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"Let me now answer, very directly, Marie's question":
The impact of quoting members of the public in Prime Minister's Questions

Peter Bull[1,2] and Maurice Waddle[1]

Abstract

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the UK attracts much criticism for the adversarial and occasional aggressive language on display. During his successful campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn called for a "new kind of politics" (ITV 2015). One feature of his "new" approach, apparent during his early sessions as Leader of the Opposition, was to include questions to Prime Minister David Cameron sourced from members of the public. Although, subsequently, these "public questions" became less frequent, they provided an opportunity to compare their interactional effects with standard "non-public questions". Arguably, the aim of this salient feature of his approach to questioning Cameron was to redress the moral order of PMQs. We test this proposal via two measures of the PM's responses: reply rate and personalisation. Results showed that Corbyn's public questions did not enhance Cameron's reply rate. However, whereas Cameron used significantly more personal attacks than Corbyn in response to non-public questions, the level of such attacks by the PM for public questions was as low as Corbyn's, with no significant difference between them. In this latter regard, such an approach showed the potential to mitigate the ritualistic and customary verbal aggression of PMQs.

Keywords: PMQs, personal attacks, personalisation, quotations, reply rate, equivocation

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[1] University of York, York, UK
[2] University of Salford, Manchester, UK

1. Introduction

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is the central British parliamentary institution and its highest profile parliamentary event. Every Wednesday at noon in the House of Commons, Members of Parliament (MPs) have the opportunity to pose questions to the Prime Minister (PM). The event takes place whenever Parliament is sitting and typically lasts for at least half an hour. Via an application and selection process, MPs can ask questions on a topic of their choice. Thus, PMQs provides a degree of political accountability and, arguably, a level of high profile democracy the envy of many citizens the world over.

At the same time, PMQs is notorious for its aggressive adversarial language. This has often led to severe criticism from select committees, parliamentarians and commentators (e.g. Blair 2010; Martin 2013; Thomas 2006). Thirty years ago, the interaction between the leaders of the two main parties was described as a form of "gladiatorial combat", with both sides engaging in vocal partisanship by cheering their leader and booing their opponents (Irwin 1988, 82). On 17 June 1987, at his re-election as Speaker [the Speaker is the parliamentary official who presides over debates in the House of Commons], Bernard Weatherill told the House that he was "appalled" to hear the noises during the radio broadcast of PMQs; in the 1983-1987 parliamentary session, he regularly appealed for better (and quieter) behaviour at PMQs (Irwin 1988). More recently, the current Speaker, John Bercow, complained about the "character, conduct, content and culture" of PMQs, arguing that it is dominated by questions from the Leader of the Opposition (LO) to the exclusion of backbench questions, that MPs treat the PM as though s/he were "a President in sole control of the entire British Government", and that MPs "yell and heckle" in an "unbecoming manner" providing "scrutiny by screech" (Bercow 2010).

A principal theme of this special issue is the interface between aggressive language and what has been termed the *moral order*. This has been defined as "a socially-constructed set of

understandings" and "a tradition of thought worked out over time within a community" (Domenici and Littlejohn 2006, 7), which influences the actions of individuals in a group setting (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997). The particular focus of this paper is an attempt by a leading British politician (Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of the Labour Party) to redress the moral order of parliamentary debate through a reform of the discursive norms of PMQs.

The concept of *norm* has been defined as "a rule or principle that specifies actions which are required, permissible or forbidden independently of any legal or social institution" (Sripada and Stich 2006, 281). Sometimes referred to as *normativity*, this concept provides a standard for evaluating and making judgements about behaviours or outcomes, thereby specifying one key aspect of the moral order.

Notably, Jeremy Corbyn during his campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 bemoaned the current practice of PMQs, and expressed his desire for change, promising an end to "throwing clubhouse theatrical abuse across the floor of parliament" (Wintour, 2015). The most salient feature of Corbyn's new approach was to pose questions sourced from members of the public (referred to here as *public questions*), whereas in contrast, questions traditionally have not been so sourced (we refer to those as *non-public questions*). In this paper, the relative impact of public and non-public questions is assessed and evaluated; the full analysis is reported below. This is preceded by an account of the social frame and parliamentary conventions of PMQs, together with a review of relevant academic research. We argue that this novel approach of the new LO provides an excellent situational context in which to conduct a case study of the complex interrelationship between parliamentary language and the moral order, focussing specifically on Jeremy Corbyn's attempt to reform the discursive norms of PMQs.

1.1 The social frame of PMQs

The tradition of PMQs dates right back to the eighteenth century, to the era of the first British

PM, Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742). In its modern form, the institution of PMQs dates from 1961, when it was formalised to two 15-minute sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays whenever Parliament was sitting. In 1997, this procedure was changed by the newly elected PM Tony Blair to just one weekly session every sitting Wednesday, lasting about 30 minutes. Notably, the tradition of question time is not confined to the UK. In Canada, this convention is known as Question Period, in Australia and New Zealand as Question Time, in India as Question Hour. However, the ensuing discussion is based on British parliamentary procedure.

