, or contains and/or is premised on incorrect information	<i>Mr Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab)</i> : Is the Prime Minister aware that, once he has had the guts to go to the country, for the first time in his political life he will be sitting on the Opposition Benches? I have been keeping this seat warm for him. After the election, at least half a dozen Tory ex-Ministers will put the knife into him, because they want his job. Then he will have the galling experience of having to vote for one of those Tory bastards. Which one will it be? (HC Deb 13-2-97, vol. 290, col. 460-4)
Helpful question	A question which acts as a prompt to allow the PM to set out the government position/policy and/or attack the opposition ^a	Ms. Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): in south Acton, the Acton Community Forum is piloting an extremely good scheme called 'Generations Together', which is all about encouraging each generation to pass on its own skill sets to each other; basically, it is about getting the community to help itself. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an excellent example of what the big society is all about? (HC Deb 14-7-10, vol. 513, col. 948)

^aThese questions are, in the main, asked by government backbenchers and many can be considered to be syndicated. However, after particular noteworthy events (e.g. terrorist attacks, natural disasters, etc.), the Leader of the Opposition and opposition backbenchers may ask helpful questions in order to allow the PM to update the House and set out the government's response. As such, helpful questions should not be seen necessarily as planted and/or sycophantic.

session shows a sharp decline between the Thatcher, Major and Blair years. While there was an average of 35.7 questions during each of Thatcher's first ten PMQs sessions, the equivalent number for Blair was 25.9, a decrease of 27.5%. Since

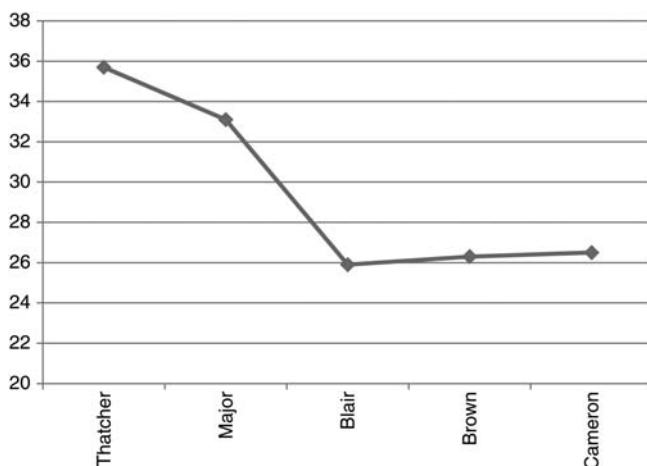


Figure 1 The average number of questions per session.

Blair, there has been a slight upward trend with Brown and Cameron responding on average 26.3 and 26.5 questions per session, respectively.¹¹

This decrease in the number of questions correlates strongly with increases in the rowdiness of MPs ($r = -0.517$, $P < 0.01$) and the time allocated to the PM and LO ($r = -0.896$, $P < 0.01$), and less strongly, though still statistically significant, with the number of questions posed by the LO ($r = -0.342$, $P < 0.05$).

Turning to the conduct of MPs during PMQs, a key indicator—the average number of interruptions per session recorded in *Hansard*—has increased significantly between Thatcher’s first ten sessions and Cameron’s (see Figure 2).

The data also show that another indicator of conduct—the average number of times the Speaker calls the House to order per session—also has an upwards trajectory. However, this is a less satisfactory measure of conduct, as the personality

¹¹It has been reported that John Smith made it normal practice for the Leader of the Opposition to ask all his/her allotted questions (Bercow, 2010), although, when LO, Neil Kinnock increased the number of questions he asked at PMQs in a conscious attempt to raise his media profile (Total Politics, 2010). Thus, additional analysis of Major’s premiership was carried out to see what impact, if any, the election of John Smith as leader of the Labour Party and the institutionalisation of this practice made to the total number of questions asked. This analysis focused on the 20 15-minute sessions of PMQs that followed on from John Smith’s and Tony Blair’s election as Labour Party Leader and preceded John Smith’s death and the 2007 General Election. The results indicate that there was a sharp decline in the average number of questions posed between the first 20 sessions of John Major’s premiership and the first 20 sessions after John Smith became LO and that there has been a relative plateau since then (see Appendix). These findings do suggest that the institutionalisation of the practice of the LO using all his allotted questions does mark a significant moment in the long-term decline in the number of questions posed at PMQs.

