



Tuned in or Turned off?

Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions



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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Group on Information for the Public, UK Parliament. The report also draws on the *Audit of Political Engagement* project which is supported by the Cabinet Office and the House of Commons.

We are grateful to the following for their help and advice with the research for this report: Jane Carn and Stefanie Tetenberg (YouGov); Tom Mludsinski, Michael Clemence, Gideon Skinner and Dr Roger Mortimore (Ipsos MORI); Mihir Bose; Liz David-Barrett (Research Fellow, Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation, Saïd Business School); Professor Gary Davies (Director of the Reputation, Brand and Competitiveness Research Group, University of Manchester); Dr Rogan Taylor (Director of the Football Industry Group, School of Management, University of Liverpool); Lord Burns and Lord Ouseley. We particularly thank the participants across the country who took part in our focus groups in October 2013.



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Contents

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| Executive summary | | 5 |
| Introduction | | 11 |
| About this report: method and structure | | 17 |
| Chapter 1 | Public attitudes to Parliament and politicians | 19 |
| Chapter 2 | How the public view the House of Commons chamber and committees | 27 |
| Chapter 3 | Reforming PMQs: Scrutiny and spectacle | 41 |
| Chapter 4 | Rebuilding Parliament’s reputation | 57 |
| Case study: | Managing reputation: Parliament and the national game | 67 |
| Appendix I | The North-South divide | 71 |
| Appendix II | Focus group recruitment overview | 75 |
| Appendix III | Focus group discussion guide | 79 |
| Appendix IV | Quantitative survey methodology | 87 |
| Appendix V | Audit of Political Engagement (APE) Poll topline findings | 91 |

Executive summary

The public recognise Parliament's 'essential' role at the heart of our democracy but are deeply dissatisfied with the culture and conduct of politics. Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is a significant contributory factor in this disenchantment.

Perception of PMQs – focus group findings

PMQs is a 'cue' for the public's wider perceptions of Parliament – it provides a lot of the raw material that feeds their negative assumptions about politicians. They see Parliament through the prism of the House of Commons chamber. They commonly assume that PMQs is therefore how Parliament works all the time.

'I found that most of the MPs just sat jeering at everyone and not actually listening to what people were saying – just what my image of Parliament is in my head.'

'This is everything that's wrong with politics. MPs groaning like they're in panto, MPs NOT LISTENING to each other, the PM refusing to answer simple yes or no questions and reading from a script like some kind of actor. I mean, what were they even talking about?'

PMQs, in principle, is an important part of the democratic process because of the opportunity to hold the government to account. But PMQs in practice alienates, angers and frustrates the public.

'I don't think it serves any purpose any more – it is supposed to hold the PM to account but is now just a pantomime.'

'They talk to us as if we know exactly what they are talking about. Not sure how others feel, but I for one find that they are talking over me and treating me as some sort of imbecile.'

The public dislike the noise, the point-scoring and the perceived failure to answer the questions.

'...in the real world if you knew a person who would never give a straight answer to a question you would suspect they had something to hide or were dishonest'.

'...a pathetic spectacle'... MPs 'just seem to be point-scoring and not really thinking'.

The atmosphere – particularly the noise – confuses viewers and makes them feel uncomfortable – on occasion it is perceived to border on bullying.

'there's something very uncomfortable to me about watching one person get "attacked" by so many people'.

The conduct of MPs is perceived like that of school-children in a playground.

'Like a scene from a school playground. They wonder why people do not take them seriously.well, I guess they do not wonder, evidently.'

'...children behave better, they are normally quiet in class'.

'...my grandchildren have more manners than our politicians'.

They contrast the behaviour with their own lives – particularly in the workplace – and conclude that MPs are setting a very poor example.

'They do argue like children. I mean can you imagine any other sphere of adult life where one would act with so little respect?'

'If I went off like that in my job I would be sacked.'

They dislike the theatrical quality of it.

'A rousing speech, and passionate conviction is a good thing. This was noise and bluster and showing off – theatrical, but not good.'

'...theatre as in farce drama to see who can out do the other'.

They are also suspicious about the theatrical and pantomime aspects. They doubt the authenticity of what they see and consequently consider it dishonest.

