

# **‘THE HONOURABLE GENTLEMAN SHOULD MAKE UP HIS MIND’**

**Strategic Manoeuvring with Accusations of Inconsistency in  
Prime Minister's Question Time**

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor  
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam  
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus  
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom  
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties  
ingestelde commissie,  
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel  
op donderdag 17 december 2009, te 12:00 uur

door

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geboren te Algiers, Algerije

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To Peter  
(1950-2008)

His presence in this work is beyond description.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Peter Houtlosser, who supervised my PhD research with utmost generosity, until his untimely death, I am thankful. Nothing has stimulated my thoughts like Peter's intellectual enthusiasm or refined my ideas like his persistently critical attitude. His memory was often my drive to write the chapters of this manuscript. Peter, I am grateful.

I am also very thankful to my supervisors, Frans van Eemeren, Francisca Snoeck Henkemans and Erik Krabbe, for their critical guidance and support. Throughout the different stages of my PhD research, their critical feedback kept challenging me to clarify my thoughts and to defend my claims, and their personal concern encouraged me to develop my ideas and to amend my proposals.

I would like to thank my fellow participants in the research colloquium of the department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric, at the University of Amsterdam. The research they presented at the colloquium, as well as the questions and remarks they raised when I presented my own research have been a great source of inspiration for me. Special thanks to Jan Albert van Laar. Our several talks about theoretical tools and concepts have considerably influenced my work. I am also thankful to David Zarefsky. The challenges he raised when commenting on an earlier version of my work have guided a good deal of my investigations.

I would also like to thank Corina Andone and Bilal Amjarso whose friendship has made light and enjoyable the long and often argumentative PhD office hours. I thank Makis, Marija, Jelmer, Henrike, Constanza, Walid, Dora and Merel for the moments of comfort and inspiration their friendship has provided. I am especially thankful to Marcin for being close and caring.

To Abdellatif, Thuraya and Riham my gratitude and love. I remain motivated by their gratification and concern.



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## 1 ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY AS A RESPONSE TO CRITICISM

### 1.1 A common argumentative practice in Prime Minister's Question Time

Responding with accusations of inconsistency to criticism is a common argumentative practice in Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. Especially when responding to questions critical of a certain policy, action or plan of the Government, it is not at all uncommon for the Prime Minister to accuse his opponents of being inconsistent. The Prime Minister, who, more or less by definition, will not agree with the criticism expressed by Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Opposition, may rather attempt to avoid discussing such criticism. He attempts to exclude from the discussion standpoints of the Opposition in which such a criticism is expressed, and justifies the exclusion by pointing out that the current positions of the MPs are inconsistent with other positions they have assumed. The following exchange between the current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron is an example.

(1) *David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

In January last year, the Government were sent details of 4,000 dangerous foreign criminals and for an entire year they did absolutely nothing with that information. Can the Prime Minister explain how such a catastrophic failure to protect the public took place?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

The Attorney-General has asked the Crown Prosecution Service to conduct an inquiry into this matter. A request was made by the Dutch authorities for us to look through our DNA records. Some 4,000 names were put to us by the Dutch, and 11 cases have been discovered as a result of the investigation. The inquiry will cover all the details of what happened. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that it was possible for the Dutch to ask us to look at our DNA records only because we are keeping full DNA records. The Conservatives opposed that legislation.

(House of Commons official report, 2008b)

The exchange is about a disk that contains DNA profiles of 4,000 foreign criminals. In January 2007, the disk was sent to the British Crown Prosecution Service by the Dutch authorities. The DNA information on the disk was supposed to be checked against the British database in order to trace those foreign criminals

who are in the United Kingdom. But the check did not start until January 2008.<sup>1</sup>

In his question, Mr. Cameron implies that the failure of the Government to check the DNA data of 4,000 serious criminals for more than a year is catastrophic. In his answer, Mr. Brown does not address the standpoint implied. Instead, he announces that an investigation is being conducted, explains the details of the case and accuses Mr. Cameron of being inconsistent in an attempt to avoid the discussion of his standpoint. In his explanation, Mr. Brown stresses the importance for the case concerned of keeping full DNA records, and emphasises that this is a government policy which the Opposition opposed. This emphasis paves the road for the charge of inconsistency that the Prime Minister makes against his opponent.

Mr. Brown accuses Mr. Cameron of being inconsistent about the benefits of keeping full DNA records. He implies that in order for Mr. Cameron to have a right to criticise the Government for failing to check DNA data, Mr. Cameron needs to believe that keeping DNA records is beneficial. Yet, Mr. Cameron's previous actions, namely his opposition to the government policy of keeping full DNA records, imply that he does not believe keeping DNA records to be beneficial. By means of this alleged inconsistency, the Prime Minister seems to attempt to exclude the standpoint of the Leader of the Opposition from the discussion. Mr. Brown's non-acceptance of Mr. Cameron's standpoint initiates an argumentative confrontation. However, instead of proceeding with the argumentative discussion of the standpoint he does not accept, Mr. Brown attempts to rule the standpoint out.<sup>2</sup>

When a discussant attempts to exclude a standpoint from the discussion by means of an accusation of inconsistency, the discussant claims that the proponent of the standpoint cannot be committed to this standpoint because he

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about this case, see the coverage of BBC News at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/7253989.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7253989.stm)

<sup>2</sup> The exchange of questions and answers about the DNA data check goes on for two more rounds, in which the two parties reformulate their positions and advance new ones. However, the first round, which is examined here, can be considered independently for the sake of illustrating how the Prime Minister employs a charge of inconsistency in an attempt to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition. In addition, the first round can be considered a complete independent exchange because it is very common in Question Time that the question-answer exchange about an issue is one round only. The Prime Minister takes that into account as he provides answers to the questions posed by the Leader of the Opposition.

can also be held committed to a position that is inconsistent with it. By means of the accusation of inconsistency, the discussant attempts to rule out a standpoint as untenable, lead its proponent to retract it and consequently put an end to the initial disagreement about it in the argumentative confrontation. The latter is beneficial for a discussant who does not accept a standpoint and yet finds it difficult to refute it. Also beneficial is the resort to accusations of inconsistency as a means to rule out standpoints that one wishes not to discuss. That is so at least because it seems fair to assume that a discussant cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously.

The Prime Minister's responses to standpoints from the Opposition by accusations of inconsistency seem particularly opportune in the kind of parliamentary session in which they here occur. In Question Time, parliamentary rules and conventions restrict the discussants' range of the argumentative positions they can adopt. For example, as Head of Government, the Prime Minister is required to defend his Government's plans, policies and actions against criticism. He is, consequently, expected to assume a position in which he refutes standpoints of MPs from the Opposition whenever these express criticism of his Government. In the exchange above, for example, Mr. Brown is required to refute Mr. Cameron's standpoint that the failure of the Government to check the DNA data of 4,000 serious criminals for more than a year is catastrophic. The exclusion of this standpoint, which is not easy to refute, is particularly beneficial to the Prime Minister in view of his institutional obligation.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister's choice of accusations of inconsistency as a means to exclude opposition standpoints seems particularly opportune considering how crucial for public political discussions the value of political consistency is. The damage a charge of inconsistency can cause to the public image of the politician accused goes way beyond the scope of the exchange in which it occurs. Mr. Brown's accusation of inconsistency above is an example. By implying that the Leader of the Opposition cannot be for and against keeping full DNA records at the same time, Mr. Brown attempts not only to avoid a discussion of the criticism that he cannot refute but also to damage the image of the Leader of the Opposition as a high profile politician seeking the leadership of the country. After all, a Leader of the Opposition who cannot offer a consistent

policy cannot be expected to provide better governance.

Even though it is in principle not unreasonable to request the proponent of a standpoint to be consistent, attempting to exclude a standpoint from the discussion by means of an alleged inconsistency can be a case of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The infamous *tu quoque* variant is typically associated with discussants' attempts to silence their co-discussants by pointing out inconsistencies between the co-discussants' words and deeds. The question may therefore be raised as for when the Prime Minister's accusation is a reasonable attempt to rule out an untenable standpoint of the Opposition, and when it is a fallacious attempt to silence the Opposition. This question gets more complicated once institutional political considerations are taken into account. Given that holding the Government to account is central to the argumentative practice of Question Time, is it at all reasonable to rule out a standpoint in which criticism of the Government is expressed? Conversely, given that political consistency is particularly significant in government-related discussions, is it not justifiable to consider all inconsistent positions untenable and to rule them out consequently?

In order to shed light on the Prime Minister's responses, described above, this study was undertaken.

## **1.2 A pragma-dialectical approach to the Prime Minister's accusations**

The Prime Minister's accusations of inconsistency in response to standpoints from the Opposition will be examined from the perspective of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003a). This approach is particularly useful for the intended examination because it provides a view and tools that are instrumental for an analytically insightful and critically evaluative account of the Prime Minister's responses at issue.

In pragma-dialectics, argumentation is viewed as "a verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 1). This view is largely a consequence of the adoption of four meta-theoretical

starting points, according to which argumentation as a subject matter is functionalised, externalised, socialised and dialectified (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 2004). As explained by van Eemeren and Grootendorst,

Functionalisation means that we treat every language activity as a purposive act. Externalisation means that we target the public commitments entailed by the performance of certain language activities. Socialisation means that we relate these commitments to the interaction that takes place with other people through the language activities in question. Finally, dialectification means that we regard the language activities as part of an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with critical norms of reasonableness (2004: pp. 52-53).

The principles of functionalisation and socialisation are particularly relevant for the study of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. These two principles contribute significantly to a view of argumentation that encompasses all the elements of argumentative discourse that are relevant to the defence or refutation of a point of view and accounts well for the interactional aspect inherent in such discourse. Both principles are necessary for the examination of the Prime Minister's responses at issue.

The principle of functionalisation allows for an analysis of the Prime Minister's responses as part of an argumentative discourse. In spite of their importance in argumentative practice, the Prime Minister's responses at issue would not be taken into account by many approaches to argumentation. Because they are attempts to avoid the discussion of a standpoint, rather than to provide a defence of it, the Prime Minister's responses at issue would fall outside the scope of examination of product-oriented approaches, the subject matter of which is restricted to the constellations of statements that constitute a defence of a point of view. In contrast, because the pragma-dialectical approach adopts a functionalised view of argumentative discourse, in this approach, the subject matter includes the whole process through which points of view are defended or refuted. The subject of investigation in a pragma-dialectical approach encompasses all the speech acts that are functional to the defence or refutation of a point of view. These include not only the speech act complex of argumentation, but also speech acts such as asserting a standpoint and expressing doubt about it.

The interactional aspect of the Prime Minister's responses at issue can be accounted for in a pragma-dialectical examination thanks to the meta-theoretical starting point of socialisation. The view that argumentation is aimed at

convincing, rather than merely justifying or refuting, takes argumentation to involve not only a party that defends a point of view, but also a party that needs to be convinced of this point of view, i.e. the critic. Argumentation can thus be seen as a dialogic exchange of speech acts between a party that defends a standpoint and a party that doubts it underlies. The speech acts performed by both parties communicate information, incur commitments and obligations that guide the development of the interaction and shape the argumentative discourse accordingly. Such a social and interactional view of argumentation allows for investigating the Prime Minister's accusations of inconsistency in a way that does justice to their function in discourse, i.e. as critical responses to standpoints expressed by the Opposition.

In addition to the beneficial view of argumentation that the pragma-dialectical approach offers, the approach provides theoretical tools that are useful for the investigation of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. Three of such tools are particularly relevant for this study: first, the ideal model of a critical discussion designed to describe the different stages an ideal argumentative discourse needs to pass through and the dialectical obligations according to which ideal arguers need to act (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984); second, the concept of strategic manoeuvring coined to account for the tension between arguers' ideal dialectical obligation and their actual concern with being rhetorically effective (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999); and third, the concept of argumentative activity types, introduced to address the (mostly institutionalised) conventional aspects of argumentative practice (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005).

The pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion is a procedural model that describes how argumentative discourse would be structured were such discourse to be solely aimed at resolving differences of opinion. The model spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion, i.e. the resolution of a dispute by means of critically testing the standpoints at issue. In the first stage of a critical discussion, the difference of opinion needs to be externalised: clarity must be achieved as to which standpoints are to be defended and what doubt or criticism has to be overcome (*the confrontation stage*). It also needs to be established what the material and

procedural starting points of the discussion are (*the opening stage*). The arguments advanced in support of the standpoint(s) at stake need to be systematically tested (*the argumentation stage*) based on which the outcome of the discussion can be established (*the concluding stage*). For each of the stages, the model specifies the types of speech acts that can contribute to the resolution of the difference of opinion. On the basis of these types, the discussant's dialectical obligations pertinent to each of the dialectical stages are specified. For example, in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, the party who challenges an expressed standpoint needs to express clearly what kind of challenge is involved: it should advance either the speech act of casting doubt upon the standpoint expressed or the speech act of advancing the opposite standpoint.<sup>3</sup>

As a heuristic and analytic tool, the model provides a template against which argumentative practice is to be compared in order to recover its underlying argumentative organisation. In a pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative exchanges, actual exchanges are first reconstructed in terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion. The reconstruction reveals the argumentative function of the different contributions discussants make as part of an argumentative exchange.<sup>4</sup> The Prime Minister's responses at issue respond to a standpoint of the Opposition by casting doubt on it. Because the responses do not provide arguments in support of standpoints but cast doubt on them instead, the argumentative function of the responses might not be easily recognisable. Viewed in light of the ideal model, the responses can be seen to occur in those parts of argumentative exchanges in which differences of opinion come about and which are to be reconstructed as part of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, hereafter *argumentative confrontations*. Seeing the responses as part of argumentative confrontations reveals the role they play in the definition of the difference of opinion, and traces the effect they can have on the argumentative resolution of the difference of opinion.

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<sup>3</sup> According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), the speech act of casting doubt is an illocutionary negation of a commissive speech act by means of which a speaker expresses his non-acceptance of the speech act he reacts to.

<sup>4</sup> Elaborate discussions of the merits and problems of reconstruction can be found in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs & Jackson, 1993).

As a critical evaluative tool, the model provides a template against which argumentative practice is to be compared in order to assess its reasonableness. In the ideal model, the exchange of speech acts is regulated by a discussion procedure motivated by a dialectical notion of reasonableness, in which reasonable argumentative discourse is taken to be geared towards a resolution of the difference of opinion that is achieved by critically testing the standpoints at stake (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: pp. 135-157). The procedure incorporates fifteen rules that need to be followed in order for a discussion to proceed reasonably. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst explain, “the rules specify in which cases the performance of certain speech acts contributes to the (critical) resolution of the difference of opinion” (2004: p. 135). In a pragma-dialectical evaluation of a piece of argumentative discourse, reasonableness is assessed by checking the extent to which actual argumentative moves adhere to the rules for a critical discussion and contribute positively to the resolution of the difference of opinion. In light of this dialectical conception of reasonableness, argumentative moves such as the Prime Minister’s responses at issue would be judged as reasonable moves whenever they constitute argumentative contributions that further the critical testing of points of view. If they constitute contributions that hinder the testing, they will be judged as fallacious. Given that critical testing can be highly instrumental in achieving political accountability by subjecting the performance of the Government to the utmost of scrutiny, it will be particularly beneficial to judge the reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue on the basis of their contribution to the critical testing of the standpoints that are being discussed.

While the ideal model of a critical discussion provides a tool to take into account the discussants’ interest in critically testing standpoints, when analysing and evaluating the Prime Minister’s responses at issue,<sup>5</sup> the concept of strategic manoeuvring provides a tool to do justice to the discussants’ interest in winning the discussions in which they get involved. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003a) observe, discussants in actual argumentative practice are not only

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<sup>5</sup> The pursuit of a critical resolution of differences of opinion is not merely ideal. In a number of studies, van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels (e.g. van Eemeren *et al.* 2009) have shown that the dialectical norm is intersubjectively valid among normal language users. In other words, the critical resolution of differences of opinion is an ideal the pursuit of which can be attributed to discussants in actual argumentative practice.



concerned with critically testing their standpoints, but they are also concerned with getting these standpoints accepted (p. 391).

The concerns with critical reasonableness and with rhetorical effectiveness can be at odds with each other. It is not unusual that critical testing steers the discussion away from the favourable outcome of getting one's point of view accepted: a standpoint might not pass the critical testing, in which case it is to be retracted rather than accepted. Neither is it unusual that discussions are steered towards a favourable outcome by hindering the critical testing procedure: standpoints might get accepted as a result of silencing critical reactions rather than addressing them. And yet, balancing the two concerns is not out of the question: it is perfectly possible for discussants to win discussions by means of reasonable argumentation. It is the pursuit of such balance that van Eemeren and Houtlosser call strategic manoeuvring.

According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2000, 2002c, 2006), in argumentative practice, discussants attempt to strike a balance between (dialectical) reasonableness and (rhetorical) effectiveness with every move they make. In every move, discussants make opportune choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices in an attempt to critically test the standpoints at issue and steer the discussion towards a favourable outcome. This view sheds significant light on the Prime Minister's responses at issue. Seen from the perspective of strategic manoeuvring, the Prime Minister's resort to an accusation of inconsistency can be viewed as a potentially reasonable and opportune choice. The accusation has the potential to steer the discussion towards the favourable outcome of ruling out standpoints of the Opposition in a reasonable way: it declares them untenable on the –in principle– reasonable ground that one cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously.

The concept of strategic manoeuvring does not only refine the pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative practice, but also the evaluation of such a practice. The pragma-dialectical view of fallacies as argumentative moves that hinder the critical testing of standpoints can be refined in view of the tension inherent in the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness. In view of the concept of strategic manoeuvring, fallacies can be viewed as the result of failing to balance the pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness

with that of dialectical reasonableness and allowing the former to override the latter.<sup>6</sup> In such cases, where the balance is distorted in favour of rhetorical effectiveness, a discussant's strategic manoeuvring is said to have *derailed* (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b). Seeing unreasonable argumentative moves as derailments of strategic manoeuvring allows for a more adequate evaluative account of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. It then becomes possible to explain why the Prime Minister's responses at issue are reasonable in some cases and unreasonable in others: in principle, the response can be a sound instance of strategic manoeuvring when the accusation is employed in an attempt to rule out an untenable standpoint without obstructing the critical testing procedure. It can, however, also be an instance of derailed strategic manoeuvring if the accusation silences the proponent of a standpoint and hinders the critical testing procedure.

While the ideal model of a critical discussion and the concept of strategic manoeuvring provide insight into the argumentative dimension of the Prime Minister's responses at issue, the concept of argumentative activity types (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005) provides insight into the institutional dimension of the responses. The concept was introduced into the pragma-dialectical framework in order to account for those aspects of argumentative practice that are conventionalised, typically as a result of rules and conventions of a more or less formalised institutional context in which argumentation takes place. As introduced by van Eemeren and Houtlosser, argumentative activity types are "cultural artifacts that can be identified on the basis of careful empirical observation of argumentative practice" (2005: p. 76).<sup>7</sup> Van Eemeren and

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<sup>6</sup> According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003b), an argumentative move is reasonable as long as the critical testing of standpoints is not hindered by the discussants' pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness, i.e. as long as the balance between dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness is not disturbed in favour of the latter. In the case that it is the pursuit of dialectical soundness that overrules the pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness, van Eemeren and Houtlosser do not talk of unreasonable moves, but of misfires instead.

<sup>7</sup> In their article 'Theoretical Construction and Argumentative Reality', where they introduce the concept of argumentative activity types into the pragma-dialectical framework, van Eemeren and Houtlosser state that they view argumentative activity types as somehow different from Levinson's (1979, 1991) activity types (2005: p.76). Levinson's concept of activity type refers to

[a] culturally recognised activity, [...] a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions

In spite of the similarity between the two –they both describe conventionalised communicative rule-governed practice–, the concepts refer to descriptions that differ in their degree of abstraction and the extent to which they are 'empirical'.

Houtlosser observe that rules and conventions of the contexts in which argumentation occurs create preconditions for argumentation that constrain arguers' strategic manoeuvring. The rules and conventions limit the arguer's choice of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices. Consequently, some of the arguers' possibilities to steer the discussion in their own favour in a reasonable way are closed off while other possibilities open up (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007b).

Taking the rules and conventions of Prime Minister's Question Time into account seems of major importance when studying the Prime Minister's responses at issue. It is crucial, for example, that the Prime Minister has the institutional obligation to defend his Government against the criticism of his fellow MPs. Such a convention seems to close off the Prime Minister's –usually open– possibility to accept opposition standpoints without challenge. The Prime Minister's attempt to rule out opposition standpoints seems more opportune in view of such a limitation. By shedding light on the institutional dimensions of the strategic function of the Prime Minister's response at issue, the concept of argumentative activity types contributes to an empirically adequate analytic account of the responses at issue. The concept provides insight that can also refine the evaluative account of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. Rules and conventions can be the source of criteria for assessing the reasonableness of argumentative moves. In the case of the Prime Minister's response at issue, it seems for example plausible that, in order to judge whether the inconsistencies alleged by the Prime Minister are relevant to the discussion of opposition standpoints or not, one needs to consider the extent to which discussants are expected to be consistent in the specific context of Question Time.

### **1.3 Objectives and organisation of this study**

This study comes as part of a larger pragma-dialectical project to examine argumentation in institutionalised contexts. Like the other studies in the project, it examines the influence of the rules and conventions of institutionalised contexts on arguers' attempts to balance dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness. In particular, the study aims to offer a detailed account of the Prime Minister's

attempts to balance dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness when he responds by accusations of inconsistency to opposition standpoints in the particular context of Question Time in the British House of Commons. The account to be given will encompass an analytic view of the responses, in which their strategic function as a particular way of manoeuvring is spelled out, as well as an evaluative view, in which the conditions are specified that need to be fulfilled in order for the response to be considered reasonable.

To achieve the main objective of this study, I shall first give an account of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring in which a discussant responds to a standpoint he does not accept by an accusation of inconsistency. By taking the pragma-dialectical approach to activity types as a starting point for a thorough examination of the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time, I shall then systematically derive institutional insights for the analysis and evaluation of this way of strategic manoeuvring. Finally, these institutional insights will be applied in the analysis and evaluation of the Prime Minister's responses to opposition standpoints by accusations of inconsistency, leading to a more empirically adequate and consequently more critically insightful account of these recurrent argumentative moves.

I intend to achieve the main objective of the study by answering the following research questions.

- (1) What strategic function can in general be ascribed to accusations of inconsistency that come in response to contested standpoints?
- (2) How is the arguers' simultaneous pursuit of critical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness in defining their difference of opinion constrained by the rules and conventions of Prime Minister's Question Time?
- (3) What is, in the specific context of Prime Minister's Question Time, the strategic function of the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to standpoints from the Opposition?
- (4) Under which conditions are the Prime Minister's responses at issue reasonable?

The study is divided accordingly into six chapters. Except for the introductory and concluding chapters, each chapter addresses one of the research questions formulated above.

In order to answer the first question, Chapter 2 characterises accusations of inconsistency that come in response to critical standpoints, such as the Prime Minister's responses at issue, as instances of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring that occurs in argumentative confrontations. The responses are examined in the context of the discussants' pursuit of defining their differences of opinion in a way that is at the same time both reasonable and favourable to them. Responding to a standpoint by an accusation of inconsistency is in this chapter analysed as a way of expressing doubt in an attempt to make the proponent of the standpoint retract his standpoint, and consequently, terminate the dispute about it at the early stage of argumentative confrontation. The accusation is discussed as an opportune choice by means of which a discussant attempts to steer the argumentative confrontation about a standpoint that he does not accept towards the favourable outcome of an elimination of the initial disagreement about this standpoint, in what can in principle be a reasonable way.

In Chapter 3, the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time is examined as an argumentative activity type. The practice is described, discussed and characterised in terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion. Special attention is devoted to the argumentative confrontations in Question Time. The characterisation is intended to identify the preconditions for argumentation that result from the rules and conventions of the parliamentary session.

In Chapter 4, the Prime Minister's responses at issue are particularly examined in view of the insights gained from Chapter 2 about the argumentative strategic function of responses to standpoints by accusations of inconsistency, combined with the insights gained in Chapter 3 about the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time. The examination is aimed at providing a detailed analytic account of the Prime Minister's responses at issue, in which the institutional dimension of their strategic function is highlighted.

In Chapter 5, the reasonableness of the response at issue is discussed. First, pragmatic and dialectical perspectives on reasonableness are combined in the investigation of the reasonableness of accusations of inconsistency as an expression of doubt in response to contested standpoints. Starting from the dialectical view that a certain instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring is

sound if the pursuit of a favourable definition of the difference of opinion does not override the pursuit of a definition that furthers the critical testing of points of view (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003a), and taking the characteristics of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency into account, general soundness conditions are set for the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue. By also taking characteristics of the activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time into account, the soundness conditions will be made more specific. By formulating these soundness conditions, I aim at providing a critically insightful evaluative account of the Prime Minister's response at issue.

In the last chapter of this study (*Chapter 6*), the findings of the previous chapters will be discussed. These findings are summarised and their significant implications are pointed out and assessed, based on which suggestions for further research are made.

## 2 STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING WITH ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY

### 2.1 Explicit attempts to avoid a discussion

It may very easily happen in Question Time that the Prime Minister is confronted with criticism that he would rather not discuss. For example, he may have no strong defence against a point of view of the Opposition that is critical with respect to the consequences of a government policy or plan, but still would rather not admit that things are not going as they should. In such cases, it seems advantageous for the Prime Minister to avoid a discussion about the criticism expressed. Sometimes, the Prime Minister's attempt to avoid the discussion of a certain point of view is discreet. The Prime Minister may for instance respond to the initial critical standpoint of the Opposition by advancing and defending an alternative standpoint of his own that is different from the initial standpoint but related to the same issue. Cases of evasion arise from these discreet attempts. The exchange below, between Ian Duncan Smith, the leader of the Opposition, and Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, is an example.

(1) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

May I join the Prime Minister in congratulating Her Majesty on the 50th anniversary of her accession? Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since he came to power?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

It has risen; however—[Hon. Members: "How much?"] It has risen by about 20,000; however, the number of operations as a whole has also risen by more than 500,000; 19 out of 20 operations are done on time; the average waiting time for an operation has fallen since 1997; and, therefore, although it is correct that the number of cancelled operations has risen, if we look at the number of operations as a whole—more than 5.5 million in this country—I think that the national health service has a record to be proud of.

*Mr. Duncan Smith:*

The answer is quite correct: 50 per cent. I have to tell the Prime Minister that that is not just a figure. He talks about the rise in the number of operations done, but the numbers that have been cancelled have risen as well, and that is a real tragedy for those who have to wait. [Interruption.] Well, the reality—he may not want to hear this—is that this is not one or two cases, but 80,000 people who have had their operations cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them. That is a matter of fear and anxiety for 80,000 people—many more than when he came to power. So, as those numbers have risen and 80,000 people have had their operations cancelled, will he now tell us the reason why?

*Mr. Blair:*

As I explained a moment ago, far more operations have been done by the national health service—about 500,000 more. Less than 2 per cent. of operations are cancelled, which should put the matter in perspective. The only answer is indeed to increase the capacity of the health service, including more nurses, doctors and consultants, as well as other staff, and more beds. That is precisely why we are increasing investment in the national health service. The right hon. Gentleman is in favour of cutting that investment. Therefore, whatever the problems of cancelled operations—I say that they should be put in perspective—the remedy that he has, which is to cut that investment, is the wrong remedy. The remedy that we have—invest and reform—is the right one.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

Mr. Duncan Smith's question, in his first turn, whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since the Prime Minister came to power cannot be meant literally. There is no doubt that the Leader of the Conservative Opposition knows well that the number of cancelled operations has risen under the Labour Government. In fact, by means of the question, Mr. Duncan Smith means to imply a critical standpoint regarding the National Health Service (NHS), namely that *there is a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations*. In his response, Mr. Blair answers the literal question but avoids discussing the critical standpoint implied. He admits that the number has risen, but does not want to discuss whether this is a problematic rise or not. From his answer, it seems that Mr. Blair would rather discuss the performance of the NHS in general. The figures he presents of the number of operations carried out by the NHS in general, the percentage of operations carried out on time and the average waiting time are all arguments that he presents in defence of an alternative standpoint, namely that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*. By portraying the rise in the number of cancelled operations as trivial in comparison with the record of the NHS, Mr. Blair attempts to avoid a discussion about the standpoint of the Opposition without the need to express explicitly that he is not willing to discuss the rise itself.

Mr. Blair's attempt to avoid discussing Mr. Duncan Smith's standpoint about the problematic nature of the rise in the number of the cancelled operations is not really successful. In his next turn, Mr. Duncan Smith persists in expressing his standpoint, and cites the actual number of cancelled operations, 80,000 cases, arguing that such a huge number cannot be considered trivial. Mr. Duncan Smith's persistence gets Mr. Blair to discuss, in the turn that follows, the standpoint about the problematic rise that he attempted to ignore. In his second



turn, Mr. Blair concedes that the rise can be considered a problem but he does so only to criticise the Opposition and justify the policies of his own Government; he says ‘whatever the problems of cancelled operations –I say that they should be put in perspective– the remedy that he has, which is to cut that investment, is the wrong remedy. The remedy that we have—invest and reform—is the right one’. In spite of this criticism, Mr. Blair’s concession is important for Mr. Duncan Smith, who uses it, eventually, to support yet another critical standpoint: *government policies are damaging the NHS*. This standpoint is hinted at when Mr. Duncan Smith says ‘So, as those numbers have risen and 80,000 people have had their operations cancelled, will he now tell us the reason why?’ in his second turn. In his third turn which will be discussed in example (3) to come, this standpoint is expressed explicitly.

The Prime Minister’s attempt to avoid the discussion can also be far less discreet. The Prime Minister might for example attempt to exclude from the discussion a critical standpoint of the Opposition by portraying the standpoint as not worth any discussion. In such attempts, the Prime Minister expresses explicitly that he is not willing to discuss a certain critical standpoint of the Opposition even though he does not accept it. In this study, I shall refer to the Prime Minister’s explicit attempts to avoid discussing a standpoint of the Opposition as attempts to exclude that standpoint from the discussion. I take the explicit unwillingness to discuss a certain standpoint to be central to the attempt of a discussant to exclude another discussant’s standpoint from the discussion. In fact, it is this explicit unwillingness that distinguishes the attempt to exclude a standpoint from the discussion from the mere evasion of a standpoint, both being attempts to avoid the discussion about a certain standpoint.

The expression of unwillingness usually involves some justification for excluding from the discussion the standpoint that is not accepted. For example, the Prime Minister often portrays the standpoint he wishes to exclude as ridiculous, inappropriate or even illegitimate. The exchange below is an example of the Prime Minister’s attempts to justify excluding from the discussion a standpoint of the Opposition that he does not agree with.

(2)

*David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

There are currently six police investigations under way into the conduct of government in London. The most recent allegations are that the London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that that is completely unacceptable?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

As on any occasion when a matter referring to a police investigation is raised, I have to say this is a matter for the police. It should be fully investigated, but it is not a matter for this House until the police complete their investigations.