The basic procedure of PMQs is as follows. Backbench MPs who wish to put a question to the PM are required to table their questions in advance of the session. The order of questions is randomised via a process known as "the shuffle", and the MPs' names are entered onto the Order Paper (House of Commons Information Office 2010a). At the session, the names of MPs on the Order Paper are called by the Speaker to put their question to the PM. PMQs always begins with the same tabled routine question, inviting the PM to list his/her official engagements for the day. Following the PM's reply, the called MP can ask a further question (termed a "supplementary") on virtually any topic related to the PM's general responsibilities or to some aspect of government policy. There is no requirement for the PM to have advance knowledge of a supplementary question, thus there is a potential for unpredictability and surprise. The MP is limited to this one supplementary and cannot follow up on the PM's response with any further utterance (Harris 2001). However, this is permissible for the LO, who is allowed up to six supplementary questions. These questions may be posed consecutively, or in more than one bloc (for example, in two groups of three questions).

In PMQs, MPs must orient to the expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response (Q/R) pattern. However, they are expected to observe certain traditions and conventions regarding what is termed "unparliamentary language". Specifically, they should not be abusive or insulting, call another MP a liar, suggest another MP has false motives, or

misrepresent another MP, conventions which are enforced by the Speaker. S/he is responsible for maintaining order during debates and may admonish MPs who break the rules of the House. The Speaker may ask an MP to withdraw an objectionable utterance. Over the years, Speakers have objected to the use of abusive epithets such as blackguard, coward, git, guttersnipe, hooligan, rat, swine, traitor, and stoolpigeon (House of Commons Information Office 2010b). An MP who refuses to comply with the Speaker may be suspended from the House (referred to in parliamentary procedure as "naming").

These conventions regarding parliamentary and unparliamentary language have been regarded as "mitigating techniques" (e.g. Harris 2001), a means whereby the full force of the aggressive, adversarial language of PMQs may be softened or regulated. However, in light of the foregoing criticisms, and of academic research on adversarialism in PMQs reviewed below, it is seriously open to question whether these conventions actually work, indeed, whether verbal aggression has actually now become the moral order of PMQs. That said, some commentators are full of praise for the adversarialism with which the event has come to be associated. For example, Gimson (2012, 11) claimed that the "institutionalised rudeness […] is part of being a free nation", and that the aggressive adversarialism has contributed to PMQs becoming "one of the few genuinely popular bits of British politics".

1.2 Academic research on PMQs

Research on PMQs can be broadly summarised under four main headings: (1) historical trends (e.g. Dunleavy, Jones, and O'Leary 1990; Dunleavy, Jones, Burnham, Elgie, and Fysh 1993); (2) types of questions (e.g. Irwin, Kennon, Natzler, and Rogers 1993; Giddings and Irwin 2005); (3) adversarialism (e.g. Bates, Kerr, Byrne, and Stanley 2014; Bull and Wells 2012; Harris 2001; Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke 2019); (4) public perceptions of PMQs (Allen et al. 2014). Given that the main focus of this paper is on adversarialism in PMQs, relevant research specifically on this theme is briefly summarized below.

According to Harris (2001), much PMQs discourse is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). FTAs are forms of speech which may either cast a person in a bad light or threaten their future freedom of action (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). Although members are constrained by the rules relating to parliamentary language, FTAs are an intrinsic feature of the exchanges between opposition politicians (Pérez de Ayala, 2001). Harris analysed 12 sessions of PMQs (held between March and November 2000). She argued that systematic impoliteness is not only sanctioned in PMQs but rewarded in accordance with expectations of MPs through an adversarial and confrontational political process – a view supported by Tracy (2008) who refers to "reasonable hostility". Hence, even the most serious FTAs rarely, if ever, result in a breakdown in interpersonal relationships, nor is that the intention. MPs clearly perceive that the main role of political opposition is to oppose, namely, to criticise, challenge, subvert, or ridicule the policies and positions of the government. Nowhere is this more evident than in these weekly exchanges between the PM and the LO. Indeed, the latter is likely to regard his/her reputation as a skilful and effective adversary as a significant measure of leadership success, whereby they can best enhance their own "face" by undermining that of the PM. Arguably, this adversarial and confrontational process was heightened by the televising of the House of Commons debates (which began in November 1989).

A study by Bull and Wells (2012) followed up the analysis of Harris (2001). They identified six distinctive ways in which FTAs are performed in questions, and five in which the PM may counter FTAs in replies. Following Goffman (1967), Bull and Wells (2012) utilised the term *face aggravation* to refer to the aggressive use of facework in PMQs, in which antagonists seek to score points at the other's expense. Overall, they proposed that face aggravation between the PM and LO is not just an acceptable form of parliamentary discourse, it is both sanctioned and rewarded, a means whereby the LO may enhance his/her own status.

They further argued that PMQs should be regarded as another of the situations identified by Culpeper (1996), where impoliteness is not a marginal activity, but central to the interaction that takes place.

