

## SLIDE 1

### The leaders' place in the Westminster system

## SLIDE 2 outline

This paper will explore - how breaking the parliamentary rules during PMQs is a strategy to enhance one's leadership capital.

- Subsequently I will examine the extent to which the attitude of the leaders towards the PMQs as an institution is reflective of their place in the Westminster system and on the political and ideological spectrum.

## SLIDE 3 :

### I – Relation between breaking the rules and leadership

Let's first focus on rule-breaking :

In a political game, Frederick George Bailey makes the distinction between two different types of rules : normative and pragmatic rules.

First, the **normative rules** (i.e formal and official rules of the game) : are dictated by the parliamentary guide Erskine May which encapsulates a wide range of prescriptions and recommendations on how debates should be conducted.

Erskine May states that “**inferences, [...] ironical or offensive expressions are not in order**”. The ultimate sanction the Speaker can give is to order the MP to leave the House. As in any game the actors will play by the rules and more importantly with the rules if they want to gain an edge over their opponents ; and to do so they'll create **pragmatic<sup>1</sup> 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).

## SLIDE 4 = mitigating face threats

One of those strategies includes **mitigating face threats**, that is to say, they soften the attack with less offending words or polite forms of address so that most insults go unsanctioned

---

<sup>1</sup> F. G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils*, 1971. New York : Schocken Books, 1969.

(even though these are occurrences of violations of parliamentary rules). -- → *See Examples in Slide*

In the case of mitigated attacks the leader seeks to undermine the opponent's authority by focusing on the substance of the attack and its underlying message.

#### SLIDE 5 = But S. Harris

However, some members, especially leaders deliberately level insults / attacks at their opponents without mitigation. As Sandra Harris contends, this is part of a strategy ; **insults are deliberate and rewarded**. -- → *See examples in slide*

In that case, what matters is not so much the substance of the attack but the form, and the emotional impact on the audience. However, the abuser is very likely to be sanctioned. What the abuser really seeks is getting greater **visibility** and **publicity**<sup>2</sup>. Because, according to Murray Edelman "The most conspicuous characteristics of leaders is their visibility<sup>3</sup>" and this visibility is what matters<sup>4</sup> (P. Norton)

What is interesting to point out is that there is no de facto relation between how offensive the attack is and the damaging effect (of the insult) on the other party. Sometimes those mitigated attacks are more damaging in terms of reputation / credibility / legitimacy (of the opponent) than a sanctioned one.

#### SLIDE 6 = (in symbiosis) strategic-relational approach

It would be a mistake to think that agency is omnipotent. Recent studies in political institutionalism underline that the agent in the system does not single-handedly determine the course and the outcome of an action. The place which has come to represent a system (ex : the Westminster system) is **as** crucial a determinant as the agent but not in a separate way. **The dualism 'structure and agency' is replaced by a strategic-relational approach** (Jessop and Hay) ; the leader is a strategic agent who operates in a **strategically selective context** (meaning that the environment/context here the institutional setting, favours certain strategies over others as means to realise a given set of intentions or preferences<sup>5</sup>).

The potential that the House of Commons offers in terms of afforded strategy is very specific to this physical space/ environment. The unique combination of the aforementioned variables enables experienced members to gain tactical advantage in forming effective strategies

Not only is breaking the rules a strategy to score points during the debates but it is also and pre-requisite (for the members of the House)

---

<sup>2</sup> John Uhr, Parliamentary Oppositional Leadership, Chap 4 in Dispersed Democratic Leadership, 2009

<sup>3</sup> M. Edelman, Constructing the Political Spectacle

<sup>4</sup> M. Franklin & P. Norton, Parliamentary Questions, p.109

<sup>5</sup> C Hay, Political Analysis, : Red Globe Press; 1st ed. 2002 edition.