(House of Commons official report, 2008c)

Mr. Cameron's question to the Prime Minister addresses the conduct of the Government in London in light of a heated controversy over an alleged misuse of public funds by Lee Jasper, the London Mayor's Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities. In his question, Mr. Cameron implies that *it is unacceptable that the London Mayor's director for equalities and policing -Lee Jasper- has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies*. A difference of opinion is presumed to arise in relation to this standpoint. Mr. Brown can be expected not to accept the standpoint implied, if only because he would not want to agree with a point of view that is negative of a civil servant who is a fellow member of the Labour Party. Mr. Brown is, however, unwilling to engage in a discussion about the standpoint implied. The case mentioned should not be the subject of a discussion in Parliament because it is being investigated by the police, he argues. By referring to the Parliament's *sub judice rule*, according to which Houses of Parliament must not discuss current or impending court cases (Rogers & Walters, 2006: p. 303), Mr. Brown attempts to exclude from the discussion a standpoint that he does not accept. Regardless of the reasons behind this attempt –it could be that, on the one hand, the Prime Minister finds it difficult to engage in a discussion about Mr. Cameron's standpoint because he has no evidence against the alleged corruption, but that, on the other hand, he would not want to seem hesitant about the unacceptability of the alleged corruption– Mr. Brown's response is an example of a very common (and institutionally acceptable) way of excluding standpoints expressed by the Opposition in Question Time.

Another common way of excluding standpoints expressed by the Opposition in Question Time is when the Prime Minister justifies the exclusion of a certain standpoint of the Opposition by referring to an inconsistency in the

latter's position. These attempts constitute the focus of this study. The following is an example:

(3)

*Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

[...] The answer that he did not give to my question is that hospital beds are in short supply because they are being blocked by people who cannot get a care home or nursing home bed. The figure that he did not want to provide is that 40,000—nearly 10 per cent.—fewer care home beds are available since 1997 when he took over. Age Concern says that the care sector is in crisis. The head of the Registered Nursing Homes Association said that Government policy was to blame. The Government's policies are damaging the NHS. Is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

Public sector investment in the health service has increased under the Government and is continuing to increase. We are roughly the only major industrial country anywhere in the world that is increasing expenditure on health and education as a proportion of national income. Is it the Conservative party's case that we are not spending enough on health and education? When we announced our spending plans, Conservatives called them reckless and irresponsible. We know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it. The clearest evidence of that came yesterday, when the Leader of the Opposition said:

"The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated."

What an insult to the NHS and the people who work in it! Conservatives denigrate the health service because they want to undermine it. We want to increase investment, whereas the right hon. Gentleman would cut it.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

The question and answer are part of the same exchange as example (1) earlier. After the Leader of the Opposition had managed to get the Prime Minister to concede that the rise of cancelled operations is problematic (*example (1)*), he advances in his question, in example (3) above, the standpoint that *government policies are damaging the NHS*.

Mr. Blair's response is again an attempt to avoid discussing the critical standpoint of the Opposition, this time by an explicit attempt to exclude this standpoint from the discussion. Referring to the Conservatives' opposition to more investment in health, as well as quoting Mr. Duncan Smith about the worthlessness of the NHS, Mr. Blair claims that Mr. Duncan Smith cannot be critical of government policies in relation to the NHS. As presented by Mr. Blair, the view that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS*, which was put forward in the question of Mr. Duncan Smith, is inconsistent with Mr. Duncan Smith's previous positions, namely that the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of. By presenting the current point of view of Mr. Duncan Smith as being inconsistent with the latter's previous positions, Mr. Blair portrays Mr.

Duncan Smith's current point of view as a position that is untenable. In other words, Mr. Blair points out an inconsistency in Mr. Duncan Smith's position in an attempt to exclude his standpoint from the discussion.

## **2.2 The elimination of the initial disagreement**

The attempts of the Prime Minister to exclude from the discussion a standpoint of the Opposition occur in argumentative confrontations. In these confrontations, there is an initial disagreement between the Prime Minister and the Opposition about a critical point of the Opposition. This disagreement can give rise to an externalised difference of opinion to be resolved by means of argumentation if the Prime Minister and the Opposition maintain their points of view and express commitment to them. The Prime Minister's attempts to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion are attempts to do away with the initial disagreement without argumentation. The Prime Minister wants to point out the untenability of the standpoint of the Opposition, aiming to lead the MP from the Opposition to retract it. The retraction of the standpoint is favourable to the Prime Minister: it eliminates the initial disagreement that triggered the argumentative confrontation and creates a situation in which the Prime Minister does not need to refute the criticism he does not accept.

The Prime Minister's attempts to eliminate his disagreement with the Opposition about standpoints expressed by the latter, by means of accusations of inconsistency, can be considered as instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring. As defined by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2003b) strategic manoeuvring refers to the arguers' attempt to reasonably steer the discussion towards a favourable outcome. It is the attempt with every argumentative move in a discussion to strike a balance between the aim of critically testing a point of view, i.e. the dialectical aim, and the aim of winning the discussion, i.e. the rhetorical aim. Confrontational strategic manoeuvring, which is the arguers' strategic manoeuvring in argumentative confrontations, concerns the definition of the difference of opinion (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007b). In argumentative confrontations, arguers are expected to pursue the dialectical aim of defining the difference of opinion at issue in a way that does not hinder the critical testing

procedure. In this stage of an argumentative discussion, arguers are also expected to pursue the rhetorical aim of defining the difference of opinion in the most opportune way in order to win the discussion. To strategically manoeuvre in this stage is to attempt to strike a balance between these two specific aims and attempt to reach a definition of the difference of opinion that is opportune without hindering the critical testing procedure.

Argumentative confrontation can lead to different outcomes. That is to say that different types of disputes (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: pp. 16-22) can result from the different ways in which an initial disagreement between two arguers evolves in their confrontation. For example, arguers arrive at a definition of their difference of opinion as a non-mixed dispute when the standpoint at issue is (merely) not accepted, i.e. is faced with mere doubt. In such cases, one of the arguers expresses a certain standpoint and upholds it while the other expresses and upholds doubt concerning this expressed standpoint. In other cases, the standpoint at issue is also rejected. In that case, the definition of the difference of opinion obtained is a mixed dispute, in which one of the arguers expresses and upholds a certain standpoint against the (expressed and upheld) doubt of the other arguer who expresses and upholds an opposite standpoint. There are, however, also cases in which the argumentative confrontation evolves in a way that eliminates the disagreement. For example, the arguer who has advanced a certain standpoint may realise, once his standpoint is faced with doubt, that he cannot commit himself to the defence of this standpoint, and may therefore retract (rather than uphold) the standpoint that he has advanced. The outcome of the confrontation in such a case is a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute.<sup>8</sup>

The Prime Minister's attempts to eliminate his disagreement with the Opposition, in the examples (2) and (3) above, are examples of confrontational strategic manoeuvring that aims at arriving at the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute. In these attempts, the Prime Minister casts doubt upon the critical standpoint of the Opposition by pointing out reasons for considering this

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<sup>8</sup> Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992a) do not mention no dispute as one of the types of disputes that can result from argumentative confrontations; however, the retraction of a standpoint advanced and the retraction of the doubt cast are listed as options that are available to arguers in the confrontation (1984: p. 101). The definition of the difference of opinion as a no dispute is the result of these two options being kept available to arguers.

standpoint untenable, aiming to lead the Opposition to retract it. In example (2), Mr. Brown's reference to the *sub judice rule* provides support for considering Mr. Cameron's point of view about the Lee Jasper case untenable: Mr. Cameron cannot have a claim about a matter that is still undergoing a police investigation. Likewise, in example (3), Mr. Blair's pointing out of an inconsistency in Mr. Duncan Smith's position provides support for considering the latter's position untenable: Mr. Duncan Smith cannot uphold a claim that is inconsistent with another position that he can be held committed to.

In both cases, above, the retraction of the critical standpoint by the Opposition would bring about an outcome of the argumentative confrontation that is favourable to the Prime Minister. Mr. Brown would not need to engage in a discussion concerning the behaviour of Lee Jasper, and yet he might be considered to have defeated Mr. Cameron who had to give up his critical standpoint. Similarly, the success of Mr. Blair's accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Duncan Smith would spare him the need to discuss whether or not government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS because Mr. Duncan Smith's retraction of his critical standpoint would eliminate the initial disagreement about this standpoint. The definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, which results from Mr. Duncan Smith's retraction of his standpoint, is very likely to be considered a victory for Mr. Blair. In both cases, the Prime Minister seems to have managed to steer the argumentative confrontation towards the favourable outcome of identifying no dispute about the Opposition's retracted critical standpoint, and therefore would be considered to have defeated the Opposition without the need to engage in a discussion concerning this standpoint.

The Prime Minister's resort to parliamentary rules (*example (2)*) or to accusations of inconsistency (*example (3)*) to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition provide good examples of arguers' attempts to remain within the boundaries of reasonableness while steering argumentative confrontations towards favourable outcomes. Referring to the *sub judice* rule of Parliament seems to be a reasonable way for the Prime Minister to exclude a standpoint of the Opposition which concerns a case that is under police investigation. Similarly, pointing out an inconsistency between the Opposition's point of view at issue and another position or action of the Opposition seems a reasonable way to lead the

Opposition to retract the standpoint at issue. After all, one cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent positions about the same matter simultaneously. In view of the alleged inconsistency, it becomes in principle reasonable to consider the point of view at issue untenable and in need of retraction.

As can be seen from examples (2) and (3) above, the Prime Minister's explicit attempts to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion are not necessarily unreasonable. Argumentative confrontations can evolve reasonably and yet yield a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute. In order to establish in a more systematic way how reasonable argumentative confrontations may evolve, and how they may lead to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion can be useful.

### **2.3 A dialectical profile of the confrontation stage**

Dialectical profiles are heuristic tools developed within the pragma-dialectical framework in order to provide a step-by-step specification of the moves that the two discussants in a critical discussion can make or have to make (van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007a, 2007b). The profiles represent in the form of dialogical trees the moves that are relevant to the critical resolution of the difference of opinion. For every stage of the resolution process, a dialectical profile can be designed to represent the sequential patterns of moves that contribute to the realisation of a particular dialectical aim in this stage. The dialectical profile of the confrontation stage would, for example, spell out the different procedural ways in which the difference of opinion can be defined.

It is crucial to emphasise that dialectical profiles are not designed to provide a descriptive representation of how argumentative exchanges actually proceed; they are rather designed to provide a normative representation of how such exchanges ought to proceed in order for a particular dialectical aim of a particular dialectical stage to be realised. For example, the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage is designed to represent how argumentative confrontations ought to proceed if arguers aim at defining their difference of opinion in a reasonable way. For that, the parties' dialectical obligations in the confrontation

stage of a critical discussion are expressed in terms of turns in a tree-like dialogical diagram.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I shall propose a design for the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage. In designing the profile, I shall follow the principles of (a) systematicity, (b) comprehensiveness, (c) analyticity, (d) economy and (e) finiteness as suggested by van Eemeren *et al.* (2007b). By operating in this way, the presentation of sequential moves will include all the moves that are necessary for the achievement of every definition of the difference of opinion that is achieved in accordance with the ideal dialectical procedure of critical testing, without becoming too complex, repetitive or infinite. A basic dialectical profile<sup>10</sup> of the confrontation stage of a single dispute is presented below (*Figure 1*) followed by a step-by-step specification of how an ideal confrontation can proceed.

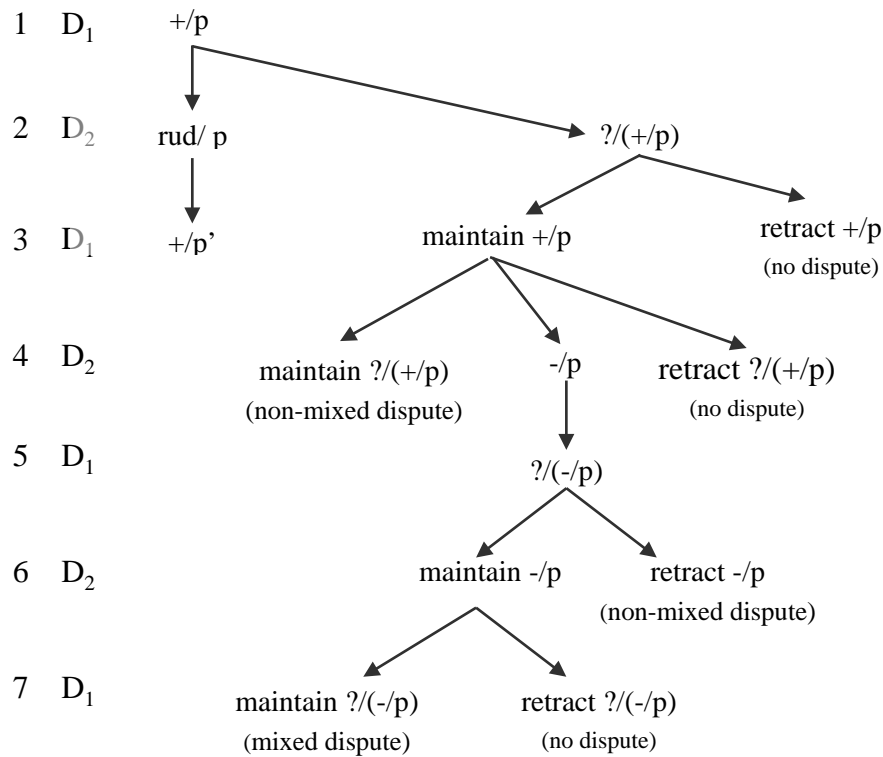
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<sup>9</sup> The idea of dialectical profiles was inspired by Walton and Krabbe's idea of a profile of dialogue (Krabbe, 1992, 2002; Walton & Krabbe, 1995; Walton 1999). However, unlike profiles of dialogue, dialectical profiles are always supposed to be normative (van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007a). That eventually makes the heuristic functions of the two concepts significantly different.

<sup>10</sup> The profile suggested is basic in the sense that it expresses the basic dialectical procedure. Based on it, extended profiles can be designed to highlight specific extra elements such as the formulation of the expressed opinion (e.g. van Laar, 2006).



**Figure 1: Basic dialectical profile of the confrontation stage of a single dispute**



- 
- D<sub>1</sub> : MP from the Opposition
  - D<sub>2</sub> : The Prime Minister
  - +/p : Advance a positive standpoint concerning the proposition p
  - ?/(+p) : Cast doubt on the positive standpoint
  - /p : Advance a negative standpoint concerning the proposition p
  - ?/(-/p) : Cast doubt on the negative standpoint
  - rud/p : Request a usage declarative concerning the proposition p
  - +/p' : Advance a reformulation of the positive standpoint by using a usage declarative

The confrontation stage of a critical discussion is initiated by an arguer, discussant 1 (D<sub>1</sub>), expressing a standpoint (*turn 1*), and another arguer, discussant 2 (D<sub>2</sub>), casting doubt on it (*turn 2, right branch*). In these first two turns, an initial disagreement is externalised concerning a certain standpoint. This externalised initial disagreement triggers the critical discussion aimed at critically resolving the difference of opinion. However, the externalisation of this initial disagreement is not enough for a complete confrontation; the discussants need to arrive at a

definition of their difference of opinion. In order for that to happen,  $D_1$  is required in his next turn to either uphold his expressed standpoint or retract it (*turn 3*). Because ideally the discussants are voluntarily engaged in a critical discussion about a certain standpoint, both options should be allowable to  $D_1$  in response to the doubt of  $D_2$ . While upholding the expressed standpoint would be a step towards confirming the initial disagreement, the retraction of the expressed opinion would terminate it. Retracting the expressed standpoint at this turn would leave the discussants with no externalised disagreement, and would therefore end the confrontation stage with no dispute to resolve (*turn 3, right branch*).<sup>11</sup>

In response to  $D_1$  upholding his expressed opinion,  $D_2$  should also be given the chance to either maintain or retract his expressed doubt concerning  $D_1$ 's expressed opinion (*turn 4*). Here too, both options should be granted to  $D_2$  in order to guarantee the discussants' freedom of engagement in a discussion. The retraction of the expressed doubt by  $D_2$  would leave the discussants with no disagreement to resolve, and therefore end the confrontation stage with a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute (*turn 4, right branch*). The upholding of doubt by  $D_2$  would in contrast confirm the difference of opinion between the discussants: there would then be an elementary difference of opinion, a non-mixed dispute in which  $D_1$  has a positive standpoint that  $D_2$  doubts (*turn 4, left branch*).

In response to  $D_1$ 's upheld standpoint,  $D_2$  can go one step further in externalising the disagreement: instead of merely upholding his doubt concerning the expressed and upheld standpoint, he could also express its opposite (*turn 4, middle branch*). Supposing that  $D_1$ 's expressed standpoint is a positive standpoint concerning a proposition  $p$ ,  $D_2$  can at this turn of the confrontation respond to  $D_1$ 's maintained positive standpoint by advancing a negative standpoint concerning the same proposition  $p$ . In contrast with the simple move of upholding doubt, the move of advancing a negative standpoint in response to  $D_1$ 's

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<sup>11</sup> The retraction of doubt or of the standpoint advanced, at this point of the argumentative exchange, does not fall under the problematic cases of retractions discussed by Krabbe (2001). At this point, the retraction does not remove a commitment that is necessary for the other party to build a case. It is, consequently, not a retraction that hinders the critical testing procedure and should therefore be considered permissible.

maintained positive standpoint is a complex move. It is complex in the sense that it involves two simple moves: upholding doubt and expressing a negative standpoint. This complex move by  $D_2$  has the potential to turn the disagreement between  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  into a mixed dispute in which the discussants have opposite standpoints concerning the same proposition.

In response to  $D_2$ 's expressed negative standpoint,  $D_1$  has only one option: to doubt it (*turn 5*). Given that a standpoint implies doubt concerning its opposite, and that  $D_1$  has expressed and upheld a positive standpoint concerning a proposition  $p$ ,  $D_1$  can be held committed to an implied doubt concerning the opposite standpoint as soon as this standpoint is expressed by  $D_2$ . In response to  $D_1$ 's doubt concerning his negative standpoint,  $D_2$  should be allowed to either retract or uphold his advanced negative standpoint (*turn 6*). Here again,  $D_2$  should have these options in order to guarantee that the externalisation of the disagreement remains voluntary. Retracting the negative standpoint will terminate the disagreement about it and leave the discussants with an externalised disagreement about the positive standpoint only, i.e. a non-mixed dispute (*turn 6, right branch*). Maintaining the negative standpoint (*turn 6, left branch*) will in contrast move the disagreement about the negative standpoint one step further: the disagreement has the potential to become fully externalised in the following turn.

In response to  $D_2$ 's upheld negative standpoint (*turn 6, left branch*),  $D_1$  is granted, in line with the voluntariness requirement, the freedom of either upholding or retracting his doubt concerning the negative standpoint advanced (*turn 7*). If  $D_1$  maintains his doubt concerning the negative standpoint of  $D_2$ , the disagreement about this standpoint is confirmed. Confirming the disagreement about the negative standpoint closes the confrontation stage with a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute in which the discussants have opposite standpoints, each doubted by the other discussant (*turn 7, left branch*). If  $D_1$  retracts his doubt concerning the negative standpoint of  $D_2$ , the disagreement about this standpoint ceases to exist. Furthermore, the retraction of doubt concerning the negative standpoint by  $D_1$  requires him to retract his own positive standpoint:  $D_1$  cannot maintain a positive standpoint if he does not have doubt

about its opposite. After all, when a discussant expresses a positive standpoint concerning a proposition, doubt regarding the negative standpoint is implied, and he can be held committed to it as soon as this negative standpoint is expressed. Without having doubt concerning an existing negative standpoint, a discussant cannot uphold a positive standpoint.<sup>12</sup> Retracting doubt concerning the negative standpoint is in this case another complex move in the confrontation stage: it implies the retraction of the positive standpoint as well. Opting for this complex move,  $D_1$  eventually puts an end to his disagreement with  $D_2$  and closes the confrontation stage with no dispute to be resolved by means of argumentation (*turn 7, right branch*).

The profile also includes the option for  $D_2$  to respond to the initial expression of the positive standpoint of  $D_1$  by requesting the latter to define or clarify some terms or to be more precise or detailed in expressing his standpoint. This is achieved by performing a request for a usage declarative ( $D_2$ , *turn 2, left branch*) that promotes mutual comprehension of the expressed standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: p. 109). In response to this request,  $D_1$  has to provide the requested usage declarative, which results in a reformulation of the initial standpoint that is clearer, more precise or more detailed ( $D_1$ , *turn 3, left branch*). In response to this reformulated standpoint,  $D_2$  can either express doubt, or request another usage declarative to which  $D_1$  has to respond by a once more reformulated standpoint which can be faced with either doubt or yet another request for a usage declarative, and so on. Eventually, every reformulated standpoint of  $D_1$  becomes an initial standpoint from which the confrontation can proceed (*turn 1*).

Even though it is in principle the right of any of the discussants to request the other to perform a usage declarative that provides further definition, precisation, amplification, explication or explicitisation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984), in the confrontation stage, this move can be performed only by  $D_2$  as a response to the initial expression of the positive standpoint by  $D_1$ . The

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<sup>12</sup> If  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  have a disagreement concerning a positive point of view, it is not possible for them to have no disagreement concerning the negative point of view, unless this negative point of view is not assumed by any of them. (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: p. 17)

reason for this is that all the other moves in the confrontation stage are about a specific proposition  $p$  about which  $D_1$  expresses a standpoint. Ideally, the need for a usage declarative to promote mutual understanding arises only as a response to the expression of the (positive) standpoint by  $D_1$  in his first turn. Once  $D_2$  understands  $D_1$ 's expressed standpoint, there should no longer be any room for misunderstanding. If  $D_1$ 's expressed standpoint is understood by  $D_2$ , all the remaining moves become clear: upholding the expressed standpoint, retracting it, doubting it or retracting the doubt cast on it, as well as the expression of its opposite, retracting it, doubting it or retracting the doubt cast on it; there should be no need for a usage declarative with respect to any of these.

The specification presented above describes the different ways in which an ideal confrontation can proceed; an actual confrontation hardly ever proceeds as described. Actual argumentative confrontations are never ideal in the sense that they do hardly ever aim solely at defining the difference of opinion between the arguers in a way that does not hinder critical testing. Furthermore, actual argumentative confrontations are not always reasonable, in the sense that even when arguers are actually geared towards achieving a clear definition of the difference of opinion, their efforts need not always be successful and they might well fail to achieve the definition they pursue. Moreover, arguers can even be geared towards a reasonable definition of their difference of opinion, and argue reasonably, without necessarily performing all and only those moves that are prescribed in the ideal model and represented in the dialectical profile. An arguer can for example express his doubt by means of a question or a request for justification, and he may also respond to an initial expression of a positive standpoint by the immediate expression of the opposite standpoint.

In spite of the gap that exists between ideal and actual argumentative exchanges, dialectical profiles are instrumental for the examination of actual argumentative confrontations. Every move in the profile is in fact a slot that expresses the (dialectical) function of a multitude of actual argumentative moves that can be considered analytically relevant, and is in that sense a slot for analytically relevant moves (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006). As van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992b, 2000) explain, a particular argumentative move can be considered analytically relevant when the move plays a role in the critical

resolution of a difference of opinion. For example, asking a question in response to an expressed opinion is often analytically relevant because the question can function as an expression of doubt concerning the expressed opinion.<sup>13</sup>

Because dialectical profiles are derived from the ideal model of a critical discussion, which includes all moves that are relevant to the resolution process, these profiles taken together represent every move in actual argumentative discussions that is relevant to the resolution of the difference of opinion. Under the basic assumption that arguers are expected to pursue a critical resolution of their difference of opinion, the profiles guide the analyst into a methodological interpretation of the moves in actual argumentative exchanges. For example, with the help of the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage, the analyst can assign an argumentative function to the actual argumentative moves that play a role in the definition of the difference of opinion between the arguers. Every actual argumentative move that is analytically relevant can, from this perspective, be considered a realisation of a certain slot for analytically relevant moves in the dialectical profile.<sup>14</sup>

Viewed in light of the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage, the Prime Minister's attempts to exclude opposition standpoints in examples (2) and (3) can be viewed as attempts to reach the outcome of no dispute at turn 3 of the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage. The attempts can be considered cases of a particular *type* of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in which a discussant who casts doubt on an expressed opinion aims to lead the other discussant, who is the proponent of this expressed opinion, to retract it in order to define the difference of opinion as no dispute. In general, a *type* of confrontational strategic manoeuvring can be viewed as the attempt, at a certain slot for analytically relevant moves in the confrontation stage, to bring about the performance of a *preferred* analytically relevant move in a turn that follows, in order to reach a favourable definition of the difference of opinion. Like all types of confrontational manoeuvring, the type at issue aims at a favourable definition

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<sup>13</sup> Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992b) draw a distinction between analytic and evaluative relevance. While it is enough for a move to play a role in the critical testing procedure to be analytically relevant, a move needs to play a positive role, i.e. to be a positive contribution to the critical testing procedure, in order for it to be also evaluatively relevant.

<sup>14</sup> The profile can also be insightful in making explicit the moves that are left implicit in the discourse, such as the doubt that is implicit in expressing an opposite point of view.

of the difference of opinion within the boundaries of critical reasonableness. This particular type of manoeuvring can however be distinguished from other types in terms of (a) the particular point in the dialectical procedure where it occurs, (b) the specific outcome that is pursued, and (c) the dialectical route<sup>15</sup> that is favoured to reach the pursued outcome.

#### **2.4 Strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint**

The type of confrontational strategic manoeuvring at issue occurs at the slot for the analytically relevant move of casting doubt by  $D_2$  on a positive standpoint that has just been expressed by  $D_1$ . In both examples (2) and (3), the Prime Minister reacts to the expression of a critical standpoint by the Opposition by providing justification for not accepting the expressed standpoint. In example (2), he points out that the standpoint of the Opposition violates the rules of Parliament by bringing into discussion a matter that is under police investigation, and in example (3) he points out that the standpoint of the Opposition is inconsistent with some other position that the Opposition assumes. Both of these moves convey that the Prime Minister does not accept the standpoint of the Opposition; they therefore function as expressions of critical doubt about it. Thus, the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue realises the slot for the analytically relevant move of casting doubt at turn 2 of the dialectical procedure (see Figure 1).

The type of confrontational strategic manoeuvring at issue aims at defining the difference of opinion as no dispute, to the favour of  $D_2$ . As can be seen from the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage, a no dispute outcome can be reasonably achieved at three points of the dialectical procedure of the confrontation: turns 3, 4 and 7. At turn 3,  $D_1$  can retract his expressed positive standpoint. That would eliminate the initial disagreement between  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  leaving them with no dispute to argue about. At turn 4,  $D_2$  can retract his expressed doubt about the positive standpoint of  $D_1$ , which would also eliminate the initial disagreement between  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  leaving them with no difference of

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<sup>15</sup> A dialectical route is a sequence of analytically relevant moves that needs to be performed in order to achieve an outcome of a certain dialectical stage (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006, 2007b).

opinion to resolve by means of argumentation. While the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute resulting at turn 3 is to the favour of  $D_2$  who would not have to give up his doubt, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute resulting at turn 4 is to the favour of  $D_1$  who can in fact maintain his positive standpoint. Consequently, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute reached at turn 4 cannot be considered to be the favourable outcome pursued in a type of strategic manoeuvring of  $D_2$ . Another definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute can result at turn 7 where  $D_1$  retracts his doubt concerning  $D_2$ 's negative standpoint and consequently withdraws his own positive standpoint. This no dispute definition of the definition of the difference of opinion is also favourable for  $D_2$  because it enables him to maintain his negative standpoint without the need to discuss it.

Because the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, favourable to  $D_2$ , can be achieved at two different points of the dialectical procedure, two different dialectical routes that lead to it can be favoured by  $D_2$  (*Figure 2, below*).

**Figure 2: Dialectical routes that lead to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute favourable to  $D_2$**

Dialectical route 1:

1. $D_1$ :	+/p	advance a positive standpoint
2. $D_2$ :	?/(+/p)	advance doubt in respect of the advanced positive standpoint
3. $D_1$ :	retract +/p	retract the positive standpoint => No dispute

Dialectical route 2:

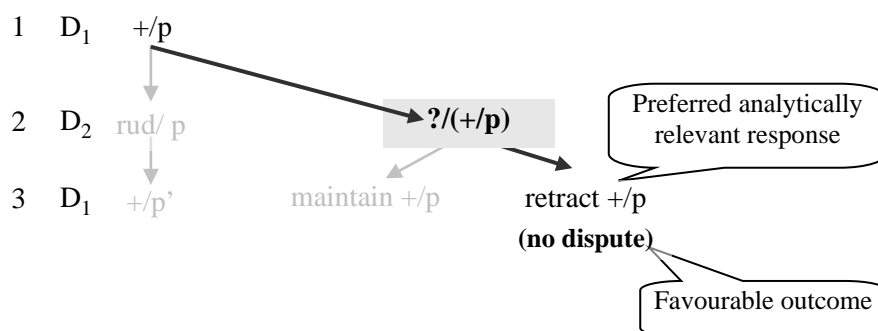
1. $D_1$ :	+/p	advance a positive standpoint
2. $D_2$ :	?/(+/p)	advance doubt in respect of the advanced positive standpoint
3. $D_1$ :	maintain +/p	maintain the advanced positive standpoint
4. $D_2$ :	-/p	advance a negative standpoint
5. $D_1$ :	?/(-/p)	advance doubt in respect of the advanced negative standpoint
6. $D_2$ :	maintain -/p	maintain the advanced negative standpoint
7. $D_1$ :	retract ?/(-/p)	Retract doubt in respect of the advanced negative standpoint, which implies retracting one's own positive standpoint



| => No dispute

In principle, it is possible that either of these routes is  $D_2$ 's favourite when he casts doubt on the expressed opinion of  $D_1$  attempting to bring about the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, favourable to him. However, for the Prime Minister's attempts to exclude a standpoint of the Opposition described above, route 2 cannot really be the Prime Minister's favourite. Route 2 requires the Prime Minister to assume a standpoint that is the opposite of the one he wants to exclude from the discussion, and that is a commitment that we may assume he would rather avoid. The Prime Minister's attempts are, therefore, best represented by the type of strategic manoeuvring that takes route 1 to achieve a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute. The particular type of strategic manoeuvring at issue is represented in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3**



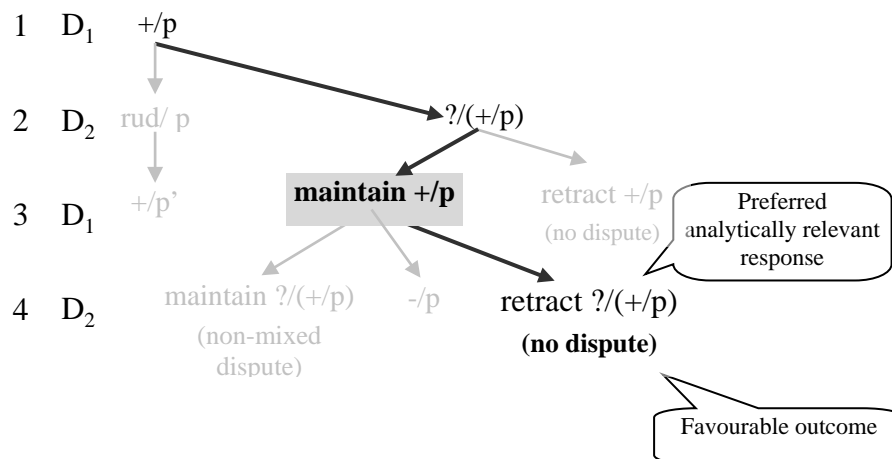
The Prime Minister's attempts to exclude the standpoint of the Opposition in examples (2) and (3) were both instances of this type of strategic manoeuvring. In each of these instances, the Prime Minister casts doubt on a standpoint expressed by the Opposition in a way that is very likely to lead the Opposition to retract the standpoint at issue in the next turn. The Prime Minister thereby aims to reach a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, which is favourable to him.