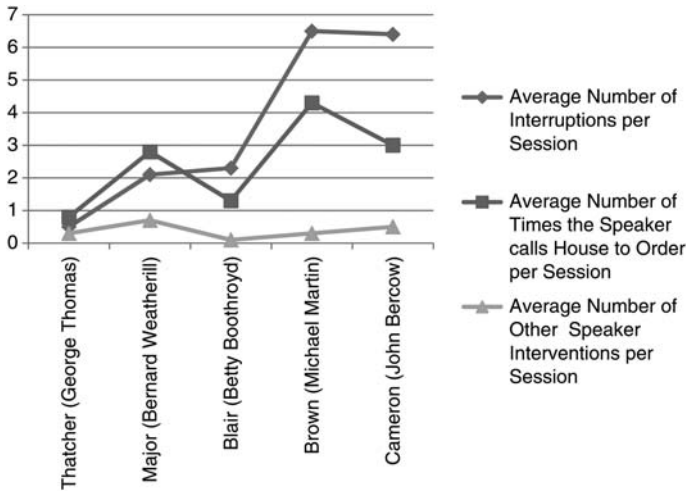


Figure 2 The indicators of conduct during PMQs (Speaker in brackets).

and style of the Speaker will influence the number of times s/he calls the House to order, whereas the way Hansard records Parliament remains more stable. For example, while the number of interruptions was higher in Blair’s first sessions than in Major’s, the number of times Betty Boothroyd called the House to order was lower than when Bernard Weatherill was Speaker. Taken together though, these two indicators of conduct appear to lend evidential support to the notion that there has been an increase in the rambunctiousness of PMQs over the years.

With regard to the time taken up during PMQs by different parliamentary actors, two trends are noticeable (see Figure 3).¹² First, the amount of time the PM and the LO speak have both increased, particularly since Blair in the case of PMs and Brown in the case of LOs. In 1979, Thatcher accounted for almost 45% of the words uttered by the PM in a typical PMQs session; in 2010, Cameron accounted for 60% of words uttered. In 1979, the LO accounted for 4.1% of the total number of words spoken in an average PMQs session; in 2010, that figure had almost tripled to 11.5%. Second, the amount of time allotted to government and opposition backbenchers has decreased. Opposition backbench questions to Brown and Cameron accounted for 14% and 16% of words,

¹²In order to compare length of questions and answers, we followed Burnham *et al.* (1995) in adding up the lines of print in Hansard for each type of speaker (PM, LO, Government Backbencher and Opposition Backbencher). This approach is not ideal, as it does not take into account talking speed, length of interruptions, etc. but without recourse to audio recordings of PMQs it does allow for approximate comparisons of the time allocated to different groups within PMQs over time.

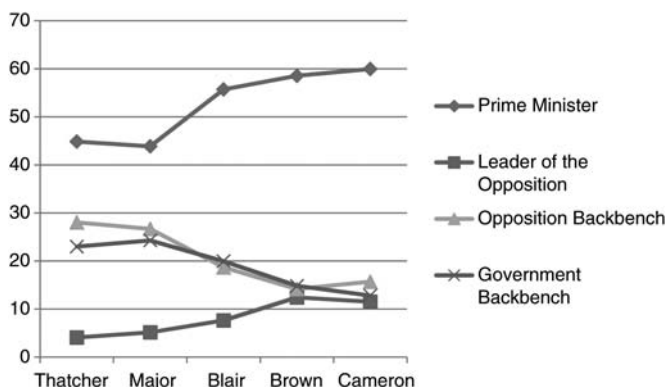


Figure 3 The time taken up during PMQs by different sections of parliament (as indicated by the percentage of total lines in Hansard).

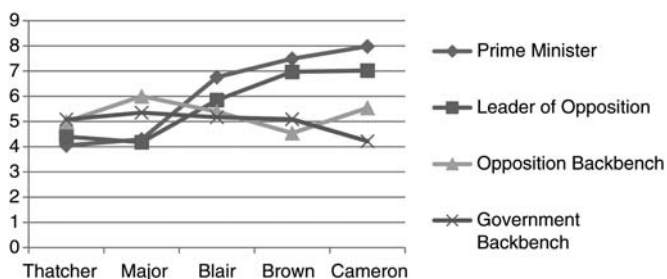


Figure 4 The average number of lines per question/answer.

respectively, compared with 28% in Thatcher’s first ten sessions. Government backbench questions to Cameron accounted for 13%, compared with 23% and a high of 24% in the Thatcher and Major eras, respectively.

