

Ending 'Punch and Judy' Politics?

The State of Questions and Counter-Questioning during PMQs at Westminster.

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One of the core functions of PMQs is to hold the Prime Minister to account for the actions (or inactions) of the Government of the day. However, concern is often raised that the procedure is not working as intended. Nick Clegg, for example, recently called it a 'farce' that should be 'scrapped' (Nick Clegg, BBC Radio 5 interview, January 2015). Aware of the wider functions of the procedure (see Shephard 1999; and Martin 2011), this paper focuses upon the actual questioning itself. It explores the quantity of questions asked by MPs including the PM, and controls for the quality of questions to ascertain the degree to which PMQs is as much about questions to the opposition by the PM as it is questions to the PM. Data include the first year of the Blair government contrasted with the first year of the Cameron government. Results suggest that far from trying to end 'Punch and Judy' politics, Cameron has been significantly more 'Punch and Judy' in style than Blair.

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'...like a fight over a bag of boiled sweets in a boys' school playground, circa 1950...PMQs is puerile, point-scoring, yah-boo nonsense, which has done more to debase the reputation of politicians than anything else – and that includes spin doctors, leaked emails and fiddled figures' (Jackie Ashley, 2002)

'Prime Minister's Questions should be for the PM to be able to answer what the government's policies are not for point-scoring' (Hansard Society, 2014a: 31)

There is much commentary and public opinion out there on how bad Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is and/or has become, but there is very little systematic data examining how true this actually is, and how things have changed over time. This paper starts to address the paucity of data on 'Punch and Judy' point-scoring at PMQs by counting the quantity of questions asked by MPs including the PM, while accounting for the quality of questions to ascertain the degree to which PMQs is as much about questions to the opposition by the PM as it is questions to the PM.

What occurs during PMQs is important because this is the one procedure that the general public are most familiar with. Indeed, recent survey evidence has shown that 54 percent of the general public report having watched and/or heard PMQs in the last 12 months (Hansard Society, 2014b: 65). Moreover, over 80 percent of those who have watched and/or heard PMQs think that there is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question (Hansard Society, 2014b: 71). A specific Hansard Society (2014a) report on the state of PMQs based on extensive focus group research with the public found quite negative attitudes towards the procedure, for example:

‘I don’t think it serves any purpose any more – it is supposed to hold the PM to account but now it is just a pantomime’ (Hansard Society, 2014a: 5)

‘...the PM refusing to answer simple yes or no questions...’ (Hansard Society, 2014a: 5)

‘...a pathetic spectacle’...MPs ‘just seem to be point-scoring and not really thinking’ (Hansard Society, 2014a: 5)

In assessing what needs to change, the Hansard Society found that most participants wanted to eradicate the petty point-scoring (2014: 32), or what David Cameron referred to as ‘Punch and Judy’ politics. Indeed, Cameron is on record as saying how much he lamented ‘Punch and Judy’ politics and how he wanted to get rid of this kind of behaviour. In his victory speech for leadership of the Conservative Party Cameron stated:

‘...we need to change, and we will change the way we behave. I’m fed up with the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name calling, backbiting, point scoring, finger pointing’ (David Cameron, quoted in *The Guardian*, 6 December 2005).

However, in a January 2015 YouGov survey, 79 percent of the public thought that David Cameron had not managed to rid Westminster debates of ‘Punch and Judy’ politics. Public perception is of course one thing, and reality of what actually takes place during procedures is another. By contrasting Blair’s first year with that of Cameron’s, I attempt to assess whether ‘Punch and Judy’ politics has improved or not.

The Hansard Society (2014a) are concerned about the reputation of the parliament and argue that for parliament to repair its reputation it needs to address four key areas: being out of

touch; bad behaviour; questions over format and effectiveness; and a perceived lack of accountability (2014a: 9). While measures of bad behaviour have been studied already (see for example, Shephard 1999 and Bates et al. 2014) and there has been a commendable attempt to measure the number and quality of replies (Bates et al., 2014), we do not yet know about the extent to which the PM uses the procedure to exacerbate ‘Punch and Judy’ politics by asking questions as well as and/or answering them per se. It is this gap that this research seeks to fill.