## SLIDE 7 :

### 2 – breaking the rules : a pre-requisite<sup>6</sup>

As indicated earlier, Parliament is a place with formal rules and conventions and members are prone to taking unconventional (informal) paths including breaking the rules to maximize their gains. Not only have those practices become tolerated and routinely used ; but it is also something that is deemed the « **appropriate action**<sup>7</sup> ». Johnathan Culpeper<sup>8</sup> argues that **impoliteness is the norm** in specific contexts and situations ; not only are those breaches acceptable but they're also expected in what Sandra Harris calls a community of practice.

Paradoxically, breaking the rules becomes **an act of conformity**.

That means that a leader who is reluctant or unable to conform to the socio-cultural requirements of the place/the community loses credibility. He/she is perceived as weak. That is the reason why *Pmqs* is “*a very public test of leadership*” (Christopher Reid)

## SLIDE 8 :

### 3 – Between rebellion and status quo

The distinction between normative (or institutional) rules and pragmatic rules proves relevant in determining a leader's attitude towards the game and more generally towards the system. Normative rules as defined earlier constitute the formal prescriptive framework of the game within which a sub system of informal rules develop and those rules have become the norm.

Peter Bull and Maurice Waddle in their study on adversarialism during PMQs go one step further by concluding that “**aggressive adversarialism has seemingly become the moral order of PMQs**<sup>9</sup>”.

While breaking formal rules in the context of PMQs is an act of conformity ; **breaching informal rules, that is to say the norms**, might be interpreted as an **act of rebellion**. Refusing to comply with this moral order is the expression of a need for change. In his first appearance as Leader of the Opposition during PMQs, Jeremy Corbyn called for such a change saying he would aim to bring a “more adult tone” to proceedings. He decided to **crowdsource questions from ordinary people**.

---

<sup>6</sup> See C Ilie, Parliamentary Discourse, 2005

<sup>7</sup> J.G. March & J.P., Olsen, Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”, 2005. See also The Logic of Appropriateness

<sup>8</sup> J. Culpeper, Impoliteness using language to cause offence

<sup>9</sup> P.Bull & M Waddle, Let me now answer, very directly Marie's question

Introducing a new way of asking questions is an attempt at changing the rules of the game (both formal and informal ones). However, those questions were shortlisted and selected for strategic purposes.

This case of crowdsourcing questions from voters is **not** an act of rebellion ; quite the opposite, it's another strategy to score political points very much in accordance with the ethos of the game. According to Richard Sennet<sup>10</sup> Corbyn doesn't rebel against authority but within the bounds of authority.

### **SLIDE 9 =preservation of the game**

As a matter of fact, nobody **has the intention of destroying the game** although many political figures have been calling for reforms and changes to the format of PMQs --→ *See examples in slide*

In spite of all those calls for reforms **nothing has changed.**

The members of the House act as rational agents.

Operating within existing procedures and norms enables them to save resources and maximize profits, that is why they are intent on keeping the structure of the game intact. Pierre Bourdieu calls this *modus vivendi* a « collusion originaire » : an original collusion. This status 'quo is the expression of a conservative stance more than a disruptive one.

### **SLIDE 10 = leaders' attitude towards the institution**

This position reflects a more general attitude towards the political system and the institutions as a whole. This is illustrated by the reluctance (rather the refusal) of major parties to change both the physical and structural frame of the system. Neither the Labour party nor the Conservatives have been enthusiastic about the 'prospect of reforming the electoral system (their respective campaign on the referendum on AV in 2011 was an illustration of their position). They haven't been eager either to alter the confrontational layout of the Lower House as opportunities do so have been offered by circumstances like the reconstruction of the building after the war or the relocation of the House of Commons to an exact replica of the chamber in Richmond House (scheduled for 2025)

The difference between parties remains on the surface, they are not on the fundamental structural principles of the British political system and regime. Parties will strive to create distinctions with other parties on the form rather than on the substance. Back to PMQs, one might assume that giving out the harshest sanction to a member (use of Standing Order 43,