Similar trends can be seen in the number of questions asked by different parliamentary actors: the number of questions posed by the LO has increased over time, while the number of questions posed by the opposition and government backbenches has decreased. However, these trends do not mirror exactly the trends seen in the amount of time spent speaking by the different parliamentary actors. As can be seen in Figure 4, while the average lengths of backbench questions have remained relatively constant, the average lengths of LO questions and PM responses have both increased significantly. Indeed, the average length of response has almost doubled between the beginning of Thatcher’s and Cameron’s premierships. Furthermore, the position under Thatcher and Major in which the average LO question and PM response was shorter than the average backbench question has been reversed under Blair, Brown and Cameron. Thus, the

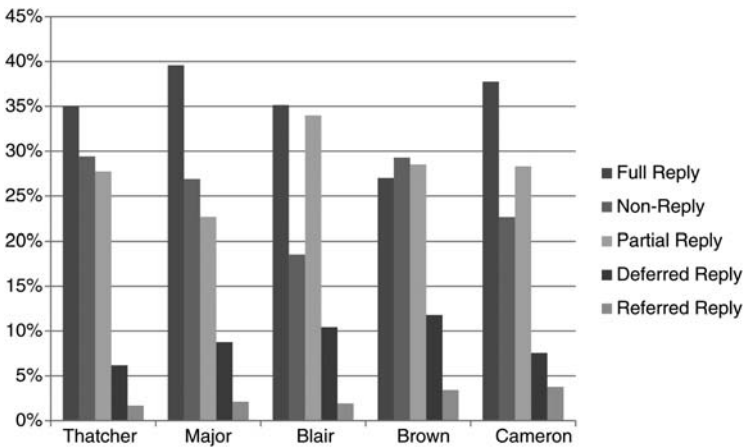


Figure 5 Types of answer.

LO is tending to ask not only longer questions but also more of them, and the PM, while responding to fewer questions, is providing much longer responses. The overall effect of this growing dominance of PMQs by the PM and, particularly, the increased centrality of the contest between the PM and LO appears to be the marginalisation of backbenchers on all sides of the House.

2.2 Types of questions and answers

As can be seen in Figure 5, Brown gave the lowest percentage of full replies and, along with Thatcher, the highest percentage of non-replies, Major gave the highest percentage of full replies followed by Cameron and Blair the lowest percentage of non-replies again followed by Cameron. Figure 6 shows an indication of the average fullness of answer for each PM.¹³ These figures suggest that, on average, Blair gave the best quality answers in terms of the fullness of reply, while Thatcher and Brown (with almost identical average scores) gave the lowest quality answers.

However, this does not take the difficulty of question into consideration. Thus, while a good indicator of which PM gave, on average, the fullest answers, it

¹³The ‘average answer’ was calculated by weighting each answer category in terms of its quality. Thus, each answer was given a weighting relating to its ‘fullness’ (Full reply, deferred reply, referred reply—weighting of 3; partial reply—weighting of 2; non-reply—weighting of 1). Average scores were worked out by gaining the sum of each answer category multiplied by its weighting code. The sum of the resulting numbers were then divided by the number of questions to derive an (indication of) an ‘average answer’. Hypothetically, a Prime Minister who gave full replies 100% of the time would get an average score of ‘3.00’—the highest possible. Vice versa, a Prime Minister who gave 100% non-replies would get an average score of ‘1.00’—the lowest possible.

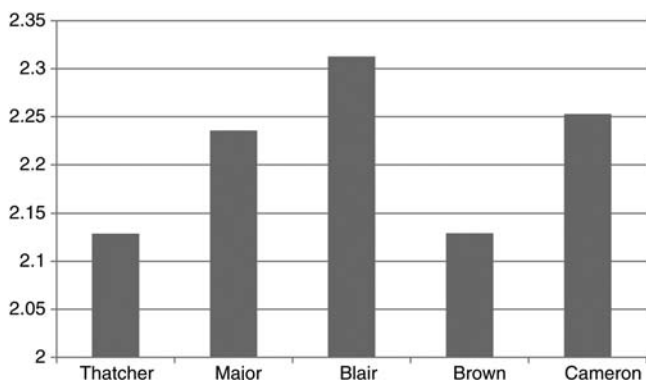


Figure 6 The average fullness of answer.

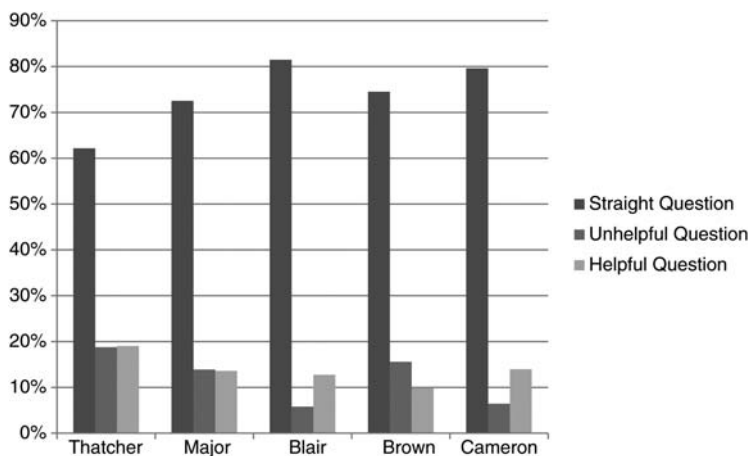


Figure 7 Types of question posed.