Even more damning is the view that the partisan battle of the chamber means that ‘PMQs can be swiftly dismissed as an effective means of holding the prime minister to account’ (Bennister and Kelso, 2015). The question is, do we have data to know for sure that it is it even like this, and if it is was it ever thus? To what extent is this perspective a product of anecdotal experience and/or a time-based assessment?

On the positive side, there is some evidence that those who watched/heard PMQs in full are more likely to find it informative, exciting, and are less likely to be put off politics than those who only watched/heard clips in part or not at all (Hansard Society, 2014b: 70). Such findings add credence to those such as Salmond (2014a) who argues that unplanned robust debate is a good thing for public engagement. People might not like their politicians but Salmond finds evidence that it increases partisanship and turnout. Salmond argues that it is better to have higher engagement (for example, voting) and antipathy towards leaders than it is to have lower engagement and a more sanguine view of leaders (2014b). However, what happens if you want both higher engagement AND a more sanguine view of leaders? Perhaps if behaviour was not so ‘yah-boo’, ‘party political point-scoring’ at PMQs we could still have interest and engagement and a better view of politicians themselves.

Controlling for age, a poll by YouGov (2015) that finds that those aged over 40 are much more likely to view the standard of debate in the Commons as ‘loud, aggressive, and childish’ than those under the age of 40. Interestingly, Cumberbatch et al. (1992), Shephard (1999), and Bates et al. (2014) find that the number of interruptions during PMQs has increased over time. What we don’t yet know is the extent to which ‘Punch and Judy’ politics has altered over time. If the YouGov public perception and interruptions data is anything to go by, then it looks like ‘Punch and Judy’ point-scoring behaviour has worsened over time. Interruptions have increased, and the older public are more dismissive of the behaviour in Westminster

than the younger generations, possibly suggesting that they are aware that behaviour has got worse over time. However, as well as measuring interruptions, we need other measures and ways to decipher if behaviour has worsened over time, or if the older publics are viewing the past through rose-tinted spectacles ('it was better in the old days').

Bates et al. lament the 'very few detailed empirical studies' (2014: 276) of PMQs and yet they have engaged in some considerable research on the procedure across the last five PMs. As well as finding that interruptions have increased over time, Bates et al. (2014) find that the number of questions reached has declined since Thatcher in large part due to the increase in interruptions, as well as in the rise of supplementaries being granted the Leader of the Opposition – for the latter point, see work by Giddings and Irwin, 2005). Bates et al. (2014) also engage in qualitative research and find that non-replies to questions is lowest for Blair and Cameron, although when they control for difficulty of question, Thatcher and Brown were found to provide the fullest answers. Other studies have examined the rise in the ratio of open questions to substantive questions over time (Irwin et al., 1993; and Shephard, 1999); the attendance rates of PMs over time (Shephard, 1999; and Kelly 2015); the rise in questions tabled post-cameras (Borthwick, 1993); the rise in partisanship post-cameras (Norton, 1993; and Shephard 1999); and the rise in combativeness (Burnham et al. 1995); the roles of the Leader of the Opposition (Alderman, 1992); topics covered by the questions of the Leader of the Opposition (Griffith and Ryle, 1989) and by all MPs (Bates et al., 2014). There have also been wider studies examining quantitative counts of prime ministerial activities in the House (Dunleavy et. al., 1990 and 1993) as well as an examination of the roles and functions of questions (see for example, Chester and Bowring 1962; Franklin and Norton, 1993; Wiberg, 1994; Shephard, 1999; and Martin, 2011 and 2013).

This study aims to add to the body of existing work on PMQs to date by exploring an as yet unexamined aspect of point-scoring, yah-boo, 'Punch and Judy' politics. I do this by counting the quantity of questions asked by MPs including the PM, while accounting for the quality of questions to ascertain the degree to which PMQs is as much about questions to the opposition by the PM as it is questions to the PM.