Based on techniques devised by the first author for the analysis of Q/R sequences (Bull 1994; 2003; 2009; Bull and Mayer 1993), a substantive study of PMQs was conducted by Bates et al. (2014). They compared the opening sessions of PMQs for five PMs (Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron) – a period spanning 31 years. Their aim was to test a general perception that PMQs has developed into a focal point for shallow political point scoring rather than serious scrutiny of the Prime Minister and her/his government. They found that the conduct of PMQs had become rowdier over the period sampled, with weekly sessions becoming increasingly dominated by the leaders of the two main parties to the gradual exclusion of other MPs.

One way of conceptualising and evaluating adversarialism in PMQs is via an assessment of personal attacks by the main protagonists. Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) devised a coding system (detailed in section 2.2) – based on personal disrespect – to facilitate such an analysis. Their study, which is discussed below, covered the same five PMs as Bates et al. (2014), but with an extended research period to include the latter sessions of their premierships as well as those at the start. Results showed some recent periods to be highly aggressive, with well over half of the leaders' exchanges personally antagonistic.

Notably, this kind of behaviour does not find favour with large proportions of the general public. Although comments about public perceptions of PMQs have typically been essentially anecdotal, a formal study of public attitudes to PMQs (entitled "Tuned in or turned off: Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions") was recently commissioned by the Hansard Society (Allen et al. 2014). This study was based on four focus groups, and a series of questions posed in an *Audit of Political Engagement* opinion poll. Across all four focus

groups, there was a strong reaction to PMQs as "childish". The interaction between the politicians – likened by some to badly behaved children in a playground – was considered uncivilised and disrespectful. Overall, the process was described as "pointless", a "waste of time", and an exercise in "futility". Many of the respondents were infuriated by a perceived failure to answer a "straight question", combined with scoring party points. Overall, the focus group research clearly suggested that while citizens recognised the value of PMQs in theory, they deplored the way PMQs is played out in practice.

The results of the audit of political engagement (Allen et al. 2014) showed that although some people liked the tone and format of PMQs, they were in a minority. So, for example, in response to the statement "There is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question", 67% of people agreed, and only 5% disagreed (28% were "don't knows"). Overall, for the majority of the respondents, the observed behaviour of the MPs fostered negative perceptions of Parliament and damaged its reputation. Arguably, this is because that behaviour violates what is regarded as morally acceptable by the general public, in the sense that it violates the norms of civilised behaviour. It is in this context that Corbyn's introduction of publicly sourced questions should be considered, as outlined below.

1.3 Quotations in PMQs

PMQs has its own distinctive rhetoric, and one particular feature is the use of quotations (Bull and Wells 2012). A recent study of PMQs interactions between former Conservative PM David Cameron and former Labour LO Ed Miliband, found that quotations made up 9% of their combined word count (Fetzer and Bull, in preparation). The politicians either quoted themselves, other politicians, or expert sources. In every case, these quotations were used in an adversarial manner, either to deconstruct the argumentation, credibility and leadership of opponents and their party, or to enhance these qualities in themselves.

The novel approach adopted by the current LO Jeremy Corbyn following his appointment as Labour Party leader (12 September 2015) involved a distinctive use of quotations – in the form of questions sourced from members of the public. At his first PMQs session as LO just four days into his new role, his initial question to the PM was sourced in this way. He introduced it follows:

> […] Many told me that they thought Prime Minister's Question Time was too theatrical, that Parliament was out of touch and too theatrical, and that they wanted things done differently, but above all they wanted their voice heard in Parliament. So I thought, in my first Prime Minister's Question Time, I would do it in a slightly different way. […] So I sent out an email to thousands of people and asked them what questions they would like to put to the Prime Minister and I received 40,000 replies. There is not time to ask 40,000 questions today - our rules limit us to six - so I would like to start with the first one, which is about housing. Two-and-a-half thousand people emailed me about the housing crisis in this country. I ask one from a woman called Marie, who says, "What does the government intend to do about the chronic lack of affordable housing and the extortionate rents charged by some private sector landlords in this country?"

Cameron's response included the following:

> […] Let me now answer, very directly, Marie's question. We do need to see more affordable housing in our country. We delivered 260,000 affordable housing units during the last Parliament, and we built more council houses in our country than had been managed in the previous 13 years, but I recognise that much more needs to be done. […] (Hansard HC Deb, 16 September 2015, col. 1037)

In Corbyn's first PMQs as LO, all six of his questions were sourced from members of the public. Subsequently, Corbyn reduced this to three or four of his allotted six questions at the next two sessions, then to only one or two questions over the next 16 sessions (his twentieth session on 13 April 2016 was the first session when none of his questions were of this type). The aim of this paper is to assess whether this innovation had any effect on mitigating the adversarial discourse of PMQs based on two distinct methodological techniques, as detailed below.

1.4 Measures of analysis

The measure used here to assess whether Corbyn's novel approach to asking questions had fostered a more informative dialogue is termed *reply rate*. This tried and tested method refers to the proportion of questions that receive an explicit reply (Bull 1994, 2003), defined as a response where the politician provides the information requested in the question: the lower the reply rate, the more equivocal the politician.