This type of manoeuvring can be referred to, either by mentioning the slot for analytically relevant moves that it realises, as strategic manoeuvring in casting doubt, or by mentioning to the slot for analytically relevant moves that it aims at bringing about, i.e. the preferred analytically relevant response, as strategic manoeuvring to lead the proponent of a standpoint to retract his standpoint, or by mentioning both slots, as strategic manoeuvring in casting doubt

in an attempt to lead the proponent of a standpoint to retract his standpoint. Even though the latter is the most accurate of the three, for the sake of simplicity, I shall opt for a slightly less complicated way of referring merely to this type of manoeuvring by mentioning the aim of the arguer in this type, that of ruling out a standpoint.

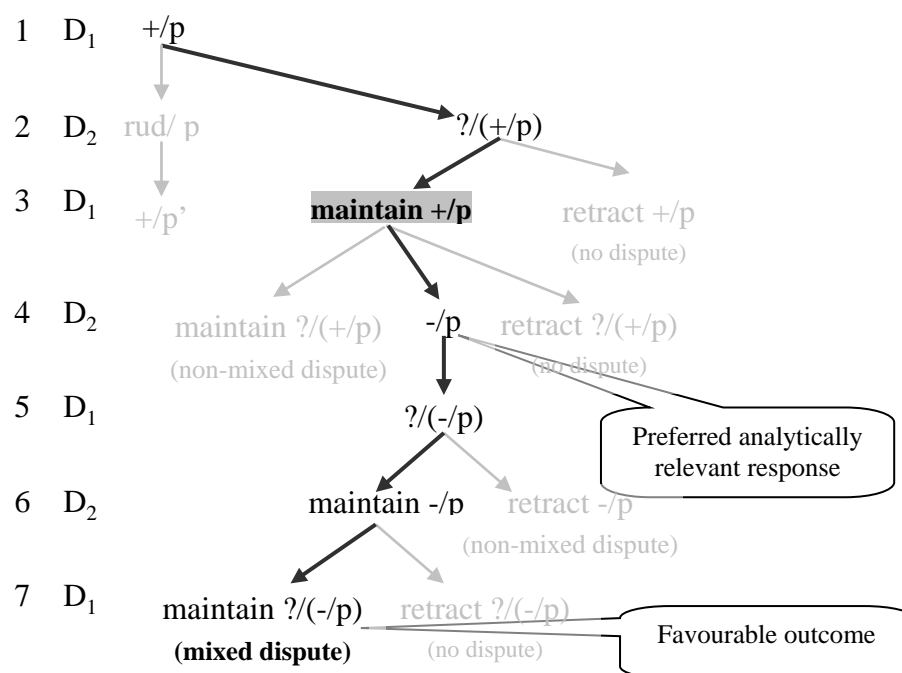
Different types of strategic manoeuvring result from variations in the slot for the analytically relevant move that is realised, the outcome that is pursued or the dialectical route that is favoured. For example, there can be a type of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in which  $D_1$  aims at a defining the difference of opinion as no dispute, and, in order to achieve this outcome, maintains his positive standpoint at turn 3 in a way that leads  $D_2$  to retract his advanced doubt at the next turn. This type is represented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**



Another type of confrontational manoeuvring that is available to  $D_1$  (Figure 5) is one that brings about a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute, which can also be a favourable outcome of the confrontation stage for  $D_1$ .  $D_1$  then maintains the positive standpoint in a way that leads  $D_2$  to express and uphold the opposite standpoint in turns 4 and 6 of the dialectical profile.

**Figure 5**



As suggested above, a type of confrontational manoeuvring is an attempt to strike a balance between arguers' dialectical and rhetorical aims at a certain slot for analytically relevant moves in the dialectical procedure of the confrontation stage. While the concern for rhetorical effectiveness directs the arguer's choices towards a favourable definition of the difference of opinion and a particular dialectical route that leads to it, i.e. a preferred dialectical route, the concern for critical reasonableness restricts their choices to those outcomes and routes that are in accord with the dialectical norm of critical testing.

The main advantage of identifying types of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in terms of analytically relevant moves is that at this level of characterisation it is possible to generate, in a systematic way, a finite list of types of strategic manoeuvring within the category of confrontational manoeuvring. That is because, as van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2007b) observe, the dialectical profile indicates a finite set of routes that arguers can take if they want to achieve the outcome of a certain dialectical stage in a reasonable way (p. 376).

In contrast with the finite number of analytically relevant moves that are available to the discussants in a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a, 2004), the number of moves that the arguer may choose in actual

argumentative discussions is infinite. In fact, in every actual move in an actual discussion a choice is made from countless possibilities for realising a slot for analytically relevant moves in the dialectical procedure. Because every actual argumentative move is an opportunity for strategic manoeuvring in realising a slot for analytically relevant moves in a certain dialectical stage (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006), the countless possibilities for realising a certain slot of analytically relevant moves are in fact countless *ways* of strategic manoeuvring. In other words, every *type* of strategic manoeuvring, which is identified in terms of analytically relevant moves, can be realised in an indefinite number of *ways* in an actual argumentative discussion. The Prime Minister's resort to an accusation of inconsistency in an attempt to exclude standpoints of the Opposition can be considered as a particular *way* of strategic manoeuvring, in which the particular *type* of strategic manoeuvring characterised above is realised by means of accusations of inconsistency.

## **2.5 Accusations of inconsistency to rule out a standpoint**

While both examples (2) and (3) discussed earlier are cases of the same type of strategic manoeuvring, which is aimed at excluding a standpoint from the discussion, the two examples differ in the way the slot for the analytically relevant move of casting doubt is realised in the actual confrontation. In example (2), Mr. Brown casts doubt by referring to the *sub judice* rule, while, in example (3), Mr. Blair casts doubt by pointing out an inconsistency in Mr. Duncan Smith's position. This difference in the actual argumentative move that realises the slot for the analytically relevant move of casting doubt results in two different ways of strategic manoeuvring. In example (2), the Prime Minister's attempt to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition is an instance of a particular way of manoeuvring in which reference to parliamentary rules is employed to exclude a certain standpoint from the discussion. In example (3), the Prime Minister's attempt is an instance of another way of manoeuvring, one in which an accusation of inconsistency is employed to exclude the standpoint.

A particular *way* of strategic manoeuvring is in this sense a particular way of realising a particular *type* of strategic manoeuvring. The Prime Minister's

attempts to exclude standpoints of the Opposition by means of accusations of inconsistency are to be viewed as instances of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring in which a particular type of manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint is realised by means of an actual accusation of inconsistency. It is this particular way of manoeuvring that will be the subject of examination in this study.

While a type of strategic manoeuvring can be referred to by reference to the slots for analytically relevant moves it involves, the reference to a particular way of manoeuvring needs to include reference to the actual moves that are performed by the arguer in a discussion. The particular way of manoeuvring, subject of examination in this study, can thus be referred to by mentioning the actual move that is performed as strategic manoeuvring by accusation of inconsistency. Reference to actual moves is however not sufficient in depicting the particular way of manoeuvring; there also needs to be a reference to the analytically relevant function of the move and the outcome it pursues. An adequate way to refer to the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue would hence be to refer to it as strategic manoeuvring in casting doubt by an accusation of inconsistency to rule out a standpoint. Here too, I opt for simplicity by referring to the way of confrontational manoeuvring at issue as strategic manoeuvring by accusation of inconsistency to rule out a standpoint. This way of referring to the manoeuvring reflects both the actual argumentative move that is performed and the favourable outcome that is aimed at. Furthermore, referring to the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue as proposed above mentions, as van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2007b) recommend, the most conspicuous manifestation of the manoeuvring at issue, i.e. the accusation of inconsistency.

In light of the view that an instance of strategic manoeuvring is actually a speech act that realises a slot for analytically relevant moves of the dialectical procedure (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006), the particular way of strategic manoeuvring that is the subject of this study can be viewed as the one in which the speech act of accusation of inconsistency realises the particular type of manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint. With the help of the characterisation of an accusation of inconsistency as a speech act (Andone, 2008) and in light of the account given by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) for speech acts in argumentative discussions, I shall characterise the particular way of strategic

manoeuvring at issue and analyse the Prime Minister's responses in example (3) as a case of this particular way of manoeuvring.

The account Andone provides of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency is central to the intended characterisation and analysis because it makes it possible to link the perlocutionary effects of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency to the Opposition's retraction of their standpoint, which the Prime Minister's manoeuvring aims at. As characterised by Andone (2008), "an accusation of inconsistency counts as raising a charge against an addressee for having committed himself to both A and –A, in an attempt to challenge him to provide an answering response to the charge" (p. 155).<sup>16</sup>

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), the minimal perlocutionary effect of an illocutionary act is acceptance; illocutionary acts can however have optimal perlocutionary effects as well. For example, the illocutionary act of a question has the minimal perlocutionary effect of getting itself accepted as such, but also the optimal perlocutionary effect of securing an answer. As for all other illocutionary acts, the minimal perlocutionary effect of accusations of inconsistency is acceptance. The optimal effect of this speech act (also referred to as consecutive perlocutionary effect or consecutive consequence) is what Andone refers to in the essential condition as providing an answering response to the charge. In line with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1995), who understand an accusation of inconsistency as an attempt to get the accused to eliminate the inconsistency by retracting one of the inconsistent commitments (p. 195), I suggest that such an answer needs to be the retraction of either of the two mutually inconsistent commitments expressed, i.e. either the commitment to A or the commitment to –A.

In the exchange between Mr. Blair and Mr. Duncan Smith examined earlier, Mr. Blair accuses Mr. Duncan Smith of an inconsistency concerning the latter's attitude towards the NHS. On the one hand, the position implied in the

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<sup>16</sup> Andone (2008) lists the following conditions for the speech act of accusation of inconsistency: the addressee has committed himself to both A and –A (*propositional content condition*); the speaker believes that the addressee will (1) acknowledge that the presence of an inconsistency obstructs the argumentative exchange that he and his interlocutor are engaged in, and (2) be committed to provide an answering response to the charge of inconsistency (*preparatory conditions*); the speaker believes that (a) the addressee has committed an inconsistency, and (b) the presence of an inconsistency constitutes an obstruction to the exchange (*sincerity conditions*).

question of Mr. Duncan, namely that the *Government is to blame for damaging the NHS*, entails an interest in the NHS. On the other hand, the Conservatives' opposition to the government's plans to increase investment in the health sector as well as the quoted point of view of Mr. Duncan Smith commit him to an opposite attitude, Mr. Blair implies. In support of the alleged inconsistency, Mr. Blair says that 'we know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it', and he quotes Mr. Duncan Smith as saying that 'the health service does not serve anybody' to conclude that the Opposition wants to undermine the NHS.

As characterised by Andone, the accusation of inconsistency attributes to the accused the commitments to A and –A. In the case at issue, Mr. Blair attributes to Mr. Duncan Smith a commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* (A) and to its opposite. The commitment to A is presented as following from the Opposition's critical standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS*, and the opposite commitment is attributed to Mr. Duncan Smith on the basis of his previous positions, especially his quoted words that the NHS does not serve anybody. The accusation also requires the accused to retract one of the inconsistent commitments. Upon acceptance of the accusation, Mr. Duncan Smith needs to act in accordance with one of the consecutive consequences of his acceptance, i.e. he must either retract his current position (and therefore his commitment to A) or to admit that he does not maintain his other position (and therefore retract the attributed commitment to –A).

Once the expression of a standpoint and the response with an accusation of inconsistency in the actual dialogue between Mr. Blair and Mr. Duncan Smith are viewed as part of an argumentative exchange, these two actual moves can be viewed as realisations of the slots in the dialectical profile for advancing a standpoint and for casting doubt respectively. These slots are represented in turns 1 and 2 of the dialectical profile. The accusation of inconsistency can be the realisation of an expression of doubt concerning the standpoint of the Opposition that *the Government's policies are to blame for damaging the NHS* because an implication of this accusation is that the Opposition cannot express this standpoint. More precisely, in presenting the previous positions of Mr. Duncan Smith as his real position (*we know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run*

*down the national health service*), Mr. Blair implies that the commitment that Mr. Duncan Smith cannot maintain is the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*. Since this commitment, which needs to be retracted according to Mr. Blair, follows from the standpoint of the Opposition, Mr. Blair's accusation can be taken to convey his doubt concerning the standpoint of the Opposition.

When an accusation of inconsistency is employed in an argumentative discussion, arguers usually aim to bring about one particular consecutive consequence of the illocutionary act: either the retraction of the commitment to A, or the retraction of the commitment to  $\neg A$ . The particular consecutive consequence that an arguer aims at will be hereafter referred to as the *preferred* consecutive consequence. Considering that the speech act of accusation of inconsistency is a realisation of a certain slot for analytically relevant moves in a particular type of strategic manoeuvring, the preferred consecutive consequence will realise the preferred analytically relevant move in that particular type of manoeuvring. When an accusation of inconsistency is employed to rule out a standpoint, I take the preferred consecutive consequence to be the retraction of the commitment that follows from the standpoint of the proponent, i.e. the commitment to A, because such a retraction entails the retraction of the expressed standpoint itself, which is the preferred analytically relevant response in the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue (*see Figure 6, below*).

**Figure 6: Actual preferred route taken in the strategic manoeuvring by accusation of inconsistency to rule out a standpoint**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. D<sub>1</sub>: Advance a standpoint (+/p)</li> <li>2. D<sub>2</sub>: Accusation of inconsistency (?/(+/p))</li> <li>3. D<sub>1</sub>: Retracting commitment to A (retract +/p)</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center; margin-left: 40px;">=&gt; <i>No dispute</i>)</p>	<div style="border-left: 1px solid black; padding-left: 10px;"> <p>preferred consecutive consequence</p> <p>favourable outcome</p> </div>
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The retraction of the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* by Mr. Duncan Smith is clearly the response preferred by Mr. Blair. In his response to the standpoint of Mr. Duncan Smith, Mr. Blair seems to imply that the Opposition cannot criticise the government for having policies that damage the NHS if they do not think that the NHS deserves to be taken care of. Failing to



commit to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* therefore requires the Opposition to retract the standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS*. In other words, the retraction of the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* by Mr. Duncan Smith would be a realisation of the slot for retracting the expressed standpoint in the dialectical procedure.

As it has been characterised above, Mr. Blair's attempt to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition by means of an accusation of inconsistency is an instance of a particular way of realising the type of confrontational manoeuvring characterised earlier as strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint. In this way of manoeuvring, the accusation of inconsistency is a particular realisation of the slot for expressing doubt. The preferred consecutive consequence of the accusation, the retraction of the commitment to A, would be a realisation of the slot for retracting the positive standpoint, which is the preferred analytically relevant move. An arguer's strategic manoeuvring in this particular way would consist of making the most opportune choices from the topical potential, audience frames and stylistic devices that are available in order to lead the proponent to retract his commitment to A, and to portray the retraction of the proponent's standpoint to be due as a consequence of the retraction of the commitment to A. In example (3), for instance, Mr. Blair exploits the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring in an attempt to appear reasonable while leading Mr. Duncan Smith to retract the standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS* through the retraction of his commitment to the proposition that *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*.

From the topical potential available to Mr. Blair, he has chosen to express his doubt about the opposition standpoint by reference to a relevant inconsistency in the position of the Opposition. From all the propositions that follow from the Opposition's (current) standpoint, Mr. Blair selected a proposition A (*the NHS deserves to be taken care of*) that is inconsistent with another position of the Opposition, namely the one against investment in the health sector. The accusation of inconsistency puts pressure on the Opposition to retract one of the inconsistent commitments. The Prime Minister's choice of the previous position puts pressure on the Opposition to retract the commitment that follows from the current position, i.e. commitment to A, rather than the other commitment

assumed. In other words, the choice of the previous position directs the Opposition towards Mr. Blair's preferred response. Mr. Blair chooses to refer to a particular position of the Opposition that is not easy to abandon. He refers to one of the Conservative Party's principal positions, one that is very unlikely to change: the opposition to more investment in public sector. From this position, Mr. Blair draws an opportune implication that is inconsistent with the Opposition's current position, namely that the Opposition can be held committed to –A (*the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of*). He further quotes Mr. Duncan Smith as saying that the NHS does not serve anybody to support the attribution of the latter commitment. Given that Mr. Duncan Smith is very unlikely to give up the Conservatives' position against investment in the public sector, there is little chance that he would retract the commitment implied in the other position. It is rather the commitment that follows from the current standpoint that Mr. Duncan Smith will have to retract if he accepts the alleged inconsistency.

Mr. Blair's choice from the topical potential becomes an even more effective means of directing Mr. Duncan Smith towards the retraction of his standpoint thanks to an opportune choice of stylistic devices in presenting the alleged inconsistency. For example, Mr. Blair's presents Mr. Duncan Smith's commitment to *the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of* as beyond doubt when he says 'we know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service'. Such a presentation is opportune because it creates the impression that the accusation of inconsistency will be acceptable, i.e. the minimal perlocutionary effect of the speech act will be achieved, and that therefore Mr. Duncan Smith will have to make a choice between the two inconsistent commitments, i.e. the optimal perlocutionary effect of the speech act is expected. In other words, the way the accusation is formulated makes it not easy for the accused to deny it.

Furthermore, Mr. Blair attempts to present his accusation in a way that supports his interpretation of the Opposition's previous position as implying the commitment to –A. As he presents the Conservatives' opposition to an increase of investment in the health sector, Mr. Blair repeats in different formulations the idea that the Conservatives do not care about the NHS: they want to run it down,

they do not believe in it, they say it does not serve anybody, they insult it, denigrate it and want to undermine it. To attribute these different and yet much related attitudes towards the NHS to the Conservatives strengthens the implication that the Opposition does not think that the *NHS deserves to be taken care of*. Mr. Blair presents these different and yet very related attitudes as variations of the same commitment, namely that the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of, in order to compensate for the absence of an explicit pronouncement where this commitment is clearly taken by the Opposition.

The Prime Minister's choices of the topic and presentation of the accusation of inconsistency are in fact strategic only in combination with a particular choice of audience frame: the Conservative Party as a proponent of the critical standpoint that the Prime Minister wishes to exclude from the discussion. Had the proponent of the standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS* been an MP from a party that does not oppose investment in health, the Prime Minister would not have been capable of pointing out an inconsistency in the position of this proponent concerning the commitment as to whether or not *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*. With such a proponent, it would not have been possible for Mr. Blair to express doubt by means of the accusation of inconsistency that he employs to doubt Mr. Duncan Smith's standpoint.

Not only the appropriateness but also the effectiveness of employing the particular accusation which Mr. Blair employs depends on the proponent of the standpoint that he attempts to rule out. For example, suppose the proponent had been some other MP from the Conservative Party, an MP who is not the leader of the party or someone who had not expressed his standpoint against investment in health so strongly. For such a proponent, it would have been easier to change his mind concerning the Party's original position against the investment in health. There is a quite good chance that such a proponent would retract the commitment to  $\neg A$  instead of retracting the commitment to  $A$  as Mr. Blair's strategic manoeuvring intends. Because of the personal nature of commitments, strategic manoeuvring by means of accusations of inconsistency is more audience-frame-dependent than other ways of strategic manoeuvring are.



### **3 PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME**

In the previous chapter, the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to the criticism expressed by the Opposition were characterised as a particular way of strategic manoeuvring. This characterisation highlighted the strategic argumentative function of the responses as attempts to rule out, in what is in principle a reasonable way, a standpoint that is not accepted. Because institutional considerations are central to the discussants' attempts to win discussions within the boundaries of reasonableness, an adequate account of the strategic function of the responses at issue cannot be achieved without taking into account characteristics of the institutional context in which the responses occur. In this chapter, I shall, therefore, discuss the institutional context in which these attempts occur, i.e. that of the parliamentary session of Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons.

I shall start by discussing the concept of argumentative activity types (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005) in terms of its contribution to a more empirically adequate account of argumentative exchanges that occur in institutionalised contexts. Then, I shall describe and discuss the argumentative practice of Question Time and characterise it as an argumentative activity type, in order to shed light on the opportunities and constraints that the rules and conventions of the session provide for arguers' confrontational manoeuvring. The insights gained from the activity type perspective will, in the next chapter, be integrated into the analysis of attempts of the Prime Minister to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion, in order to provide an empirically adequate analytic account of the Prime Minister's attempts at issue.

#### **3.1 Towards an empirically adequate account of institutionalised argumentative practices**

The integration of institutional considerations into the analysis of argumentative exchanges is essential for an empirically adequate account of these exchanges. As

van Eemeren and Houtlosser observe, argumentation typically takes place in contexts that are to a greater or lesser degree institutionalised. The contexts in which argumentative exchanges typically occur are regulated by rules and conventions that establish preconditions for those argumentative exchanges. These preconditions eventually shape argumentative exchanges by creating opportunities and constraints for the arguers' strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006). For example, as a consequence of the convention of not allowing arguments from analogy in a Dutch criminal trial, certain strategic possibilities are closed off, mainly in relation to the evidence furnished by the prosecution, and at the same time other strategic possibilities open up, mainly for the defence (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009).<sup>17</sup> It is in the pursuit of tracing the influence of institutional considerations such as these that van Eemeren and Houtlosser introduced the concept of argumentative activity types.

Within the pragma-dialectical framework, the concept of argumentative activity types was introduced to represent the more or less institutionalised communicative practices in which argumentation plays a central role and which manifest themselves in more or less fixed formats that are culturally established (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005, 2009; van Eemeren & Garssen, 2008). Van Eemeren and Houtlosser discuss the institutionalised argumentative practices of mediation, adjudication and negotiation as examples of argumentative activity types. They describe each of these practices in view of its aim and the means to reach this aim given the rules and conventions that regulate it. Starting from this description, they identify the resulting conventional preconditions for argumentative exchanges that take place as part of the practices concerned. For example, the activity type of negotiation is described as the argumentative practice that is triggered by a conflict of interests and which aims at a compromise.

As van Eemeren and Houtlosser observe, the acceptable starting points, the allowable argumentative means and the possible ways to determine the outcome of the discussion are preconditioned by the rules and conventions that regulate negotiation practice. For example, the interests of the negotiating parties and their concessions are conventionally accepted as common starting points. So

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<sup>17</sup> More examples can be found in van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005: pp. 80-83).

are the laws, conventions and agreements that are relevant to the issues that are being negotiated; for instance, international trade agreements are typically the source of much of the common ground in a session of international trade negotiation. Also typical of negotiation is the practice of embodying arguments in exchanges of bids and offers, and their achieved outcome in a mutually accepted compromise.<sup>18</sup>

Using the concept of argumentative activity types, preconditions that apply to conventionalised argumentative practices can be methodically identified. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser identify the general preconditions that are applicable to the argumentative exchanges in the activity types of adjudication, mediation and negotiation by characterising each of the conventionalised argumentative practices at issue in terms of the four stages of critical testing. They identify preconditions that apply to (a) the initial situation which triggers the argumentative exchanges in the conventionalised practice, viewed in terms of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, (b) the procedural and material starting points that are mutually accepted in the practice concerned, viewed in terms of the opening stage, (c) the argumentative means allowable and employed by the arguers in the practice examined, viewed in terms of the argumentation stage, and (d) the possible outcomes of the argumentative exchanges in the practice at issue, viewed in terms of the concluding stage of a critical discussion. The preconditions so identified are represented in the table below.

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<sup>18</sup> On the basis of van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), Mohammed (2007b) presents an elaborate account of the argumentative activity type of negotiation as the argumentative practice in which negotiators externalise their interests in positions that they adopt, and engage in an argumentative discussion about the contribution of these positions to a compromise that satisfies the maximum of their conflicting interests. The characterisation of the activity type of negotiation suggested had been kept general to cover the different variants of negotiation encounters. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2008) observe, negotiation encounters can have different formats, each with their own more specific rules and conventions. The parties are usually free in their choice of the format they follow, but once the choice is made, they are bound to such specific rules and conventions.

**Figure 7: Three types of argumentative activity related to the model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005: p. 79)**

<b>Critical Discussion</b>	<i>Confrontation Stage</i>	<i>Opening Stage</i>	<i>Argumentation Stage</i>	<i>Concluding Stage</i>
<b>Action Types</b>	<i>Initial Situation</i>	<i>Starting Points (Material, Procedural)</i>	<i>Argumentative Means</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
<i>Argumentative Discourse</i>	Difference of opinion; decision up to the parties	Largely implicit intersubjective rules; implicitly and explicitly shared concessions;	Argumentation defending standpoints in critical exchanges	Resolution difference of opinion by joint decision or parties return to initial situation
<i>Adjudication</i>	Dispute; 3 <sup>rd</sup> party with jurisdiction to decide	Largely explicit codified rules; explicitly established concessions	Argumentation based on interpretation of concessions in terms of facts and evidence	Settlement of dispute by sustained decision 3 <sup>rd</sup> party (no return to initial situation)
<i>Mediation</i>	Disagreement; 3 <sup>rd</sup> party with no jurisdiction to decide	Implicitly enforced regulative rules; no explicitly recognized concessions	Argumentation conveyed in would-be spontaneous conversational exchanges	Conclusion of disagreement by mediated arrangement parties or provisional return to initial situation
<i>Negotiation</i>	Conflict of interests; decision up to the parties	Semi-explicit constitutive rules of the game; changeable sets of explicit concessions	Argumentation incorporated in exchanges of offers, counter-offers and other “commissives”	End of conflict by compromise parties, mutually accepted agreement or return to initial situation

The identification of institutional preconditions for argumentative practices, achieved in the characterisation of argumentative activity types in terms of the four stages of critical testing, sheds light on the potential effects that the pursuit of institutional aims has on the different stages of argumentative exchanges. Similar to Stephen Levinson’s activity types, argumentative activity



types are structured through rules and conventions that are adapted to advance the realisation of a goal that the participants have in the specific context of the activity at issue. As Levinson (1992) puts it, the “structural elements [of activity types are] [...] rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question, that is the functions that members of the society see the activity as having” (p. 71). Given that argumentative activity types describe the argumentative practice in contexts that are to a greater or lesser extent institutionalised, an argumentative activity type is structured through rules and conventions that are adapted to advance the realisation of an institutional goal that can be attributed to the arguers in the specific context of the activity at issue. For example, the rules and conventions of a negotiation encounter are adapted to the goal of reaching a compromise that satisfies the maximum of the parties’ conflicting interests, which is the point of the activity. As arguers get engaged in a negotiation encounter, their argumentation is supposed to be geared towards the satisfaction of this goal. In light of such a view, one can say that what the theory of argumentative activity types actually describes is the conventionalised argumentative practices in terms of their institutional aims and the argumentative means available to realise these aims given the institutional rules and conventions of the practice concerned.

By highlighting the significant role that institutional aims play in shaping argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types contributes to an empirically adequate analysis of institutionalised argumentative practices. Because the empirical aims of arguers, i.e. the aims that they actually pursue in practice, play an important role in shaping argumentative exchanges, a more realistic examination of argumentative exchanges needs to take those empirical aims into account. In the pragma-dialectical pursuit of a more realistic account of argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types complements the concept of strategic manoeuvring. While the concept of strategic manoeuvring provides the means to highlight the role that the arguers’ empirical aim of being rhetorically effective plays in shaping argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types highlights the role that institutional aims play in shaping arguers’ strategic manoeuvring, i.e. their pursuit of balancing reasonableness and effectiveness.

As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2006) explain, the concept of strategic manoeuvring came in response to the realisation that arguers are usually not only concerned with being reasonable but also with being effective (p. 383). In view of the concept of strategic manoeuvring, arguers' concerns with reasonableness and effectiveness are translated into dialectical and rhetorical aims respectively. The dialectical aims are specifications of the normative aim of critical testing and each of these aims pertains to a particular point in a stage of the procedure for critical resolution of a difference of opinion. They embody the obligations that the parties of a difference of opinion need to meet in order for the aim of critical testing to be achieved. The general dialectical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion by critically testing the points of view at stake. The rhetorical aims are specifications of the descriptive aim to get one's own point of view accepted. In pragma-dialectical terms, the general rhetorical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion to one's own favour. Similar to the dialectical aims, rhetorical aims that relate to each of the stages of critical testing can be formulated. Such aims are characterised as counterparts of the dialectical aims. For every dialectical aim that is derived from the arguers' normative concern with critical reasonableness there is a rhetorical complement that is derived from the arguers' descriptive concern with rhetorical effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> Despite their different origins, dialectical and rhetorical aims are both empirical aims that are attributed to arguers in argumentative practice.

Dialectical and rhetorical aims are aims that arguers are assumed to have in all argumentative exchanges. Whether they are arguing in a negotiation, mediation, adjudication encounter, or in a parliamentary debate, arguers should ideally be attempting to critically test their points of view, and they are usually also attempting to get their points of view accepted. Dialectical and rhetorical aims of the arguers can thus be considered to be the intrinsic aims of argumentation. In contrast, institutional aims, which are attributed to arguers as

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<sup>19</sup> An account of the specification of the dialectical and rhetorical aims according to the stages of critical resolution of differences of opinion can be found in van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002c). Even though the pragma-dialectical rhetorical aims originate from a descriptive assumption about the practice of argumentation, these aims are not entirely descriptive; they are in fact a normative conceptualisation of the descriptive aim of pursuing rhetorical effectiveness, performed in light of the dialectical ideal aim of critical testing.

they engage in argumentative exchanges in a specific conventionalised context, vary from one context to another. For example, the aim of reaching a compromise that satisfies the maximum of the parties' interest is an aim that arguers are assumed to have only when they argue in a negotiation encounter, and the aim to convince a judge to resolve a disagreement to one's own favour is specific to adjudication encounters. Unlike dialectical and rhetorical aims, institutional aims are in this sense extrinsic aims of argumentation. They are derived from the context in which argumentative exchanges occur and they relate to the function that argumentation is supposed to have in that context. In view of the concepts of strategic manoeuvring and argumentative activity types, argumentative exchanges are perceived as the result of the interaction of, on the one hand, the dialectical and rhetorical *intrinsic* aims of argumentation, and on the other hand, the institutional aims, as one of the main *extrinsic* aims of argumentative exchanges.<sup>20</sup>

The integration of rhetorical and institutional insights into the dialectical framework enhances the empirical adequacy of the examination of argumentative exchanges. A dialectical framework that incorporates rhetorical insights enables the analyst to capture elements of the argumentative discourse that are motivated by the concern for effectiveness, in addition to those elements that are motivated by their concern for reasonableness. By incorporating institutional insights, the framework enables the analyst to capture also those elements that are motivated by institutional concerns, i.e. concerns that are related to the function that argumentation fulfils in the more or less institutionalised context in which it occurs.

