Prime Minister’s Questions as Political Ritual at Westminster

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Although Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) are the best-known item on the British parliamentary agenda, there is surprisingly little recent scholarly work on them by political scientists. Patrick Dunleavy et al. (1995) and John and Bevan (2011) concentrated on the accountability function and policy content of the questions. Mark Franklin and Philip Norton’s (1993) Parliamentary Questions, published shortly after parliament was televised, included systematic and extensive accounts of PMQs in the early 1990s. Oral questions to ministers, of which PMQs were once a part, have been the subject of some scholarly attention. Bird’s (2005) essay excepted, this work predates or ignores concerns about the effects of the political environment in parliament on women’s representation and takes no account of its impact on the public (Chester and Bowring, 1962; Bird, 2005; Martin, 2011; Saalfeld, 2011).

PMQs are a prominent feature of political news. Journalists routinely report PMQs, which are a recurring topic in parliamentary sketches and Wednesday news bulletins. Such journalism is responsible for a body of largely unchallenged received wisdom. We are told that PMQs are a ‘Punch and Judy’ show, a gladiatorial contest between party leaders who falter at their peril. Their adversarial nature bears responsibility for putting the public off politics but it is a loved and necessary part of the theatre of British politics.

It is the most famous parliamentary session anywhere in the world. In Britain it is both reviled and relished. The present Speaker, John Bercow, knows that for the most part the public dislikes the schoolboy rowdyism and tries periodically to quieten things down. He rarely succeeds for long.

(Hoggart, Guardian, 2011)
Journalists’ views are shared by women MPs and feminist observers of parliament, who contend that the occasion is particularly off-putting to women, so much so that they explain women’s relatively lower levels of interest in politics and also their reluctance to become parliamentarians.

Although the content of PMQs is undoubtedly important, scholarly neglect of their impact on public and elite opinion cannot be justified. PMQs have a crucial political representation dimension because they underpin a widely accepted socially exclusive definition of what politics is, and of who and what it takes to become a politician. These effects cannot be read off as an analysis of content but must be explored by research that takes account of the context and performance. The concept of political ritual used as part of an institutionalist approach permits consideration of the impact of PMQs on political representation and suggests a research design that focuses on the attitudes of both parliamentarians and the public.

This chapter presents the results of such research. Following a brief description of PMQs their context and nature are discussed from the standpoints of participants and observers. Then evidence of the attitudes of MPs and the public are presented and analysed and differences between women and men are outlined. These findings challenge the notion that PMQs are off-putting to the public, especially women, and show that many MPs are ambivalent, women more so than men. The conclusions discuss these unexpected findings and assess their significance.

**Political ritual**

The concept of political ritual works particularly well in an institutionalist account of parliament. Used in this way it can help to explain established patterns of behaviour by alerting us to the nature of the context in which a procedure takes place and the different meanings that may be conveyed. Parliamentary questions are not all conducted in a formal, orchestrated ceremony or explicitly referred to as a ritual, but appear to be ritualised nonetheless in that they are rule-governed, structured and symbolic. Participants are not necessarily aware of their participation in ritual, it may be done unthinkingly, based on assumptions about ‘the way things are done’. Parliament’s rituals are a heterogeneous set of activities, in which a number of MPs themselves participate and which are not typically accompanied by the pomp and circumstance which attend formal ceremonies: ‘Parliamentary ritual’