disregards that some PMs may receive questions that are more challenging. Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 7, the types of questions posed by parliamentary actors differ markedly between PMs. In this respect, Thatcher stands out, as she was asked the lowest percentage of straight questions (62%) and the highest percentage of both unanswerable¹⁴ and helpful questions (19% in both cases). The overall pattern of types of questions posed to Blair and Cameron is broadly comparable. Blair and Cameron were asked the largest proportion of straight questions overall (81 and 80%, respectively) and helpful questions over twice as often as unanswerable questions (13% compared with 6%, and 14% compared

¹⁴She was also the only PM to be asked an unanswerable question by one of her own backbenchers.

with 6%, respectively).¹⁵ Major is similar to Thatcher in that he was as likely to be asked a helpful as an unanswerable question, although he was asked a higher percentage of straight questions. Brown stands out as the only PM to be asked a higher percentage of unanswerable questions (16%) than helpful ones (10%). Thus, as Figure 8 shows, Brown was asked, on average, the most difficult questions, followed by Major, Thatcher, Blair and Cameron.¹⁶

While these averages for each PM show a fairly strong correlation ($r = 0.285$), albeit one which is not statistically significant given the small sample size, between the difficulty of the question and the fullness of the answer (see Figure 9), they do not provide in themselves an indication of (one type of) prime ministerial quality at PMQs: being held accountable by providing information and explaining the government's position. One way in which this can be shown is by subtracting each PM's average question score from their average answer score.¹⁷ As shown in Figure 10,¹⁸ these scores indicate that, at the beginning of their premierships, when the quality of answer in terms of its fullness is taken into account for any given question, Thatcher and Brown appear the most accomplished at PMQs. Blair and Cameron appear the least accomplished in this respect.¹⁹

2.3 Questions by topic

Questions posed at PMQs are a reflection of both the broader socio-economic and geopolitical context and the priorities of both government and opposition. For example, coinciding with the first Gulf War, Major's first ten sessions of PMQs were dominated by defence questions (see Figure 11) and a fifth of

¹⁵A breakdown of the questions posed by Coalition Government Backbench shows that Liberal Democrat MPs asked straight questions exclusively. Conservative MPs asked helpful questions 41% of the time and straight questions 59% of the time, comparable to the types of questions posed by government backbenchers to Thatcher.

¹⁶The 'average question' posed to each Prime Minister was calculated in a similar manner to the 'average answer'. Each question was given a weighting relating to its 'difficulty' (unanswerable question—weighting of 3; straight question—weighting of 2; helpful question—weighting of 1).

¹⁷Based on this model, a hypothetical Prime Minister with 'perfect average' ability at PMQs would score zero. Thus, a positive score indicates that the quality of answers exceeds the difficulty of the questions and a negative score indicates that the quality of answers were lower than the difficulty of questions.

¹⁸Scores were multiplied by 100 to make them easier to read.

¹⁹In this model, deferred and referred replies were given a weighting of 3, as they were deemed to be complete and appropriate responses in the context of PMQs. If given a weighting of 2 and treated as comparable with partial replies, the overall ranking of prime ministerial quality differs little with the exception that the positions of Brown and Thatcher are reversed and Brown receives a positive rating.

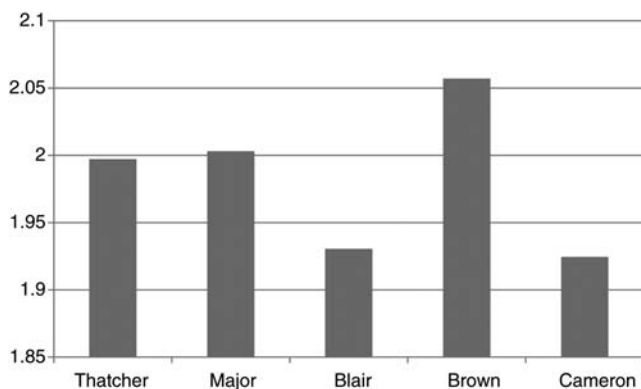


Figure 8 An average difficulty of question.