### **3.2 The argumentative practice of Question Time**

Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons is the parliamentary session in which the Prime Minister provides oral answers to

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast to other approaches, where the institutional aims are integrated into the rhetorical aims of the arguers (see Jacobs 2002), pragma-dialectics maintains a distinction between the aims of being rhetorically effective and being institutionally effective. Such a distinction allows for tracing the influence of extrinsic characteristics of argumentative discourse, basically those derived from its context-dependent institutional aims, on the ways of realising its intrinsic aims, being to argue both reasonably and effectively.

questions of his fellow MPs. The practice of having a regular session in which the Prime Minister provides oral answers to questions from the House of Commons started in 1961. Until Tony Blair became Prime Minister in 1997, Prime Ministers used to answer questions from MPs twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, at a session of fifteen minutes on each day. However, since Wednesday 21 May 1997, which was Mr. Blair's first Question Time session as a Prime Minister, Prime Minister's Question Time has become a weekly session of thirty minutes. The new 'arrangement', which was highly criticised by the Opposition who saw it as a way for the Prime Minister to reduce his presence in the House of Commons, was presented by the new Government as a reform that would provide MPs with the chance 'to probe the Prime Minister in depth' (House of Commons official report, 1997). In either of the arrangements, for almost 50 years now, Prime Ministers and MPs have been engaging in sessions of heated argumentative exchanges that are conveyed by means of questions and answers. The highly confrontational sessions, described by the BBC as 'the modern equivalent of the Roman games, only more brutal', are among the most media-covered parliamentary events. They are among the most attended sessions in the House, as well.

The procedure of Question Time is regulated mainly by Standing Orders, which are the rules made by Parliament in order to regulate its procedure. Other sources for regulating parliamentary procedure are practice, which refers to the general understanding established over the centuries and not necessarily written down, as well as the House of Commons Rulings from the Chair, which refer to the clarifications provided by the Speaker of the House regarding decisions on procedure. Both can be found in the regularly revised Erskine May's Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament (UK Parliament Web Site, 2006).<sup>21</sup>

Two central provisions regulate parliamentary questions (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002). First, questions must either press for action or seek information, and second, questions that have been recently

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to the three sources mentioned, Rogers and Walters mention *Acts of Parliament* as a fourth source for Parliamentary Procedure (2006: 185-186). There are, however, no *Acts of Parliament* that regulate matters related to Prime Minister's Question Time; the acts regulate legislation procedures mainly.

answered may not be asked again. The report further explains that the other rules that regulate the practice of parliamentary questions “depend on these central provisions and are intended to ensure that orderly questions are not crowded out by those relating to matters of debate for which other parliamentary opportunities are available” (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 11).

In Question Time sessions, the Prime Minister provides oral answers to tabled as well as supplementary questions. Tabled questions are submitted to the Clerks in the Table Office of the House of Commons at least three sitting days before the session. Because the number of submitted questions usually exceeds the number of questions that can realistically be expected to get answers, the submitted questions are put to a random shuffle and only fifteen of them are printed in the Commons Questions Book to be actually asked during the session. When asked in the House, every tabled question is followed by at least one supplementary question in which the MP who tabled the question can follow up on the same topic. After the first supplementary question has been answered, MPs who would like to pose more supplementary questions stand up trying to ‘catch the eye’ of the Speaker who decides who next will be given the chance to pose a question. The Speaker is also to decide when enough supplementary questions have been addressed. Because the Prime Minister is given prior notice of tabled questions, his answers to them are prepared in advance. In contrast, his answers to supplementary questions require some improvisation, since no prior notice is required for these questions. However, prior to Question Time sessions, the Prime Minister receives briefings from Government departments on the most topical matters of high political significance (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 10). Consequently, even though MPs have the chance to ask the Prime Minister questions without prior notice, supplementary questions hardly ever surprise the Prime Minister or get him to make up a completely ‘improvised’ answer.

Depending on the specificity of their content, questions for oral answer can be either open or closed. Closed questions ask for specific information about a specific policy or action of the Government. In contrast, open questions address government policies or actions generally. As a result of a prime-ministerial practice of transferring closed questions to departmental ministers in the 1960s

and the early 1970s, open questions have become dominant in Question Time (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 18). Even though the transferring practice ended in the late 1970s, open questions remain dominant in Question Time, today. Such dominance contributes significantly to the argumentative nature of the question answer exchange in Prime Minister's Question Time. Not only is it much easier for MPs to convey opinions about government policies and actions by means of open questions, it is also easier to ask supplementary political questions about almost anything that falls under the responsibility of the Government when these supplementaries come after open questions.

The first tabled question in every Question Time session is the engagements question, which is a routine question about the Prime Minister's official engagements of the day. Both the question and the answer to it are conventionally standardised: an MP asks the Prime Minister to 'list his official engagements' for that day, and the Prime Minister replies: 'This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further meetings later today'. Often, though, the Prime Minister starts with a brief official statement, also on behalf of the House of Commons, addressing occasions of national or international interest, such as expressing congratulations or condolences or paying tribute. Below is an example of Gordon Brown's answer to the engagements question on 5 November 2008, the morning after the presidential elections in the United States of America:

(1) *Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our profound condolences to the family and friends of the soldier from 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Royal Gurkha Rifles who was killed in Afghanistan yesterday. In the week leading to Remembrance Sunday, we should remember the debt of gratitude that we owe to all those who have laid down their lives in service of our country.

Before I list my engagements, I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our sincere congratulations to Senator Barack Obama on winning the presidency of the United States and writing a new chapter in history in doing so. The bonds that unite the United States and the UK are vital to our prosperity and security and I know from talking to Senator Obama that he will be a true friend of Britain. The Government look forward to working with the new Administration as we both help people fairly through the downturn. I also want to pay tribute to Senator McCain, who has shown the characteristic dignity that has marked a lifetime of service to his country.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

(House of Commons official report, 2008f)

After the Prime Minister's answer to the engagements question, the room is open for MPs to ask supplementary questions. Even though the engagements question is in itself a mere routine, the question is important because of the supplementaries that follow. The engagements question is a special open question that arose out of the prime-ministerial practice described above, of transferring specific questions to ministerial departments, and was maintained after this practice was abandoned. As Rogers and Walters (2006) explain, in order not to lose their chance of receiving an answer from the Prime Minister, which would happen if the latter transferred their questions to the responsible Government departments, MPs started asking the Prime Minister one of two main tabled and open questions: whether he would list his engagements for the day or whether he would visit their constituencies (pp. 229-230). Given that such a question cannot be transferred, asking it would guarantee that MPs get answers after which they have the chance to pose supplementary questions. The latter would be the real questions they wanted to ask, and for which they would receive an answer because supplementary questions are non-transferable either.

Even now, after the transferring practice has been abandoned, the engagements question remains important. Because the supplementary is a follow-up question, its scope depends on the scope of the original question. Since the scope that the engagements question covers is so wide, a supplementary question after the engagements question has an almost unlimited scope (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: 9). Supplementaries after the engagements question can be about almost anything that falls under the responsibility of the Government. That allows MPs to tackle topics of the highest current significance in their contributions. The exchange below, which includes the engagements question and answer as well as the following supplementaries, is an example. In the first supplementary, a Labour MP asks the Prime Minister about the measures that the Government is taking to save small businesses during the global financial crisis, which was the prime topic of discussion at the time of the session. While this supportive contribution gives the Prime Minister the chance to present the efforts and achievements of his Government in addressing the crisis, the next supplementary comes from the Leader of the Opposition to pressure the Prime

Minister to defend his Government against an accusation of incompetence.

(2) *Adrian Bailey:*  
If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 29 October.

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*  
This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

*Mr. Bailey:*  
Small businesses, which are essential to jobs in my constituency, are suffering from high raw material prices, high energy prices and, in some cases, reduced demand. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the support that we have given to the banks is reflected in the support that banks give to small businesses during this difficult time?

*Mr. Brown:*  
My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Central to the recovery of jobs is the resumption of lending by banks to businesses. I discussed that not only as a national problem, but a problem in many countries, with President Sarkozy when I met him last evening. We have all taken measures to recapitalise our banks and to ensure stability. We continue to work on increasing access to funding. Having recapitalised the banks, we want to ensure that they will extend availability of credit at competitive prices. Further announcements will be made tomorrow when we have a meeting with the banks. We are also considering new mechanisms by which, for example, the European Investment Bank can give financial support where traditional institutions are not able to do so. We urge banks not to change the terms and charges for existing lending to small businesses in our country. The President and I also talked about the role of fiscal policy in the future. I have been discussing that with other leaders. It is right that fiscal policy supports monetary policy at this time.

*David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*  
If the Prime Minister wants to help small business, he can start by cancelling his plan for putting up the rate of corporation tax for small business. In the past fortnight we have learned that housing repossessions are up 71 per cent., unemployment is rising at its fastest rate for 17 years and the economy is shrinking. Will the Prime Minister now finally admit that he did not abolish boom and bust?

(House of Commons official report, 2008e)

In fact, for a few weeks before and after this session, the Leader of the Opposition made use of his right to ask supplementary questions in order to criticise the reaction of the Government to the financial crisis, as he did in the exchange above.

After the supplementary questions are over, the Speaker moves to the second tabled question by calling the number of the question and the name of the MP who has tabled it. After the answer of the Prime Minister, the MP who has advanced the question gets the opportunity to ask a supplementary question, as a follow up to his initial question, which the Prime Minister then answers as well. More supplementary questions and answers follow, until the Speaker announces the next tabled question. This goes on until Question Time is over (House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Pérez de Ayala 2001; Rogers & Walters,



2006: pp. 229-232).

In view of the purpose of this study, the most interesting parts of Question Time are the question-answer encounters between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It is in these encounters that the Prime Minister's attempts to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion by means of accusations of inconsistency, the focus of my interest in this study, are most recurrent. The encounters, which always start by a supplementary that the Leader of the Opposition poses, often after the engagements question as in the example above, are also the most confrontational of all the exchanges in Prime Minister's Question Time. They can go up to six rounds in which the Leader of the Opposition continues to supplement one question after the other, criticising the Prime Minister and his Government, while the Prime Minister responds by defending his Government and often also by attacking the Opposition. Although it is often these exchanges that are meant when Prime Minister's Question Time is criticised for being a "partisan joust between the noisier supporters of the main political parties" (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 18), it is also acknowledged that in these encounters between the Head of Government and the Leader of the Opposition the most important political argumentative exchanges take place. The encounters between the Prime Minister and the leader of the third largest party are also important. These can go up to three rounds, as parliamentary conventions restrict the number of contributions for the leader of the third largest party to a maximum of three questions.

Even though Prime Minister's Question Time proceeds via a sequence of questions and answers, the session is so argumentative that it has been widely considered as a mini-debate about the performance of the Government (Beard, 2000; House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Rogers & Walters 2006; Wilson, 1990). In fact, Question Time can hardly be considered as an information seeking session. It is almost always the case that the questions of MPs are posed in such a way that an answer cannot really be expected. As Wilson (1990) observes, the questions are usually preceded by a set of assertions (both presuppositions and propositions) that constitute argumentation in defence of a standpoint, which is usually left implicit. The question itself is most of the time formulated in a way that makes any direct answer commit the Prime Minister to

the preceding assertions (pp. 131-178). In addition to the argumentative nature of questions, the debate-like character of Question Time is also manifested by the way the questions of MPs are divided: MPs in favour of the Prime Minister's policies pose supportive questions, and MPs against him pose challenging ones. The Speaker of the House is expected to keep a balance between the two sides as he invites MPs to take the floor (House of Commons Information Office, 2005).

By emphasising the overall argumentative nature of Question Time one does of course not exclude the occurrence of non-argumentative exchanges. Such exchanges are, however, very infrequent and marginal, especially when considering supplementary questions. As described by Civil Service Guidance, supplementaries are the means for MPs from the Opposition to put the Minister questioned 'on the defence' (Rogers & Walters, 2006: p. 317); they are occasions to make political points. The supplementary questions posed by the Leader of the Opposition always convey a critical point of view about some policy or action of the Government. Because of their undisputed argumentative nature as well as their dominantly confrontational characteristics, the encounters between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are the prime subject of examination in this study.

### **3.3 The institutional aims of the argumentative practice**

The function of parliamentary questions is generally expressed as to seek information, or to press for action, in order to hold the Government to account (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 1; House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002; Rogers & Walters, 2006: pp. 311-312). The House of Commons Information Office factsheet on parliamentary Questions (2005) explains that addressing questions obliges "Ministers to explain and defend the work, policy decisions and actions of their departments" (p. 2). It is through this obligation to explain and defend policies and actions that the Government is held to account by MPs as representatives of the general public of voters.

Over the years, the nature and function of questions for oral answer have diverged considerably from those of questions for written answer. While both are aimed at holding the Government to account, questions for written answer have

been mainly concerned with obtaining information and questions for oral answer have become more and more concerned with pressing for action. As explained earlier, the latter concern contributes significantly to the argumentative nature of oral questions and answers. In order for MPs to press for a certain course of action effectively, it is usually necessary to justify the promoted course of action, and often also to criticise the actions that need to be replaced. Similarly, in order to respond properly to such questions, Ministers need to justify their actions and sometimes even argue against the alternative actions proposed by MPs.

Furthermore, within the category of oral questions, Prime Minister's Question Time and ministerial departments' Question Time have also diverged. The Select Committee report on parliamentary questions notes that the "distinction between Prime Minister's Questions and departmental Question Time is sufficiently fundamental that special provisions for the former would be justified" (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 19). As the report explains, the distinct nature of Prime Minister's Question Time is dictated by the scope of the Prime Minister's responsibilities. On the one hand, the Prime Minister's responsibility is vast: he is the Head of Government and is therefore responsible for all that is done in the name of it. But on the other hand, the Prime Minister's immediate responsibility is so general that there are very few things for which he has a direct administrative responsibility (p. 18). The vast and yet general nature of the responsibility for the policies and actions of the Government that the Prime Minister has, limits the specificity of the actions that MPs can press for when posing questions for oral answer to the Prime Minister. This limitation, in turn, dictates a certain scope for the accountability of the Prime Minister that can be pursued through questions for oral answer: when questioning the Prime Minister in a Question Time session, MPs try to hold the Prime Minister accountable for the general performance of his Government. The scrutinising argumentative question-answer exchanges in which MPs press for action and the Prime Minister defends and justifies the actions and policies of his Government are eventually aimed at holding the Government to account for its general performance.

Because it is the purpose for which Question Time was established, the aim that the Government should be held to account can be attributed to MPs and

the Prime Minister as participants in this kind of parliamentary sessions. Many of the rules and conventions that regulate the practice of Question Time are intended to further the achievement of this aim. For instance, one of the main rules mentioned in the Erskine May's Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament in relation to Prime Minister's Question Time is that questions need to address the responsibilities of the Prime Minister in his capacity as Head of Government only, and not in his capacity as a party leader, for example (McKay *et al.*, 2004). Another rule proscribes questions that address matters of legal controversy, the discussion of which does not contribute to holding the Government to account (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 4).<sup>22</sup> The Speaker of the House as well as the Clerks in the Table Office see to it that the practice adheres to the rules and lives up as much as possible to the expectations ensuing from such an aim.

The Clerks make sure that all tabled questions are in conformity with the relevant rules and conventions and the Speaker of the House sees to it that supplementary questions as well as answers are so, too. The exchange below is an example. In it, Mr. Duncan Smith asks Mr. Blair a question that seems to violate the rules of Question Time by not being related to the responsibilities of the Head of Government.

(3) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

[...] The truth is that the Prime Minister has had to climb down. Let us ask why. Perhaps the Prime Minister can tell us, as leader of the Labour party, how much money the unions gave his party last year.

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

In no shape or form are we giving way on the reform programme in the health service and the education service. [Hon. Members: "How much?"] Well, the amount of money given to the Labour party—thanks to the procedures we introduced—is there for people to see.

It is important that we carry on with the reforms in health, education, transport, and law and order, but the reforms should be matched by investment. I will take on either people like the right hon. Gentleman who want to cut investment, or people in the trade union movement or elsewhere who want to halt the advance of reform. "Invest and reform" is right. Now perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will tell us what his position is.

*Mr. Duncan Smith:*

The Prime Minister took a long time not to answer the question. Let us now give him the answer. The figure is £8 million, in a six-month period last year—and in the case of two

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<sup>22</sup> Not all the rules applying to the practice of Question Time are intended to further the process of holding the Government to account. Some rules are motivated by a concern about other processes, which are external to Question Time. For example, the *sub judice* rule, which does not allow parliamentary discussions of matters that are under police investigations, is intended to protect the independence of police investigations. Such rules are usually not specific to Question Time, but are rules that apply to all parliamentary practice including that of Question Time.

unions that are either on strike or about to strike, it is nearly £1.25 million.

*Mr. Speaker:*

Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the Leader of the Opposition, but I must tell him that the Prime Minister is here to answer questions as Prime Minister, not as leader of the Labour party. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am talking about the rules of the House, which the House has given me to protect. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition could ask another question.

*Mr. Duncan Smith rose—[Interruption.]*

*Mr. Speaker:*

Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

*Mr. Duncan Smith:*

This issue goes right to the heart of the Government. While I fully respect what you say, Mr. Speaker, I must point out—*[Interruption]*—if I may—that it is about what is happening on the railways and in the Post Office. I am simply raising an issue, and asking a question about whether there are links with and reasons for government policy. I would like to pursue that line if you are agreeable, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps I can ask the question—*[Interruption.]*

*Mr. Speaker:*

Order. The Leader of the Opposition is using some ingenuity. Let us see how he puts his question—whether he puts it in another way.

*Mr. Duncan Smith rose—[Interruption.]*

*Mr. Speaker:*

Order.

*Mr. Duncan Smith:*

I will certainly ask the question, Mr. Speaker, but perhaps in a slightly different way. No wonder the Prime Minister grovels to the trade unions after having attacked them, from one day to the next. The truth is—this is the reality for the present Government, so heavily linked to the trade unions—that five years ago the Prime Minister used to talk about "24 hours to save the health service"; on Monday, it was 24 hours to save his donations. Instead of briefing and retreating, attacking and withdrawing, why does the Prime Minister not cut his links with the strikers and the wreckers?

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

The exchange above is an example of common interventions that the Speaker of the House makes in order for the practice of Question Time to be a contribution to the aim of holding the Government to account. In this case, the Speaker does not see the relevance of the question that the Leader of the Opposition asks about the donations that the Labour Party received from trade unions to the performance of the Government. Mr. Duncan Smith responds by claiming that his question is definitely about the performance of the Government: it is about 'links with and reasons for government policy'. In other words, as he reformulates it, Mr. Duncan Smith's question is about the reasons that made Mr. Blair change his mind, as Head of Government, about the trade unions on strike.

Even though Question Time was established for the purpose of holding the Government to account, there are a number of other aims that can be

associated with the argumentative practice of these prominent parliamentary sessions. In addition to their collective aim that the performance of the Government is scrutinised, MPs and the Prime Minister have been using their argumentative exchanges in Question Time to pursue a multitude of other individual institution-related aims. Professor the Lord Norton of Louth, academic advisor for the House of Commons Procedure Committee, mentions a few. In the Select Committee report on parliamentary questions, Lord Norton is quoted to say:

Question Time used to be an opportunity for backbenchers to seek information from Ministers. It has in recent decades become more an opportunity for frontbenchers to intervene and for opposition Members to try to catch Ministers, as well as for government backbenchers to support Ministers and put questions about Opposition policy. This change in nature has been a feature especially of Prime Minister's Question Time. (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: pp. 11-12)

Furthermore, the Select Committee report on parliamentary questions observes that MPs have also been using Question Time as a means of 'partisan point-scoring, of self-promotion, of promoting external interests' (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 11). As observed in the report, MPs often use their questions to convey political statements that promote their party's policies or to attack those of their adversaries, and similarly in his answers the Prime Minister often conveys pride in the achievement of his party's policies or criticism of those of the Opposition.

Using contributions in Question Time for such *party-political* purposes has increased significantly as a result of the wide media coverage of the House's proceedings. The fact that the questions and answers can be followed by an external public made Question Time become an opportunity for both MPs and the Prime Minister to address and appeal to the general public of voters. In fact, it can sometimes be very obvious that a certain question by an MP or an answer by the Prime Minister is primarily concerned with conveying party-political statements to the public of voters. The following is an example:

- (4) *Mr. MacGregor*  
As rail privatisation completes its final stages, does the Prime Minister agree that it already demonstrates substantial benefits for both passengers and taxpayers? Is not its success one of the main reasons why the Labour party, which bitterly opposed rail privatisation through all its parliamentary stages, as it did with nearly every other privatisation, is all at sea over its policy?

*Mr. John Major:*

It is undoubtedly the case that the Labour party has not supported a single privatisation until it has proved to be a success, at which point it pays lip service to it. Under Labour, none of the privatisations would have taken place. It certainly bitterly attacked rail privatisation, which has now increased investment, increased rolling stock, improved services, provided extra service and saved the taxpayer a substantial amount. [Interruption.] It is, in short, a success, and no doubt that is why the Labour party wishes to shout it down.

(House of Commons official report, 1997)

In the exchange above, which came shortly before the general elections as a result of which Labour came to power, Mr. John Major, the Prime Minister at the time, responds to a question by a fellow Conservative MP about the Government's disputed policy of privatisation. In his response, Mr. Major advances argumentation in support of the standpoint that *Conservatives, unlike Labour, are capable of providing good leadership for their country*. He presents Labour as incapable, or even unwilling, to support policies that would bring good to the general public.

Party-promoting contributions are not limited to the Prime Minister; the Leader of the Opposition also makes use of questions in order to appeal to the public of voters. The following is an example:

(5) *David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

I think that people watching this will just conclude that this Prime Minister cannot answer a question and cannot make a decision. People are starting to say about this Government, "Never mind the complete lack of vision, never mind the relaunches; just focus on keeping us safe." In a week when the prisons adviser says that they have got no prisons strategy, when President Musharraf says that they have no terrorism strategy and when the only good idea that they have about police reform has come from the Conservative party, should he not just accept that people are not safe under Labour?

(House of Commons official report, 2008a)

In this exchange, Mr. Cameron, the Leader of the Conservative Opposition, employs his criticisms of the Government to support the standpoint that *Conservatives, unlike Labour, would be able of keeping the British people safe*. Starting the question with a reference to the 'people' watching makes it quite obvious that the main target of the Leader of the Opposition is the public rather than the Prime Minister. In questions and answers such as the above, which are very common in Question Time, both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition employ argumentation to convince the voters that their own party is

the one that deserves voters' support. In spite of the importance of institution-related aims such as the above, I will, in this study adopt a perspective in which the aim of holding the Government to account concerning its general performance is considered to be the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of Question Time.

This choice of perspective is motivated primarily by my interest in accounting for the interaction between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. My concern with providing an adequate account of the Prime Minister's attempts to exclude the criticism of the Leader of the Opposition from the discussion requires me to focus my attention on the discussion in which the two politicians address each other rather than the simultaneous discussions in which each of them addresses third parties. Adopting a perspective in which the aim of promoting party interests is considered the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of Question Time would place the answers of the Prime Minister, in which he accuses the Leader of the Opposition of an inconsistency, in a discussion between him and the general public of voters. In this discussion, the Prime Minister attempts to convince the voters that his party is the one that is capable of leading the country. The Leader of the Opposition is, strictly speaking, not an arguer in this discussion. Even though one can think that the Prime Minister is trying to convince the voters by reporting to them the results of his discussion with the Leader of the Opposition, the relevance of an accusation of inconsistency to this discussion is far less obvious than its relevance in the discussion in which the Prime Minister directly defends the performance of his Government against the criticism of the Leader of the Opposition.

The choice of the discussion to focus on is a mere choice of perspective – made in view of a particular analytic interest– from which the argumentative practice of Question Time is to be examined. It does not, by any means, allege that the questions and answers of the Leader of the Opposition and of the Prime Minister contribute exclusively to either a discussion that is aimed at holding the Government to account or a discussion that is aimed at promoting their political parties. In fact, the different discussions run simultaneously and the aims are often pursued by means of the same exchanges. Yet, the discussions can be analytically distinguished so that one of the discussions and the aim pursued in it



becomes more prominent.

The choice of a perspective in which the argumentative practice of Question Time is aimed at holding the Government to account is not only beneficial to the examination of the argumentative move with which I am concerned. The choice is also instrumental to a critical examination of the institutional effectiveness of the argumentative practice of Question Time to achieve the purpose for which Question Time was established. Very often, failures to be argumentatively reasonable result in failures to achieve institutional aims. That is because the argumentative quality of the exchanges can be indicative, to a high extent, of their institutional quality. That this should be so can be supported by considering that in cases where argumentative exchanges are the primary means for achieving institutional aims, one may expect the institutional effectiveness of the exchanges to be highly dependent on the quality of the critical testing achieved in them. For example, if in Question Time the Government is held to account primarily by means of argumentative exchanges that scrutinise its performance: the more critical the exchanges that scrutinise the performance of the Government are, the better the Government is held to account.<sup>23</sup> Of all the aims pursued in Question Time, the aim of holding the Government to account can be considered the purpose for which the institution was established. Therefore, the focus on this aim makes the examination of argumentative reasonableness in fact telling for the extent to which the practice of Question Time is instrumental for the achievement of the aim for which such a parliamentary session was established.

Moreover, the adopted perspective can also be useful for a critical evaluation of the parliamentary procedure that regulates Question Time. Since, as mentioned earlier, some of the rules that regulate Question Time are motivated by concerns in processes other than holding the Government to account, it is very much possible that some of these rules and conventions do in practice obstruct the pursuit of the aim for which the institution was established. At least at first sight, the convention that allows the Prime Minister to refuse to address a particular question if that 'would not be in the public interest' is an example. Through the

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<sup>23</sup> See Mohammed (2007b) for a discussion of how the quality of the critical testing of standpoints in a negotiation encounter can be indicative of the institutional effectiveness of the exchange, i.e. of the quality of the resolution of the conflict of interests.

examination of the effects that similar rules and conventions have on the critical testing procedure, it can be examined to what extent rules and conventions that regulate Question Time promote the holding of the Government to account.

From a perspective in which the argumentative practice of Question Time is viewed to be aimed at holding the Government to account, I will, in the next section, characterise the argumentative practice as an argumentative activity type. Following van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), the characterisation will highlight the different preconditions that result from the rules and conventions of Question Time. These preconditions apply to the initial situation that triggers the argumentative exchanges, to the procedural and material starting points that are mutually accepted by MPs and the Prime Minister, to the allowable argumentative means employed by them, and to the possible outcomes of their argumentative exchanges.

### **3.4 The argumentative activity type of Question Time**

In the argumentative activity type of Question Time, the argumentative confrontation is triggered by the controversial nature of the performance of the Government typical of Question Time. While the Prime Minister and the MPs from his party are in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government, MPs from the Opposition are in favour of a negative evaluation.<sup>24</sup> The controversy about the performance of the Government underlies all argumentative exchanges of Question Time. In their questions, MPs imply and defend points of view in favour of either a positive or a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government. In his answers, the Prime Minister implies and defends a standpoint in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of his Government. So, for example, when the Leader of the Opposition questions the

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<sup>24</sup> While it is usually the case that MPs from the party of the Prime Minister are in favour of a positive view of the performance of the Government that need not always be the case. Unlike the Prime Minister, MPs from his party have no parliamentary obligation to defend the Government: their obligation is rather a party-obligation observed by whips, who are MPs appointed by each party to maintain party discipline. But in spite of the strictness of the whipping system, cases of no support for government decisions from MPs of the ruling party are not impossible. In 2002, for example, Labour MPs have openly criticised the decision of the Labour Government to go to war against Iraq. Although possible, cases of opposition from MPs from the ruling party are not standard; they are rather a manifestation of a ruling party in crisis.

Prime Minister about alleged corruption, as he does in the exchange between Mr. Cameron and Mr. Brown about the police in London discussed in Chapter 2, the Leader of the Opposition implies that because of the alleged corruption the Government is not doing a good job. Also, when the Prime Minister answers by denying and refuting the allegations or by boasting about the achievements of his Government, as he does when he responds to Mr. Duncan Smith in the exchange about the National Health Service (NHS) also discussed in Chapter 2, the Prime Minister is in fact implying that, because of the achievements mentioned, his Government is doing well.

The controversial performance of the Government is in fact a preconditioned topic for the initial disagreement that gives rise to argumentative confrontations in Question Time. The rules and conventions of this kind of parliamentary sessions require MPs to address in their questions only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister as Head of Government. As a result of the general and broad nature of the Prime Minister's responsibilities and the practice of transferring specific questions to ministerial departments, both explained earlier, it has become conventional that the questions and answers express and defend standpoints in relation to the general performance of the Government. Over the years, the initial situation in the argumentative confrontations of Question Time has grown into an initial disagreement about whether or not *the performance of the Government is up to standard*. The answers that the Prime Minister gives defend a positive standpoint, i.e. *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, against the critical doubt of the Opposition. Also often, the Prime Minister's answers attempt to refute the negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, which is defended by questions from MPs from the Opposition. Even though this initial disagreement underlies all argumentative exchanges of Question Time, the disagreement is seldom made explicit in the questions or in the answers.

When in their questions and answers MPs or the Prime Minister address the public of voters and promote their parties, there seems to be a different initial situation: a disagreement that relates to the competence of a political party in leading the country. MPs from the Opposition seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership*, and MPs from the

ruling party and the Prime Minister seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership*. However, as a result of rules and conventions of Question Time, this difference of opinion cannot be independent of the difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government discussed above. Because questions of MPs and answers of the Prime Minister have to address the latter's responsibilities only, MPs and the Prime Minister can eventually address the difference of opinion concerning the competence of a political party in leading the country only through addressing their difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government. So an MP from the Opposition would need to base his defence of the standpoint that *unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership* mainly on a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government, and the Prime Minister or an MP from his party would need to base his defence of the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership* mainly on a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government.

In addition to the preconditions they create for the topics of the initial disagreements, the rules and conventions of this kind of parliamentary session create preconditions for the types of disputes, i.e. the definitions of the differences of opinion that result from the argumentative confrontations between the parties as well. The Prime Minister has a parliamentary obligation to defend his Government, and MPs have party-obligations to either support him in defending the performance of the Government, in the case that they belong to his party, or to oppose him and criticise the performance of the Government, in the case that they belong to the Opposition. That means that, argumentatively, the Prime Minister and the MPs from his party are expected to advance and uphold the positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* and the MPs from the Opposition are expected to advance and uphold the negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Consequently, the dispute that results from the confrontation is institutionally expected to be mixed: two opposite standpoints are advanced and upheld. Especially in the case of the argumentative exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, which are at the focus of my interest in this study, the argumentative confrontation is evidently preconditioned to result

in a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute. As a result of his prominent political role, the Leader of the Opposition cannot be expected to do less than doubting the positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* and advancing and upholding the negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. When MPs from the Prime Minister's party ask questions, the dispute might not appear to be mixed. However, taking the argumentative exchanges of Question Time as a whole makes the mixed dispute more apparent.

Starting points in the argumentative activity type of Question Time, material and procedural alike, are highly preconditioned by parliamentary rules and conventions. All parliamentary rules and conventions, the general ones as well as those which are specific to Question Time, are mutually accepted as starting points for these argumentative exchanges. For example, the content of both questions and answers is preconditioned to conform to parliamentary conventions regarding parliamentary language and respect for the Crown, the judiciary and Members of the two Houses of Parliament. As a result, arguments hardly ever doubt the honesty or the motives of any of the arguers directly. The rules and conventions also prescribe a clear procedure and impose a clear assignment of roles. The Prime Minister is the main protagonist of the positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, since he has the parliamentary obligation to defend his Government. MPs from his party are commonly assigned the same role since they are conventionally expected to support him. MPs from the Opposition and the Leader of the Opposition in particular are assigned the role of the protagonist of the negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, since they are conventionally expected to attack the performance of the Government. Furthermore, the question-answer format determines the division of the burden of proof. In general, the format stipulates that the argumentation is exchanged in an equal number of turns between MPs and the Prime Minister, and that the MPs advance their argumentation first while the Prime Minister concludes the exchanges. Accordingly, in the mixed dispute between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, for example, the latter needs to defend his negative standpoint first.

