

Research Proposal

Does Blair answer the question? An analysis of his performance at Prime Minister's Questions since the 1997 general election.

Background

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is the half-hour weekly opportunity for backbench and opposition MPs to question the Prime Minister. It is the highlight of the political week in Westminster, guaranteeing its participants media coverage and frequently setting the news agenda for the rest of the day. It is political theatre, and is often criticised for that fact.

Since becoming Prime Minister, Tony Blair has been accused of having a disregard for Parliament and its procedures. He moved PMQs from two quarter-hour sessions to one half-hour session without consultation, much to the consternation of many MPs¹. He is frequently charged with delivering soundbites instead of answers, and of being too combative, blaming the previous Conservative government for problems rather than accepting responsibility. Above all, he is accused of failing to answer the questions put to him.

Aims

This study will seek to prove or disprove these accusations through an analysis of Blair's weekly performances at the dispatch box. It will discover the proportion of questions that are answered and the proportion that are not, and attempt to ascertain both how and why some questions do not receive satisfactory replies. In addition to

¹ House of Commons, 14 May 1997, *Hansard* column 37:
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmhansrd/vo970514/debtext/70514-01.htm#70514-01_head4

this, it will address the wider relevance of PMQs in scrutinising the Prime Minister's activities, and the effectiveness of its main participants in doing so.

Sources

The main source for this research will be Hansard, the official report of proceedings in the UK Parliament, accessible from 1988 to the present day via the Parliament website. In addition to this, if necessary, newspaper reports will be used for background information on the topics being addressed at PMQs.

Sampling

It would not be feasible to look at every question asked (for the purposes of this research a question is defined as a tabled Question or a supplementary question) and every answer given at every PMQs since Blair came to power – there would be over 6,000². Some sampling is therefore necessary: the research will be limited to questions asked by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders, or their stand-ins, to Tony Blair. This therefore excludes the rare occasions when other Cabinet members have deputised.

It is to be noted from the outset that this sample is not representative of the entire population of the Commons, but concentrates instead on the 'headline' exchanges at PMQs: the ones that are likely to have the greatest impact. Furthermore, because of the ballot system operated at PMQs, by convention these are the only two figures that are guaranteed to get called to ask questions every week. The questions asked by individual backbenchers are far less numerous and often also less interesting: of those that are actually questions and not sycophantic praise of policies or leaders, many are

² Own estimate, based on calculations looking at *Hansard* indexes

concerned with constituency issues. Of course, limiting the research in this way will also make for an interesting comparison between the performances of the six different opposition leaders since 1997: which leader and which party is most successful in extracting answers from the Prime Minister?

Even cutting down the number of questioners considered each week to two would still leave too much to consider, however – over 2,000 questions. As well as this purposive sampling, random sampling will therefore be employed: only every fourth PMQs will be analysed.

Methods

A qualitative text analysis of each set of questions and answers will fit them into one of the following categories:

1. Blair gave a full, satisfactory answer to the question
2. Blair gave a partial answer, citing a lack of information or an inability to give a full answer (such as for legal or security reasons)
3. Blair gave a partial answer, evading the rest of the question for no apparent legitimate reason
4. Blair did not answer the question, citing legitimate reasons as above
5. Blair did not answer the question and gave an unsatisfactory reason for not doing so
6. Blair did not answer the question and gave no legitimate reason for not doing so

Questions will also be categorised into subject areas, firstly by government department (using the current configuration of departments rather than earlier ones), and where appropriate by more specific topics, such as crime or Iraq.

In addition to this, all instances of Blair attacking the opposition parties will be recorded. This will be further split into attacks on their record in office (for the Conservatives), attacks on their policy (or lack of it) and attacks on figures within the parties. These categories will not be mutually exclusive.

Finally, attempts by Blair to ask questions of the opposition leaders or goad them into responses after their final questions – which, by convention, they are not allowed to give – will also be noted.

Data from all of this will be registered in a database for later quantitative analysis in SPSS. The proportion of questions answered in total, as well as trends over time, by party, by questioner and on specific issues, will be calculated.

Time Plan

Because the source that this research will be based on is readily available, this time plan is deliberately flexible.

December 2004	Construction, testing and refinement of database and recording system
January 2005	Begin text analysis and recording of data. To save unnecessary work, data from the analysis will be inputted directly into the database, rather than recorded on paper and inputted later.

Analysis will be chronological, a year at a time according to the following schedule:

Week commencing:	
3 January	1997
10 January	1998
17 January	1999
24 January	
31 January	2000
7 February	2001
14 February	2002
21 February	
28 February	2003
7 March	2004
14 March	2005
21-27 March	Transfer data to SPSS and calculate statistics
28 March- 10 April	Write research report
11 April	Deadline for research report