



Strategic positioning within the normative institutional environment of Westminster

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Strategic positioning within the normative institutional environment of Westminster

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INTRO

The adversarial layout of the House of Commons with its two sets of benches opposing each other reflects the confrontational style of UK politics. The nature of the electoral system, first-past-the-post, is translated in this spatial configuration making the chamber a physical and structural cue that UK politics is adversarial and highly competitive. This characteristic of British politics is best exemplified during PMQs (Prime Minister's Question Time) : a kind of condensed version (a metonymy) of parliamentary politics.

During the weekly debates, the party leaders are engaged in a 'gladiatorial contest' trying to get or retain power, and to do so they will resort to a wide range of strategies. Due to the highly competitive nature of the debates, PMQs are commonly construed as a zero-sum game: the members are strategic agents trying to win the game¹ by delivering the best performance. In this institutional context (frame I dare say), the debates are subject to strict parliamentary rules which will constrain but also enable the actors' choices. Those rules are the primary material in the elaboration of strategies. Actors will play within, by and with the rules, and sometimes against those rules or even beyond the bounds of what is acceptable. The rules here are to be defined as the normative frame of the game.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between the members of the British House of Commons and the different types of rules in this institution.

¹ F G Bailey Game, *Stratagems and Spoils*, 1971. New York : Schocken Books, 1969.

Subsequently, I will examine the correlation between the member's attitudes towards the normative framework of the PMQs and their position from within the system and on the Westminster system as a whole.

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1. Breaking the rules as a strategy

In order to fully grasp the implications of rule breaking, a short description of the parliamentary rules that apply during debates in the House is necessary.

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 called Erskine May, which encapsulates a wide range of prescriptions and recommendations on how debates should be conducted.

Erskine May's guidance is that "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language". Although no specific definition of unparliamentary language is to be found in any parliamentary codes of conduct, Erskine May states that "inferences, [...] ironical or offensive expressions are not in order". Should such attacks be directed at individual members of the House, the user of such words would be ordered by the Speaker to withdraw the offensive statement and then ordered to leave the House for the remainder of the day's sitting if s/he refuses to comply with the Chair's instructions (standing order 43). 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 will create **pragmatic rules**² 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),

² F. G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils*, 1971. New York : Schocken Books, 1969.

they are also identified as informal rules³.

One of those strategies includes **mitigating face threats**, that is to say they soften their attacks with less offending words or polite forms of address so that most insults go unsanctioned (even though these are occurrences of violations of parliamentary rules). In the case of a mitigated attack the leader seeks to undermine the opponent's authority by focusing on the substance of the attack and its underlying message.

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 rewarded⁴.

In that case, what matters is not so much the substance of the attack but the form, and the emotional impact on the audience, the abuser is nonetheless very likely to be sanctioned. What the abuser really seeks is getting greater visibility and publicity⁵. [Because,] according to Philip Norton "The most conspicuous characteristics of leaders is their visibility" and this visibility is what matters ⁶ (according to Murray Edelman)

Unmitigated FTA : David Cameron to ed Balls in March 2012 : *a muttering idiot*

Mitigated FTA : 01/02/12 David Cameron (to Ed Miliband) : *The issue for the right hon. Gentleman is why he is in favour in opposition of things he never did in government. Some might call it opposition ; some people might call it hypocrisy*

³ Helmke G. and Levitsky S., informal institutions and comparative politics, Informal institutions : socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels

⁴ Sandra Harris, *Being politically impolite*, 2001

⁵ John Uhr, Parliamentary Oppositional Leadership, Chap 4 in *Dispersed Democratic Leadership*, 2009

⁶ Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*

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 FTAs are more damaging to the opponent in terms of reputation / credibility / legitimacy than a more direct one.

Now, **one** can wonder to what extent and why this kind of disorderly behaviour has become a standard during PMQs.

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2. Behaviour constrained by social norms

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 action⁷ ». Johnathan Culpeper⁸ argues that impoliteness is the norm in specific contexts and situations ; not only are those breaches acceptable but they're also expected.

The MPs are socialized in this environment and reproduce the behaviour that the cultural ethos of the place command them to adopt. Sandra Harris in reference to Lave's work⁹ compares the House of Commons to a community of practice where members internalise the socio-cultural practices of the place, that is to say they emulate other members in their use of verbal attacks and other rule breaches. Paradoxically, breaking the rules becomes an **act of conformity**. As a consequence, one could say that the rule is to break the rules.

⁷ J.G. March & J.P., Olsen, *Elaborating the "New Institutionalism"*, 2005. See also *The Logic of Appropriateness*

⁸ J. Culpeper, *Impoliteness using language to cause offence*

⁹ J. Lave, *Situating Learning in Communities of Practice*

That implies that a leader who is reluctant or unable to conform to the socio-cultural standards of the place loses credibility. He/she is perceived as weak.

TRANSITION : Leadership is then contingent on how well the leaders wield attacks during debates. A good performance during PMQs will bolster the support from the parliamentary group as well as, and more importantly, from the public. This, then, begs the question of how the members of the public are influential in the leaders' strategies.

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3. Reaching out to voters

As rule breaking has become the norm, the necessity for stronger attacks is required for impact and greater visibility. This kind of escalation seems to be a natural process according to Culpeper : "A powerful participant can threaten more severe retaliation should the less powerful participant be impolite¹⁰".