Rules and conventions make it also clear what kinds of contributions are allowed in the argumentative practice of Question Time: MPs pose questions and the Prime Minister provides answers. Argumentative means are thus preconditioned: MPs need to advance their argumentation in the form of questions that literally address the Speaker of the House, and the Prime Minister should formulate his argumentation in the form of answers that address the Speaker, too. Consequently, as observed by Wilson (1990: pp. 131-178), MPs' argumentation is conventionally embodied in sets of assertions that precede the literal questions, and the Prime Minister's argumentation is conventionally embodied in sets of assertions that constitute his answers. The fact that arguers defend their standpoints by means of arguments that either defend or criticise government policies and actions is a result of a conventional precondition created by the parliamentary rule that requires questions to relate only to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister, mentioned earlier. As explained, it is conventional that every question posed in Question Time conveys an argument about a certain policy or plan of the Government, advanced in support of either the implicit positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* or the likewise-implicit negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.

MPs, who rightly expect that their arguments will be faced with challenge, rarely leave their arguments unsupported by further arguments. In other words, MPs usually anticipate that sub-disagreements will arise in relation to their arguments, and that they might need to engage into argumentative exchanges aimed at critically resolving such sub-disputes. Eventually, the arguments, which usually express an evaluation of a government policy or action, become sub-standpoints about which a sub-disagreement develops. The following is an example. The exchange was also quoted in 1.1.

- (6) *David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*  
First, may I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Corporal Damian Lawrence, who was killed in Afghanistan on Sunday? He died serving our country. May I also take the opportunity to wish the Prime Minister a happy 57th birthday? [*Interruption.*] Enough of that.  
In January last year, the Government were sent details of 4,000 dangerous foreign criminals and for an entire year they did absolutely nothing with that information. Can the Prime Minister explain how such a catastrophic failure to protect the public took

place?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

The Attorney-General has asked the Crown Prosecution Service to conduct an inquiry into this matter. A request was made by the Dutch authorities for us to look through our DNA records. Some 4,000 names were put to us by the Dutch, and 11 cases have been discovered as a result of the investigation. The inquiry will cover all the details of what happened. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that it was possible for the Dutch to ask us to look at our DNA records only because we are keeping full DNA records. The Conservatives opposed that legislation.

(House of Commons official report, 2008b)

In this exchange, the Leader of the Opposition defends a negative standpoint about the performance of the Government by means of an argument concerning a lack of government actions to protect the British public. Mr. Cameron anticipates that the Prime Minister will not accept his argument that *the government is failing to protect the people*, so he presents, as an argument that supports it, the case of the Government's failure to act upon information that was given by the Dutch authorities about 4000 foreign criminals. His argumentation can be reconstructed as following:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
  - 1.1 The actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure
    - 1.1.1 For an entire year, the Government has not done anything with the DNA information it has concerning 4000 foreign criminals

Mr. Cameron rightly anticipates that Mr. Blair does not accept his argument that *the actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure* and that a sub-disagreement concerning this argument, which then becomes a sub-standpoint, will arise. The Prime Minister does not only reject the sub-standpoint, but he also advances his own (contrary) sub-standpoint in which he claims that the Government is adopting policies that protect the public and defends the latter by mentioning the example of the government policy of keeping full DNA records as a sub-argument.

The response of the Prime Minister, above, is a good example of the kind of attempts to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition that I am interested in. Upon presenting the sub-argument that *the Government is keeping full DNA records as a policy that protects the public*, Mr. Brown emphasises that the Conservatives have opposed this policy. The Prime Minister attempts to avoid discussing the sub-argument of Mr. Cameron by claiming that the latter cannot criticise the Government for not dealing properly with DNA records because he has in the



past opposed the government policy of keeping full DNA records. In doing so, the Prime Minister implies that one cannot oppose a government policy and then criticise the Government for not implementing it. A detailed analysis of the case will follow in Chapter 4; for the moment I will restrict my attention to the sub-disagreements that are institutionally anticipated in the argumentative practice of Question Time.

Unlike the main dispute concerning the performance of the Government, the sub-disputes about government policies and plans are most of the time explicit. These sub-disputes are also often multiple and not necessarily mixed. Supportive questions, usually asked by MPs from the ruling party, give rise to non-mixed and sometimes multiple sub-disputes. Typically, supportive questions advance and support a sub-standpoint in which a positive evaluation of a certain government policy or action is expressed as an argument in support of the positive main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard*. The Prime Minister's response to this kind of question is usually to advance further arguments in support of the sub-standpoint expressed in the question. In such cases, the Prime Minister and the MP do not disagree about the sub-standpoint which they both defend against anticipated doubt. Sometimes, instead of further supporting the sub-standpoint advanced by an MP from his party, the Prime Minister advances and defends another sub-standpoint in support of the positive main standpoint. The Prime Minister's sub-standpoint needs to be related to the same issue as that addressed by the sub-argument of the MP. Together, the two sub-standpoints constitute a multiple sub-dispute.

Unlike the sub-disputes arising from supportive questions, sub-disputes arising from critical questions are usually mixed. A critical question, usually asked by an MP from the Opposition, advances and supports a sub-standpoint in which a negative evaluation of a certain government policy or action is expressed in support of the negative main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In order to defend his Government, the Prime Minister is expected to refute the sub-standpoint advanced. He can do so by adopting and then defending an opposite sub-standpoint, in which case the sub-dispute that arises is mixed. However, it is typical that the Prime Minister responds to critical questions by advancing a contrary sub-standpoint instead.

That leads the argumentative confrontation towards a multiple and mixed dispute.

The responses of the Prime Minister, that are the subject of this study, occur most of the times in the course of sub-disputes of the second kind. For example, in response to the sub-standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS*, as part of the exchange between Mr. Blair and Mr. Duncan Smith about the NHS discussed in Chapter 2, Mr. Blair responds by advancing a contrary sub-standpoint that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*. The exchange between Mr. Cameron and Mr. Brown about foreign criminals discussed above is another example. In response to the sub-standpoint that *the actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure* Mr. Brown advances the contrary sub-standpoint that *the Government is adopting policies that further the protection of the public*

The way in which outcomes of argumentative exchanges are determined is highly preconditioned by the purpose and the format of Question Time. The main difference of opinion is hardly ever expected to be actually resolved. That is not only because of the limited time of the session, but also as a result of the institutional goal. In order to maximise political accountability, the performance of the Government needs to be scrutinised as clearly as possible, and that requires the highest possible degree of critical testing of the points of view concerning the performance of the Government. In some cases the sub-differences about certain policies or plans can be resolved, but such cases are rare. Often, the Prime Minister concludes his answers by presenting the sub-dispute as having been resolved, which he can do because the question-answer format gives him the advantage of having the last word. However, rarely do these claimed resolutions reflect actual critical resolutions.

## **4 THE STRATEGIC FUNCTION OF RESPONDING TO CRITICISM WITH ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY**

In the preceding chapter, I have described and discussed the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time and characterised it as an argumentative activity type. The characterisation of the activity type made it possible to identify a number of significant preconditions for argumentative confrontations that result from the rules and conventions of the parliamentary session. In this chapter, I shall take these institutional preconditions into account and re-examine the Prime Minister's responses to criticism from the Opposition with accusations of inconsistency. The re-examination aims at providing a more empirically adequate (analytic) account of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. The account pursued sheds light on the institutional dimension of the attempts, whose argumentative dimension has already been captured in the characterisation of the particular way of manoeuvring in Chapter 2. As a case in point, I will re-examine the exchange between Tony Blair and Ian Duncan Smith about the National Health Service (NHS), discussed in Chapter 2, and analyse Mr. Blair's strategic manoeuvring in view of the institutional preconditions for argumentation identified in the argumentative activity type perspective, developed in Chapter 3.

### **4.1 Pursuing an institutionally strategic outcome in argumentative sub-confrontations**

As has become clear in Chapter 3, in this study, the sessions of Prime Minister's Question Time are to be viewed as argumentative discussions about the performance of the Government in pursuit of the institutional goal of holding the Government to account. The sessions consist of questions and answers that advance argumentation defending and attacking two main opposite standpoints: a positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* and a negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to*

*standard*. Guided by this characterisation, the question-answer exchange in which Mr. Blair accuses Mr. Duncan Smith of being inconsistent in his attitude towards the NHS, discussed in Chapter 2 and included again below for the sake of convenience, needs to be reconstructed as part of such a discussion.

(1) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*  
[...] The answer that he did not give to my question is that hospital beds are in short supply because they are being blocked by people who cannot get a care home or nursing home bed. The figure that he did not want to provide is that 40,000—nearly 10 per cent.—fewer care home beds are available since 1997 when he took over. Age Concern says that the care sector is in crisis. The head of the Registered Nursing Homes Association said that Government policy was to blame. The Government's policies are damaging the NHS. Is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*  
Public sector investment in the health service has increased under the Government and is continuing to increase. We are roughly the only major industrial country anywhere in the world that is increasing expenditure on health and education as a proportion of national income. Is it the Conservative party's case that we are not spending enough on health and education? When we announced our spending plans, Conservatives called them reckless and irresponsible. We know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it. The clearest evidence of that came yesterday, when the Leader of the Opposition said:

"The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated."  
What an insult to the NHS and the people who work in it! Conservatives denigrate the health service because they want to undermine it. We want to increase investment, whereas the right hon. Gentleman would cut it.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

In his question, Mr. Duncan Smith defends the negative main standpoint and in his answers, Mr. Blair defends the positive main standpoint. Mr. Duncan Smith defends the negative standpoint by saying that *government policies are damaging the NHS*. He cites the high number of cancelled operations among those scheduled by the NHS as evidence, arguing that government policies in the care sector have caused shortage in the supply of hospital beds, which has in turn lead to a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations.

In Chapter 2, the criticism of the Government for having policies that damage the NHS, advanced by Mr. Duncan Smith, was interpreted as the critical standpoint that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS*. The interpretation was guided by the knowledge that the claim comes in the context of criticising the Government. The characterisation of the argumentative practice as an argumentative activity type allows, however, for a more precise interpretation of Mr. Duncan Smith's argumentation. The statement by which Mr. Duncan

Smith criticises the Government for having policies that damage the NHS can be interpreted as an argument advanced in support of the negative main standpoint. The argument would be something like *government policies are damaging the NHS*, which is in fact what the Leader of the Opposition actually says in his question. As a defence of the negative main standpoint, this argument gets a justificatory power ascribed to it. The justificatory power is expressed in a linking premise like *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The blame implied in the critical position of Mr. Duncan Smith is part of the justificatory power of the argument rather than its propositional content. Therefore, in light of the activity type perspective, the argumentation of Mr. Duncan Smith, in his question, is to be interpreted as follows:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1 Government policies are damaging the NHS
- (1.1') (If government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

As predicted by the activity type perspective, the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS* becomes a sub-standpoint as a result of the Prime Minister's institutionally anticipated challenge, typical of this type of parliamentary session.

The insight that exchanges between the Prime Minister and his adversaries constitute sub-discussions, in which arguments are challenged and defended, often in anticipation of their being rejected (or at least not accepted) by the opponent, sheds significant light on the argumentative function of the Prime Minister's accusation at issue. The analysis of the exchange about the NHS provided in Chapter 2 showed how the accusation attributes to the Leader of the Opposition two mutually inconsistent commitments and urges him to retract one of them. The accusation attributes to Mr. Duncan Smith a commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* as a proposition entailed by criticising government policies for damaging the NHS, as well as a commitment to the opposite proposition, i.e. a commitment to *the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of*, on the basis of other positions of the Conservative Party that undermine the NHS. The accusation is presented in a way that directs the Leader of the Opposition to retract the first commitment and thereby retract the critical

standpoint by which the commitment is entailed. Thus far the analysis in Chapter 2; the insights gained from the argumentative activity type perspective, however, make clearer how exactly Mr. Blair attempts to lead his adversary to retract his criticism by leading him to retract his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*.

In light of the activity type perspective, it can be seen that the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, which is attributed to the Leader of the Opposition on the basis of his critical position, is in fact entailed by the linking premise of the argument of the Leader of the Opposition. By making Mr. Duncan Smith retract his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, Mr. Blair attempts to get the Leader of the Opposition to retract his commitment to the linking premise of his argument, i.e. the commitment to *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Mr. Blair's accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Duncan Smith is therefore an attempt to dismiss an argument by dismissing its justificatory power. It is an attempt to define the sub-difference of opinion about the sub-standpoint, i.e. the argument, of the Leader of the Opposition as no dispute, in the argumentative sub-confrontation about it.

The definition of the sub-difference of opinion about the argument of the Leader of the Opposition as no dispute is particularly strategic in this type of parliamentary sessions. The Prime Minister's institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government imposes constraints on the definitions of the difference of opinion allowable as outcomes of the sub-confrontation between the Prime Minister and MPs from the Opposition about arguments advanced by these MPs. In view of the Prime Minister's institutional obligation, the outcome of no dispute is the only alternative to a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute, often undesirable for the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister is to live up to his institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government, the Prime Minister is expected to challenge and refute arguments advanced by MPs from the Opposition, in which criticism is expressed concerning these policies, plans or actions. For example, in the case of the exchange about the NHS, Mr. Blair is expected to challenge and refute Mr. Duncan Smith's argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS*. As a

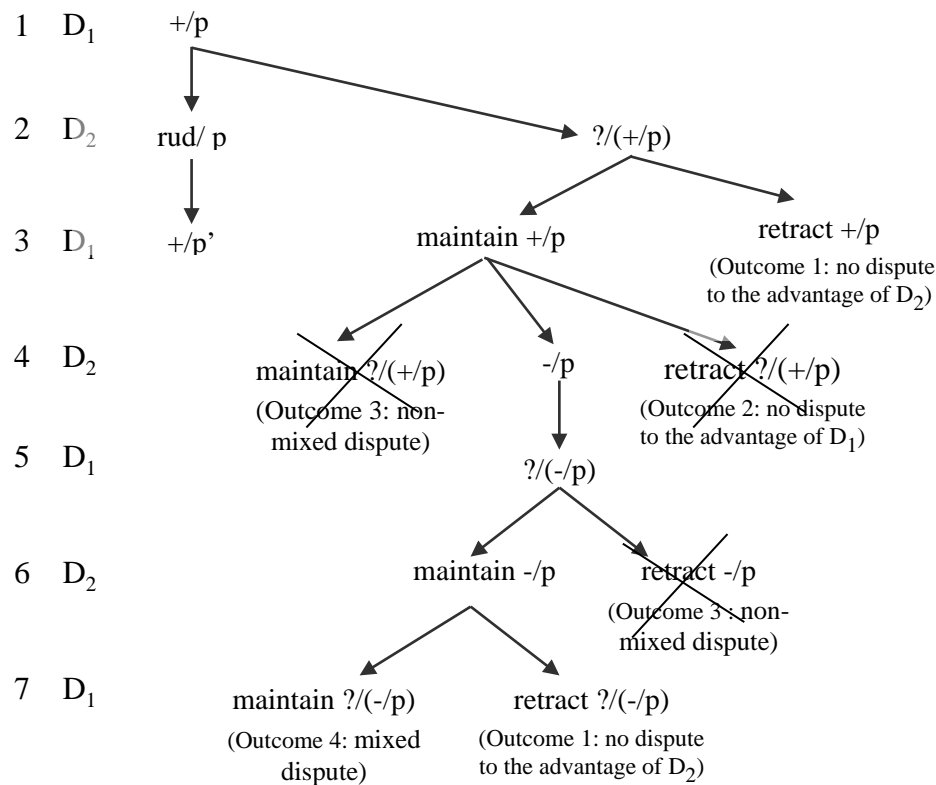
result, their sub-confrontation is preconditioned to result in a mixed sub-dispute concerning the argument he needs to refute, unless the argument is retracted. By re-examining the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage, designed in Chapter 2, in view of the Prime Minister's institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government, I shall show that, unless the arguments advanced by MPs from the Opposition are retracted, the argumentative sub-confrontations about them are preconditioned to result in mixed sub-disputes.

In Chapter 2, it has been shown that an argumentative confrontation between two discussants ( $D_1$  and  $D_2$ ) concerning a certain positive standpoint ( $+/p$ ), advanced by  $D_1$ , can in principle result, within the boundaries of reasonableness, in any of the four following outcomes: first, a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to  $D_2$ 's favour, second, a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to  $D_1$ 's favour, third, a non-mixed dispute about the positive standpoint of  $D_1$  and fourth, a mixed dispute about the positive standpoint of  $D_1$  and its opposite advanced by  $D_2$ .

The confrontation can result in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the favour of  $D_2$  (*turn 3, right branch*) in the case that  $D_1$  retracts his positive standpoint ( $+/p$ ) in response to the doubt of  $D_2$ . The same outcome can be reached in the case that  $D_1$  retracts the advanced positive standpoint ( $+/p$ ) in response to the advanced and maintained opposite standpoint ( $-/p$ ) by  $D_2$  (*turn 7, right branch*). The confrontation can result in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the favour of  $D_1$  (*turn 4, right branch*) in the case that  $D_2$  retracts his doubt in response to the maintained positive standpoint of  $D_1$ . The confrontation can result in a non-mixed dispute concerning the standpoint of  $D_1$  in the case that  $D_2$  maintains this doubt concerning the standpoint maintained by  $D_1$  (*turn 4, left branch*). The same outcome can be reached in the case that  $D_2$  advances the opposite standpoint ( $-/p$ ) but later retracts it in response to the doubt of  $D_1$  (*turn 6, right branch*). The confrontation can result in a mixed dispute in the case that both  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  advance opposite standpoints ( $+/p$  and  $-/p$ ) and maintain them each against the doubt maintained by the other (*turn 7, left branch*)).

With the exchange about the NHS as a case in point, I shall show how the institutional obligations of the Prime Minister allow only for the first and the last of the outcomes above in the argumentative sub-confrontations about arguments from the Opposition. In Figure 8, below, the dialectical profile suggested in Chapter 2 is reproduced with the institutionally excluded outcomes crossed out.

**Figure 8: A dialectical profile for sub-confrontations about arguments from the Opposition in Prime Minister's Question Time**



- 
- D<sub>1</sub> : MP from the Opposition  
D<sub>2</sub> : The Prime Minister  
+/p : Advance a positive standpoint concerning the proposition p  
?/(+p) : Cast doubt on the positive standpoint  
-/p : Advance a negative standpoint concerning the proposition p  
?/(-p) : Cast doubt on the negative standpoint  
rud/p : Request a usage declarative concerning the proposition p  
+/p' : Advance a reformulation of the positive standpoint by using a usage declarative

*The outcomes that have been crossed out are excluded as a result of institutional considerations (see text).*

By challenging the justificatory power of the argument from the Opposition, Mr.



Blair expresses doubt concerning the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, implied in the line of argument of his opponent, which initiates a sub-confrontation about this premise.<sup>25</sup>

In this sub-confrontation, the first outcome that is excluded is the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the advantage of Mr. Duncan Smith (*turn 4, right branch*). If the Prime Minister is expected to defend government policies and actions, what is expected from Mr. Blair is at least that he will not accept arguments that criticise such policies or actions. The most straightforward way for him to express the non-acceptance expected is to express his critical doubt about the acceptability of the argument itself, i.e. its propositional content expressed in 1.1 in the argumentation structure. The indirect doubt cast upon the argument by doubting its linking premise (*I.I'*), however, expresses enough non-acceptance for Mr. Blair to live up to his duties as Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister should maintain his critical doubt about the linking premise implied in the line of argumentation of the Opposition. Only if he is willing to proceed into a sub-discussion about the propositional content of the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS* can the Prime Minister retract his doubt concerning the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* and end the sub-confrontation about the latter in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to Mr. Duncan Smith's advantage. In the exchange at issue, Mr. Blair's critical doubt about the linking premise comes in fact after failed attempts to refute the propositional content of the argument (*I.I*). That would make the retraction of doubt concerning the linking premise go even more against his institutional obligations. It is, therefore, unlikely to happen.

The second outcome excluded in the sub-confrontation about the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, is the outcome of a non-mixed dispute about this linking premise. In the case that the Prime Minister does not manage to refute the propositional content of an argument from the Opposition, merely

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<sup>25</sup> In this exchange, "p" in Figure 8 is to be interpreted as this linking premise.

doubting the justificatory power of this argument cannot lead to an adequate defence of the performance of the Government in the institutional sense. Having failed to refute the propositional content of the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS*, Mr. Blair's defence of the performance of his Government requires him to not only doubt, but also deny the justificatory power of the argument. A competent Prime Minister would not only doubt that the damages in the NHS referred to by the Opposition are signs that the performance of the Government is not up to standard, but would also oppose that and argue that the damages referred to are not signs that the performance is not up to standard as the linking premise claims. In other words, a non-mixed dispute resulting from the Prime Minister's mere doubt concerning the linking premise is excluded if the Prime Minister is to live up to his institutional responsibilities. The outcome of a non-mixed dispute would have been even less expected, had the sub-confrontation been about the propositional content of the argument rather than its justificatory power. It is certainly not acceptable for Mr. Blair to merely cast doubt upon the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS*. Unless he casts doubt on the justificatory power of the argument, Mr. Blair needs to challenge the propositional content of the argument and further advance and maintain its opposite, leading the sub-confrontation to a mixed dispute (*the fourth outcome, turn 7, left branch*). As long as Mr. Duncan Smith maintains his critical argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS* against the doubt of Mr. Blair, advancing and maintaining the opposite argument that *government policies are not damaging the NHS* seems to be the only way for Mr. Blair to live up to his institutional responsibility is to justify and defend the performance of his Government.

Even though acting in accordance with his institutional obligations requires the Prime Minister to adopt positions that can lead to mixed sub-disputes about (the propositional content or the justificatory power of) arguments from the Opposition, this outcome need not always be the one reached in actual sub-confrontations. The response of the MP from the Opposition advancing the argument can lead the argumentative sub-confrontation towards the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute favourable to the Prime Minister, instead. Because the MP from the Opposition can retract his argument (*turn 3, right*

*branch*), the sub-confrontation can result in the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute even if the Prime Minister acts in accordance with his institutional obligation and expresses critical doubt concerning the argument from the Opposition (*turn 2, right branch*). The sub-confrontation can result in the same definition of the difference of opinion even after the Prime Minister advances and maintains the opposite sub-standpoint (*turn 6, left branch*), in accordance with his institutional obligations, namely in the case that the MP from the Opposition retracts his doubt concerning the Prime Minister's opposite sub-standpoint (*turn 7, right branch*).

Compared with a mixed dispute as outcome, the outcome of no dispute is usually more advantageous to the Prime Minister. With a mixed dispute as an outcome, the Prime Minister is required to advance sub-argumentation in order to live up to his obligation to refute the Opposition's implicit sub-standpoint, namely that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, incurred on him by his institutional obligation to refute the Opposition's main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. With a no dispute as an outcome, the Prime Minister is not required to do so. In cases where MPs from the Opposition retract their critical arguments, the Prime Minister has nothing against which he needs to defend the performance of his Government. In the exchange about the NHS, for example, Mr. Duncan Smith's retraction of the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS*, or equally of its justificatory power expressed in the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, would require him to retract his standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard* without the need for Mr. Blair to advance refutatory arguments. As explained earlier, the charge of inconsistency advanced by Mr. Blair against Mr. Duncan Smith is an attempt to reach such a result at the first possible occasion (*turn 3*), by leading Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his argument. Even though reaching the outcome at the later occasion (*turn 7*) also spares the Prime Minister the need to argue against an argument from the Opposition, in view of institutional considerations, achieving the outcome at the first occasion appears to be often even more advantageous. As we shall see, the exchange about the NHS

provides an example.

In the exchange about the NHS, reaching a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute at turn 7 is less advantageous to Mr. Blair because it requires him to advance and be ready to uphold the sub-standpoint that *it is not the case that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* as the opposite of the linking premise of Mr. Duncan Smith which he challenges. The expression of such a sub-standpoint is certainly not to the advantage of Mr. Blair, if only because it can easily be interpreted as a sign that the Prime Minister tolerates the act of causing damage to the NHS, an impression that the Prime Minister would not want to give. The definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute reached at turn 3 of the confrontation is definitely the most advantageous outcome for the Prime Minister given his institutional obligations and interests.

The definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute pursued by Mr. Blair in the exchange about the NHS is advantageous, not only argumentatively, as has been shown in Chapter 2, but also institutionally, as I have made clearer above. The outcome affected by the retraction of a critical argument by an MP from the Opposition, is institutionally advantageous to the Prime Minister primarily because it allows him to act in accordance both with his institutional obligations and interests without incurring serious argumentative obligations. The outcome makes it possible for the Prime Minister to defend the performance of his Government without having to refute the argument from the Opposition which is usually necessary for refuting the standpoint of the Opposition that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.

#### **4.2 Handling the institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition**

In the exchange about the NHS, Mr. Blair employs an accusation of inconsistency aiming to lead Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his argument, in an attempt to handle his own institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition while incurring a minimum of argumentative obligations. Even though in the last two turns of the exchange, discussed above, Mr. Blair's attempt is directed at the

justificatory power of the argument from the Opposition, in previous turns, Mr. Blair has attempted to address the propositional content of the argument. In this section, I shall examine the whole exchange about the NHS trying to explore an additional strategic aspect of the Prime Minister's accusations at issue.

In his first question to the Prime Minister in Question Time session of 6 February 2002, Mr. Duncan Smith addresses the issue of cancelled operations. The passage is also quoted in 2.1.

(1a) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*  
May I join the Prime Minister in congratulating Her Majesty on the 50th anniversary of her accession? Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since he came to power?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*  
It has risen; however—[Hon. Members: "How much?"] It has risen by about 20,000; however, the number of operations as a whole has also risen by more than 500,000; 19 out of 20 operations are done on time; the average waiting time for an operation has fallen since 1997; and, therefore, although it is correct that the number of cancelled operations has risen, if we look at the number of operations as a whole—more than 5.5 million in this country—I think that the national health service has a record to be proud of.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

As always in Question Time, the argumentation in support of the main standpoints develops gradually over turns, as a result of the question-answer format of the session. In his first turn, Mr. Duncan Smith asks the Prime Minister whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since the latter came to power. The Leader of the Opposition, who knows very well that the number has risen, considerably in fact, cannot be really asking for information. By asking the Prime Minister to tell *the House* whether the number has risen or fallen, the Leader of the Opposition attempts to elicit information that he can use as arguments to defend his standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Already at his first turn, Mr. Duncan Smith can be seen to imply that

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1 There is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government
- (1.1') (If there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

In his response to the question, Mr. Blair does not merely provide an answer. Realising that his answer to the question serves as an argument in support of his opponent's standpoint, he includes in his response statements that challenge the justificatory power of such an argument. Mr. Blair responds by saying that even though the number has risen, such a rise cannot really be a sign of bad performance. He argues that the rise is trivial if compared to the achievements of the Government in the health sector, and gives examples of such achievements. In other words, Mr. Blair confirms the propositional content of his opponent's argument that *there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government*, but rejects its justificatory power (by rejecting the propositional content of the linking premise that *if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*).

The positive records of the NHS under his Government listed by the Prime Minister not only supports his opposite sub-standpoint that *it is not the case that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, but also his sub-standpoint that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*, which he expresses at the end of his turn. In view of the over-all discussion about the performance of the Government, the latter sub-standpoint can be considered as an argument in support of the positive main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard*. Mr. Blair's argumentation in his first turn can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is up to standard)
  - 1.1 The NHS has a record to be proud of
    - (1.1') (If the NHS has a record to be proud of, then the performance of the Government is up to standard)
      - 1.1.1a The number of operations as a whole has risen by more than 500,000
      - 1.1.1b 19 out of 20 operations are done on time
      - 1.1.1c The average waiting time for an operation has fallen since 1997
      - 1.1.1d The rise in the number of cancelled operations does not affect the record of the NHS significantly
        - 1.1.1d.1 The number of operations as a whole has increased significantly

Mr. Blair, who cannot reject the propositional content of the argument that *there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government*, rejects the argument's justificatory power. The Prime Minister rejects the argument's linking premise, leading the argumentative sub-confrontation into a mixed sub-dispute about it. Furthermore, Mr. Blair attempts to defend his main positive standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* by an argument that is, given the rise in cancelled operations, contrary to the linking premise he rejects, namely that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*. With Mr. Blair's contrary argument, the sub-dispute becomes also multiple, in a qualitative way.<sup>26</sup> In this qualitatively multiple and mixed sub-dispute, Mr. Duncan Smith holds the sub-standpoint (+/p<sub>1</sub>) that *if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, while Mr. Blair holds the opposite sub-standpoint (-/p<sub>1</sub>) that *it is not the case that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* and the contrary sub-standpoint (+/p<sub>2</sub>) that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*.

Advancing a contrary sub-standpoint is advantageous to the Prime Minister who, because of institutional obligations, has to refute the argumentation that the Leader of the Opposition advances in support of the negative main standpoint, as well as defend his own positive main standpoint. By choosing to defend his own positive standpoint by an argument that is contrary to the argument of the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister attempts to defend his main standpoint and refute that of his opponent by means of the same sub-arguments.

By introducing this qualitatively multiple mixed dispute, the Prime Minister attempts to refute the argument from the Opposition by merely defending his own contrary argument. In the present case, a successful defence of the sub-standpoint that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*, i.e. one which leads

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<sup>26</sup> In a qualitatively multiple and mixed dispute, as introduced by van Eemeren *et al.* (2007a, pp. 22-24), a discussant responds to a certain standpoint (+/p<sub>1</sub>) by advancing a standpoint that is alternative to it (+/p<sub>2</sub>), i.e. a contrary standpoint. The dispute is multiple because two different propositions, p<sub>1</sub> and p<sub>2</sub>, are discussed. The dispute is mixed, because the two proposition are related in a way that commits the proponent of (+/p<sub>2</sub>) to (-/p<sub>1</sub>), and the proponent of (+/p<sub>1</sub>) to (-/p<sub>2</sub>), even when these are not explicitly advanced.

the Leader of the Opposition to accept the sub-standpoint, requires the Leader of the Opposition to retract his sub-standpoint that *if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Mr. Blair hopes that when Mr. Duncan Smith accepts that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*, he will also accept that *the rise in the number of cancelled operations is trivial compared to the achievements of the Government in the health sector*. That, if achieved, would require Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his linking premise and consequently the line of argument and the negative main standpoint it defends. Mr. Duncan Smith, however, does not do so. In his next turn, Mr. Duncan Smith reformulates his argument in a way that allows him to maintain it against the arguments of the Prime Minister. In fact, in his second turn, Mr. Duncan Smith argues that *the rise in the number of cancelled operations is not trivial*.