---

<sup>10</sup> R Sennett, *Autorité*

that is to say a member) = i.e : being ordered to leave the House, results from the most serious case of rule violation, one that could be conceived as a threat to the game. In that respect, the Labour parliamentary party records a higher number of suspensions than any other parties between 1990 and 2021 (8 suspensions in total). Getting suspended from the House can be construed as an act of rebellion, but in fact, it is a strategy to get greater visibility very much in accordance with the rules. Conversely, the Conservatives show more deference towards the institution, only one suspension has been recorded for them, this echoes Faith Armitage's similar conclusion that the Conservatives seem to be more constrained by a belief system about the propriety of obedience to the rules of the House <sup>11</sup>

### SLIDE 11 = Ian Blackford

The case of Ian Blackford, the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the House of Commons, is a further illustration of the relation between breaking the rules and the position of the party in the institutional environment of Westminster.

At first glance, the tactics and strategies adopted by Ian Blackford, are similar to those of the other parties. However, he uses the whole gamut of breaches available during the debates. What is different from his counterparts is the fact that he is the only one to take the role of rule breaking, therefore personally taking the risks of the variety of sanctions that can be imposed, whilst his counterparts would avoid being suspended from the House 'delegating this task to backbenchers. It would be inconceivable for the PM or the LO to be ordered out of the House (this is a tactic reserved for MPs). Ian Blackford though, as the leader of the third largest party in the House exploits this tactic directly and personally, taking advantage of the publicity.

When the social distancing rules were first imposed on Westminster, the House of Commons told MPs to avoid having "distracting backgrounds" when they appeared on camera via video link for Wednesday's PMQs. In total disregard of those instructions, Ian Blackford's background appeared with numerous and various different objects, all highlighting his Scottishness (his favourite football team, tartan curtains as background...)

Besides, on the 13th of June, 2018, he orchestrated his suspension from the House after he accused the Parliament of disrespecting the people of Scotland and for grabbing power from them. He refused to sit down when ordered to by the Speaker, another telling and meaningful (albeit symbolic) action. Another of his symbolic violation of the House's rules : is that unlike his predecessors, Ian Blackford intentionally crosses the red line in front his bench in order to stand beyond the line and face his opponents. It is an unambiguous attempt at taking control. Ian Blackford does not seem to show much 'deference nor respect for this institution.

Moreover, he makes extensive use of violent verbal attacks.

The 'cumulative effect of those breaches contributes to making him **the epitome of the rule breaker**. He acts as if he wanted to push the limits of the system to breaking point.

---

<sup>11</sup> Faith Armitage, *Peace and Quiet in the British House of Commons, 1990-2010*,

## SLIDE 12 = quotations Ian B

This is quite meaningful all the more so as his violations of the rules are often related to one specific message : **the rejection of the Westminster system and the promotion of the Scottish independence.**

He doesn't intend to destroy the game or change the rules of the game, **his attitude signals the wish to leave the game, to get out of this system, the Westminster system.**

## CONCLUSION

Breaking the rules through verbal attacks has become the hallmark of the democratic debates of the House of Commons, esp during PMQs. Such a norm is reflective of the philosophical view that politicians hold about British democracy. This seems to be corroborated by The Hansard Society's 2019 report : Audit of engagement 16 according to which 54% say Britain needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules while only 23% disagreed with such a view. As I have contended in this paper leaders do not break the rules with the purpose of bringing about structural change but rather for partisan benefits. They need to give the illusion that they break the rules.

Interestingly, the last major constitutional change/crisis was brought about by Brexit which was the result of a referendum. Voters acted as the ultimate umpire of the decision (even though one may wonder to what extent people can make an informed choice, free from the rhetorical and heresthital strategies of politicians, esp during debates like PMQs). As John Major said in agreement with one backbencher : "the holding of referendums on major constitutional issues runs contrary to the practice of parliamentary sovereignty in this country and that further", (18 June 1992, vol 209, col 1036), meaning such a form of direct democracy may pose a threat to the structure of the game.

Stéphane REVILLET

*Centre Interlangues-Texte, Image, Langage (EA 4182)*  
*Univ. Bourgogne Franche-Comté, F-21000, Dijon*