There is now a substantive research literature on reply rates in broadcast political interviews. Analyses of 33 such interviews conducted with British party political leaders (broadcast between 1987 and 1992) showed a mean reply rate of just 46% (Bull 1994, 2003). In an independent study of a completely different set of interviews (with the then leaders: Conservative PM Margaret Thatcher and Labour LO Neil Kinnock), the politicians were found to give direct answers to only 39% of questions (Harris 1991). More recent studies have found even lower reply rates. An analysis of two interviews with Theresa May shortly after she became PM showed a reply rate of just 27% (Bull 2016). An analysis of four interviews from the 2017 UK general election showed very similar results, with reply rates of 28% for Corbyn and 27% for May (Bull 2017). However, to date there have been no comparable studies of reply rates for PMQs in the UK.

The second measure – *personalisation* – refers to disrespectful comments directed at another politician rather than addressing the topic under discussion, figuratively referred to through the football analogy of "playing the man rather than the ball" (Waddle and Bull 2016). Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) devised a coding system to facilitate identification of personal attacks in PMQs. This measure is used here to evaluate the levels of aggressive language between the PM and the LO. For example, in a particularly caustic exchange between the leaders in 2015, Cameron's response to former LO Ed Miliband included "[…] The truth is he is weak and despicable and wants to crawl to power in Alex Salmond's[1] pocket" (HC Deb, 11 March 2015, col. 288).

Utilising this measure of personalisation, an analysis was conducted by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) of PMQs held between 1979 and 2016, covering the early and latter premiership periods of Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown, and Cameron. The results showed that PM Cameron was significantly more personally antagonistic towards the LO than each of the four PMs who preceded him. His level of personal attacks peaked when responding to questions from LO Miliband in 2015, when almost 62% of his replies contained at least one such attack. Interestingly, however, Cameron's attacks reduced significantly towards the end of his time in office in 2016 when responding to questions from Jeremy Corbyn – down over threefold to just 20% of his replies.

It is possible that the reduction in the PM's disrespect was because Corbyn himself used fewer personal attacks than any other LO analysed in the study spanning a 37-year period. Just over 8% of Corbyn's questions during Cameron's latter sessions contained a personal attack. The significant reduction in personal disrespect by the PM may have been a reflection of

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[1] Alex Salmond is a former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and former First Minister of Scotland. He was an MP the UK Parliament 1987-2010 and 2015-2017.

Corbyn's relative politeness. Indeed, this would fit with the proposal of Culpeper (2011), that impoliteness – or in this case politeness – tends to be reciprocated during interaction.

Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) offered three further proposals for Cameron's reduced personal disrespect. Firstly, attacking the older and relatively polite LO to a high degree may not have reflected well on the PM. Secondly, opinion poll ratings for Corbyn's party at that time were lower than for any period of opposition for well over half a century (Hughes 2016). Therefore, it may have been considered politically expedient to avoid damaging the Labour leader. The final proposal concerned how Cameron's latter period coincided with the EU referendum campaign – a situation which, unusually, saw the PM and the LO campaigning on the same side: for the UK to remain in the EU. Conceivably, this may have led to reduced antagonism between the leaders.

It is also conceivable that the PM would be less inclined to respond with personal disrespect when Corbyn's questions were sourced from, and referred directly to, a named member of the public. Arguably, such questions might inhibit personal attacks by the PM, because, as a democratically elected politician, he would not want to be seen to be responding to their legitimate concerns through this kind of personalisation. However, by the time of Cameron's latter period as analysed by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) – his final 10 sessions prior to resignation – Corbyn was asking such questions infrequently. Conversely, for the period of analysis here, where public questions were in regular use, there was an opportunity to evaluate their interactional effect.

1.5 Hypotheses

There were two main hypotheses for the current study:

The first of these relates to reply rate and was based on previous research showing that politicians tend to answer more questions from members of the public than those of

professional interviewers (Bull 2003). Accordingly, it was predicted that public questions in PMQs would be associated with an increased reply rate.

The second hypothesis relates to personalisation. It was predicted that the PM would be less inclined to respond to public questions with personal disrespect (as reasoned above), thereby these questions would also be associated with a reduction in personal attacks.

2. Data and methodology

Transcripts were accessed online from Hansard, the official written record of UK parliamentary debates (https://hansard.parliament.uk/). Hansard, however, is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings. According to the definition adopted by the Select Committee on Parliamentary Debates (HC 239 1907), it is "substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument". For this reason, and to facilitate more precise analysis of the proceedings, use was also made of video recordings of the PMQs sessions. These are accessible from the Parliament website (https://www.parliament.uk/).

Analysis was based on Jeremy Corbyn's first 20 PMQs sessions as Leader of the Labour Party following his appointment on 12 September 2015. The first of these sessions took place on 16 September 2015, the twentieth on 13 April 2016. As the primary focus of the study was on PM David Cameron's responses to LO Corbyn's questions, a further session where neither of the leaders participated (9 December 2015[2]) was excluded. Analysis was restricted to the weekly six Q/R exchanges between the LO and the PM, making a total of 120 Q/R exchanges from the 20 sessions.

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[2] On this date, George Osborne (First Secretary of State) took the questions in place of PM Cameron; Labour's Shadow First Secretary of State Angela Eagle stood in for LO Corbyn.

