

Meaningful scrutiny, or a PR stunt? Experts respond to Ed Miliband's proposal for a 'Public PMQs'

By The Author

Is Ed Miliband's [idea](#) for a "public Prime Minister's Questions" a good one? Following on from part one of our 'Ask the Experts' piece, we asked the Hansard Society's Matt Korris, Huddersfield University's Andy Mycock, and Christina Leston-Bandeira to join Democratic Audit's Sean Kippin in giving their view on whether this is a public relations act, or a bold step forward in scrutinising the Prime Minister.

Matt Korris, Senior Researcher, Hansard Society

Reform of Prime Ministers' Questions is sorely needed. It is the most high-profile element of Parliament's work, but [our research](#), the first to explore public attitudes to PMQs in detail, found significant public dissatisfaction with the way it is conducted.



New measures to engage and involve the public in politics can be part of the solution. Ed Miliband has proposed public questioning of the Prime Minister at Westminster, however there will be logistical and resource challenges to overcome if it is not to turn into an event just for those that live within easy travel distance of London.

An alternative would be to take the session to different areas of the country. Again, this could be expensive and logistically challenging to do regularly but MPs may have to leave Westminster in the next Parliament anyway to facilitate badly needed repairs to the building. In which case it will open up opportunities for new, creative thinking about how and where the work of Parliament takes place.

Digital tools present alternative possibilities. The public could pose questions on Twitter as already happens with Select Committees, or via live video-conferencing or submit questions in advance to a site that allowed people to vote on which questions should be put to the PM. Whatever the model, politicians should be willing to experiment with the format to see what generates broad interest and substantive engagement.

However, new methods of engaging the public should not come at the expense of addressing existing concerns about PMQs. Our research demonstrated strong public disgust with the behaviour of MPs at PMQs – they see them as noisy, aggressive and unprofessional. School children in a pantomime farce rather than great democratic drama. Addressing this does not mean sucking all of the life out of the event – the public want passion and argument – but politicians need to respond to the public's concerns by debating more and jeering less.

Dr Andy Mycock, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Huddersfield

Although Ed Miliband's has denied that his proposal for the [introduction](#) of 'People's PMQs' is a gimmick, it reeks of 'back of a fag packet' policy-making both in terms of its design and aspirations. Miliband clearly seeks to tap into wider concerns about the connectivity (or lack thereof) of politicians in Westminster with the electorate. He appears unaware that numerous such opportunities already exist but most people avoid engaging with politicians who, when exposed to questioning by public at large, tend to resort to formulaic answers that are often cliché-ridden smokescreens.



PPMQs would more than likely offer more of the same and simply replicate the many shortcomings of PMQs highlighted by the Hansard Society in a report published [earlier this year](#). Miliband would have been better advised to address the widespread abrogation of responsibility by parliamentarians concerning the political culture and practice that underpins PMQs and makes it such an insular and irrelevant event for most citizens.

Christina Leston-Bandeira, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, University of Hull

Giving the public the chance to put questions directly to the Prime-Minister could go either way: it could be a total disaster, or it could be a useful path for communication between the public and the Prime Minister and Government. Instructions on how to submit questions would have to be very clear.



The idea could work reasonably well if digital means were used to ensure wider access. It should not be instead of the current Prime Minister's Questions, they should serve different purposes. It shouldn't be seen neither as a solution for engagement with politics and realistic expectations should be set as to its purpose. But it could be an interesting tool to facilitate some direct communication with the general public.

Sean Kippin, Managing Editor, Democratic Audit

It isn't easy to get excited about Ed Miliband's modest proposal for a version of Prime Minister's Question which involves the public, though that doesn't necessarily make it a bad idea. Recent years have brought us not only "Cameron Direct", and "Call Clegg" but a number of smaller regional events in which the public are granted access to scrutinise, question, or generally yell at our political leaders, so it's not exactly a ground breaking suggestion.



If Miliband's idea were to work, however, steps would need to be taken to ensure that the audience wasn't drawn from self-selecting minority of political enthusiasts. Perhaps this could be done in the style of jury service, with a random selection of members of the public being guided, where necessary, through the process by a resolutely apolitical and independent team of experts. Somebody – ideally the Speaker – would have to chair the session, ensuring that questions were answered more rigorously than we tend to see in PMQs.

Obviously, this innovation isn't sufficient on its own, and must form part of a wider package of

democratic reforms such as an elected House of Lords, a lowered voting age, reformed and improved citizenship education, and easier access to voting. Only then can we say that we are on the right track when it comes to ending our crisis of political engagement.

[Click here to see part one of our 'Ask the Experts' piece on Ed Miliband's proposal for a "Public PMQs"](#)

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