(1b) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

The answer is quite correct: 50 per cent. I have to tell the Prime Minister that that is not just a figure. He talks about the rise in the number of operations done, but the numbers that have been cancelled have risen as well, and that is a real tragedy for those who have to wait. [*Interruption.*] Well, the reality—he may not want to hear this—is that this is not one or two cases, but 80,000 people who have had their operations cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them. That is a matter of fear and anxiety for 80,000 people—many more than when he came to power. So, as those numbers have risen and 80,000 people have had their operations cancelled, will he now tell us the reason why?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

As I explained a moment ago, far more operations have been done by the national health service—about 500,000 more. Less than 2 per cent. of operations are cancelled, which should put the matter in perspective. The only answer is indeed to increase the capacity of the health service, including more nurses, doctors and consultants, as well as other staff, and more beds. That is precisely why we are increasing investment in the national health service. The right hon. Gentleman is in favour of cutting that investment. Therefore, whatever the problems of cancelled operations—I say that they should be put in perspective—the remedy that he has, which is to cut that investment, is the wrong remedy. The remedy that we have—invest and reform—is the right one.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

Mr. Duncan Smith defends his argument by saying ‘this is not one or two cases, but 80,000 people who have had their operations cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them’. Furthermore, in this same turn, Mr. Duncan Smith asks the Prime Minister about the causes of the problematic rise. By means of the question-like imperative ‘will he now tell us the reason why?’ Mr. Duncan Smith subtly suggests that the causes of the problematic change are so clear that they can only be told, rather than explained or discussed. In light of the activity type



perspective on Question Time, the imperative can be further interpreted as an argument that relates to government policies and supports a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government.

Thus, the Leader of the Opposition can be viewed as suggesting that government policies are the cause of rising numbers of cancelled operations. A suggestion to which the Prime Minister responds in the turn that follows, as he compares the policies of his Government with those proposed as a solution to the problem by the Opposition. In his second turn, Mr. Duncan Smith's argumentation in support of his negative main standpoint seems to develop to convey the following:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1a There is a *problematic* rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government
- (1.1a') (If there is a *problematic* rise in the number of cancelled operations, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- (1.1b) (Government policies are responsible for the problematic rise)
- 1.1a.1 80,000 people suffered fear and anxiety as a result of their operations being cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them

Even though he accepts that the rise of cancelled operations can be considered a problem, Mr. Blair is not willing to accept it as a sign that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. As he asserts that 'whatever the problems of cancelled operations [...] they should be put in perspective', the Prime Minister is trying to say that once the problem of cancelled operations is put in perspective, the other records of the NHS would indicate that the performance of the Government is up to standard. Again, the Prime Minister is faced with an argument the propositional content (*1.1a*) of which he cannot challenge and, therefore, he challenges the argument's justificatory power instead (*1.1a'*).

Mr. Blair needs to respond also to the implicit argument that *government policies are responsible for the problematic rise*. Even though the argument is only implied, yet the Prime Minister has to address it. As the characterisation of the activity type of Question Time has shown, the exchanges in a Question Time

session are (supposed to be) about government plans and policies and the Prime Minister is expected to address the critical reaction to these plans and policies if he is to live up to his responsibility as Head of Government. That makes it very hard for the Prime Minister to ignore an argument about the responsibility of the government policies for the problematic rise of cancelled operations, even if this argument is only suggested in his opponent's question. Yet, because the argument has only been suggested and not expressed explicitly, Mr. Blair can afford to address it indirectly. Instead of opposing the argument that *government policies are responsible for the rise of the number of cancelled operations*, Mr. Blair chooses to argue that *government plans, unlike those of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations*. By means of this argument, Mr. Blair attempts to change the topic of the sub-confrontation. Instead of addressing the argument from the Opposition, he addresses a closely related alternative. The topic shift is advantageous to Mr. Blair not only because it might allow him to avoid discussing an argument from the Opposition that he cannot refute, but also because his alternative argument contributes directly to the defence of his positive main standpoint. In this turn, Mr. Blair can be viewed to argue that

- (1) (The performance of the Government is up to standard)
- 1.1 The government policy of increasing investment in the NHS, unlike policies of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations
  - 1.1.1 Increasing investment in the NHS would increase its capacity
    - 1.1.1.1a Increasing investment in the NHS would increase the number of nurses, doctors and other staff
    - 1.1.1.1b Increasing investment in the NHS would increase the number of beds

In this turn, it is clear that the Prime Minister is not only defending the performance of his Government, but also arguing that this Government, rather than one led by his opponent, is capable of solving the problem. His arguments as Head of Government can be also useful for him as party leader. The arguments do not only support a standpoint that expresses a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government, but also a standpoint that defends the fitness of his party for solving the problems of the country. The latter is to be understood as presenting an argument in the simultaneous discussion about the competence of political parties providing good leadership for the country, a discussion which the

activity type perspective (*section 3.4*) showed to be central to Question Time.

The comparison the Prime Minister makes between his policies and those of the Opposition can be considered to be his first, mild, attempt to do away with discussing his opponent's argument. As explained in the activity type characterisation, the Prime Minister is under the obligation to refute the Opposition's negative main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Mr. Blair portrays the Opposition's alternative plans as incapable of solving the problem of cancelled operations, thereby suggesting that the Opposition cannot really criticise the way the Government is dealing with the problem when their own policies would not have prevented it. The Prime Minister suggests that Mr. Duncan Smith cannot really maintain his argument that *there is a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government* and can therefore not maintain his standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard* either. By attempting to make his opponent retract his argument, Mr. Blair aims to do away with the opponent's standpoint without discussing his argument.

Up to this point, Mr. Blair could afford to address the argument that *government policies are responsible for the problematic rise* only indirectly. In his next turn, however, the Leader of the Opposition asserts his claim very explicitly: *government policies are damaging the NHS*, he argues, forcing Mr. Blair to be more direct as well.

(1c) *Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

[...] The answer that he did not give to my question is that hospital beds are in short supply because they are being blocked by people who cannot get a care home or nursing home bed. The figure that he did not want to provide is that 40,000—nearly 10 per cent.—fewer care home beds are available since 1997 when he took over. Age Concern says that the care sector is in crisis. The head of the Registered Nursing Homes Association said that Government policy was to blame. The Government's policies are damaging the NHS. Is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

Public sector investment in the health service has increased under the Government and is continuing to increase. We are roughly the only major industrial country anywhere in the world that is increasing expenditure on health and education as a proportion of national income. Is it the Conservative party's case that we are not spending enough on health and education? When we announced our spending plans, Conservatives called them reckless and irresponsible. We know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it. The clearest evidence of that came yesterday, when the Leader of the Opposition said:

"The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated."

What an insult to the NHS and the people who work in it! Conservatives denigrate the health service because they want to undermine it. We want to increase investment, whereas the right hon. Gentleman would cut it

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

With this point being made clear, Mr. Duncan Smith's argumentation in support of the negative main standpoint can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1 Government policies are damaging the NHS
- (1.1') (if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1.1a Government policies in the care sector have caused shortage in hospital bed supply
- 1.1.1b Shortage in hospital bed supply has lead to a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations among those scheduled by the NHS<sup>27</sup>

It is in response to the explicit accusation that government policies are damaging the NHS that the Prime Minister responds by an explicit attempt to exclude the argument from the Opposition from the discussion. In his next turn, the Prime Minister challenges the justificatory power of his opponent's argument by accusing him of being inconsistent in his attitude towards the NHS. The accusation is an attempt to lead this sub-confrontation concerning the linking premise of the challenged argument (1.1') to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, as an outcome which allows the Prime Minister to avoid the argumentative obligation to refute an argument from the Opposition, without compromising his institutional obligation to defend his Government.

Knowledge of institutional considerations relevant to the argumentative practice in Question Time helps us see Mr. Blair's accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Duncan Smith as an instance of a recurrent attempt of the Prime Minister to avoid discussion of arguments from the Opposition he has the institutional obligation to address but has difficulty refuting. In the exchange about the NHS, the accusation of inconsistency seems to be the strongest among

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<sup>27</sup> 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b, being cumulatively coordinatively connected, are expressed in the ironic question *is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?*

the Prime Minister's attempts. Prior to it, the Prime Minister tried, first, to avoid the direct refutation of the sub-standpoint that *if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, by advancing the contrary sub-standpoint that *the NHS has a record to be proud of*. Second, the Prime Minister attempted to change the topic of the sub-confrontation about the sub-standpoint that *government policies are responsible for the problematic rise* into a sub-confrontation about the closely related sub-standpoint that *government plans, unlike those of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations*. The resort to the accusation of inconsistency, the strongest of the attempts, does not come before other attempts have failed.

### **4.3 Making strategic choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices**

Knowledge of institutional considerations sheds significant light not only on the strategic dimension of the outcome pursued by the accusation and the gradual development of it, but also on the way the outcome is pursued. Knowledge of the rules and conventions of Question Time and the preconditions they create for argumentative exchanges provide significant insights into the strategic choices of topics, audience frames and style the Prime Minister makes as he attempts to reach the favourable definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute.

In Chapter 2, the analysis of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring employed by Mr. Blair in order to avoid discussing Mr. Duncan Smith's standpoint, later reconstructed as an argument cf. p.45) that *government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS* unravelled the strategic function of Mr. Blair's choices from the topical potential, audience frames and stylistic devices available to him. These choices were strategic in the sense that they contributed to at least one of the following: (a) attributing, beyond any doubt, a certain commitment to Mr. Duncan Smith based on another position he has assumed, (b) directing Mr. Duncan Smith towards maintaining this commitment and/or (c) portraying the current position of Mr. Duncan Smith to entail a commitment that is inconsistent with, and therefore cannot be maintained together with, the other

commitment attributed. For example, the choice of attributing a commitment through quotation is a strategic choice of stylistic device because quotation gives a high degree of credibility to the attribution. The choice of referring to a position of Mr. Duncan Smith that is central to conservative policy, such as the Tory's opposition to investment in the health sector, is a strategic choice of topic because it makes it quite hard for Mr. Duncan Smith to retract the commitment. The choices are strategic in the sense that they contribute to leading Mr. Duncan Smith to retract (the linking premise of) his argument and thereby to eliminating any disagreement about it, to the advantage of Mr. Blair.

Mr. Blair's choices would appear to be even more strategic, once institutional considerations and the resulting argumentative preconditions of the argumentative activity type of Question Time are taken into account. For example, once it is taken into account that differences of opinion about the leadership competence of political parties run simultaneously with the main difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government, one becomes aware of an extra strategic aspect of the choice of the Prime Minister to refer to the Tory's opposition to investment in the health sector in particular. As explained in Chapter 3, in Question Time, simultaneous to the main difference of opinion about the performance of the Government there are concurrent differences that relate to the competence of the different political parties in providing good leadership. Because Question Time sessions are supposed to be about the performance of the Government, simultaneous differences of opinion can be addressed only indirectly, by addressing the main initial difference about the performance of the Government. The choice of referring to the Conservatives' position concerning investment in health becomes more advantageous in view of such a precondition. The choice of topic is opportune not only in the discussion about the performance of the Government, but also in the discussion about the competence of the Conservative party in providing good leadership. By emphasising the bad consequences that can result from the Tories' opposition to investment in health care, Mr. Blair defends the point of view that the Conservatives cannot provide good leadership to the country.

Taking into account the concurrent differences of opinion sheds significant light on the choice of the accusation of inconsistency as a stylistic

device to express doubt concerning Mr. Duncan Smith's argument as well. The accusation can play a role in the discussion of at least two differences of opinion. In the dispute concerning the performance of the Government, the accusation can lead in a potentially reasonable way to an outcome that is desirable to Mr. Blair. By appealing to the principle that one cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, Mr. Blair attempts to direct Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, and consequently retract *government policies are (to blame for) damaging the NHS* as a line of argument advanced in support of the standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In the dispute over the political competence of the Conservative party, the accusation of inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of a standpoint such as *Conservatives cannot provide good leadership*. After all, a political party that is inconsistent cannot provide good leadership.

The interplay between political and argumentative roles, typical of Question Time, renders even more strategic the choice of Mr. Blair to address Mr. Duncan Smith in the audience frame of the Leader of the Conservative party. In Question Time, as in most parliamentary sessions, arguers conventionally (and in virtue of their political party obligations) adopt argumentative positions in line with the positions of their political parties. Being the leader of one's party makes the obligation to stick to party positions even stronger. The previous position of Mr. Duncan Smith to which Mr. Blair refers is strategically chosen to be one that is central to Conservative policy: to reduce investment in the public sector. Had the previous position been more of a personal opinion of Mr. Duncan Smith and less of a position of the Tories, Mr. Duncan Smith would have had more freedom to retract his commitment to it and maintain his commitment to his current point of view, namely that *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*. But because the leader of the Conservative party cannot publicly renounce a central Conservative position without the risk of great political loss, Mr. Blair has more chances to get his opponent to maintain his previous commitment and thus to have no other option but to retract the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* and therefore to the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.

Mr. Blair takes advantage of the preconditions for argumentation imposed by the format of Question Time to reach this result. The Prime Minister has the last word, so Mr. Duncan Smith cannot respond by choosing which commitment to maintain, and the exchange is on view to a public that would, given the centrality to the Conservatives' political program their opposition to investment in health to is, attribute to Mr. Duncan Smith the commitment Mr. Blair wants him to maintain. Had Mr. Duncan Smith been given the chance to respond to Mr. Blair, it is unlikely that he would have retracted any of his commitments, especially not his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, if only because such a retraction would work against him in the discussion about the competence of his party in leading the country. However, by lack of response, the retraction can easily be attributed to him by the public watching the session. The commitment attributed to Mr. Duncan Smith, by Mr. Blair, namely that *it is not the case that the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, works in favour of Mr. Blair in the concurrent dispute about the political competence of the Conservatives, too.

#### **4.4 Characteristics of a particular way of confrontational manoeuvring**

The examination of the exchange about the NHS sheds light on three main characteristics that are central to the particular way of strategic manoeuvring that is subject of this study. First, the exchange about the NHS shows that the Prime Minister can aim at leading MPs from the Opposition to retract the arguments he needs to refute, but wishes not to discuss, by challenging the commitment of his opponents to the justificatory power of the arguments after attempts to refute the arguments' propositional contents have failed. Second, the case also shows that in the particular activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time, the retraction of the argument by the MP from the Opposition saves the Prime Minister from ending up with a mixed dispute about the argument from the Opposition, which can be institutionally undesirable to the Prime Minister. Third, the NHS case shows that the accusation of inconsistency is not only an argumentatively opportune choice of style in the discussion of the performance of the Government, but also an institutionally opportune choice: the alleged



inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the Prime Minister's position in the concurrent discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country. With the help of some other exchanges in which this particular way of manoeuvring occurs, I shall show that the three characteristics above are not particular to the NHS case.

In the exchange below, the first part of which was also examined in Chapter 2, Gordon Brown, the Labour Prime Minister, responds to the criticism of David Cameron, the Conservative Leader of the Opposition, by an accusation of inconsistency.

(2)

*David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

There are currently six police investigations under way into the conduct of government in London. The most recent allegations are that the London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that that is completely unacceptable?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

As on any occasion when a matter referring to a police investigation is raised, I have to say this is a matter for the police. It should be fully investigated, but it is not a matter for this House until the police complete their investigations.

*Mr. Cameron:*

The point is that while these accusations are going on and this investigation is under way, the Mayor—the Labour Mayor—has said that he “trusts Lee Jasper with his life”, and last night he said that he is already planning to reappoint him. Does not every element of the Prime Minister's moral compass tell him that this is wrong?

*Mr. Brown:*

As I understand it, the person whom the right hon. Gentleman is talking about has resigned and is no longer in that employment. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to support the police in their investigation, why does his candidate for the Mayor of London say that the first target for cuts is transport and policing? That is the Conservative party—cutting transport and cutting policing.

(House of Commons official report, 2008c)

Mr. Cameron's question to the Prime Minister addresses the conduct of the Government in London in light of a heated controversy over an alleged misuse of public funds by Lee Jasper, the London Mayor's Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities.

In his first question, Mr. Cameron argues that

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1 The conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations

- 1.1.1 The London Mayor's director for equalities and policing [Lee Jasper] has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies

An initial disagreement is triggered in relation to Mr. Cameron's argument, which Mr. Brown is expected not to accept. Nevertheless, Mr. Brown attempts to avoid a discussion about the argument by appealing to the Parliament's *sub judice rule*: the case mentioned should not be the subject of a discussion in Parliament because it is being investigated by the police, he argues.

In response to the *sub judice rule*, Mr. Cameron reformulates his argument taking into account that the matter is under investigation. He reformulates the argument as *the London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been accused of channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies* (1.1a.1 below), and in order to support this line of argument, which has become weaker, he complements it with the argument that *the Government (London's Labour Mayor) supports the accused director* (1.1b below). Mr. Cameron implies that the support for the accused is in itself a sign of bad governance. In his second turn, Mr. Cameron argues that

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1a The conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations
- (1.1a') (If the conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1b The Government (i.e. London's Labour Mayor) supports the accused director for equalities and policing
- (1.1b') (If the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1a.1 The London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been *accused of channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies*

In his response, Mr. Brown reports that the accused is no longer in employment. Viewed as a response to the criticism, the Prime Minister's answer can be interpreted as pointing out that the accused is no longer part of the Government in order to reject any association between what he does and the conduct of the Government. The answer can also be interpreted as an attempt by Mr. Brown to deny that the accused is supported by the Government in an attempt

to refute Mr. Cameron's argument 1.1b above. Yet, this is not a real refutation, especially considering the support quoted by Mr. Cameron. To compensate for this weak refutation, Mr. Brown resorts to the accusation of inconsistency to exclude from the discussion the argument that he cannot refute.

Mr. Brown accuses Mr. Cameron of an inconsistency in relation to the issue of police investigation: while the Opposition opposes investment in policing, the Leader of the Opposition now claims that the police should be supported in their investigation. The Prime Minister suggests that the Conservative's opposition to investment in policing implies that they do not support the police. Since Mr. Cameron's party does not care to support the police, Mr. Cameron cannot claim that *if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, Mr. Brown argues.

As in the exchange about the NHS, the Prime Minister challenges the justificatory power of an argument from the Opposition after he has proved incapable of refuting its propositional content. Also, as in the NHS case, the Prime Minister attempts to direct his sub-confrontation about the linking premise challenged towards the outcome of no dispute in order to avoid the institutionally undesirable outcome of a mixed dispute in which he has to advance and maintain the opposite of the linking premise he challenges. But it is not hard to see that Mr. Brown cannot commit himself to the opposite of the linking premise even though he challenges Mr. Cameron's commitment to it.

In fact, as a Prime Minister, Mr. Brown cannot advance the sub-standpoint that *it is not the case that if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, without the risk of a considerable political loss among the general public of voters. Unless Mr. Cameron retracts the linking premise, Mr. Brown would have either to accept the premise and fail in his institutional responsibility to defend his Government, or to oppose the linking premise and run the risk of losing the general public of voters. Taking such considerations into account, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute pursued by the accusation of inconsistency becomes particularly favourable for the Prime Minister. By appealing to the commonly accepted

principle that one cannot commit oneself to two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, Mr. Blair attempts to eliminate the argumentative obligation to refute a challenged argument without failing in his institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition. After all, if his opponent retracts his argument, Mr. Brown has nothing to refute.

Also, similar to the NHS case, the strategic dimension of the accusation of inconsistency is central to the concurrent discussion about the competence of the Opposition in leading the country. The accusation of inconsistency counts as an opportune choice of a stylistic device to express the doubt of Mr. Brown regarding the commitment of Mr. Cameron to the linking premise. The alleged inconsistency of the leader of the Conservative party constitutes an argument in favour of the point of view that the Conservatives cannot provide good leadership to the British people. This is the main standpoint Mr. Brown adopts in the discussion concurrent with the discussion about the performance of the Government.

The three characteristics above, central to the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue, can also be observed in the case below about the EU referendum.

(3)

*Peter Bottomley (MP, Conservative Party):*

To return to the European treaty, what polling or survey evidence did the Prime Minister have on what the result of a referendum would have been?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

The one poll that people look at is an actual referendum. In 1975 there was a referendum that recorded a yes vote, with more than two thirds of the population voting yes. I remind Conservative Members that most of those who were here in 1992 walked through the Lobby to oppose a referendum on Maastricht, and now they want a referendum on a treaty that is far less significant. They should think again about their position.

(House of Commons official report, 2008d)

This short exchange comes after a long and heated exchange between Mr. Brown and the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, about the Government's decision to cancel a referendum on the ratification of the Lisbon treaty and to have the decision taken by Parliament instead. In the exchange between Mr. Cameron and the Prime Minister, the former fiercely criticised the Government for cancelling the referendum they had promised in their election manifesto. Mr. Cameron even suggests that the Prime Minister cancelled the

referendum because he was not confident that he would win it. Mr. Bottomley's question above comes to add to the same discussion. In his question, the MP from the Opposition suggests that a referendum would have shown that British people oppose the EU treaty. He implies that because the Government plans to ratify the treaty against the preference of the British people, the performance of the Government can be judged as not up to standard. In light of earlier discussions about the referendum, the question of the MP from the Opposition also implies that the Government's unwillingness to organise the referendum on the treaty is in itself an indication that its performance is not up to standard, especially since the Government has, in its elections manifesto, promised that they would hold a referendum on the EU treaty. Mr. Bottomley's argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
  - 1.1 The Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people
    - (1.1') (If the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
  - (1.2) (The Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty)
    - (1.2') (If the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

In his answer, Mr. Brown tries first to refute the argument that *the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people*. He rejects the suggestion that a referendum would have shown that the British people oppose the treaty on the ground that the results of surveys and polls cannot to be considered a reliable source of evidence; only the results of actual referenda can be such a source, he argues. He then refers to the referendum of 1975, which showed that British voters were in favour of UK's membership in the European Economic Community. Mr. Brown implies that if one considers those results, one would tend to think that British voters would approve the new EU treaty if a referendum were to take place.

The Prime Minister also needs to refute the argument that *the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty*. Given that the

cancellation of the referendum is a fact that cannot be denied, the Prime Minister can defend his Government only by challenging the justificatory power of the argument. In fact, the heated discussion between the Prime Minister and Mr. Cameron was about the linking premise that *if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In that discussion, Mr. Brown tried repeatedly (without success) to argue that *it is not the case that if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard because the Lisbon treaty does not have any constitutional nature anymore*. Mr. Brown's attempts did not seem to succeed and Mr. Bottomley's question implies the same argument.

In response to the argument from the Opposition about cancelling the referendum implied in Mr. Bottomley's question, Mr. Brown responds with an accusation of inconsistency. Mr. Brown accuses the Conservatives of being inconsistent concerning referenda: they have voted against having a referendum on the Maastricht treaty in 1992, and now they claim that not holding a referendum is an indication of bad government performance. Mr. Brown distrusts the Opposition's belief in referenda given their previous actions, and suggests that because the justificatory power of the arguments from the Opposition entails such a belief, the MP from the Opposition cannot maintain his linking premise, and therefore, has to retract the argument he has advanced. By means of this accusation, the Prime Minister attempts to direct the sub-confrontation about the linking premise of Mr. Bottomley's argument towards the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, which is advantageous to him.

In this case as well, the Prime Minister employs the accusation of inconsistency in an attempt to exclude from the discussion the linking premise of his opponent's argument after failing to refute the argument's propositional content. In this case, unlike in the exchanges about the NHS and the London police, the Prime Minister has no political interest in avoiding commitment to the opposite of the linking premise. However, Mr. Brown's failure to refute the linking premise in his earlier exchange with the Leader of the Opposition makes the definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute still undesirable. Also, in this case, by attributing two inconsistent commitments to Conservative

MPs, the accusation not only helps the Prime Minister lead his opponent to retract an argument which he would have had to refute otherwise, but it also contributes to the Prime Minister's defence of his position that the Conservatives cannot provide good leadership.





## 5 THE REASONABLENESS OF RESPONDING TO CRITICISM WITH ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY

In the previous chapters, I have analysed the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring in argumentative sub-confrontations. The analysis has made clear the strategic function of the accusation by showing how the Prime Minister employs it to make an MP from the Opposition to retract his argument, and consequently, eliminate the initial disagreement concerning this argument. Even though it is necessary for a reasonable discussant to be consistent in the positions he holds,<sup>28</sup> the attempt to lead a discussant to retract a current position because it is inconsistent with another one that he also assumes is not always reasonable. The *tu quoque* variant of the *ad hominem* fallacy might be the most salient example of unreasonable accusations of inconsistency employed to silence an opponent.

In this chapter I shall investigate the reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses at issue. I start from the view that a particular instance of strategic manoeuvring is dialectically sound as long as an arguer's attempt to lead the discussion to a favourable outcome does not overrule his commitment to the critical testing of the points of view at issue (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007c). Based on this view, I aim to formulate the soundness conditions for the particular way of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency. These conditions will be discussed in light of political institutional considerations central to the activity type of Question Time, in order to arrive at a view of the reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses at issue that is sensitive to the institutional point of the argumentative practice

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<sup>28</sup> Unlike van Laar (2007), I understand that consistency in one and the same discussion is a dialectical requirement for the protagonist of a standpoint (Barth and Martens, 1977: p. 88). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst make it clear that "admitting inconsistent statements within one and the same discussion makes it impossible to resolve the dispute" (1992a: 114). I take cases of provocative thesis (Krabbe, 1990) to be exceptions, especially since, as noted by Krabbe, in such cases, the thesis does not reflect the position of its proponent but rather that the opponent is being inconsistent, if he would deny it.

concerned.

### **5.1 The reasonableness of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint**

When viewed as instances of strategic manoeuvring, argumentative moves are considered reasonable as long as the pursuit of winning the discussion, typical of strategic manoeuvring, does not hinder the critical testing procedure (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002b). As explained earlier, in every move in an argumentative discussion, arguers manoeuvre strategically to reconcile a dialectical concern with critically testing a standpoint and a rhetorical concern with winning the discussion. When, in a particular case, the attempt to steer the discussion towards a favourable outcome constitutes a hindrance to the critical testing procedure, the strategic manoeuvring in the move is said to have derailed and the instance of strategic manoeuvring is considered fallacious (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002c, 2003b, 2007b).

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser explain that the dialectical and rhetorical concerns that arguers attempt to reconcile in their strategic manoeuvring relate to the outcome of the dialectical stage in which the manoeuvring occurs. For example, in argumentative confrontations, arguers attempt to reconcile concerns that relate to the definition of their difference of opinion as the outcome of the confrontation stage. Dialectically, arguers are assumed to be aiming at defining their differences of opinion in a way that does not hinder the critical testing procedure. Arguers are, for instance, assumed to attempt ‘to achieve clarity’ concerning the specific issues about which they have a difference of opinion as well as the positions they assume in relation to these issues. Rhetorically, arguers are expected to be aiming at steering the argumentative confrontations towards a definition of the difference of opinion that is favourable to them. Each of the arguers is assumed to pursue such a rhetorical aim by attempting, for example, to achieve a particular definition of the disagreement or to take up a particular position that would increase the chances of his own point of view being accepted (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002c). Thus, in light of van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s view on the reasonableness of strategic manoeuvring, in order for instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring to be reasonable, the attempt

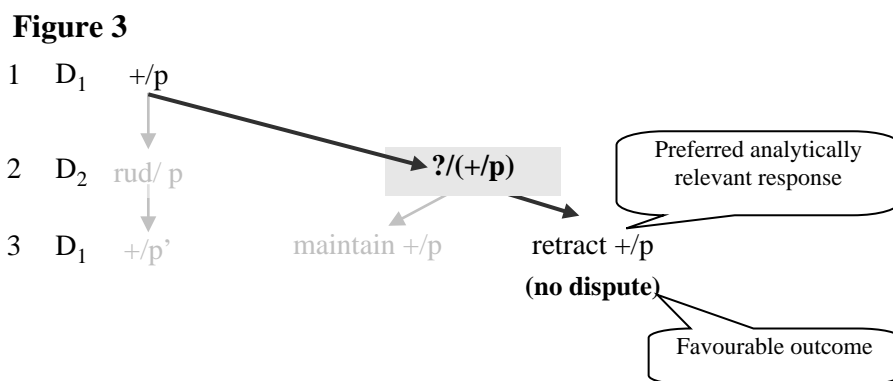
to reach a definition of the difference of opinion that is opportune should not hinder the critical testing procedure.

In order for a move in an argumentative confrontation not to hinder the critical testing procedure, two requirements need to be met. First, the move needs to constitute a contribution to at least one of the definitions of the difference of opinion that are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. That is mainly because, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst observe, for an argumentative move to be sound, the move needs to further the achievement of the dialectical objective of the stage in which it occurs. A reasonable move in an argumentative confrontation needs, accordingly, to contribute to the development of the confrontation towards at least one of the possible definitions of the difference of opinion as non-mixed, mixed or as no dispute. The second requirement that a move in an argumentative confrontation needs to meet, in order not hinder the critical testing procedure, is that the move does not hinder the development of the argumentative confrontation towards any of the outcomes that are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. A reasonable move in an argumentative confrontation needs, accordingly, to let any of the definitions of the difference of opinion to come about. The two general requirements that need to be met in order for a move in an argumentative confrontation to be considered a dialectically sound instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring can be formulated as follows

- (1) The move needs to *constitute a contribution* to at least one definition of the difference of opinion that *does not hinder* the critical testing procedure, and
- (2) The move must *not prematurely preclude* any other definition of the difference of opinion that furthers the critical testing procedure.

Once a move in an argumentative confrontation is viewed as an instance of a particular type of confrontational strategic manoeuvring, the pursuit of one particular outcome, i.e. a favourable outcome, is attributed to the move, so that the move is eventually viewed as an attempt to bring about the favourable outcome within the boundaries of reasonableness. As instances of the type of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint, the Prime Minister's responses to

criticism with accusations of inconsistency are attempts to bring about, within the boundaries of reasonableness, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute as an outcome of the confrontation. As it has been characterised in section 2.4, the type of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint is the attempt of an arguer, who casts doubt on an expressed opinion, to lead the proponent of this opinion to take the dialectical route that leads to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute. This outcome, favourable to the arguer, can be achieved by making the proponent retract the expressed opinion in the turn that follows (*Figure 3*, reproduced below for convenience).



In order for an instance of the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue to be reasonable, the actual move that functions as an expression of doubt in the confrontation needs to be a dialectically sound argumentative move.

By taking into account the particular type of confrontational manoeuvring of which an argumentative move is a case, the general requirements for a dialectically sound case of confrontational manoeuvring above can be further specified. Focusing on a particular type of confrontational manoeuvring would make it possible for example to be more specific about how a particular move contributes to a certain definition of the difference of opinion, or how it precludes another. That is mainly because in the characterisation of a particular type of strategic manoeuvring, the pursuit of a favourable outcome of the pertinent argumentative stage is expressed in terms a preference for a particular sequence of analytically relevant moves, i.e. a preference for a dialectical route that leads to the favourable outcome.

In view of the first requirement for reasonableness suggested above, a reasonable instance of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint needs to *constitute a contribution* to at least one definition of the difference of opinion that

does not hinder the critical testing of the point of view at stake. That is to say that the move that functions as an expression of doubt needs to be a contribution to at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. This first requirement is in fact two-fold: a sound expression of doubt needs (a) to constitute a relevant response to the expressed point of view, which I will hereafter refer to as the *responsiveness requirement*, and (b) to enable a continuation of at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage, which I will hereafter refer to as the *continuity requirement*.<sup>29</sup>

The second general requirement for reasonableness is meant to eliminate any hindrance to achieving definitions of the difference of opinion that can in principle be achieved within the boundaries of reasonableness. More specifically, the requirement is intended to guarantee that none of the definitions of the difference of opinion that are unfavourable given the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue is blocked. In the type of confrontational manoeuvring at issue, these are definitions of the disagreement as a non-mixed or a mixed dispute. The unfavourable definitions usually come into being via dialectical routes that are different from the one that leads to the favourable definition. Hereafter, I shall refer to such routes as non-preferred dialectical routes. Usually too, at the slot of analytically relevant moves that the case of strategic manoeuvring instantiates, the dialectical route followed so far branches out into preferred and non-preferred routes. In order to guarantee that none of the definitions of the difference of opinion allowed in a critical discussion is blocked by the manoeuvring, the expression of doubt should not hinder the continuation of any of the non-preferred dialectical routes that branch out from this juncture of the dialectical procedure. To this requirement, I shall hereafter refer as the *freedom requirement*.

