
Prime Minister's Questions in the United Kingdom

Rt. Hon. John Bercow MP

At Westminster every Wednesday when the House is in session the Prime Minister responds to questions for about thirty minutes. In recent years there has been some discussion in Canada about the pros and cons of instituting a similar practice. This article outlines the history of the British procedure and some problems that have developed with it over the years.



For most of the public Prime Minister's Questions is the shop window of the House of Commons. The media coverage of that thirty minute slot dominates all other proceedings in Parliament during the rest of the week. If the country comes to an adverse conclusion about the House because of what it

witnesses in those exchanges, then the noble work of a dozen Select Committees will pale into insignificance by comparison. If we are serious about enhancing the standing of the House in the eyes of those whom we serve then we cannot ignore the seriously impaired impression which PMQs has been and is leaving on the electorate. It is the elephant in the green room.

There will be some of my colleagues who I expect, very sincerely, to disagree with me. They argue that PMQs is splendid theatre, that it is secretly loved by those watching on television and that it is even therapeutic for parliamentarians to let their lungs loose on a weekly basis. I have to say that I find this argument utterly unconvincing. On the basis of its logic, bear-baiting and cock-fighting would still be legal activities. To my mind, the last nail in the coffin of the case for PMQs as it occurs today was hammered in by the leaders' debates during the general election campaign. The rules for those encounters included,

you may recall, a prohibition on cheering or chanting from the audience. Does anyone plausibly contend that the cut and thrust of debate between Messrs Brown, Cameron and Clegg suffered as a consequence? Did anybody at home feel short-changed by the absence of cat-calling?

What is worse is that, as I hope to illustrate in the next few minutes, Prime Minister's Questions was never intended to have the character which it has since developed. When it was introduced in 1961, it had three distinctive features:

- Questions were directly related to those areas in which the Prime Minister had personal responsibility rather than treating him as if a President in sole control of the entire British Government.
- Questions and answers were short and snappy and dominated by backbenchers
- The exercise occurred in an atmosphere of comparative cordiality.

A little history is instructive. Before the 1880s, questions to the Prime Minister were dealt with no differently from questions to other ministers. They were asked, without notice, on days on which ministers were available (invariably Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday) in whatever order Members rose to ask them. Public business could not commence until questions had been completed. The first change was made in 1881 when as a courtesy to William Gladstone, then aged 72, questions to the Prime Minister were asked last on the list to enable him to come into the House somewhat later in the day than he would have done otherwise.

The introduction of fixed time-limits for questions and the late slot for PMQs meant that while in theory

John Bercow is the Member of Parliament for Buckingham in the House of Commons in Westminster. He was elected Speaker of the House in 2009. This is an edited version of a speech delivered to the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies in London on July 6, 2010. For the full transcript see www.johnbercow.co.uk/06072010_cps_speech.

they were posed four days a week, in practice they were often never reached and very rarely completed. In 1953, in deference to Winston Churchill, then aged 79 and ailing, it was agreed that questions would be submitted on Tuesdays and Thursdays. An increasing dissatisfaction with the level of scrutiny this involved led to a landmark Procedure Committee report in 1959 which recommended that questions be taken in two 15-minute slots on Tuesday and Thursday which, a little reluctantly, the Government eventually accepted. The first PMQs was held on an experimental basis in July 1961 and, having been deemed a success by all concerned, the then Speaker announced it would continue on a permanent footing in October 1961.

It was a very different event to the one that it has subsequently become. In the early 1960s, it was routine for the Prime Minister to transfer questions which were not his direct responsibility to the relevant Cabinet minister, the number of questions tackled was about double in those thirty minutes a week to that of today and backbenchers did the asking. In 1964, for instance, the norm was that the Leader of the Opposition, Harold Wilson, would be called just the once in the Thursday session and not at all on Tuesdays. While exchanges could be lively, contemporary accounts do not record them being remotely raucous.

All of this changed over time but more by accident than design. Questions continued to be transferred by Jim Callaghan, and indeed it was at this time that the Clerks in the Table Office devised the untransferable question "if he will list his engagements for today". This formulation had the additional advantages that the supplementary could cover any subject, and any development even minutes before the start of PMQs; and it was convenient for Members because they did not need to think of a substantive Question to table when it was long odds that they would be successful in the ballot anyway. Small wonder that "the engagements question" has proved such a survivor.

But even as the engagements question became more widely used, it was clear that the days of transfers were over. Margaret Thatcher indicated at the start of her premiership that she would not transfer questions; and it was evident that she was as happy to answer on the detail of what a Department was doing as it was that the Ministers of that Department were horrified by the PM's close interest.