2.1 Reply rate

To obtain a measure of reply rate, Q/R sequences were analysed according to a procedure devised by Bull (1994, 2003, 2009) which provides specific criteria for identifying different types of questions, and whether the politician answers the questions. In this procedure, six main question types are identified, three of which utilise interrogative syntax, three utilise non-interrogative syntax. The three interrogative question types can be distinguished according to the type of reply expected (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik 1985). Those that expect affirmation or negation (e.g., "Have you finished the book?") are called *yes-no* or *polar questions*. Those that expect one of two or more options presented in the question (e.g., "Would you like to go for a walk or stay at home?") are referred to as *alternative questions* (sometimes also as *disjunctive questions*). Those that typically expect a reply from an open range of responses (e.g., "What is your name?" or "When are you going out?") are referred to as *interrogative word question*s, or sometimes as *wh-questions* (Quirk et al. 1985). The value of making these distinctions is that they provide clear criteria for assessing whether a question has been answered.

Three non-interrogative types of question can also be distinguished: *declarative, moodless*, and *indirect*. Declarative questions are comparable in form to declarative statements, except they are typically accompanied by final rising question intonation (Quirk et al. 1985). Moodless questions do not have a finite verb (Jucker 1986). Finally, there are indirect questions: a means of asking a question through reporting that of another.

These non-interrogative syntax question types might seem to present a problem for the analysis presented above of responses to questions. However, as Harris (1991) points out, since moodless and declarative utterances are typically put forward for agreement or disagreement by the interviewee, they can for the most part be regarded as polar questions. To test Harris' hypothesis, an analysis was conducted of all three non-interrogative type questions (N = 223)

in a data set of 33 televised British political interviews broadcast between 1987 and 1992 (Bull 2003). Results showed that 92% of these questions could be regarded as polar, the remainder as either disjunctive or interrogative word. Thus, it was concluded that the guidelines for interrogative syntax questions could be extended to include the three types of non-interrogative questions in that data set (Bull 2003). The Results section below includes illustrative examples for each of these interrogative question types.

Responses to questions are categorized as either explicit replies, intermediate responses (e.g., implicit replies, partial replies, or half replies), or what are termed *non-replies* (a complete failure to answer the question) (Bull 1994; 2003; 2009). The term non-reply was coined in preference to the term pejorative "evasion", because it may be perfectly legitimate for a politician not to answer a question in certain circumstances (e.g., when it is based on a false or misleading presupposition). Satisfactory reliability has previously been obtained using this system, in which two interviews were rated by two independent raters, showing a Cohen's (1960) coefficient on questions/replies/non-replies of $k = 0.82$ (Bull 1994).

Each of the LO's turns from the corpus of 120 Q/R exchanges was coded for question type (yes-no, alternative, interrogative word, declarative, moodless, or indirect). In some cases, more than one question type was applicable for a single turn. The coding of question would then facilitate assessment of the PM's response – whether the information requested by the LO had been provided. Thereby, each response was coded as either a non-reply, an intermediate reply, or an explicit reply. In this study, only explicit replies (where the politician gives a full answer to the question) qualified for inclusion in the overall reply rate. All the transcripts were coded by both researchers, with any disagreements being resolved by discussion.

2.2 Personalisation

Instances of personalisation were analysed separately, based on a technique devised by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019). Their coding system, based on disrespect, clarifies what is

identifiable as a personal attack. In the famously adversarial environment of PMQs, politicians often direct personal references at their opponents in relation to performance or behaviour. However, only those utterances deemed disrespectful were identified as personalisation – effectively, a personal attack. The study by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke highlighted seven comment types identifiable as personal disrespect: negative personality statements; implications of an enduring negative character trait; negative names/labels; aspersions/disparaging insinuations; patronising/condescending remarks; mockery; and badgering (comments regarded as personal harassment).

An example of personalisation from the current corpus was of such personal salience that it attracted widespread press coverage. During Q/R exchanges on the health service, Cameron responded to one question by saying what he imagined his mother would say to Corbyn: "[...] I know what my mother would say. She would look across the Dispatch Box[3] and say, 'Put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem[4]'" (HC Deb, 24 February 2016, col. 291).

Further examples identified as personal disrespect (underlined), although patently lower in personal aggression than that above, include one from Corbyn's opening question at his very first session as LO: "[…] I am sure the Prime Minister will absolutely welcome this, as he welcomed the idea in 2005, but something seems to have happened to his memory during that period. […]" (HC Deb, 16 September 2015, col. 1037). Another, from a response by the PM was:

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[3] The Dispatch Box (also, 'despatch box') is a box located on either side of the central table in the chamber of the House of Commons. The leaders stand at their respective dispatch box when speaking.

[4] Cameron's comment here relates to Corbyn's apparent silence during the singing of the national anthem at a memorial service in September 2015 (Heffer 2016), and for criticism by some for attire deemed inappropriate. Cameron's response followed shouts – "Ask your mother" – by Labour members. It was reported that his mother had recently signed a petition against cuts to local services in the PM's own constituency.

[…] We now have a Labour party whose housing policy does not support home ownership, just as its defence policy does not believe in defence, and just as we now have a Labour party that does not believe in work <u>and a Labour leader who does not believe in Britain</u>. (HC Deb, 13 January 2016, col. 852).