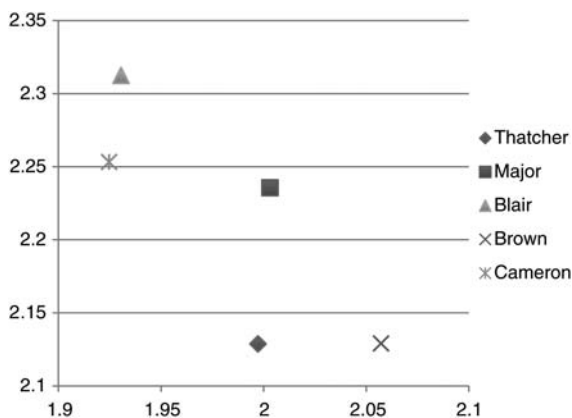


Figure 9 The difficulty of question by fullness of answer.

questions posed to Thatcher concerned industrial relations. Similarly, whereas the economy is a comparatively low priority under both Blair and Brown when the economy was performing relatively well and there was comparatively little disagreement between the two main parties, it is the topic of roughly a fifth of questions under Thatcher, Major and Cameron when the country was in or recovering from recession and/or ideological differences about the role of the state in the economy were more pronounced.

Perhaps more interestingly, the data also show that the spread of the number of questions for each topic is more uneven for Thatcher and Major (with a standard deviation of 22.3 and 26.1, respectively), than for Blair, Brown and Cameron (with standard deviations of 11.1, 13.6 and 14.0, respectively). This may support Tom Dalyell's point that, in addition to context, events and political priorities

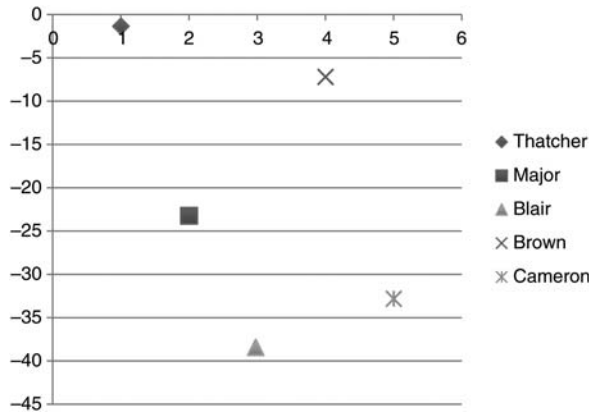


Figure 10 The indicator of prime ministerial quality at PMQs in terms of fullness of answer for any given question.

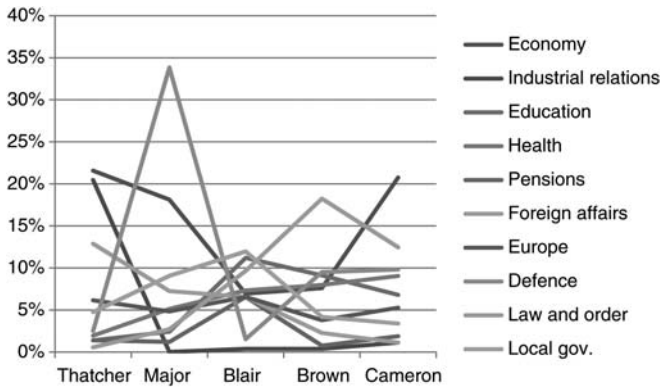


Figure 11 Questions by topic (selection).

affecting the topics of questions posed, there is an expectation (on behalf of all parliamentary actors including the PM) that the PM can answer questions and be held to account on a broader range of topics than previously.

2.4 Gender and tenure

As can be seen in Figure 12, although female MPs were almost as likely as male MPs to ask helpful questions while their party was in government, they were less than half as likely to ask unanswerable questions while in opposition. Further, as Figure 13 indicates, the longer the tenure of an MP, the less likely s/he is to ask a helpful question and the more likely to ask an unanswerable question.

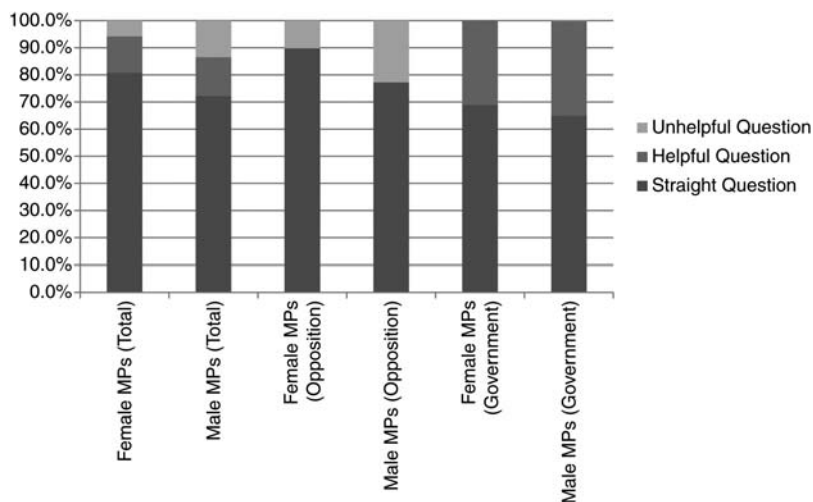


Figure 12 Types of question by gender.

