

THE LEADERS' PLACE IN THE WESTMINSTER SYSTEM

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OUTLINE :

- How is breaking the parliamentary rules during PMQs a strategy to enhance one's leadership capital ?
- To what extent is the attitude of the leaders (towards the PMQs as an institution) reflective of their place in the Westminster system and on the political and ideological spectrum ?

1 – RELATION BETWEEN BREAKING THE RULES AND LEADERSHIP

- Erskine May's guidance is that *“good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language”*.

*“...inferences, [...] ironical or **offensive expressions are not in order**”*

➡ **normative rules** (i.e formal and official rules of the game) (F.G Bailey)

➡ **pragmatic rules** to escape sanctions (i.e tactics and manoeuvre which may or may not be conducted within the limits set by the rules of the game).

One of those tactics :

mitigating face threats (= low risk)

Examples:

➡ 25/04/96, vol 276, col 584 : John Major to T Blair : *I realise that in the **new autocratic Labour party**—where party **henchmen oversee everything** that Front Benchers and Back Benchers say*

➡ 27/02/96, vol 272, col 717. Mr. Pickles (Cons) to D Cameron : *Is he aware that the last time that **that proposal was seriously made was in Germany under the Third Reich** ? (Does he agree that, in seeking a role model for his own leader,) the hon. Gentleman (Mr. Mandelson, Lab) (has bypassed domestic role models and) **seeks the concept of "Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer"** ?*

BUT Sandra Harris contends, this is part of a strategy ; **insults are deliberate and rewarded** (= higher risk)

The aim is to get **pubicity** and **visibility** (John Uhr, 2009)

Examples:

(speaking of Ed Miliband) : *muttering idiot*

(speaking of the LO) : *one-trick pony and he has run out of the road*

(Speaking of the LO) : *he's the nothing man*

(Speaking of Liam Byrne) : *Where is "Baldemort"? He is not at home today* (01/02/2012, col 820)

Agency operated **in symbiosis** with the environment / place

The dualism 'structure and agency' is replaced by a **strategic-relational approach** (Jessop and Hay)

strategically selective context = the environment/context (here the institutional setting) favours certain strategies over others as means to realise a given set of intentions or preferences. (C Hay, 2002)

2 – BREAKING THE RULES : A PRE-REQUISITE

PMQs = a **community of practice** (Lave, S. Harris)

- Impoliteness / breaking the rule : the “**appropriate action**” (J.G. March & J.P., Olsen, 2005)
- Impoliteness is **the norm** in specific contexts and situations (Johnathan Culpeper)

--→ breaking the rules becomes an **act of conformity**.

Leadership dependent on the leader's capacity to perform well in terms of breaking the rules/ being aggressive

↳ John Whittingdale : “*doing badly at PMQs undermines a leader faster than anything*”.

3 – BETWEEN REBELLION AND STATUS QUO

- “aggressive adversarialism has seemingly become **the moral order** of PMQs”
(Peter Bull and Maurice Waddle)

Breaking formal rules in the context of PMQs = act of conformity **≠** breaking informal rules/norms = **an act of rebellion** (?)

- Ex : (J. Corbyn’s) crowdsourcing questions from voters

Preservation of the game = no intention to destroy the game

despite calls for change :

- Cameron promised to change the tone of PMQs (but did exactly the opposite)
- Ed Miliband along with Labour MPs like Paul Flynn suggested alternative formats (public question time).
- The Procedure Committee's 1995 report recommended reforms such as adopting an approach similar to that of Select Committees.

↳ BUT to no avail

LEADERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE INSTITUTION/SYSTEM :

Both parties favour a **status quo**. No structural nor physical alterations

- **Labour** more rebellious but only on the face of it = seeking greater visibility
- **Conservatives** = impression of more deference toward the institution

Ian Blackford = epitome of the rule breaker

↳ Rule violations related to specific message :

⇒ the **rejection of the Westminster system**

⇒ the promotion of the **Scottish independence**

-----→ Rule breaking = signals Blackford's wish to get out the Westminster system

➡ **Scotland has been completely ignored by Westminster** ... and 16 consecutive polls have shown a **majority for independence** (*Wednesday 16 December 2020, Volume 686, col 268*)

➡ the real **disaster facing the people of Scotland is another 20 years of Westminster** government? is for **Scotland to become an independent** country (Volume 684: debated on Wednesday 18 November 2020 , col 319)

➡ We are faced **with a power grab by Westminster** (Volume 692 : debated on Wednesday 14 April 2021, col 315)

➡ **the Westminster Government want to strip away** the rights of children in Scotland (Volume 692: debated on Wednesday 14 April 2021, col 315)

➡ under this **broken Westminster system** (Volume 689: debated on Wednesday 24 February 2021 Col 909-10)

➡ ... from the **chaos of Westminster**...right to choose our own future as an **independent country** in Europe (Volume 667: debated on Wednesday 30 October 2019 , col 362)