BUT the balance must be struck between what is acceptable and unacceptable, **NOT** for the presiding officer of the session but for the public which, through a mechanism of informal sanctions, is the true, the actual referee / umpire of the game.

Ex : In 2012, Cameron ordered the shadow treasury secretary, 'Angela Eagle, to "calm down, dear", and that was sanctioned by the press the day after.

'Forfeiting the trust of the public is the most damaging *faux-pas* a party leader can make in so far as only the votes of the electorate can propel

¹⁰ J Culpeper, Reflections on impoliteness, relational work and power

the party into power. That means that the ultimate sanctions are given by the voting-out-of Chamber public (those sanctions are referred to as informal sanctions). The game has therefore extended beyond the boundaries of the initial physical frame and an additional set of informal rules emerges, making up a sort of 'supra frame'. Arguably, this outer frame dramatically changes the mode of interaction during the debates. Consequently, party leaders will become more prone to addressing the voters directly thereby establishing an inside-out communication.

Some leaders like David Cameron or Boris Johnson have used a different camera angle by staring at one of the cameras set at the side of the dispatch box rather than looking at the Leader of the Opposition or at the Chair. More interestingly, in a bid to increase public rapport and audience appeal, leaders will favour the use of verbal cues and verbal symbols as a means of getting across key messages. Such a rhetoric strategy helps them relate to the public more easily and more directly. Undoubtedly, the emotional force of an insult, a symbol, a soundbite, and so on, as well their (over)simplification of the message exceeds the rational force of any statement/argument¹¹. (Leaders engage their audience through a more personal / intimate way of communication)

TRANSITION : As rule-breaking has become conventionalized, one may wonder how members of the different parliamentary groups can signal their refusal / unwillingness to adhere to the system.

¹¹ C. Illie, *Insulting as (un)parliamentary practice in the British and Swedish Parliaments: a rhetorical approach*, 2004

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4. Between rebellion and status quo

The distinction between normative 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 rigid formal prescriptive framework of the game within which a sub system of informal rules develop. And those 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 PMQs¹²”.

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 rebellion¹³. Refusing to comply with this moral order is the expression of a need for change. In his first appearance as Leader of the Opposition in 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.

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 crowdsourced 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.

¹² P.Bull & M Waddle, Let me now answer, very directly Marie's question

¹³ M. Bloch, Political Language & oratory in traditional society, 1975, p.25

According to Richard Sennet¹⁴ Corbyn doesn't rebel against authority but within the bounds of authority.

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5. No intention of destroying 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.

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 enable them to save resources and maximize profits¹⁵, 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.

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 (let's remember their respective campaign on AV in 2011). 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 surface¹⁶, they are not on the fundamental structural principles of the British political system and regime. Parties will strive to create distinctions with other parties

¹⁴ R Sennett, *Autorité*

¹⁵ P. Norton, *Playing by the rules : The constraining hand of Parliament procedure*

¹⁶ R Rose *Do parties make a difference* p 12-13

based on the form rather than on the substance. Back to Parliament, one might assume that giving out the harshest sanction to a member = that is to say ordering the member to leave the House, results from the most serious case of rule violation. In fact, the sanction is not proportional to the degree of impoliteness of an attack but in relation to the seriousness of the breach of the formal rules, namely refusing to comply with the Chair's order. In other terms such violations are those which pose a greater 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 for disorderly conduct). Getting suspended from the House can be interpreted 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 ¹⁷).

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6. The case of Ian Blackford

The case of Ian Blackford is a further illustration of the relation between breaking the rules and the position of the party in the institutional framework of Westminster.

At first sight, the tactics and strategies adopted by Ian Blackford, the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the House of Commons

¹⁷ Faith Armitage, *Peace and Quiet in the British House of Commons, 1990-2010*,

(and leader of the 2nd largest party of the opposition) are similar to those of the other parties. However, he uses the whole gamut of breaches available during the debates. This ranges from the extensive use of violent verbal attacks (for ex see slide 8) to exhibiting personal and symbolic objects in the background of his room during the semi-virtual parliament. More to the point, he is the only leader in the House of Commons to get expelled. In **contrast**, his counterparts would avoid being suspended delegating this task (if may say) to backbenchers. In short, what is different from his counterparts though, 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.

Ian Blackford exploits those tactics directly and personally, taking advantage of the publicity.

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.

This is quite meaningful, all the more so as his violations of the rules are mostly related to one specific message : **the rejection of the Westminster system and the promotion of 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. Interestingly, on the 13th of June 18, he orchestrated his suspension from the House after he had accused the Parliament of disrespecting the people of Scotland and of grabbing power from them, on that day he was followed by his all group. Another violation of the House's rules, albeit symbolic (is that) unlike his predecessors, Ian Blackford intentionally crosses the red line in front of his bench in order to stand beyond the line and face his opponent. It is an unambiguous attempt at taking control. For James C. Scott this is an act of resistance from within the system and this is

illustrative of what he calls the concept of infrapolitics.

In sum, Ian Blackford's lack of deference and respect for this institution is evidence of his wish (even intention) to exit this system and create his own game.

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, 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 heresthical 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.

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