An informal understanding also emerged that the Leader of the Opposition would be called on both days, if he wished, and have the right to ask a supplementary. Hence the proportion of all questions asked by party leaders rose from 10 % in 1967-1968 to 25% in 1987-1988

to 33.4% by 2007-2008. This was not the result of any deliberate action of the House. Indeed, backbenchers would make their irritation known if party leaders were excessive. Margaret Thatcher, when Leader of the Opposition, averaged only 1.6 interventions a session. This was partly because if she was due to speak in a parliamentary debate on a Tuesday or Thursday she frequently would not participate in PMQs at all but also because her team came to the view that if she had not drawn parliamentary blood in the first two questions then it would be counterproductive to strain the patience of the House with a third one. This self-denying ordinance or simple tactical retreat has since gone out of fashion. Even so, there was a sense that PMQs was operating to the exclusion of backbenchers. In 1977, Speaker Thomas put forward a proposal to achieve the generally well-supported objective of getting through more questions at PMQs, only to encounter resistance from the Opposition because it would have restricted the opportunity for its leader to make interventions.

By this time, the comparatively civilised conduct of PMQs had already been undermined. In his autobiography, Speaker Selwyn Lloyd deplored the decline in behaviour and blamed it on the personal animosity between Harold Wilson and Edward Heath which in his view had poisoned the exchanges more broadly. It was certainly at about this moment, when Wilson was Leader of the Opposition for the second time, that a type of question first emerged in which a government backbencher would in effect invite the Prime Minister to attack his principal opponent and his or her policies. This development was widely deplored but not halted.

It was only in the 1980s, though, that PMQs became close to what they are today. Neil Kinnock came to office as a relatively unknown figure and felt obliged to employ PMQs as a device for enhancing his profile. He asked an average of 2.5 questions per PMQs, a much higher proportion than Mrs Thatcher had done, and would never let a session pass without an intervention. The highly polarised nature of politics in the 1980s was reproduced in the decibel level experienced in the Chamber. His successor, John Smith, was rightly confident in his skills as a parliamentary orator and it was he who established the precedent that he would always take his full allocation of three questions per session, which his successors, Margaret Beckett and Tony Blair followed as have all the Conservative leaders since then.

By the early 1990s, it was important to note, it was universally recognised that PMQs was not what it should

be. As a result, the Procedure Committee was invited to investigate the event and to recommend sweeping changes. It was widely assumed that substantial reform would be forthcoming. Colin Brown in *The Independent* of June 15, 1994, for example, wrote that:

Prime Minister's Questions in the Commons look likely to be reformed after both John Major and Tony Blair gave their blessing to changing the procedure. The move to reform the twice-weekly 15 minute exchanges follows growing criticism that the Common's clashes have become so stage-managed and rowdy that they are bringing the House into disrepute.

The eventual Procedure Committee report of 1995 broadly echoed Brown's sentiments. It argued that PMQs, "could no longer be held to pass the test that the purpose of a question is to obtain information or press for action". The exchanges had, the Committee lamented, "developed from being a procedure for the legislature to hold the executive to account into a partisan joust between the noisier supporters of the main political parties". The event was, "not seen outside the House to reflect well on the performance of the House". The Committee was convinced that a radical overhaul had become overdue.

The 1995 report set out a number of bold options. Their suggestions included:

- Changing to a procedure of short question and answer debates on substantive subjects.
- Having backbenchers put questions to the Prime Minister in a Select Committee format.
- Making a distinction between the Tuesday session (which would continue to consist of open questions) and the Thursday one (which would focus on a small number of topics).
- Dispensing with the requirement for notice of a question by having name-only ballots to all questions.
- Extending both sessions to 30 minutes each to allow for more backbench participation.

None of the seriously bold elements in this package was adopted. Instead the most notable change to occur in its aftermath was that Tony Blair collapsed the two 15-minute sessions into one 30-minute event in 1997 with the Leader of the Opposition combining his three questions across two days into six questions on the one Wednesday. In recognition of their enhanced parliamentary status, the Liberal Democrat leader would be allowed two questions.

It cannot be said that the whole House received these changes with rapture. Although in fairness to Mr Blair he had signalled his intentions in evidence to the Procedure Committee in 1995, there was still a sense that the House had been bounced into new

arrangements which suited the Prime Minister rather more than they did Parliament. That instinct was reflected in the very first question which Mr Blair received as Prime Minister, asked by the normally mild-mannered Ian Taylor, then Member for Esher. Mr Taylor's inquiry opened with the words:

I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to his role of answering questions and I am grateful to him for finding the time in his diary to do so. At some point he might consult the House about these changes.