Methods

Following the same logic as Bates et al. (2014) I study comparable sessions from the start of premierships. Going further than Bates et al. (2014), I go beyond the first 10 PMQs and measure the full parliamentary year (1997-98 for Blair and 2010-11 for Cameron) and I make sure I am contrasting new incoming governments rather than including a mix of new incoming and old rotating governments. For Blair (1997-98), the total number of 30 minute PMQs was 50 and for Cameron (2010-11) it was 41. If we control for when the PM was absent the total numbers of PMQs were 49 for Blair and 38 for Cameron (see Table 1).

Table 1: Total Number of PMQs

	<u>PMQs (Total N)</u>	<u>PMQs with the PM (Total N)</u>
Blair (1997-1998)	50	49
Cameron (2010-11)	41	38

As well as counting questions on the Order Paper, all questions that were asked were also counted. To measure this, in each PMQ session I conducted a search in Word using ‘Ctrl f’ to search for every single incidence of ‘?’. This search returned totals of all the actual questions that were asked by all of the participants (including the PM). I then calculated the proportion of questions asked by the PM in relation to all the questions asked by others. Beyond a quantitative count using SPSS, there is also a qualitative assessment that parses the questions asked by the PM into two groups – those that ask questions of the opposition (usually directed at the Leader of the Opposition) and those that cannot be labelled as such (see Appendix for specific examples of coding types). ((Further measures not yet assessed in this paper include the number of questioners permitted at least one question and the total number of MPs taking, as well as Leader of the Opposition topics raised and incidences of the PM specifically blaming the last government in his/her answers)).

Results

The average number of questions reached on the Order Paper has improved under Cameron compared with Blair (see Table 2). On average nearly 14 questions per PMQ are reached under Cameron compared with under 11 for Blair per PMQ. The range for Blair (a low of 5 to a high of 16) is higher than the range for Cameron (a low of 9 to a high of 15). In nearly one in five PMQs (18 percent) under Blair the number of Order Paper questions reached was lower than the lowest figure for Cameron. However, the average number of questions asked ('?') irrespective of Order Paper questions and supplementaries is higher under Blair per PMQ than it is for Cameron per PMQ. On average, nearly 44 questions ('?') are asked under Blair per PMQ compared with nearly 40 ('?') under Cameron per PMQ (see Table 2).

Focusing on the behaviour of the two PMs the average number of questions posed by each PM is higher for Cameron than it is for Blair. On average, Cameron asked nearly five questions per PMQ compared with nearly one and a half questions per PMQ for Blair (see Table 2). Controlling for the questions asked by the PM that are specifically levelled at the opposition, results are again higher for Cameron than they are for Blair. On average, Cameron targeted just over three questions at the opposition per PMQ compared with just under one question on average per PMQ for Blair (see Table 2). As a proportion of all questions asked during PMQs we have gone from one in 48 questions asked being levelled by the PM toward the opposition to one in 13 questions. This is quite a significant shift in behaviour.

Table 2: Mean Total Numbers of Questions Asked during PMQs

	<u>Blair (1997-98)</u>	<u>Cameron (2010-11)</u>
Order Paper	10.68	13.85
All '?'s	43.74	39.97
PM '?'s	1.40	4.65
PM '?'s to opposition	0.92	3.07

Note: Data are for all PMQs including those when the PM is not present. Differences in means between when the PM is and is not present are insignificantly different.

Has Cameron helped end ‘Punch and Judy’ politics? His behaviour as far as counter-pointing through the asking of opposition questions suggests that he has not. Cameron has asked far more questions and far more questions of the opposition than Tony Blair did. Consequently, our latest reference data for PMQs suggests that the procedure has become more ‘Punch and Judy’ over time. This data might help explain why those over 40 have a far worse assessment of PMQs than those under 40 (YouGov, 2015) for whom a comparison with an earlier generation is less likely to have been possible in real time.