To recapitulate, an argumentative move that functions as an expression of doubt that aims at defining the difference of opinion as no dispute by leading the

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<sup>29</sup> Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2006) suggest that a dialectically sound case of strategic manoeuvring needs to be (a) “chosen in such a way that it enables an analytically relevant continuation at the juncture concerned in the dialectical route [...]”, (b) “in such a way adapted to the other party that it responds to the preceding move in the dialectical route [...]” and (c) “formulated in such a way that it can be interpreted as enabling a relevant continuation and being responsive to the preceding move”. Even though I do not at this stage associate -as van Eemeren and Houtlosser do- the requirements I suggest with the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, the responsiveness and continuity requirements I suggest are meant in the same way.

proponent of an expressed opinion to retract it, is a sound case of confrontational manoeuvring if the following requirements are met:

- (1a) the move needs to be an expression of doubt that is *responsive* to the expressed opinion;
- (1b) the move needs to have the potential to bring about either the maintenance or the retraction of the standpoint in the turn that follows, in order to enable a *continuation* of at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage; and
- (2) the move must not preclude the possibility that the expressed opinion is maintained in the turn that follows, i.e. that the non-preferred analytically relevant response is opted for, in order to guarantee the *freedom* of the other party to take the non-preferred dialectical route that might lead to the definition of the difference of opinion as a non-mixed or a mixed dispute.

## **5.2 Soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency**

As suggested by the requirements above, an attempt of the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition is reasonable only if the Prime Minister's attempt to lead the MP from the Opposition to retract his standpoint constitutes an expression of relevant critical doubt that does not prevent the MP from maintaining his standpoint, if he wishes to. By taking into account the pragmatic aspect of the actual move that functions as an expression of doubt, i.e. in the case studied here, the accusation of inconsistency, the suggested requirements can become more tuned to the evaluation of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring in which accusations of inconsistency are employed to rule out a standpoint. In order to arrive at a set of soundness conditions for this particular way of strategic manoeuvring, I shall in what follows further specify the three requirements of responsiveness, continuity and freedom in light of insights gained from the pragmatic examination of the particular way of manoeuvring at issue.

### 5.2.1 Requirement of responsiveness

In view of the requirement of responsiveness, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint reasonably, must be a *responsive* expression of doubt concerning the standpoint advanced by the Opposition to which it reacts. In line with van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs and Jackson (1993: p. 10), the accusation of inconsistency counts as a relevant response to a standpoint if it expresses any of the following: that the standpoint is understood as such, that it is accepted or that it is rejected.<sup>30</sup> However, given that the accusation needs to be a relevant expression of critical doubt, i.e. an illocutionary negation of acceptance, it is the non-acceptance of the standpoint advanced that the accusation needs to express.

As the characterisation of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency (*section 2.5*) shows, in this particular way of manoeuvring, the accusation attributes to the proponent of a standpoint two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, and urges him to retract one of them in order to remove the (alleged) inconsistency. The accusation attributes to the proponent of the standpoint a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint advanced and a commitment to  $\neg A$  on the basis of another position the proponent assumes. In order for the accusation to express non-acceptance of the standpoint, the attribution of the simultaneous commitment to A and  $\neg A$ , taking place in it, needs to be correct. That is to say that in order for the accusation of inconsistency to count as a non-acceptance of the standpoint it challenges, the following soundness conditions need to be fulfilled:

- (i) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged,
- (ii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to  $\neg A$  on the basis of the other position assumed, and

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<sup>30</sup> Van Eemeren *et al.* (1993: 10) suggest that the relevance of a speech act can be judged according to the contribution it makes to the achievement of the communicative and interactional goals of the preceding speech act. A speech act is a relevant response to another if it expresses that the other speech act is understood (the communicative goal of the speech act) or that it is either accepted or rejected (interactional goal of the speech act).

- (iii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused the commitments to A and to  $\neg A$  simultaneously.

In the following I shall show why each of these conditions is necessary, and together, they are sufficient, for the accusation of inconsistency to be a reasonable expression of doubt concerning the standpoint it reacts to.

Unless the accuser is justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, i.e. unless condition (i) is fulfilled, the accusation of inconsistency cannot be a relevant response to the standpoint it reacts to. The accusation of inconsistency about whether or not *the National Health Service (NHS) deserves to be taken care of* is relevant to the sub-standpoint that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* because a commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* can indeed be attributed to Mr. Duncan Smith on the basis of this sub-standpoint.

The irrelevance of the accusation that results from failing to fulfil condition (i) is of the kind associated with the *straw man* fallacy. If the accuser cannot, on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, justifiably attribute to the accused a commitment to A, the accuser distorts the standpoint by making it seem as if commitment to A follows from it. Failure to fulfil condition (i) thus violates the third rule of a critical discussion, the *standpoint rule*, which stipulates that “attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 191). The exchange between Peter Bottomley and Gordon Brown about the EU referendum, analysed in 4.5 and included below for convenience, is an example of the *straw man* fallacy resulting from a failure to fulfil condition (i).

- (1) *Peter Bottomley (MP, Conservative Party):*  
To return to the European treaty, what polling or survey evidence did the Prime Minister have on what the result of a referendum would have been?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*  
The one poll that people look at is an actual referendum. In 1975 there was a referendum that recorded a yes vote, with more than two thirds of the population voting yes. I remind Conservative Members that most of those who were here in 1992 walked through the Lobby to oppose a referendum on Maastricht, and now they want a referendum on a treaty that is far less significant. They should think again about their position.

(House of Commons official report, 2008d)



As the analysis of this exchange earlier shows, Mr. Bottomley's sub-standpoint that if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard gets challenged by means of an accusation of inconsistency concerning whether or not referenda on EU treaties should be held. Mr. Brown challenges Mr. Bottomley's sub-standpoint on the ground that while the sub-standpoint commits Mr. Bottomley to the proposition that referenda on EU treaties should be held, i.e. to A, the opposition of Mr. Bottomley's party to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty allows the assumption that Mr. Bottomley is committed to it is not the case that referenda on EU treaties should be held, i.e. to  $\neg A$ .

However, Mr. Brown is not justified in attributing to Mr. Bottomley the commitment to *referenda on EU treaties should be held*, at least not on the basis of the sub-standpoint that *if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The commitment to A does not follow from Mr. Bottomley's sub-standpoint. What follows from Mr. Bottomley's sub-standpoint is in fact a commitment to *a promised referendum should be held* rather than a commitment to *referenda on EU treaties should be held*. By over-generalising the commitment that follows from the sub-standpoint, Mr. Brown's accusation distorts the sub-standpoint. Mr. Brown casts doubt on a sub-standpoint that is not advanced by Mr. Bottomley, namely that *if the Government has cancelled the referendum on an EU treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The standpoint to which the accusation reacts is easier to attack than the one indeed advanced. The accusation of inconsistency would, hence, have been stronger as an attack on this sub-standpoint than on the one actually advanced by Mr. Bottomley.

Unless the accuser is also indeed justified in attributing to the proponent of the standpoint a commitment to  $\neg A$  simultaneously with his commitment to A, i.e. unless conditions (ii) and (iii) are also fulfilled, the accusation of inconsistency cannot count as an expression of critical doubt concerning the standpoint it responds to. Again, this is mainly because the accusation must express the unacceptability of the standpoint it responds to in order for it to count as an expression of critical doubt concerning that standpoint, i.e. in order for it to

function as an illocutionary negation of acceptance (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984), the accusation must express the unacceptability of the standpoint. The accusation conveys such unacceptability by implying that a commitment to the standpoint cannot be held simultaneously with a commitment that is inconsistent with it.

The accusation of inconsistency functions as an expression of doubt on the basis of the assumptions that there is a commitment which is inconsistent with the standpoint challenged and which can indeed be attributed to the proponent of the standpoint on the basis of the other positions he has assumed, and that the proponent is holding the two commitments simultaneously. Unless these assumptions are defended by the accuser, the assumptions are taken to be starting points acceptable for the accused. Hence, unless the accuser is justified in assuming that the other position of the proponent of the standpoint commits the proponent to  $\neg A$  now, casting doubt by means of the accusation would count as a case of considering as an accepted starting point something that is not an accepted starting point. In that sense, failure to meet conditions (ii) and (iii) results in the violation of the sixth rule of a critical discussion, the *starting-point* rule, which stipulates that “discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 193).<sup>31</sup>

The need for the two inconsistent commitments to be held simultaneously, expressed in condition (iii), has already been highlighted by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003b). In their discussion of the soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring by pointing out an inconsistency, they explain that ‘from a pragma-dialectical point of view, an inconsistency between something that is presently said and something that was said on a different occasion matters only if it involves an inconsistency in one and the same critical discussion’. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser suggest criteria for determining whether or not it is possible to take as parts of the same discussion what is presently said and something that was

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<sup>31</sup> Even though the starting point rule pertains usually to the argumentation stage (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: pp. 149-157), the rule can also be applied to exchanges that exemplify argumentative confrontations. Especially in argumentative exchanges that occur in institutionalised contexts, arguers do not enter confrontations with an empty commitment store. Reference to commonly accepted starting points is therefore possible in argumentative confrontations. The starting point rule is accordingly applicable.

said on a different occasion. According to them, it is possible to take two pieces of argumentation as parts of the same discussion if the pieces are aimed at resolving the same difference of opinion and have the same material and procedural starting points (2003b: p. 7). Even though van Eemeren and Houtlosser's conditions are primarily formulated for pointing out inconsistencies as a means of justifying the non-acceptance of a certain proposition as a starting point, their criteria can be very helpful in evaluating the accusations employed to rule out a certain (sub-)standpoint from the discussion.

In view of van Eemeren and Houtlosser's criteria for what counts as part of one and the same discussion, Gordon Brown's accusation against David Cameron in the exchange about the police investigation, analysed previously in section 4.5 and included below for convenience, seems to fail to fulfil condition (iii).

(2) *David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

There are currently six police investigations under way into the conduct of government in London. The most recent allegations are that the London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that that is completely unacceptable?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

As on any occasion when a matter referring to a police investigation is raised, I have to say this is a matter for the police. It should be fully investigated, but it is not a matter for this House until the police complete their investigations.

*Mr. Cameron:*

The point is that while these accusations are going on and this investigation is under way, the Mayor—the Labour Mayor—has said that he “trusts Lee Jasper with his life”, and last night he said that he is already planning to reappoint him. Does not every element of the Prime Minister's moral compass tell him that this is wrong?

*Mr. Brown:*

As I understand it, the person whom the right hon. Gentleman is talking about has resigned and is no longer in that employment. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to support the police in their investigation, why does his candidate for the Mayor of London say that the first target for cuts is transport and policing? That is the Conservative party—cutting transport and cutting policing.

(House of Commons official report, 2008c)

Mr. Cameron's question to the Prime Minister criticised the performance of the Government by reference to an alleged misuse of public funds by Lee Jasper, the London Mayor's Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities. According to the findings of section 4.4, Mr. Cameron argues that

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1a The conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations
- (1.1a') (If the conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1b The Government (i.e. London's Labour Mayor) supports the accused director for equalities and policing
- (1.1b') (If the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1a.1 The London Mayor's director for equalities and policing has been accused of channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies

Mr. Brown's response, that the accused is no longer in employment, can be seen as an attempt to deny that the accused is supported by the Government, which is in turn an attempt to refute Mr. Cameron's argument 1.1b above. Yet, as argued earlier, considering the support quoted by Mr. Cameron, Mr. Brown's answer does not seem to amount to a solid refutation. It is to compensate for this weak refutation that Mr. Brown points out the alleged inconsistency in Mr. Cameron's position, aiming to avoid the discussion of the argument that he cannot properly refute. He suggests that Mr. Cameron cannot claim that *if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, considering that the Conservative candidate running for the post of the Mayor of London expressed plans to cut expenditure on policing in case he would win. The two positions are presented as inconsistent regarding the attitude towards the police. While the criticism of the Government entails support for the police, the Conservative candidate's position implies the opposite, Mr. Brown suggests.

According to the conditions set by van Eemeren and Houtlosser, the mutually inconsistent attitudes towards the police attributed to Mr. Cameron do not seem to occur in one and the same discussion. The two attitudes are not expressed in the course of discussing the same difference of opinion. Lack of support for the police is attributed to Mr. Cameron on the basis of a policy of cutting expenditure on policing promoted by the Conservative Party, and can therefore be considered a commitment of Mr. Cameron in the context of a

difference of opinion that relates to a matter of policy: something about the budget or police reforms. The commitment to an attitude that supports the police is held in the context of a difference of opinion that relates to a matter of accountability: the police is investigating the conduct of the Government.

The two attitudes seem to be related to two different disputes. While the commitment to a supportive attitude towards the police, i.e. commitment to a proposition like *the police should be supported*, is held in relation to a difference of opinion regarding accountability, the commitment to a non-supportive attitude towards the police, i.e. commitment to a proposition like *it is not the case that the police should be supported*, is held in relation to a difference of opinion regarding expenditure. Being related to two different differences of opinion, the two commitments cannot be considered to be held in one and the same discussion: they cannot therefore be considered to be held simultaneously. Mr. Brown's accusation would function as an expression of critical doubt only by virtue of the two commitments being held simultaneously. By falsely presenting this to be the case, the accusation violates the starting point rule and fails accordingly to be a reasonable instance of the strategic manoeuvring at issue.<sup>32</sup>

### 5.2.2 *Requirement of continuity*

In view of the requirement of continuity, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint reasonably, must enable a *continuation* of at least one of the dialectical routes of the confrontation stage. For that, the accusation needs to be performed in a way that has the potential to bring about a response that functions as either the maintaining of the standpoint or the retraction of it. In an argumentative interaction in which an accusation of inconsistency functions as an expression of doubt, the maintaining or the retraction of the standpoint that the accusation doubts are realised through the perlocutionary effects of the accusation. The standpoint can be maintained by

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<sup>32</sup> The exchange can also be analysed as a failure to meet condition (ii). The analysis would take a commitment to A to be a commitment to *the police should be supported in their investigations*. In this case, the previous position of Mr. Cameron does not imply commitment to the opposite, since opposing investment in policing cannot be taken to imply a commitment to *it is not the case that the police should be supported in their investigations*. However, in my analysis I opt for a more general reconstruction of the commitments the Prime Minister attributes to his opponent, i.e. I take a commitment to A to be a commitment to *the police should be supported*, which I think is what Mr. Brown attempts to convey.

means of any of the two following perlocutionary effects: first, the accusation of inconsistency is not accepted by the proponent of the standpoint, and second, the accusation is accepted and the accused prefers to retract commitment to  $-A$  rather than retracting his commitment to  $A$ .

If the accused does not accept the accusation, he has no obligation to retract anything. An accused who does not accept the accusation of inconsistency responds in such a way that the minimal perlocutionary effect non-preferred by the accuser is achieved. He can express his non-acceptance by denying that his standpoint commits him to  $A$ , that his other position commits him to  $-A$  or that his commitments to  $A$  and  $-A$  are held simultaneously. By doing so, the proponent of a standpoint attempts to justify that his position is consistent in order to be able to maintain his current standpoint.<sup>33</sup>

Maintaining the standpoint is also possible if the accused accepts the accusation of inconsistency. By accepting the accusation, the accused admits the alleged inconsistency as well as the necessity to repair it by retracting, at least, one of the inconsistent commitments, i.e. he commits himself to act in accordance with the optimal perlocutionary effect of the accusation. Such a commitment would be in line with van Eemeren and Grootendorst's characterisation of (the perlocutionary illocution of) accepting the speech act of argumentation as expressing concurrence with the preparatory conditions of the speech act accepted (1982: 14). By retracting the commitment to  $-A$ , the proponent of the standpoint challenged eliminates the inconsistency by conveying that he has changed his mind about his previous position in order to be able to maintain the current standpoint. The acceptance of the accusation can also lead to the retraction of the standpoint by the accused. A proponent of a standpoint challenged, who accepts the accusation of inconsistency against him, can eliminate this inconsistency by retracting his commitment to  $A$ . By retracting his commitment to  $A$ , the accused retracts the standpoint and avoids having to retract the other position he assumes.

In order for the accusation to have the potential to bring about any of the perlocutionary effects above, it needs to be performed in a recognisable way. That is to say that it is necessary that the accusation of inconsistency is performed in

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<sup>33</sup> Dissociation is one of the ways to express non-acceptance of the accusation. By means of dissociation, the alleged inconsistency is denied by dissociating between different interpretations of the commitments attributed, one of which involves no inconsistency.

an understandable way if any of the perlocutionary effects is to be rationally expected. The expectation of any of the perlocutionary effects above is not justified if the accused does not understand that commitments to A and to –A are attributed to him simultaneously and that he is required to retract one of them to eliminate the inconsistency. In other words, a clear performance of the accusation is necessary in order for any relevant continuation of the confrontation. In order to ensure the continuation of any of the dialectical routes of the confrontation stage, the accusation of inconsistency therefore needs to fulfil the following soundness condition.

- (iv) The accusation of inconsistency needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him commitments to A and to –A simultaneously and demands him to retract one of them to eliminate the alleged inconsistency.

Failure to fulfil the condition can be associated with violations of the tenth rule of a critical discussion, the language usage rule, according to which “discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulations” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 195). Clarity, as required in the rule, does by no means rule out indirectness and implicitness as unreasonable (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987: pp. 293-296). In fact, advancing an accusation of inconsistency to express critical doubt is in itself an instance of indirectness that is not unreasonable as such. And as long as the speech act is identifiable, implicitness is no obstacle to critical testing. However, lack of clarity can have direct consequences for the critical testing procedure, for example, by masking failures to meet other requirements for reasonableness.

The exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron, about the police in London, is an example of insufficiently clear formulations of the accusation can for example mask failures to meet other soundness conditions. The vagueness in expressing the commitments attributed to Mr. Cameron makes it more difficult to detect that the alleged inconsistency is unreasonable as a result of failure to meet not only condition (iii) as discussed in section 5.2.1, but also condition (i), as it will be shown below. By means of the accusation, Mr Brown attributes to Mr. Cameron mutually inconsistent attitudes in relation to the police. The Labour

Prime Minister attributes to the Leader of the Conservative Party a commitment to a supportive attitude towards the police on the basis of the latter's criticism of the Government, and a commitment to a non-supportive attitude on the basis of plans of Boris Johnson, the Conservative candidate for the Mayor of London, to cut expenditure on policing. On the basis of Mr. Johnson's plans, Mr. Brown attributes to Mr. Cameron commitment to *it is not the case that the police should be supported*. He argues that in view of such a commitment, his opponent cannot be committed to the sub-standpoint that *if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* because such a sub-standpoint entails the opposite commitment.

Mr. Brown seems to take *supporting someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption*, i.e. not supporting the police in their investigations, to mean merely *not supporting the police*. He consequently distorts his opponent's sub-standpoint by attributing to him a more generalised version of it. However, the distortion is not easy to detect because Mr. Brown does not make it sufficiently clear what the inconsistency is about. All he says is that 'if the right hon. Gentleman wishes to support the police in their investigation, why does his candidate for the Mayor of London say that the first target for cuts is transport and policing?' It is not clear whether the alleged inconsistency is about the general attitude towards the police, i.e. something like *the police should be supported*, or about the attitude towards police investigation in particular, i.e. something like *the police should be supported in their investigation*. In fact, Mr. Brown's accusation conveys a combination of the two, which makes it difficult for his opponent to recognise the unreasonableness of the alleged inconsistency.

The mere recognisability of the accusation of inconsistency is sufficient for a justified expectation of only the non-acceptance of the accusation of inconsistency. The accusation needs to be also acceptable in order for it to have the potential to bring about the other, optimal, perlocutionary effects, i.e. a retraction of one of the two mutually inconsistent commitments. Given that the acceptance of the accusation of inconsistency commits the accused to the preparatory conditions of it, the accuser can be justified in expecting his



accusation to be accepted only if the preparatory conditions of the accusation are acceptable to the accused. The conditions need to belong to the commonly accepted starting points, in order for the accuser to be justified in expecting the accused to retract one of the allegedly inconsistent commitments. The latter, as I have argued earlier, is necessary for the continuation of the dialectical route towards the retraction of the standpoint. Soundness conditions (i), (ii) and (iii), above, see to it that this requirement is met.

### **5.2.3 Requirement of freedom**

In view of the requirement of freedom, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to reasonably rule out a standpoint, must not preclude the possibility for the accused to maintain rather than retract the standpoint in the turn that follows. That is to say that the accusation must preclude none of the accused's options to perform a non-preferred response to the accusation. As explained earlier, the non-preferred (analytically relevant) response of maintaining the standpoint, by the accused, can be realised either by not accepting the accusation of inconsistency or by accepting the accusation but retracting the commitment to  $\neg A$ . In response to the accusation, the proponent of a standpoint must be allowed to express either of the two.

An accusation that is made in a reasonable way should not violate the freedom of the accused to express his non-acceptance of the accusation. The accused should be allowed to (justifiably) deny that his standpoint commits him to  $A$ , that his other position commits him to  $\neg A$  or that his commitments to  $A$  and to  $\neg A$  are simultaneously held. Nor should the accusation violate the freedom of the accused to maintain the commitment to  $A$  in case he accepts the accusation and is willing to retract the commitment to  $\neg A$  and acknowledge that he has changed his mind about the other position he assumes. In order for the accusation not to constitute such a violation, the following condition needs to be fulfilled:

- (v) The choice of topic, audience frame, and stylistic devices of the accusation of inconsistency must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to  $\neg A$  in case the accusation is accepted.

Exactly because the accuser makes his choice of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices so that the accused is directed towards retracting commitment to A, it should be observed that such a choice does not violate the freedom of the accused to opt for a different response.

An accusation of inconsistency that fails to fulfil the condition specified above violates the first rule of a critical discussion, the freedom rule, which stipulates that “discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 190). The violation results in a case of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The exchange, below, between David Cameron and Gordon Brown is an example. The exchange forms part of a discussion about the Government’s policy to tackle the effects of the global financial crisis on the British economy. Mr. Cameron, who has repeatedly blamed the Government’s borrowing policy to combat the recession, now opposes the Government’s plan of unfunded tax cuts. He argues that such cuts cannot be made possible without further borrowings, which would only add to the problem since the current unfunded cuts can only be compensated by later tax rises.

(3) *David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):*

[...] He was asked about the Government’s claim that this recession was largely not of their making. His answer was that that was “largely drivel, frankly”. That is what he said. Let me use some words that the Prime Minister might be very familiar with. They are these:

“unfunded...tax promises...simply do not add up”.

They mean

“tax cuts before the election”,

leading to tax rises after an election. That is what he said as Chancellor just a few years ago. If he does not agree with his employment Minister, if he does not agree with his Chancellor and if he does not agree with his Trade Secretary, perhaps he can tell us—does he agree with himself?

*Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):*

[...] only a few days ago the Leader of the Opposition himself was saying that borrowing had to be allowed to happen. Then he changed his mind, and he is depriving people of real help for businesses and families. The issue will come down to this: do we want to help people through difficult times, a downturn that every country in the world has faced? It is a downturn, by the way, that even the Americans agree started in America. Do we want to help people through difficult times, or do we want to take the advice that was followed in the 1980s and 1990s by the then Conservative Government and do absolutely nothing to help people in time of need? [...]

(House of Commons official report, 2008g)

To the criticism advanced by Mr. Cameron, Mr. Brown responds by accusing the Leader of the Opposition of an inconsistency: Mr. Cameron is now criticising the

Government's borrowing policy while a few days ago he himself said that *borrowing had to be allowed*. The Prime Minister goes on by attacking the Conservative Opposition for what is according to him a refusal to help the needed in a time of crisis. He attempts to justify his Government's policies but without directly addressing the criticism expressed by his adversary.<sup>34</sup>

Viewed in the context of discussing the performance of the Government, Mr. Cameron's question can be interpreted as expressing the following line of argumentation:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
- 1.1 The Government's borrowing policy contributes to the recession
- (1.1') (If the Government's borrowing policy contributes to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

Mr. Brown challenges the justificatory power of Mr. Cameron's argument by the alleged inconsistency he attributes to him. The Prime Minister reminds his opponent that he had previously expressed the point of view that *borrowing had to be allowed*, and suggests that, therefore, he cannot be now claiming that *if the Government's borrowing policy contributes to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. By means of the alleged inconsistency, Mr. Brown urges Mr. Cameron to retract his current position in order not to hold two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously. After all, Mr. Cameron cannot think that *borrowing should not have been allowed* (*commitment to A*, entailed by his current criticism of the Government) and that *borrowing had to be allowed* (*commitment to -A*, expressed a few days ago) at the same time.

The way Mr. Brown presents the accusation of inconsistency violates Mr. Cameron's freedom to choose how to respond to it. In his attempt to avoid a discussion of the criticism against his Government, Mr. Brown attempts to direct Mr. Cameron towards the retraction of the commitment to A, as a way to lead him to retract the linking premise he challenges. By presenting the commitment

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<sup>34</sup> It is interesting that Mr. Cameron's criticism of the Government involves an accusation of inconsistency, too. The Government's plan criticised is presented as inconsistent with Mr. Brown's previous opposition to unfunded tax cuts. However, because in this study I am interested in accusations of inconsistency retorts, I shall restrict my attention to the accusation expressed by Mr. Brown in response to Mr. Cameron's criticism.

to A (*borrowing should not have been allowed*) as a commitment that would deprive families and businesses of real help, Mr. Brown makes Mr. Cameron's option of maintaining a commitment to A almost impossible. Given that politicians are required to care about people's problems, Mr. Cameron's choice to maintain a commitment to A and retract a commitment to –A instead can be considered almost precluded by the association Mr. Brown makes between the commitment to A and insensitivity towards people's problems. The association puts pressure on Mr. Cameron. It restricts his freedom of choosing the way to eliminate the alleged inconsistency concerning whether *borrowing had to be allowed* or not, and consequently violates his freedom to express the point of view that *if government policies contribute to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.<sup>35</sup>

### **5.3 Institutional considerations for reasonableness**

In applying the conditions formulated above, characteristics of the activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time need to be taken into account in order for the evaluation of the particular way of manoeuvring at issue to be sensitive to the institutional point of the argumentative discourse examined. An important element that needs to be taken into account, which has to do with the political nature of the parliamentary session, is that in the political context, actions, policies, and plans are discussed in relation to available alternatives. That is to say that, in Question Time, the performance of the Government is often judged in comparison to the alternative provided by the Opposition. Another important characteristic that needs also to be taken into account is the political basis for the assignment of roles and the attribution of commitments. Government policies, actions and plans are defended by MPs from the ruling party against the criticism of MPs from the Opposition, each attempting to promote their party as the more competent leader of the country. In the context of such a discussion, namely the

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<sup>35</sup> Mr. Brown's accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Cameron is combined with an appeal to emotions. By associating the commitment to A with insensitivity towards people's problems, Mr. Brown appeals to his adversary's fear of being associated with insensitivity in order to lead him to retract the commitment to A. The unreasonableness of the accusation is in fact a result of this combination.

discussion about the leadership competence of political parties, it seems necessary to hold MPs accountable for commitments derived from positions assumed by other MPs from their parties. For the sake of maximising the accountability of political parties, it can even be claimed that the positions assumed by individual politicians are in fact positions that can be attributed to their political parties. In what follows, I shall discuss the implications of the considerations above for the general conditions formulated earlier, hoping to make the conditions more tuned to the context in which they are to be applied.

In line with van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2004), I take it that the political context in which the Prime Minister's accusations occur determines to a great extent whether the Prime Minister is indeed justified in attributing to his adversaries the commitments he attributes to them on the basis of the positions he refers to. For example, considering that political plans and actions are to a great extent judged in relation to the alternatives provided by rivals, what appears like an over-generalised interpretation of the standpoint challenged might well be a justified interpretation. That is to say, that when applying soundness condition (i), i.e. that *the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged*, one needs to take into account that the performance of the Government is often discussed in relation to the alternative that the Opposition would provide, had it been the party in power.

For example, Mr. Brown's accusation of inconsistency regarding the police, discussed earlier, does not necessarily distort Mr. Cameron's position even if it derives from it a slightly over-generalised commitment. As long as the performance of the Government is being discussed independently of what the Opposition would have done had it been in power (as it has been done in section 5.2.1), the attribution to the Opposition of a general commitment to *the police should be supported* will count as distorting the sub-standpoint advanced by the Opposition. The attribution generalises the sub-standpoint that *if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* to something like *if the Government does not support the police, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. However, in a context of discussing the performance of the Government in comparison to what the Opposition would do if it were to take

over governance, the over-generalisation seems to be justified. Mr. Brown's accusation is an attempt of the Prime Minister to argue that, given that the Tories plan to cut expenditure on policing, the police would not have been better supported had the Conservatives been in power. That, consequently, undermines the criticism the Tories advance concerning the performance of the Government with respect to supporting the police in their investigations. That does not mean that the Prime Minister is justified in disregarding the Opposition's criticism of the Government, but his accusation can be viewed as an attempt to discuss the criticism advanced by the Opposition in perspective.

The extent to which it is justifiable for the Prime Minister to derive a certain commitment from a certain other position of the Opposition (*soundness condition (ii)*) is also highly influenced by the perspective from which Government policies are discussed in relation to the alternative offered by the Opposition. For example, Mr. Blair seems to be justified in attributing to Mr. Duncan Smith a commitment to *the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of* on the basis of his quoted words that '*The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated*' in the context of Question Time. But the attribution might not have been so justified had it happened in another context where the discussion is not about policy.

For the application of soundness condition (ii), the political nature of assignment of roles and attribution of commitments is also significant. In determining whether or not the Prime Minister is justified in holding his adversary to be committed to a certain proposition on the basis of the position he refers to, such a political nature is crucial. In principle, it is necessary, in order to hold political parties to account, to consider that the commitments that can be attributed to a certain MP are not restricted to those deriving from his own positions. It should be possible, to different degrees of justifiability, to attribute to MPs from a certain political party commitments deriving from positions that have been assumed by the leaders of their parties, election manifestos, or other public expressions of opinion made in the name of the Party. Only by considering all these together as sources of commitments, can the examination of political argumentative discourse give due consideration to the dynamics that shape such discourse. After all, the political scene in democracies is created and managed

through the action and interaction of political parties rather than individuals.

While it is crucial to give due attention to the group dynamics of political organisation in deriving commitments for argumentative discussions, it is still debatable to which extent commitments of MPs can be justifiably attributed to their fellow Party members. Are the commitments assumed by party member equally transferrable? This would be difficult to establish. Take, for example, the case of the London police. Is the Leader of the Opposition accountable for what a fellow Party member, Boris Johnson, expresses? On the one hand, the often extreme views of Mr. Johnson undermine the legitimacy of transferring his commitments to fellow Tories. Yet, on the other hand, Mr. Johnson's position was assumed in his capacity as the Conservative Party's candidate for the Mayor of London. The latter makes it actually imperative to consider his positions as representative of the policies of the party he represents.