3. Discussion

A Procedure Committee report in 1995 noted that PMQs no longer served its original purpose and had instead ‘developed from being a procedure for the legislature to hold the executive to account into a partisan joust between the noisier supporters of the main political parties’ (quoted in [Bercow, 2010](#)). In light of this, the Procedure Committee in 1995 set out a number of recommendations for reform, including having short question and answer sessions on substantive topics and extending PMQs to two sessions of 30 min each to accommodate more backbench questions. These recommendations were largely ignored. Indeed, rather than extend the two weekly sessions, the later Blair government decided instead to collapse both sessions into one 30 min slot, with the LO and the leader of the third party (i.e. the Liberal Democrats) being able to retain six and two questions, respectively; a reform which has been retained by the Coalition government and which, as our data highlight, has done little to address any of the main concerns of the 1995 Committee such as the increased length of questions and the decreasing participation of backbenchers.

Our data show that, after a big decrease in the number of questions asked at the beginning of Blair’s premiership, there has been a slight increase in the number of questions under Brown and then Cameron. At least for Cameron, this is partly due to the Speaker’s desire to increase the number of questions posed by backbenchers ([Bercow, 2010](#)). However, this slight upward trend is mainly due to Speaker Bercow both curtailing longwinded questions and answers and often allowing PMQs to overrun (see [Letts, 2011](#)). These

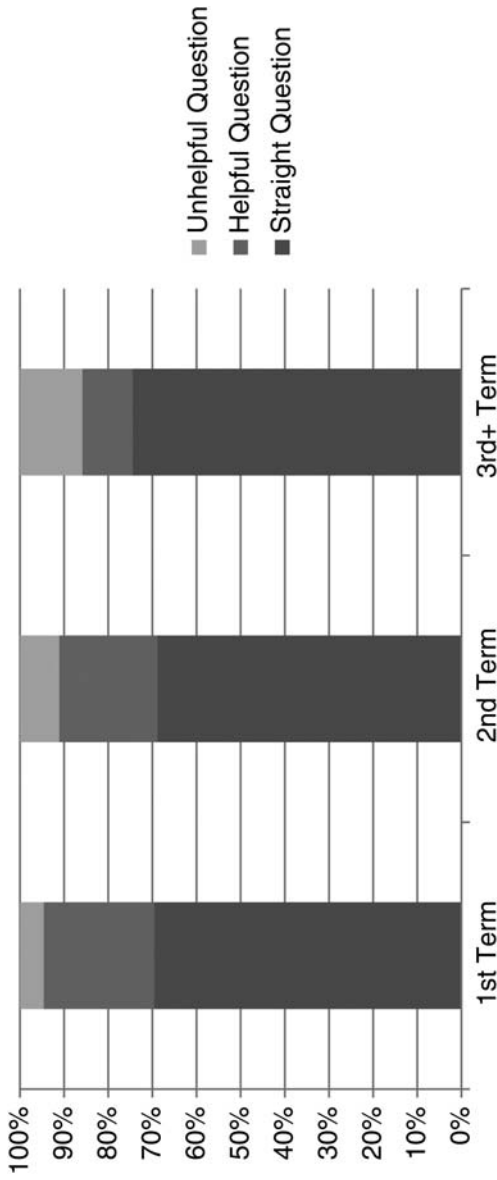


Figure 13 Types of question by tenure.

interventions have had a marginal impact on parliamentary behaviour during PMQs. Yet, as our data indicate, the average number of interruptions per session (Figure 2) has increased dramatically over the sessions under consideration, while the average amount of time taken up by backbenchers (Figure 3) has continued a steeper decline since Blair than it had under the previous Thatcher and Major administrations.