The entire corpus of 120 Q/R exchanges was assessed for personalisation. Each of the LO's questions and the PM's responses was coded as either '0' (no personal attack identified) or '1' (at least one personal attack identified within the turn). An inter-rater reliability study, based on 120 Q/R exchanges coded independently by a trained research assistant and the second author of this paper has shown this system to be highly reliable; the results, using Cohen's (1960) kappa, showed $k = 0.88$ (Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke 2019).

3. Results

The LO's questions across all 20 PMQs sessions were identified as either public or non-public. All 120 questions and 120 responses were analysed in terms of reply rates and personalisation.

3.1 Reply rates

Analysis revealed that Cameron gave explicit replies to 23% of Corbyn's public questions and to 20% of his non-public questions. A comparison via a Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Test ($W = 36$, $N = 14$, $p > .050$), showed no significant difference between public and non-public questions for reply rates.

3.2 Personalisation

A generalised linear model was used to conduct inferential statistical analyses on the data for personalisation. Overall, the results of this analysis showed that Cameron's personalisation rate was significantly greater than Corbyn's ($p = .039$). Of the 120 Q/R exchanges, 31 of Cameron's

responses (25.8%) contained a personal attack in comparison to 18 of Corbyn's questions (15%). Cameron's personalisation rate was also significantly greater for the 89 non-public questions ($p = .031$): Cameron was personally disrespectful on 25 occasions (28.1%), Corbyn on 13 occasions (14.6%). However, for the 31 public questions, there was no statistically significant difference ($p = .740$). Of those questions asked by Corbyn, five (16.1%) contained personalisation in comparison to six of Cameron's responses (19.4%). These results are displayed in Figure 1.

(FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE)

3.3 Illustrative examples

In addition to these statistical analyses, illustrative examples are presented below for each of the three main question types below (polar, interrogative-word, and disjunctive), as outlined in the Method section (Procedure) above.

Extract 1 (HC Deb, 28 October 2015, col. 338) (polar question)

Corbyn: […] can he [the Prime Minister] now guarantee to the House and to the wider country that nobody will be worse off next year as a result of cuts to working tax credits?

Cameron: What I can guarantee is that we remain committed to the vision of a high pay, low tax, lower welfare economy. We believe that the way to make sure that everyone is better off is to keep growing our economy, keep inflation low, keep cutting people's taxes and introduce the national living wage. As for our changes, the Chancellor will set them out in the autumn statement.

In this example, Corbyn asks a very specific polar question as to whether people will be worse off as a result of cuts to working tax credits (a state benefit made to people who work and have a low income). Cameron neither affirms nor denies that anyone will be worse off as a result of these cuts, hence his response was coded as a non-reply.

Extract 2 (HC Deb, 10 February 2016, col. 1567-1568) (interrogative word question)

Corbyn: […] I have a question on housing. I have an email from Rosie. […] she says: "I work incredibly hard at my job, yet I am still living at home with my parents". The lack of housing options is forcing her to consider moving—even leaving the country. She asks the Prime Minister what action he is going to take to help young people and families suffering from unrealistic house prices and uncapped rents to get somewhere safe and secure to live.

Cameron: […] What I would say to Rosie—the Rosie who wrote to him—is we want to do everything we can to help young people get on the housing ladder. That is why we have got these help-to-save ISAs, and I hope she is looking at that. We are cutting Rosie's taxes, so this year she will be able to earn £11,000 before she starts paying any taxes. If Rosie is a tenant in a housing association home, she will be able to buy that home, because we are introducing and extending the right to buy. And, of course, she will have the opportunity to register for Help to Buy, which gives people the chance to have a smaller deposit on owning their own home. If Rosie is not earning that much money, but wants to be a homeowner, shared ownership can make a real difference. In some parts of the country, you will only need a deposit of some £1,000 or £2,000 to begin the

process of becoming a homeowner. But I recognise, in this Parliament, building more houses, following those schemes, we have got to deliver for Rosie.

This extract takes the form of an indirect question (Corbyn is quoting from a member of the public called Rosie), utilising the interrogative word "what" (viz., what action the PM is going to take to help young people and families suffering from unrealistic house prices and uncapped rents to get somewhere safe and secure to live). Cameron lists a number of actions that have been taken by the government to help young people get on the housing ladder, therefore, his response was regarded as an explicit reply.

Extract 3 (HC Deb, 4 November 2015, col. 959-960) (disjunctive/alternative question)

Corbyn: If the Prime Minister will not answer questions that I put, then I quote to him the renowned King's Fund, which has enormous expertise in NHS funding and NHS administration. It said that the National Health Service "cannot continue to maintain standards of care and balance the books…a rapid and serious decline in patient care is inevitable" unless something is done. May I ask the Prime Minister which is rising faster—NHS waiting lists or NHS deficits?

