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Quieter and more civilised but not more accountable

In the face of the Covid-19 crisis, the Hansard Society wonders, in one of its last April publications, “how parliamentarians can conduct their core constitutional duties of holding the government to account, when [they] are all required to adopt rigorous social distancing”.

This question is even more relevant in relation to PMQs insofar as it is the most attended and the most watched parliamentary event of the week.

Due to social distancing far fewer MPs have been able to attend PMQs, and that resulted in less noise being made and fewer raucous attacks levelled (by the parties).

Sky News John Craig recommends that “[they] need the Commons to return to its usual boisterous, raucous and spontaneous normality if government ministers are to be held truly accountable”.

Those remarks beg the question of how disorder is an effective instrument in holding the government to account. And what “truly accountable” means in the specific context of PMQs.

The interruption as a tool to hold the government to account

I’d like to focus on two types of disorderly behaviour : interruptions on the one hand, and on the other hand : unparliamentary language -which is here defined as : threats and attacks to the face¹ (FTAs like insults, soundbites, offending remarks...).

Besides the adversarial and confrontational style of parliamentary politics, what may account for the extensive use of FTAs (disorderly language) lies at the core of the function of PMQs : holding the gvt to account.

According to Graham P. Thomas’s² definition of accountability, “criticising the government’s failure, incompetence or deceit” are FTAs *per se*, which inevitably causes disturbance especially when the PM counter-attacks to save face.

More often than not, those departures from the rules are tolerated by the Speaker, very few FTAs are sanctioned ; Sandra Harris³ mentions a very high level of tolerance of ‘illegal interventions’. This tolerance towards disorderly language lies at the root of accountability. So it is no wonder that MPs who want to make their point stronger should strike harder, which inevitably leads to an increase in the number and in the intensity of the attacks. In other words, the level of expected accountability might be reflected in the intensity and frequency of the attacks.

Whether they are challenging or dismissive backchanneling interruptions (if we use Cornelia Ilie’s typology⁴), they serve the purpose of interrupting the scripted speech of the PM urging him/her to answer more spontaneously

Those impromptu answers are valuable in appraising the government’s accountability. The PM will be judged more on the answers he will provide off the cuff than on his ready-made answers.

¹ Brown and Levinson 1987 {1978

² Thomas P Graham, *United kingdom: the prime minister and parliament*, 2006

³ Harris Sandra, *Being politically impolite : extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse*, 2001

⁴ Cornelia Ilie, *Interruption patterns in British parliamentary debates and drama dialogue*, 2004

The consequence (or the purpose) of such interruptions is to warn people about a message that is being delivered ; they function as attention getters. Whether the interruption points out an actual inaccuracy or even a downright lie, it doesn't matter. The government's accountability doesn't relate so much to the message or to the speech of the PM but to those signals sent out to the public prompting them to call into question specific points or even to a greater extent call into question the person's credibility.

What does "true accountability" mean in the context of PMQs ?

MPs represent their constituents in Parliament, and defend their interests. Unlike other parliamentary sessions, PMQs is a vehicle for individual backbenchers to raise individual grievances of constituents. MPs are the voice and in a way the body of their constituents in Parliament. In this theatrical performance⁵ backbenchers do not remain a passive audience. They make themselves and the people's voice heard by causing disturbance, by interrupting the speaking debaters. Backbenchers who are gathered in the House acting on behalf of the citizens take part in the debate through the noise they make in reaction to the speech of the leaders.

This way of interacting with the executive in order to hold them accountable is popular in essence. By popular I mean that it is the most watched parliamentary event of the week and that also means that PMQs involves a way of discursive interaction and styles of communication pertaining to and deriving from the people.

In ancient Athens, the *thorubos* (meaning the noise of the participants) was the expression of the sovereignty of the people (*dèmos*). Making noise and interrupting the debaters represented an active participation in the debate. The disruptions and roar of the backbenchers is the popular expression of the distrust, the discontent or the indignation of the people and in that case those feelings are not mediated by long-winded technical pre-scripted speeches.

Unquestionably, this is a more direct way of holding the government to account.

Even though the House debates have been subject to a new configuration where the paradigms in terms of disorderly behaviour have critically changed, MPs have been reluctant (unable ?) to change their discursive model and are still prone to disorderly attacks and interruptions. It took MPs only seven sessions with social distancing before going back to their old ways.

It seems that causing some kind of disorder through FTAs and interruptions is a natural and inescapable process of holding the government to account, and that is what 'true accountability' implies, that is to say making the voice and the noise of the people heard by using the mode of communication of the ordinary citizens.

That seems to suggest that the distance between the government and the people should be reduced to increase government's accountability.

How is the distance reduced ?

In the orderly question-answer sequences those disruptions act as metadiscursive (or rather metadramatic I should say) short-cuts or substitutes for longer, more elaborate answers or counter-arguments. This simplification of the message makes it easier for people to grasp the meaning of the spontaneous intervention of a member.

⁵ "a piece of theatre", in *Punch and Judy Politics*, Ayesha Hazarika and Tom Hamilton. "A major performance at theatre", in *Prime Minister's Questions as Political Ritual at Westminster*, J. Lovenduski.

For Cornelia Ilie⁶ the emotional force of insults that is correlated to the (over)-simplification of the message is tremendous and outweighs their rational force. I would go as far as contending that insults produce the same effects as symbols. They condense a wide range of meanings and emotions.

For Murray Edelman⁷, people think in terms of stereotypes and oversimplifications due to some incapacity to “tolerate ambiguous and complex situations and respond chiefly to symbols that oversimplify and distort”. There is no denying that FTAs and disruptions are more powerful than elaborate, well-crafted speeches.

My point here is that the use of interruptions, disruptions is a way to circumvent rationality thereby getting closer to the people, connecting with them in a more intimate way.

The closer to the people, the better the accountability.

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⁶ *Insulting as (un)parliamentary practice in the British and Swedish Parliaments: a rhetorical approach*, 2004.

⁷ Edelman Murray, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 1972, p.31