A cumulative effect of these trends has been for PMQs to accentuate one of the key historical criticisms of the Westminster system levelled by some feminist scholars (see, for example, Shaw, 2000; Lovenduski, 2005): that it encourages an aggressive, bullish, adversarial and ‘macho’ style of politics. This is a feature of the system which has been bemoaned by both David Cameron and Ed Miliband. According to Cameron, responding recently to criticisms of chauvinism: ‘sometimes you can come across in a way that you don’t mean to, that’s not the real you. You come across as a macho, aggressive male and I think that’s what PMQs tends to push you in to’ (*The Telegraph*, 2011). This is perhaps something of a surprise given that, throughout the 50-year history of PMQs, the percentage of women in the House has risen from around 4% in 1961 to 22% today. Indeed, it is notable from our data that the House appears to become more rowdy, precisely at the time when there is a sharp increase in female representation. As Figure 2 shows, there appears to be a steep increase in interruptions from the House under the Blair government, despite the fact that the percentage of women in the House almost doubled in 1997. Thus, Ed Miliband’s claim—‘Changing the composition of the House of Commons does help. [PMQs] is probably less bad than it was 20 or 30 years ago if that’s possible’ (*The Telegraph*, 2011)—does not appear to hold water. Indeed, our data suggest that, in terms of rowdiness and adversariality, PMQs has become worse despite the impact of an increased number of female MPs who, in general, are less likely to ask both kinds of polarising, adversarial questions (i.e. ‘helpful’ and ‘unanswerable’ questions) than their male counterparts.²⁰

Potentially, this finding could raise interesting questions for those scholars who focus on questions of gender representation and its wider impact on political culture and broader political outcomes. Although it is not our concern here to offer any definitive insights into these types of inquiry, it is perhaps possible to advance at least three different hypotheses for further investigation. Firstly, it could be possible that the presence of more women in the chamber has led male members to adopt a more macho ‘performance’. Secondly, we could, alternatively, question the use of the word ‘macho’ to describe the style of political interaction that PMQs appears to foster. Certainly, the chamber appears more

²⁰These findings also help question the idea that ‘Blair’s Babes’ were overly loyal and ‘lobby-fodder’, as, on average, it is male MPs who are more likely to ask syndicated and/or sycophantic questions.

rowdy and rambunctious, but whether or not this behaviour should be considered 'gendered' could perhaps be open to question. Thirdly, it is possible that the correlation between increased 'machismo' and the increase in the representation of women is coincidental and that the changing atmosphere of PMQs is due entirely to other non-gendered factors, in particular, the introduction of live television broadcasting, and the correlative heightened media and public focus that this has placed on PMQs.

Certainly, the introduction of live radio and television broadcasts cannot be entirely disregarded as a potential factor in helping to shape the general trends that our data throw up. Our results appear to confirm wider observations about the changing nature of British politics, particularly the heightened emphasis on a personality driven style of politics and the increased importance of party leadership. Since the introduction of live televised broadcasts, our data show that there has been a firmer tendency for LOs to utilise their full quota of questions, as well as increase the average length of each question, while the PM has similarly responded by taking up a considerably greater percentage of time in answering questions (Figures 3 and 4).

In terms of the general 'quality' of leadership, our study of PMQs throws up a number of interesting questions about how this might be best judged. According to Moncrieff (2011): 'Probably the two best operators were Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Both of them achieved a total dominance of the chamber' (Independent, 17 July 2011). As Figures 6 and 9 both show, in terms of measuring the fullness of answer provided by each leader at the beginning of the premiership, Thatcher and Blair actually appear at opposite ends of the graph, with Blair clearly providing a greater percentage of fuller answers than any of the other PMs in our study, while Thatcher appears to provide the least amount of full answers. However, when we take into account the difficulty of the question posed as well as the fullness of the answer (Figure 10), then the relationship between Thatcher and Blair becomes reversed and Thatcher appears only marginally ahead of Brown in terms of the overall 'quality' of answer, while Blair appears the worst PM in this respect. Although it must be remembered that our data only cover the earliest parts of the last five premiership, these findings do seem to challenge at least some of the received wisdom concerning parliamentary performance of recent PMs.

4. Conclusion

On 18 July 2011, the modern form of PMQs reached its 50th anniversary, thereby provoking an increased media spotlight on the overall purpose and effectiveness of this relatively short but exceptionally high profile aspect of Parliamentary procedure. Gradually throughout its 50-year history, and particularly since the

introduction of live television broadcasts, there is little doubt that PMQs has become the key focal point of the weekly Parliamentary schedule. As such, it seems somewhat surprising that there exist very few detailed empirical studies of this aspect of Parliamentary activity. In this exploratory paper, we have attempted to begin to address this notable gap in the literature. Our findings, which concentrate on the earliest sessions of PMQs for the last five PMs, largely concur with the anecdotal and more general inductive observations noted by other commentators. In this respect, our data offer evidential support for the notions: that the conduct of PMQs has become increasingly more rowdy over the period sampled; that this has occurred despite the increase in female representation within the House; that the weekly sessions have been increasingly dominated by the leaders of the two main parties to the gradual exclusion of all backbenchers; that there is the growing expectation that the PM will be able and willing to answer questions on a broader range of topics than previously and that the original purpose of PMQs—of providing an opportunity for the House to directly question the activities and priorities of the PM—has gradually diminished, to be replaced by a mixed bag of different types of helpful and unanswerable questions, often, though not always, used for the purposes of political point scoring.