Mr Blair replied, it should be recorded, that the Procedure Committee should feel able to "review the new system as time progresses" and "look at ways that it can be improved in the light of experience". That offer has never been fully taken up, which is a strange omission.

The failure to embrace change in 1995 still haunts us today. A Procedure Committee report into parliamentary questions as a whole which was published in 2002 really only glanced at PMQs, conceding that the contest "tends to encourage 'tribal behaviour' on both sides which damages the public image of the House, while the hopping from one subject to another which is the consequence of open questions militates against sustained and serious scrutiny" but only one very minor procedural change was recommended and accepted. The only real reform of note in all that time was achieved by the Liaison Committee. In their report *Shifting the Balance* in 2002 they suggested that the PM should attend twice a year to answer questions from them. The Government vigorously rejected the idea, but only a few months later – a good example of the delayed drop effect so often experienced by persistent select committees – the Prime Minister himself agreed to it. The Liaison Committee format is a huge improvement but nevertheless has limitations. The lengthy cross-examination of a Prime Minister once or twice a year is not a substitute for an effective event every week.

All of which leaves us with the PMQs seen in the last Parliament. We reached the point where almost nothing was deemed beyond the personal responsibility of the Prime Minister of the day, where the party leaders were responsible for a third of all the questions asked (and often more like 50 to 60% of the total time consumed) all set against a background of noise which makes the vuvuzela trumpets of the South African World Cup appear but distant whispers by comparison. If it is scrutiny at all, then it is scrutiny by screech which is a very strange concept to my mind. The academic analysis does not make for enjoyable reading either. A survey by the Regulatory Policy

Institute of all PMQs posed in 2009 concluded that the Prime Minister had answered only 56 per cent of all questions asked of him. If it seems harsh to cite Gordon Brown in this fashion then it should be observed that the same survey determined that only 56 per cent of the questions asked of him were actually genuine questions in the first place. What the detailed exercise revealed, depressingly, was that PMQs had become a litany of attacks, soundbites and planted questions from across the spectrum. It was emphatically not an act of scrutiny conducted in a civilised manner. And this is what the House of Commons has allowed to be placed in what I repeat is the shop window.

What could be done about this? It is not for the Speaker to dictate in this field or to impose his suggestions on others. It is my duty, as my predecessors before me also felt, to point out to the House the reputational damage that our present arrangements are inflicting. It seems to me that three steps could be taken which might lead us to a more attractive outcome.

The first surrounds the culture of Prime Minister's Questions. No committee can legislate for this. It would require the Prime Minister and a new Leader of the Opposition, as so nearly happened in 1994, to agree on a common understanding of behaviour, one which offered teeth to our existing code of conduct which states unequivocally that "Members shall at all times conduct themselves in a manner which will tend to maintain and strengthen the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of Parliament and never undertake any action which would bring the House of Commons, or its Members generally, into disrepute". A compact between the party leaders, endorsed by the Whips, would allow Speakers present and future to enforce order far more vigorously with the parliamentary equivalent of Yellow and Red

Cards available at their disposal if that were to prove absolutely necessary.

The second element involves the character of PMQs which has shifted too far away from backbench Members. Once again, it would be wrong to impose changes unilaterally. The very fact of a coalition administration has opened up a little more space for backbenchers as the two questions previously reserved for the Leader of the Liberal Democrats have been opened up to them. This is helpful in terms of the balance of PMQs but it is hardly decisive. If the session is to remain 30-minutes long, the next Leader of the Opposition could usefully ask whether he or she truly needed as many as six questions of the Prime Minister in order to land a blow or whether, in the spirit of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s, three or four would do instead. Arguably, however, a 45-minute or even 60-minute session conducted with mutual respect would be a huge and welcome advance on the status quo. In such circumstances, the current number of questions allocated to the Leader of the Opposition would be more appropriate.

Finally, there is the content of the encounter. Is it the right device for ensuring effective scrutiny? Does it need to be supplemented by other institutions? Are open questions posed in the vain attempt to catch a Prime Minister out actually the best means of inquiry? It has been years since a Procedure Committee even addressed these issues, let alone had their findings accepted by colleagues. It seems to me that the hour at which Mr Blair's assurance of 1997 that the Committee would be able to "review the system" must now have arrived. The ideal result for the House in my view would be more scrutiny, more civility, less noise and less abuse masquerading as inquiry.