Cameron: Let me deal directly with the King's Fund. What we have done on this side of the House is appoint a new chief executive to the NHS, Mr Simon Stevens, who worked under the last Labour Government and did a very good job for them. He produced the Stevens plan, which he said required at least £8 billion of Government funding. We are putting in £10 billion behind that plan. That is the plan that we are producing, and we can see the results: 1.3 million more operations, 7.8 million more out-patient appointments and 4.7 million more

diagnostic tests. What is going up in the NHS is the number of treatments—the number of successful outcomes. If the Honourable Gentleman wants to know who is heading for a winter crisis, I would predict that it is the Labour Party. We have seen it in a lot of his appointments: his media adviser is a Stalinist, his new policy adviser is a Trotskyist and his economic adviser is a communist. If he is trying to move the Labour party to the left, I would give him "full Marx".

In this question, Corbyn poses an alternative: "[…] which is rising faster – NHS waiting lists or NHS deficits?" Cameron simply ignores the posed alternative, asserting instead that there have been increases in government spending on the NHS, in the number of NHS treatments and in successful outcomes. Since Cameron says nothing about either waiting lists or deficits, his response was coded as a non-reply. Cameron concludes his response with an attack on the Labour Party, and a personal attack on Corbyn ("If he is trying to move the Labour party to the left, I would give him 'full Marx'"). This personal reference was adjudged disrespectful as it appears Cameron was mocking Corbyn by relating the LO's politics to Karl Marx – co-author of the 1848 Communist Manifesto.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study was based on the proposition that Jeremy Corbyn, following his appointment as Labour Party leader, attempted to redress the moral order of PMQs through a novel questioning technique (sourcing questions from members of the public) thereby focussing less on personal attacks and more on dialogue concerning substantive political issues. The impact of this technique was assessed in two distinct ways through two dependent measures: reply rate and personalisation.

Reply rate was chosen as an appropriate means of estimating whether Corbyn's new approach had brought about a more informative dialogue between the leaders. The reply rate for public questions was 23%, for non-public questions 20%, which did not differ significantly from one another. In the Introduction, reply rates are shown from analyses of political interviews, all of which were higher than that found in this study. Given that to the authors' best knowledge, this is the first study of reply rates at PMQs in the UK, we have no benchmark with which to compare these results. However, it is worth noting in this context the results of an analysis of Question Time in the House of Representatives in Australia (Rasiah 2010), according to which only 8 out of 48 questions from opposition MPs received an answer (16.67%), even lower than Cameron's reply rate reported here.

However, it may well be that in the highly charged, confrontational, face-threatening atmosphere of PMQs, the PM may be more inclined to equivocate than political leaders in televised interviews, given that s/he is repeatedly called upon to justify and defend the actions of the government. Another possibility is that political opponents may be more likely than political interviewers to pose "unanswerable" questions[5] based on face-damaging presuppositions. A good example of this can be seen in Extract 3 above, where Corbyn presupposes that both NHS waiting lists and deficits are rising; to answer such a question would be to agree with one of those contentious presuppositions. Alternatively, these reply rates may reflect a general increase in equivocation by political leaders; studies of broadcast interviews in the 1980s show an average reply rate of 46% (Bull 1994), whereas the most recent studies show reply rates down to 27% (Bull 2016; 2017). Or it may be that the questions themselves are becoming more problematic, given the ample evidence that conflictual questions create pressures on politicians to equivocate (e.g. Bull 2008; Bull, Elliott, Palmer, and Walker 1996).

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[5] Questions designed to pose a threat to face and/or containing an inaccurate presupposition (Bates et al. 2014).

Whatever the reasons, further research on equivocation in PMQs is necessary to make a fuller assessment.

From Jeremy Corbyn's perspective, such results were obviously disappointing. Indeed, he has since conceded that his desire to change the discourse of PMQs was not successful. Writing in *The Independent* newspaper, Corbyn (2016) stated that "while I've taken a different approach to asking the questions, David Cameron has carried on failing to give proper answers. […] When given the chance to defend his government's record, he has instead preferred to opt for petty attacks, while avoiding the substance of the issue, and ignoring the real problems facing our people". In that respect, sourcing questions from members of the public appears to have failed to make PMQs more dialogic and less adversarial.

The second dependent measure (personalisation) was intended to evaluate whether the use of public questions brought about any abatement in the aggressive language for which PMQs has become renowned. Here, a rather different picture emerges. Whereas Cameron used significantly more personal attacks than Corbyn in response to non-public questions – almost twice as many – this was not the case for public questions. For the latter, Cameron's personalisations were down to a level comparable to that of the relatively respectful LO, thereby suggesting that Corbyn's novel approach made PMQs discourse less adversarial.

This reduced personal antagonism is noteworthy when considering previous research by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019), where Cameron was found to use more personal attacks than any of the other four PMs across a 37-year period. This was particularly true just a few months prior to Corbyn's appointment, when Cameron was opposed at PMQs by Labour leader Ed Miliband. In that period, almost 62% of his responses were personally antagonistic. Here, across Corbyn's first 20 sessions as LO, the PM's overall personalisation was down to below 26%. The final period analysed by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) – ten sessions starting from the last PMQs of this analysis – showed Cameron's personalisation to reduce further,

down to 20%. This may be indicative of a continued effect of the LO's "different approach to asking questions" (Corbyn 2016), although by then his use of public questions was fewer than one per session.

