


Essential scrutiny or a national embarrassment? Experts respond to the Hansard Society's report on Prime Minister's Questions

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By Democratic Audit UK

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The Hansard Society recently published [research](#) which showed the public's disapproval of the shouting and braying that takes place at the weekly Prime Minister's Question time. But is this merely a sign of a healthy democracy? We asked a number of experts on Parliament and democracy to respond to the research, and give their views as to whether this ritual is worth the trouble.

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

As I stood for 50 minutes in a queue last Wednesday to get into the UK Parliament, and "PMQs" kept being murmured around me, I reflected on its popularity. The recent Hansard Society report shows that the public dislikes rowdy behaviour, which is clearly expressed in PMQs. And yet, PMQs is the envy of other parliaments: a weekly session with the Prime Minister in parliament and with top coverage from all mainstream media.



Other parliaments have tried to emulate the big show-debate of PMQs, without quite succeeding. PMQs suits a specific purpose and is like to involve a very heated exchange of views; it epitomises political debate in the UK. It is clearly, also, parliament's most visible face. Perhaps we should focus instead on enhancing the visibility of the other – less rowdy- moments of parliamentary practice, where different purposes are pursued. But will this attract as much media coverage?

Colin Talbot, Professor of Government, University of Manchester

In our Parliamentary system any notion of a separation of powers is more about an abrogation of power by the Government – Parliament long ago ceased to be a really effective check on the executive other than in extreme circumstances or fairly minor ways. Parliament exercises some control over legislation, none at all, except retrospectively, over public money and almost none over the machinery and organisation of Government.



There has been a glacially slow improvement in this over the past 35 years or so, since the creation of the modern Departmental Select Committee system. To the extent that "Parliament" as a collective exists at all, it is within the Select Committees. Only there do we see a collegial spirit and independence from the Executive and Party institutions. The recent Wright reforms have given a further boost to this, but there is still a very long way to go.

When it comes to holding the PM to at least some account, the biggest innovation has been the Liaison Committees hearings with the PM (introduced in 2002). These are inquisitorial, challenging and largely non-partisan. They should be expanded and developed as an alternative to the charade of PMQs

Dr Meg Russell, Deputy Director, the Constitution Unit, University College London

There is certainly a case for demanding less rowdy behaviour at PMQs, but we shouldn't dismiss the event purely as ineffective point-scoring. On a weekly basis it demands on-the-record answers from government on the most topical questions, in the full glare of publicity. This is a key element of accountability.



PMQs can also sometimes have concrete effects. In a current project on parliament's impact on legislation, we found an example where Labour MP Paul Goggins (whose sudden death in January generated heartfelt tributes from all sides of the House) put Cameron on the spot over the effect that the coalition's abolition of the Child Trust Fund would have on children in care.

Thus confronted, Cameron responded sympathetically, and agreed to look at the problem. Ultimately George Osborne announced a Junior ISA scheme for such children, with £5 million of funding. Perhaps such cases are rare, but they show how PMQs can work on specific policies, as well as ensuring day-to-day accountability. Indeed more such reasoned exchanges, and less yah-boo, would doubtless be widely welcomed.

Joni Lovenduski, Anniversary Professor of Politics, Birkbeck College, University of London

PMQs are a rule governed activity that supports a paradigm of politics which is internalised by MPs and accepted and internalised by the public. The ritual sustains the traditional masculine culture by continually repeating performances of adversarial confrontation. Performance is evaluated in terms of competitive success framed in the way that the discourse of sporting competitions, races or wars are framed. (Did David Cameron "win" over Ed Milliband during PMQs today?)



Commentary, if often amusing and erudite, is rarely framed in terms of the contribution to policy made in the contributions to the debate. But for the public this is the best known of all of parliament's activities, and likely its main notion of the functioning of parliamentary accountability. Generally the public thinks that PMQs are functional and their belief that parliament should hold government to account explains why. However this may be because it is all they know. Even if the practice is symbolic and ritualistic, sometimes to a ridiculous degree, if it is a means, perhaps the only means of securing accountability, it will be valued.

Stephen Bates, Lecturer in Political Science, University of Birmingham

There are a number of institutional reforms that could be introduced to bring about the kind of PMQs that Speaker Bercow has called for. These reforms, some of which have been stated and occasionally restated in various Procedure Committee Reports over the years, include: extending PMQs by quarter or half an hour each week; reducing the number of questions that the Leader of the Opposition is allowed to ask; institutionalising a set number of closed questions each week (including for the Leader of the Opposition); increasing the toleration of 'referred' answers by the Prime Minister by requiring the Prime Minister to read out (shorter versions of) departmental answers at the next session of PMQs; and ensuring that the Leader of the Opposition cannot ask his/her questions until after a set number of backbench questions have been asked.



However, there is another change that would improve parliamentary discourse and help hold the Prime Minister to greater account but that would be difficult to institutionalise formally. This change relates to how questions are posed. David Cameron is often criticised – as was Gordon Brown before him – possibly correctly, for not answering questions, yet he can only answer the questions that are put to him. If these include ad hominem attacks, it could be argued that he is not obliged to answer them; this at least gives him an excuse not to answer. To take but one recent example, an opposition backbencher asked on the 6th November 2013:

“The Prime Minister has just been boasting again about 1 million extra jobs. Can he therefore explain why in my constituency the number of people unemployed for more than two years has risen by 350% in the last year alone? It is now the worst figure in the country. Nine of the 10 worst constituencies on this measure are in the north-east, including all three Sunderland seats. Is that because they are the same old Tories, who do not care about the north-east?”

The last sentence of this question is unnecessary and detracts from the important issue raised. Questions posed at PMQs should be direct, forensic, uncomfortable and challenging for the Prime Minister; they do not need to be sarcastic or sometimes plain rude to achieve this end. A change of this sort – and also a change with regard the opposite problem of toadying questions posed by government backbenchers – can only be brought about by MPs and parties themselves. If they did so, this would increase scrutiny and accountability and would help address some of the issues raised by the recent Hansard report – but without killing PMQs as a spectacle.

Jessica Crowe, Executive Director, Centre for Public Scrutiny

The Hansard Society’s report on Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) captures what many of us have long suspected the public really thinks: “noise and bluster and showing off”. But as this [piece from Emma Burnell](#) argues, we need to reform PMQs, not lose it as an opportunity for public scrutiny.



I argued recently that Parliament’s [best scrutiny work is often unseen](#) and

unsung: forensic inquiry by select committees, leading to practical recommendations that improve people's lives, like the [DCLG Committee's mobile homes report](#). However, there are three valuable purposes to the more visible public scrutiny in the Commons Chamber:

- *MPs' representational role – putting concerns from or about their constituencies to those in power*
- *MPs' non-executive role – publicly holding the executive to account*
- *Opposition MPs' responsibility to set out alternative programmes for public consideration*

The current format of PMQs mixes these roles together. There may be merit in separating them and theming PMQs according to subject or purpose. However, unless the media starts reporting the issues and debates rather than seeking to create a “story”, the outcome may simply be less publicity. So Parliament also needs to get more social media savvy, by-passing the mainstream press to engage directly with the public.

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