Perhaps more interestingly and with perhaps more surprising results, we have also tentatively attempted here to use our data in order to establish the differing 'quality' of the answers provided by each of the five PMs in our study. From the limited sample of data we collected, we were able to rank each PM according to the quality of their answers in the following order: Thatcher, Brown, Major, Cameron and Blair. Clearly, this attempt to rank each of the leaders is by no means conclusive, as our exploratory research only covered the opening sessions of each premiership and does not take into account, for example, performance over both an extended period of time and at different points at the parliamentary and electoral cycles. However, this ranking, which perhaps goes against intuitive comparisons of prime ministerial performance at PMQs, does heighten questions regarding the purpose and target audience of PMQs. Evidently, given our wider set of conclusions, PMQs exists as a spectacle which serves a number of different purposes other than solely allowing the legislature to hold the executive to account. At present, for better or worse, it is as much a piece of theatre, dominated by two *dramatis personae*, and a party political media vehicle, as it is a serious facet of parliamentary business. In this respect, it is perhaps just as likely to continue to attract calls for reform, as it is to elicit resistance to such reform.

Despite these other functions, if the original purpose of PMQs—legislature scrutiny of executive policy—is to be maintained and re-invigorated, then our findings strongly suggest the need for institutional and, perhaps, broader cultural change. The question then becomes how is this possible while at the same time preserving those elements of PMQs which are seemingly so popular with the media and the electorate (whatever Speaker Bercow's protestations). As Peter Riddell (2011) argues, 'What may appear to be open questioning of a leader in a democracy has become a charade, but changing it may kill the spectacle'. In light of our exploratory research, suggestions which would, we believe at least tentatively, increase scrutiny and accountability without killing the 'spectacle' and which ought to be (re)considered by parliament include: extending PMQs by quarter or half an hour each week; reducing the number of LO questions (although it is recognised that this would decrease the opportunity for the LO to ask follow-up questions and draw attention to equivocation where it has occurred; an important element of PMQs); institutionalising a set number of closed questions each week (including for the LO); the retrospective highlighting of overly long questions (perhaps in the form of a letter from the Speaker to the MP requesting s/he ask shorter questions in future); a decrease in the toleration of syndicated questions (due to the role of the Whips, this may be difficult to achieve through parliamentary means and may require the media to adopt a 'naming and shaming' approach to offending MPs); an increase in the toleration of 'referred' answers by the PM (perhaps by requiring the PM to read out (shorter versions of) the departmental answers at the next session of PMQs); the monitoring of the amount of time the PM speaks (with subsequent sessions of PMQs being extended by a set amount of time if it is considered that it is the PM who is preventing legislature scrutiny, rather than other factors (such as the number of interruptions, length of backbench/LO questions, etc.)); ensuring the LO cannot ask his/her questions until after a set number of backbench questions; and, in terms of the media, encouraging greater reporting of PMQs beyond (but not instead of) sketch writers.

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Appendix

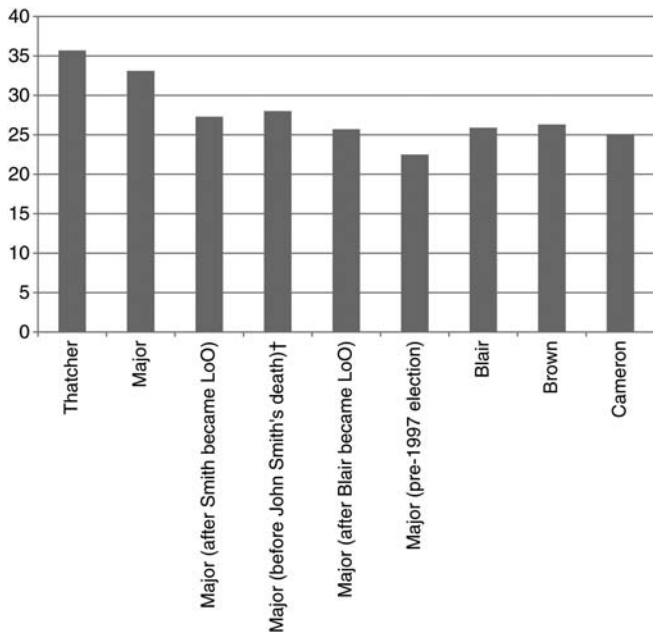


Figure A1 The average number of questions per session.