Conclusion

David Cameron may have lamented ‘Punch and Judy’ politics at Westminster, and he may have wanted to change this, yet his behaviour, at least as far as counter-pointing with asking questions of the opposition, suggests that it has only become worse. Given that virtually all of the counter-questioning of the opposition by the PM occurs in response to Opposition Leader (OL) questioning it does suggest that OL questioning should be reduced in order to free up more time for backbench questioning. If we do this then we might find that the pantomime bickering goes down while maintaining higher engagement (in line with Salmond, 2014b) and yet encouraging a more sanguine view of leaders (contrary to Salmond, 2014b). My finding here adds evidence and weight to those of the Hansard Society (2014a) who also advocated less time for the OL and more time for backbench questions.

Should we be worried about the state of PMQs? Perhaps we should be worried about the rise of interruptions (see Shephard, 1999; and Bates et al. 2014) and ‘Punch and Judy’ politics, but as Pakenham (1970) notes in his typology of legislative functions derived from his study of the Brazilian National Congress, there are multiple functions that legislatures fulfil. Legislatures are not just about scrutiny of the executive, they also carry out other functions such as representation of party, interest groups and constituents. There is also the important role of tension release, so heated arguments and exchanges are executed inside the legislature rather than on the streets. PMQs arguably provides a very important vent for tension. Consequently, when we assess legislative procedures, while it is important to consider scrutiny of the executive, we also need to consider the extent to which wider functions of legislatures are being fulfilled otherwise we might be designing procedures that improve some functions while suppressing others without due consideration for the consequences on the polity.

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Appendix 1

Examples of the PM asking the opposition questions (OQs):

The Prime Minister: I reconfirm precisely those words here today. The cheek of this lot talking about the health service! Who put up prescription charges 15 times? Who ran the national health service in such a way that people had to take up private health care because they could not get proper health care in the health service? Who ended their term of office with 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses in the service? (18 Jun 1997 : Cols. 304-5)

The Prime Minister: The problem that the right hon. Gentleman has to face up to is that he left us the biggest budget deficit in the G20, and he has absolutely no proposals to deal with it. He opposes our changes on housing benefit, yes? You oppose those? He opposes our changes on a benefit cap- *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Just as the Leader of the Opposition must be heard, so must the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman opposes our changes on a benefit cap, yes? Just nod. (13 Oct 2010: Col. 323.)

Example of the PM asking a question but it being nothing to do with the opposition (and in this case, actually in response to an ad hoc question):

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that. Of course it is important that we begin to put right the damage done over a period of years. The plain fact of the matter is that the previous Government were one of the very few Governments anywhere to preside over a situation where the proportion of national income spent on education fell, although the social security and welfare bills rose enormously. It is precisely for that reason that we do not see additional expenditure on education as enough in itself. It must be accompanied by measures that reduce the huge and appalling burden of social and economic failure that is the product of the past 18 years. It is both those things going together that allows us to get as much money as possible into the areas of productive investment and to get us out of social failure. [Hon. Members: "Where from?"] How about by reducing the numbers of young people on the dole? That is where from. (18 Jun 1997 : Cols. 310-11)

Example of the PM asking questions with clear links to the activities of the past government (current opposition), but it still not being a question directed at the opposition to answer per se.

The Prime Minister: Where the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right is that we live in a dangerous world economy, and the outlook for the world economy is choppy and difficult. That is what the Justice Secretary was talking about and what the Chancellor has been talking

about. The question for the Government is this: in an uncertain world economy, are we taking the British economy out of the danger zone? Are we doing the right thing to protect the long-term interests of people's jobs and livelihoods? That is what we are doing. What the right hon. Gentleman is doing is thoroughly irresponsible, and I think he probably knows it. (20 Oct 2010 : Col. 940)

Mixture of the two types

The Prime Minister: First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his help at the general election? Secondly, may I tell him that I would have been delighted to answer the constitutional issues if they had been put to me by the Leader of the Opposition--as we were told on the lunchtime news they would be? The answer is very simple. Of course constitutional issues are at stake, but in the end the question is whether they operate as a constitutional bar to joining if the economic benefits are clear and unambiguous. Our answer to that is that there is no constitutional bar. What is the Opposition's answer? (29 Oct 1997 : Col. 895)