In considering whether or not the Prime Minister is justified in attributing the two mutually inconsistent commitments to the accused simultaneously, i.e. in establishing whether soundness condition (iii) is fulfilled, political characteristics of the discourse are again crucial. Where do we draw the boundaries of one and the same discussion? Van Eemeren and Houtlosser's general conditions for what counts as one and the same discussion need to be tailored to the particularities of the political context. Argumentative parties need to be seen in terms of political parties rather than as individuals and the discussion of the performance of the Government needs to be viewed in relation to the alternative the Opposition would provide. But here again, in pursuing maximum political accountability one risks distorting politicians' individual responsibility as well as overlooking the necessity to consider political actions in perspective. For example, one might wonder if the commitment derived from the Conservatives' opposition to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992, can be attributed to Mr. Bottomley, sixteen years later. On the one hand, the position was not only one of the Conservative Party, of which Mr. Bottomley is a member; Mr. Bottomley himself was one of those who walked through the no lobby opposing the referendum. And yet, on the other hand, in the sixteen years that separate the two discussions, so many starting points have changed that the question becomes legitimate whether Mr. Bottomley's commitment to *a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty* should

*not be held* is simultaneously held with his commitment to *a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty should be held*.

It would contribute to holding the Conservative Party to account for its political program to extend the scope of what can be considered as one and the same discussion and include in one discussion the two discussions about referenda: the one on the Maastricht Treaty as well as the one on the Lisbon Treaty. Especially given the change of position of the Tories from Government to Opposition, it is a way of holding them accountable to seek for justification for what seems like a change of policy. However, one should be careful that the pursuit of a greater accountability of the Opposition is not achieved on the expense of the accountability of the Government. Separating the two discussions, at a certain level, and discussing the performance of the Government independently, is sometimes necessary for holding the present Government to account. In the case of the exchange with Mr. Bottomley, for example, in order to hold the Government to account, one needs to consider the argumentative discussion about the performance of the Government as a primary discussion, and consider that the previous position of Mr. Bottomley occurs in a different discussion. That would not be unreasonable, especially given the different time and political context in which that position was assumed.

In determining whether or not a certain choice of topic, audience frame, or stylistic device of the accusation of inconsistency restricts the accused freedom to choose the way to react to the accusation, i.e. whether or not soundness condition (v) is fulfilled, due attention needs to be given to the political implications of the choices made. Whether or not a certain choice precludes the possibility for the accused to express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to –A in case the accusation is accepted is highly dependent on the political implications of the reaction opted for. For example, crucial in detecting the violation of Mr. Cameron's right to maintain his commitment to *borrowing should not have been allowed* and be accountable for it is the fact that to be regarded as insensitive to people's needs in times of crisis is particularly undesirable for a party that aspires to take over Government. The particular choice of presenting the commitment to *borrowing should not have been allowed* in terms of a (quite blown up) political implication is more problematic in this



(political) context than it could have been in other (personal) ones. Had the same presentation been used in an ordinary interpersonal conversation, in which the political implications play a less important role, the accused would have had more freedom to maintain his standpoint. After all, sensitivity to people's problems matters considerably less when no responsibility is assumed towards these people.

As the discussion above shows, political institutional considerations play a crucial role in determining the reasonableness of argumentative moves. Only if such considerations are taken into account when applying the general soundness conditions, can the evaluation of the Prime Minister's response at issue be institutionally relevant.



## 6 CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Findings of the study

In this study, I have attempted to provide an empirically adequate account of accusations of inconsistency advanced by the Prime Minister in response to criticism from the Opposition in Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. I have characterised the accusations as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring (*Chapter 2*) and I have suggested a set of soundness conditions for judging the (actual) (un)reasonableness of the accusations at issue (*Chapter 5*). In order for the analysis and the evaluation of the accusations to be faithful to the institutional particularities of the argumentative practice concerned, I have characterised the parliamentary session of Question Time as an argumentative activity type and identified the preconditions that the rules and conventions of Question Time create for argumentative confrontations in the parliamentary session (*Chapter 3*). While the characterisation of the Prime Minister's responses at issue as a particular way of strategic manoeuvring, in Chapter 2, sheds light on the argumentative function of the accusations, significant insights into the institutional function of the accusations are gained by taking the preconditions identified in Chapter 3 into account. These institutional insights are instrumental for a more refined analysis of the accusations at issue (*Chapter 4*) as well as for an evaluation that does not overlook the institutional concerns of the arguers in the parliamentary session of Prime Minister's Question Time (*Chapter 5*).

In Chapter 2, the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism are characterised as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in which the Prime Minister attempts to steer his argumentative confrontations with MPs from the Opposition towards a favourable outcome within the boundaries of reasonableness. In this way of manoeuvring, the Prime Minister casts doubt on a standpoint of the Opposition that expresses criticism of policies, actions or plans of the Government, by means of accusations

of inconsistency. The Prime Minister challenges his adversary's commitment to the criticism expressed by accusing him of being inconsistent with regard to the subject matter of the criticism: while the adversary's critical standpoint commits him to A, another position with which he can be associated commits him to  $\neg$ A. By pointing out the (alleged) inconsistency, the Prime Minister, who does not accept the criticism expressed, attempts to lead his adversary to retract this criticism. The retraction of the critical standpoint eliminates the initial disagreement that has given rise to the argumentative confrontation and closes the argumentative confrontation with a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute.

In principle, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute is within the boundaries of reasonableness. The definition can be affected by a discussant who retracts a standpoint in order to avoid holding two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously. The definition is also favourable to the Prime Minister. Once the MP from the Opposition retracts his standpoint the Prime Minister is no longer under the obligation to refute the criticism that he does not accept. The Prime Minister attempts to steer his argumentative confrontations with MPs from the Opposition towards this favourable outcome by making choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices that lead the MP towards the retraction of the critical standpoint, rather than the retraction of the other position inconsistent with it, as the means to repair the alleged inconsistency.

In Chapter 3, the institutionally conventionalised argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time is characterised as a multi-layered argumentative activity type that is governed by parliamentary rules and conventions as well as by political considerations. In this activity type, the Prime Minister engages in argumentative exchanges about policies, plans and actions of the Government with his fellow MPs, in a well-regulated question-answer format. In these exchanges, interrelated differences of opinion are discussed, as the MPs and the Prime Minister pursue a number of interrelated institutional aims.

Of the several institutional aims pursued by argumentation in Question Time, holding the Government to account can be considered the institutional goal of the argumentative activity type. Holding the Government to account is the goal

for which Question Time was established as a parliamentary session and to which the discussants can be collectively held committed by virtue of their participation in the session. By discussing the government plans, policies or actions, and subjecting the performance of the Government to argumentative scrutiny, MPs and the Prime Minister pursue this goal. The argumentative exchanges between MPs and the Prime Minister can be viewed as an attempt to resolve a main difference of opinion about a standpoint like *the performance of the Government is up to standard* by means of arguments that relate to policies, plans or actions of the Government. In the course of discussing this main difference of opinion, sub-differences arise when the Prime Minister does not accept arguments advanced by the Opposition in which criticism is expressed concerning certain policies, plans or actions of his Government.

In addition to the institutional goal of holding the Government to account, a number of other institution-related aims can be associated with the argumentative practice of the parliamentary session. The most important of these aims is the promotion of party political interests. The questions of MPs convey political statements that promote their party's policies or attack those of their adversaries. Similarly, the answers of the Prime Minister often convey pride in the achievements reached by his party's policies, or express criticism of the policies of the Opposition. In their pursuit of promoting their party interests, MPs and the Prime Minister engage in the discussion of differences of opinion concerning the competence of political parties in leading the country. Accordingly, the argumentative exchanges between the Prime Minister and MPs can also be viewed as an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion about a standpoint like *unlike the other party, we can provide good leadership*.

The rules of Question Time stipulate that the questions of MPs and the answers of the Prime Minister address only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Government. Consequently, MPs and the Prime Minister need to address the differences of opinion concerning the competence of political parties only through addressing their difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government. An MP from the Opposition needs to defend the standpoint that *unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership* by means of his negative evaluation of the performance of the Government. Likewise, the

Prime Minister or MPs from his party need to defend the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, we can provide good leadership* by means of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government.

The characterisation of the argumentative practice of Question Time as an argumentative activity type identifies several significant institutional preconditions for argumentative confrontations. For example, the main initial difference of opinion, i.e. the difference concerning the performance of the Government, is expected to be mixed. The Prime Minister and MPs from his party are in favour of the positive standpoint, i.e. *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, and MPs from the Opposition are in favour of the negative standpoint. The sub-disagreements about arguments from the Opposition are also expected to be mixed. The Prime Minister has the institutional obligation to defend his Government and must therefore advance and defend a sub-standpoint that is opposite to the standpoint advanced by the Opposition in which criticism of his Government is expressed.

In Chapter 4, the Prime Minister's responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency are re-examined in light of the insights gained from the characterisation of the argumentative practice of Question Time as an argumentative activity type, carried out in Chapter 3. This re-examination sheds significant light on the strategic institutional function of the responses at issue as attempts of the Prime Minister to manage his institutional obligation to defend his Government when refuting the criticism advanced by the Opposition is not easy. As the characterisation of the argumentative activity type of Question Time shows, MPs from the Opposition express criticisms of government policies, plans or actions as arguments in support of their negative standpoint concerning the performance of the Government. Consequently, the Prime Minister's responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency are instances of strategic manoeuvring that come in response to such arguments.

On the basis of a detailed examination of the exchange between Tony Blair and Ian Duncan Smith about the National Health Service (NHS), three main characteristics that are central to the Prime Minister's strategic manoeuvring are identified. First, the accusation of inconsistency challenges the commitment of the MP from the Opposition to the justificatory power of the latter's critical

argument, often after attempts to refute the arguments' propositional contents have failed. Second, the accusation of inconsistency can save Mr. Blair from what is an institutionally undesirable outcome in the particular activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time. If it leads Mr. Duncan Smith to retract (the justificatory power of) his argument, the accusation saves Mr. Blair from having a mixed dispute about it. In such a dispute Mr. Blair would have to assume the politically undesirable position of defending the premise that *it is not the case that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Third, the accusation of inconsistency is not only an argumentatively opportune choice in the discussion about the performance of the Government, but it is also an institutionally opportune choice in the discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country. The alleged inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, the ruling party can provide good leadership*.

In Chapter 5, the reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency is discussed and soundness conditions are formulated for this particular way of manoeuvring. Guided by the view that a case of confrontational strategic manoeuvring is dialectically sound as long as the pursuit of a particular definition of the disagreement does not hinder the critical testing procedure, five conditions were formulated that need to be fulfilled in order for accusations of inconsistency employed by the Prime Minister to exclude from the discussion a point of view of the Opposition to be reasonable.

First, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the Prime Minister's accusation risks distorting the standpoint it responds to thereby giving rise to cases of the straw man fallacy. Second, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to  $\neg A$  on the basis of the other position the accused assumes. Third, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused the two mutually inconsistent commitments to A and to  $\neg A$  simultaneously. Unless the last two conditions are fulfilled, the accusation risks falsely considering as mutually accepted starting points propositions that cannot be considered as such. The unreasonable cases resulting

from failing to meet the three conditions above are in fact cases in which the accusation fails to be a responsive expression of doubt concerning the standpoint it challenges.

Fourth, in order for the accusation to be reasonable, the accusation needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him a commitment to A and a commitment to  $\neg A$  and requires him to retract one of the commitments in order to repair the inconsistency. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the argumentative confrontation cannot be expected to proceed to any clear definition of the disagreement at stake. Fifth, the choice of topic, audience frame and stylistic devices of the accusation must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the commitment to  $\neg A$  in case the accusation is accepted. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the accused's freedom of expressing points of view will be violated, giving rise to instances of the *ad hominem* fallacy.

In applying the five soundness conditions above, institutional characteristics of the argumentative practice need to be taken into account. Particular attention should be given to the fact that in political argumentative discourse political affiliation is commonly accepted as a legitimate source of deriving commitments. An MP is not only committed to positions that he has assumed himself but is also committed by affiliation to the positions of his political party, usually expressed by fellow party members. Moreover, account should be taken not only of the main discussion about the performance of Government, but also of the discussion about the political competence of political parties to lead the country. In the particular context of Question Time, the fact that the performance of the Government is not assessed independently from the alternative offered by the Opposition is crucial to the judgment of reasonableness of the accusations at issue. Unless these two points are taken into account when applying the soundness conditions above, the evaluation of the responses at issue cannot be sensitive to the political institutional point of the argumentative exchange.



## 6.2 Discussion of the findings

This study provides a fairly detailed account of the Prime Minister's responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency. Even though it may seem like an empirical study of Prime Minister's Question Time, the study is rather a theoretical study of strategic manoeuvring in (a particular argumentative move typical of) this kind of parliamentary session. For the purpose of analysing and evaluating the Prime Minister's responses at issue, pragma-dialectical tools and concepts are discussed and further developed. In particular, the relationship is explored between van Eemeren and Houtlosser's concepts of strategic manoeuvring (1999, 2007) and argumentative activity types (2005), and between these two concepts and the earlier pragma-dialectical concept of a critical discussion as an ideal of reasonable argumentative discourse (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 2004). New insights are gained into the possible application of these concepts to account for the Prime Minister's responses subject of examination. In spite of the marginality of these responses, as attempts to avoid rather than to engage in an argumentative discussion the account is significant for argumentation theory. The attempt to avoid a discussion is not always unreasonable, and yet, when it is fallacious, its consequences on argumentative discourse are dire. The examination carried out in this study is useful for understanding the Prime Minister's attempts, so that they can be properly assessed and the reasonable among them can be distinguished from the fallacious.

The present examination of the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring (*Chapter 2*) connects the pragmatic characteristics of the moves to their dialectical function. Dialectically, the responses are identified as instances of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint. They are expressions of critical doubt that attempt to lead the proponents of the standpoints doubted to retract them in order to define the difference of opinion concerning these standpoints as no dispute. Pragmatically, the responses are identified as instances of doubt that is expressed indirectly by means of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency. The accusations attempt to bring about the retraction of the standpoint doubted as one particular perlocutionary effect of the speech act, namely repairing the alleged inconsistency by retracting one of the mutually inconsistent

commitments.

In the present examination of the Prime Minister's responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring, the Prime Minister is assumed to be trying to eliminate an initial disagreement about the criticism advanced by the Opposition. Several considerations, applicable to the cases analysed in this study, lend support to this assumption. In the cases analysed, the Prime Minister employs accusations of inconsistency in response to some criticism that he does not accept, or is at least expected not to accept. That justifies the understanding of the accusations as indirect expressions of doubt concerning the criticism. Thus understood, the accusation can be viewed as either an attempt to get the criticism maintained, in the next turn, and start an argumentative discussion about it, or an attempt to get it retracted and eliminate the initial disagreement about it. In view of political considerations pertinent to the exchanges examined, it seems advantageous for the Prime Minister, to avoid rather than to engage into the discussion of the criticism. The Prime Minister's choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices support the assumption: these choices direct the MPs from the Opposition towards retracting rather than maintaining the criticism advanced.

However, it might be necessary to consider whether the accusations cannot in fact be attempts to get the Opposition to retract the previous position rather than the current criticism. Given the political nature of the argumentative exchanges of Question Time, the accusations can sometimes be understood as an expression of critical doubt concerning the position of the Opposition that is inconsistent with the current one. For example, Mr. Brown's accusation to the Tories of being inconsistent in their attitude towards the NHS can maybe be understood as an attempt to get the Tories to change their mind about their policy of cutting investment in Health. Empirical research into the outcomes actually pursued by the Prime Minister's responses at issue seems necessary in order to further support the assumption that underlies the analysis and the evaluation in this study. Further research must also be conducted in order to develop a set of criteria that can be used to determine what the favourable outcomes pursued by accusations of inconsistency, advanced in response to criticism from the Opposition, are.

In order to identify the dialectical function of the Prime Minister's responses at issue, a dialectical profile of the confrontation stage was designed (*section 2.3*). The profile represents in a dialogue-like tree and at a certain level of abstraction, all the different ways a confrontation can develop within the boundaries of reasonableness. The profile is instrumental for the analysis of the Prime Minister's responses as it represents the dialectical interaction involved in them.

Taking types of strategic manoeuvring to represent, as this study suggests, instances of strategic manoeuvring, at a certain level of abstraction, i.e. in terms of slots for dialectically relevant moves, the profile can, in principle, also be the basis for designing a typology of confrontational strategic manoeuvring. The profile presents a finite number of slots for analytically relevant moves available to arguers, a finite number of dialectical routes that can be followed and a finite number of outcomes that can be pursued in an argumentative confrontation. In principle, it should be possible, by taking these three factors as parameters, to derive a finite number of types of confrontational strategic manoeuvring that are distinguished according to the dialectical functions underlying them. Because the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage represents all the moves that play a role in the critical testing procedure, such a typology would in principle represent all the instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring. Further research should be conducted in order to check the actual feasibility of such an endeavour.

Also worth investigating in further research is whether or not dialectical profiles can be of use in analysing instances of strategic manoeuvring that relate to other stages of the critical testing procedure. The dialectical profiles of (parts of) other dialectical stages, already suggested by van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007a), can be used for that. However, it might be the case that for typologies of other categories of strategic manoeuvring, e.g. a typology of opening-stage related strategic manoeuvring, complete dialectical profiles are needed in which all the moves in the stages concerned are represented. In this case, it becomes relevant to investigate the possibility of designing complete dialectical profiles for the opening, argumentation and concluding stages. The confrontation stage, for which a profile has been designed in this study, is the simplest dialectical stage and the options of moves that need to be accommodated

in its profile are far fewer than the options that need to be accommodated in profiles for other stages.

The characterisation of Prime Minister's Question Time as an argumentative activity type (*Chapter 3*) sheds light on how aims intrinsic to argumentation, i.e. dialectical and rhetorical aims, are influenced by extrinsic aims pursued by means of argumentation, which are institutional aims in the case studied. The characterisation incorporates several different institutional aims that are pursued by means of argumentation, but prominence is given to the aim of holding the Government to account, as the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of the parliamentary session. As a result, in this study, the analysis and evaluation of the argumentative practice is carried out from the perspective of a particular institutional concern in the accountability of the Government. The strategic function of argumentative moves is analysed in terms of their contribution to this aim, and such a contribution is also taken into account when assessing the reasonableness of the moves.

In giving prominence to one institutional aim in the characterisation of the argumentative practice as an activity type, I followed Levinson (1992) and van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), who suggest that the practice of an activity type is "rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question" (Levinson, 1992: p. 71). However, because in Question Time a number of different institutional aims are significant to the argumentative practice, the activity type was characterised as multi-layered: one of the institutional aims was made prominent without ignoring the other aims. It is yet worth investigating whether or not such prominence is at all necessary, from the perspective of argumentation theory. Can the institutional aims not be considered all at an equal level, without giving prominence for one over the others? The merits of giving prominence can be investigated by looking into the possibility of characterising an activity type, Question Time for example, in terms of all the institutional aims pursued in it and the argumentative means available to realise these aims given the institutional rules and conventions of the practice concerned.

In any case, the prominence given in this study to the goal of holding the Government to account should by no means be taken to reflect a hierarchy of empirical importance. As explained in the characterisation of the activity type of

Question Time, arguers pursue the different institutional aims simultaneously and their order of importance varies from one exchange to the other. The prominence given should rather be understood as a matter of perspective from which an analyst approaches the practice when aiming to shed light on a particular empirical phenomenon. An analyst could also choose to give prominence to the aim of promoting party interests, and examine how the concern with such an aim influences politicians' argumentative choices.

The observations made about the strategic function of Mr. Blair's strategic manoeuvring in the exchange about the NHS (*Chapter 4*) can in principle be generalised to sketch an analytic account of the Prime Minister's response with accusations of inconsistency to criticism. As the discussion of the exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron about the London Police and the exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Bottomley about the referendum shows, it is not unusual for the Prime Minister to employ the accusation of inconsistency to challenge the justificatory power of the critical argument. Given the rules and conventions of Question Time, it seems also typical for this kind of exchanges that the elimination of the dispute is the only outcome of the argumentative confrontation that is politically desirable for the Prime Minister. It is also quite realistic to assume that the accusation of inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, the ruling party can provide good leadership*. Yet, the analysis of more exchanges is certainly necessary in order to provide a better supported general account of the strategic function of the accusations at issue. Further research could for example investigate whether or not it is typical for accusations of inconsistency to challenge the justificatory power of the critical argument rather than its propositional content. Research could also be conducted to investigate the role the accusation plays in the discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country and sketch a more refined account of the strategic function of the accusations at issue.

The general soundness conditions formulated for assessing the dialectical reasonableness of the strategic manoeuvring in the responses at issue (*section 5.2*) bring the evaluation closer to argumentative moves as they actually occur in argumentative practice. They are derived from van Eemeren and Grootendorst's

(2004) rules for a critical discussion (pp. 135-157) and code of conduct for reasonable discussants (pp. 190-196), but they are tuned to the particular speech act actually performed by the Prime Minister, namely the accusation of inconsistency. Similar to the code of conduct and the rules for a critical discussion, the conditions assess the reasonableness of argumentative moves based on their contribution to the critical testing procedure: a move is reasonable if it does not hinder the procedure and fallacious otherwise. However, the conditions are formulated to apply to the speech act of accusation of inconsistency rather than its reconstructed analytically relevant counterpart, namely the illocutionary negation of a commissive as an expression of doubt. Consequently, the conditions enable the analyst to trace back the dialectical (un-)reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses to aspects that relate to the accusation of inconsistency he advances. For example, condition (v) shows how a certain choice of topics, audience frames or stylistic devices that the Prime Minister employs in his accusations of inconsistency eventually obstructs the critical testing procedure, namely by restricting freedom of the accused to choose the way of responding to the accusation.

The discussion of the soundness conditions in light of institutional considerations (*section 5.3*) emphasizes the complex multi-layered nature of the argumentative activity type of Question Time. Moreover, the discussion reveals a difficulty in arriving at a well defined set of specific conditions that can be applied in the particular context of Prime Minister's Question Time to yield a clear cut evaluation of the responses at issue. It becomes clear that any judgment concerning the dialectical reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses is presumptive rather than definitive: the appropriateness of the verdict of reasonableness is dependent on the appropriateness of certain assumptions that need to be made. For each instance of the responses, the analyst needs to assume, for example, a certain position concerning whether it makes more sense to extend the set of commitments that can be attributed to the accused to include commitments incurred by his fellow party members or to limit the set and exclude such commitments. The analyst also needs to assume a certain position about whether it is, in the situation at issue, more important to hold the Government to account or to determine which of the available policies is best. In order for the

argumentative judgment of reasonableness to be in line with what is also politically rational, factors from political theory need to be taken into consideration when making such assumptions.





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## SUMMARY

This study is an attempt to provide an elaborate argumentative account of a particular move in Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. It is a pragma-dialectical examination of the Prime Minister's responses with accusation of inconsistency to standpoints advanced by Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Opposition in which criticism is expressed concerning policies, actions or plans of the Government. Typically, the Prime Minister challenges the MPs' commitment to their critical standpoints, on the basis of an alleged inconsistency between the MPs' current criticism and some other positions with which they can be associated. In this study, basic pragma-dialectical tools are employed and further developed in order to offer an account that is both empirically adequate and critically insightful of the responses.

The Prime Minister's responses at issue are characterised as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in which a favourable outcome of the argumentative confrontation is pursued within the boundaries of reasonableness (*Chapter 2*). The characterisation reveals the strategic function of the responses as attempts from the Prime Minister to get his adversaries to retract their critical standpoints on the in-principle fair ground that one cannot hold two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously. Furthermore, the characterisation sheds light on the Prime Minister's strategic choices of topics, audience frames and of stylistic devices, in his attempt to direct the MPs towards the retraction of the current criticism, rather than the retraction of the other position, as the means to repair the alleged inconsistency.

In order for the analysis of the responses to be faithful to the particularities of the institutional context in which the responses occur, the argumentative practice of Question Time is characterised as an argumentative activity type (*Chapter 3*). The institutionally conventionalised practice is characterised as a multi-layered activity type that is governed by parliamentary rules and conventions as well as by political considerations. The characterisation identifies a main discussion about a standpoint like *the performance of the*

*Government is up to standard* as well as another discussion about a standpoint like *unlike the other party, we can provide good leadership*, which runs simultaneously to the main discussion. Because the rules of Question Time stipulate that the MPs and the Prime Minister address only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Government, the difference of opinion concerning the political competence of political parties can be addressed only through addressing the difference concerning the performance of the Government.

The activity type perspective sheds significant light on the institutional strategic function of the responses at issue (Chapter 4). For example, the activity type perspective makes it clear that the Prime Minister employs accusations of inconsistency in an attempt to live up to his institutional obligation to defend his Government in those situations where, on the one hand, refuting the criticism advanced by the Opposition is not easy, but on the other hand, the Prime Minister cannot just accept it. Furthermore, getting the MP from the Opposition to retract his criticism is often the Prime Minister's only alternative to an institutionally undesirable outcome in which he would have to assume politically undesirable positions. In view of the activity type perspective, it becomes also evident that the accusation of inconsistency is not only an argumentatively opportune choice in the discussion about the performance of the Government, but is also an argument that the Prime Minister employs in support of the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, the ruling party can provide good leadership*. An inconsistent Opposition can obviously not provide good leadership.

The in-principle reasonable ground that one cannot hold two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously does not guarantee reasonableness for the Prime Minister's responses. Guided by the view that cases of strategic manoeuvring are reasonable only as long as they do not hinder the critical testing procedure, soundness conditions are formulated (Chapter 5). Institutional characteristics of the argumentative practice need to be taken into account in applying these conditions. The activity type perspective shows that particular attention needs to be given to the discussion of the competence of political parties to lead the country. Considerations that relate to this discussion can be crucial in judging whether a particular accusation is a fallacious attempt to silence criticism or rather a reasonable attempt to discuss the criticism in context. After all, in

Question Time, the performance of the Government is not assessed independently from the alternative offered by the Opposition.



## SAMENVATTING

Deze studie beoogt een uitgebreide argumentatieve uiteenzetting te geven van een specifieke discussiezet in *Prime Minister's Question Time*, het vragenuurtje van de minister-president in het Britse Lagerhuis. Het behelst een pragma-dialectisch onderzoek naar beschuldigingen van inconsistentie die de minister-president doet in reacties op standpunten die door parlementsleden (*MP's*) van de oppositie naar voren zijn gebracht en waarin zij kritiek uiten op beleid, acties of plannen van de regering. In zulke zettingen is het gebruikelijk dat de minister-president de gebondenheid van de MP aan het kritische standpunt bestrijdt door te wijzen op een vermeende inconsistentie tussen de huidige kritiek van de MP en een andere positie die aan hem kan worden toegeschreven. In deze studie wordt het pragma-dialectische instrumentarium toegepast en verder ontwikkeld om zowel een empirisch adequate uiteenzetting te geven als een uiteenzetting die kritisch inzicht biedt in dergelijke reacties.

De onderzochte reacties van de minister-president worden gekarakteriseerd als een specifieke manier van strategisch manoeuvreren in de confrontatiefase waarmee een gunstige uitkomst van de argumentatieve confrontatie wordt nagestreefd die binnen de grenzen van de redelijkheid blijft (*Hoofdstuk 2*). De karakterisering toont de strategische functie van de reacties aan: zij gelden als pogingen van de minister-president om zijn tegenstanders zover te krijgen om hun kritische standpunten in te trekken op basis van de in principe redelijke grond dat iemand niet tegelijkertijd twee mutueel-exclusieve gebondenheden kan hebben. Bovendien werpt de karakterisering licht op de strategische keuzen die de minister-president maakt voor bepaalde onderwerpen, aanpassingen aan het publiek en stilistische middelen in zijn poging om de MP de vermeende inconsistentie te laten repareren door zijn huidige kritiek, in plaats van zijn eerdere positie, in te trekken.

Om ervoor te zorgen dat de analyse van de reacties trouw is aan de specifieke eigenschappen van de institutionele context waarin de reacties plaatsvinden, wordt de argumentatieve praktijk in *Question Time* gekarakteriseerd

als een argumentatief actietype (*Hoofdstuk 3*). De institutioneel geconventionaliseerde praktijk wordt gekarakteriseerd als een gelaagd actietype dat wordt gereguleerd door zowel parlementaire regels en conventies als politieke overwegingen. In de karakterisering wordt een hoofddiscussie geïdentificeerd over een standpunt als *de prestatie van de regering voldoet* en een andere discussie over een standpunt als *in tegenstelling tot de andere partij kunnen wij goed leiderschap bieden*, die parallel loopt aan de hoofddiscussie. Volgens de regels van *Question Time* kunnen MP's en de minister-president alleen kwesties aankaarten die te maken hebben met de verantwoordelijkheden van de regering. Er kan daarom alleen worden verwezen naar het verschil van mening over de politieke bekwaamheid van politieke partijen door te verwijzen naar het meningsverschil over de prestatie van de regering.

Het actietyeperspectief verheldert de institutionele strategische functies van de reacties in kwestie op significante wijze (*Hoofdstuk 4*). Dit perspectief maakt bijvoorbeeld duidelijk dat de minister-president beschuldigingen van inconsistentie gebruikt om te voldoen aan de institutionele verplichting om zijn regering te verdedigen in die situaties waarin enerzijds het weerleggen van de kritiek van de oppositie lastig is en anderzijds de minister-president die kritiek niet zomaar kan aanvaarden. Bovendien is het voor hem vaak het enige alternatief om ervoor te zorgen dat een MP zijn kritiek intrekt, opdat er geen institutioneel onwenselijke uitkomst volgt waarin de minister-president politiek onwenselijke posities in moet nemen. Vanuit het oogpunt van het actietype wordt het tevens duidelijk dat een beschuldiging van inconsistentie niet alleen een voordelige argumentatieve keuze is in de discussie over het functioneren van de regering, maar ook een argument dat de minister-president gebruikt ter ondersteuning van het standpunt dat *in tegenstelling tot de oppositie de regerende partij goed leiderschap biedt*. Een inconsistente oppositie kan uiteraard geen goed leiderschap bieden.

De in principe redelijke grondslag dat men niet tegelijkertijd twee mutueel exclusieve gebondenheden op zich kan nemen, garandeert niet dat de reacties van de minister president redelijk zijn. Op basis van het idee dat strategische manoeuvres alleen redelijk zijn zolang ze de kritische toetsingsprocedure niet verhinderen, zijn de deugdelijkheidvoorwaarden opgesteld (*Hoofdstuk 5*). Bij het

toepassen van deze voorwaarden moet er rekening worden gehouden met de institutionele kenmerken van de argumentatieve praktijk. Het actietypeperspectief laat zien dat er in het bijzonder aandacht moet worden geschonken aan de discussie over het vermogen van politieke partijen om het land te regeren. Overwegingen die gerelateerd zijn aan die discussie kunnen cruciaal zijn voor het beoordelen of een specifieke beschuldiging een drogredelijke poging vormt om de tegenstander het zwijgen op te leggen of juist een redelijke poging om de kritiek in zijn context te bespreken. In *Question Time* worden de prestaties van de regering immers niet onafhankelijk van het alternatief dat de oppositie biedt beoordeeld.