It seems clear that public questions prompted a more respectful discourse in PMQs, such that Cameron showed no signs of returning to his previous high levels of personal antagonism. Perhaps political expediency, as detailed in the Introduction, was a factor. However, as the findings of Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) showed Corbyn to be one of the least disrespectful LOs at PMQs across a 37-year period, the alternative proposal of reciprocal politeness may indeed explain why Cameron remained less adversarial than he was prior to Corbyn's appointment. On this basis, Corbyn's new approach was not entirely unsuccessful.

With regard to the wider implications of this study, one interesting feature is its relevance to the previous study of quotations (Fetzer and Bull, in preparation). In the analysis of interactions between David Cameron and Ed Miliband, it was argued that in every case, quotations were used in an adversarial manner, either to deconstruct the argumentation, credibility and leadership of opponents and their party, and/or enhance these qualities in self. The results of this analysis suggest that Corbyn used quotations sourced from ordinary people with quite different intent – to focus political discourse more on substantive political issues, less on verbal mud-slinging. From this perspective, the use of quotations in PMQs discourse would not seem to be intrinsically adversarial, what matters rather is the way in which they are used. Furthermore, from the wider perspective of the study of language aggression and conflict, the results of this study highlight one technique with the potential for mitigating aggression in conflictual language, and to some degree, redressing the moral order in a traditional parliamentary setting.

A second interesting feature of this study is its relevance to the analysis of public perceptions of PMQs (Allen et al. 2014), discussed in the Introduction above. The authors of

that review also discussed proposals for the reform of the event, one of which was that citizens could be invited to submit questions for consideration at PMQs – a proposal which of course Corbyn subsequently implemented as described above. In fact, Corbyn's use of public questions could be seen directly to address a number of public concerns as reported by Allen et al. For example, in their Audit of Political Engagement, the statement with which respondents most agreed (67%) was "There is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question"; the statement with which respondents most disagreed (48%) was that "Most MPs behave professionally at PMQs".

Corbyn's novel approach to questioning might be construed as an attempt to redress this state of affairs – to focus political discourse more on substantive political issues, less on verbal mud-slinging. In the first aim, as Corbyn (2016) admitted, he was not successful. In his second aim, as shown by the results here, his use of public questions did have some success in reducing the level of personal attacks, which, as previously reported (Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke 2019), had been a distinctive feature of Cameron's interactive style. According to Bull and Wells (2012), the discourse of PMQs has become something of a ritual, a kind of verbal pugilism, conducted under arcane conventions resembling the Queensbury rules of boxing[6] (see Kádár 2017). To that extent, aggressive adversarialism has seemingly become the moral order of PMQs. As argued in this paper, Corbyn's novel questioning technique undoubtedly has a moral dimension in which he seeks to redress the moral order of PMQs through a reform of its discursive norms. Indeed, this dimension was fully recognised by one analyst, who memorably dubbed Corbyn following his first PMQs as "the saint in the bear pit" (Lees, 2015).

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[6] So-called because they were originally publicly endorsed by the Marquess of Queensbury.

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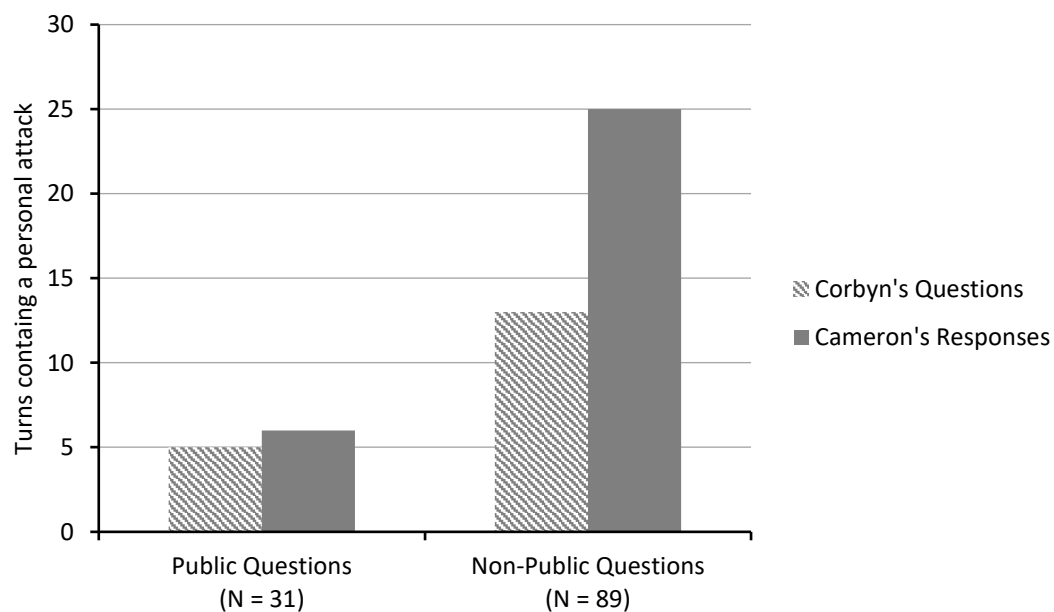
Figure 1. Personal attacks by the party leaders