'I wonder if they put on a big show for the cameras, then go off down the pub together and have a good laugh at us.'

'It's a tradition that opposite sides shout and make fun of each other. It's a pantomime. Some are best friends away from the debating chamber.'

They perceive that MPs are ridiculing situations that affect the lives of ordinary people instead of taking the issues seriously.

'I find it hard to believe that they truly care about the issues they are discussing and how it affects ordinary people.'

'...topics which are meant to be taken into consideration are in fact taken as a joke'.

The public are more likely to feel ashamed than proud of PMQs and consequently of Parliament.

'...great for tourists, crap for the country.'

'...Great Britain no longer great.'

PMQs – Audit of Political Engagement 11 opinion poll results

Fifty-four percent claim to have seen or heard PMQs – either in full (16%) or in clip form (38%) – in the last 12 months.

Awareness of PMQs is heavily skewed towards older citizens. Sixty-eight percent of those aged 65+ have seen or heard PMQs in the last year compared to just 35% of those aged 18-24.

- 67% of the public agree that 'there is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question' – 5% disagree.
- 47% agree it 'is too noisy and aggressive' – 15% disagree.
- 40% agree it 'deals with the important issues facing the country' – 20% disagree.
- 36% agree it is 'informative' – 22% disagree.
- 33% agree it 'puts me off politics' – 27% disagree.
- 20% agree that 'it's exciting to watch' – 44% disagree.
- 16% agree that 'MPs behave professionally' at PMQs – 48% disagree.
- 12% agree it 'makes me proud of our Parliament' – 45% disagree.

Consumption of PMQs affects attitudes. Those who report having seen it in full in the last year are more engaged by it than those who have seen only clips, but both groups share, almost equally, the negative perception of MPs' behaviour.

Reform of PMQs

It should be moved to a Tuesday or Wednesday evening. Wednesday lunchtime disproportionately enables only those aged 55+ to watch it in full.

The format should be varied to facilitate a more discursive approach, pursuing genuine debate on just a few topical areas as well as more rapid-fire Q&As.

Use of open questions should be reduced with renewed emphasis on closed, subject-specific questions from backbenchers.

The number of questions asked by the Leader of the Opposition should be reduced in order to free up time for more questions from backbenchers.

Citizens could be invited, once a month, to submit questions for consideration at PMQs. New technology means this can be done in simple and cost-effective ways.

A new 'sin-bin' penalty – naming a Member for disorderly conduct and removing them from the chamber for the remainder of PMQs – should be introduced for use at the Speaker's discretion.

Public perception of parliamentary committees – focus group findings

The public are more positive about the conduct of Liaison Committee and Select Committee scrutiny than they are of PMQs. However, they do not always associate this work with Parliament because it does not take place in the chamber.

The lack of noise combined with more direct answers and less point-scoring lends itself to a more 'informative' and 'engaging' exchange than PMQs. In the absence of noise and theatre viewers find it possible to understand what is being discussed.

The language used in committee sessions is not commented on negatively as being too complex, jargon, or the language of the elite. In contrast, PMQs is so overpowering and disconcerting that viewers focus more on the spectacle than the issues.

Size and scale matters. Smaller group work - e.g. in committee rather than in the chamber – is perceived to be a more effective means of reaching compromise.

Citizens are unclear about what a select committee is (*'another fuzzy term we cannot understand'*) and who its members are. They recognise the value of select committees but are concerned about their effectiveness and whether they really have the powers to make a difference. There needs to be much greater emphasis on outcomes and results in order to convey the value of this work.

'Amazon still don't pay tax, the bankers got off with their bonuses and nothing will change at the BBC.'

Accountability, accessibility and transparency

A general election is not considered a strong and useful accountability mechanism.

'We have no way to get rid of them really or stop them...the power isn't ours, we simply THINK we have power to elect... when really we tick a box and then what? Same old stuff, different day.'

The public view the concept of accountability in Parliament through the lens of their own personal experience in the workplace (e.g. performance management systems and league tables). The lack of such accountability mechanisms feeds the perception that MPs are different from and separate to ordinary people.

MPs have split loyalties and therefore do not put the public first.

‘MPs are slaves to two masters – their voters and their parties. It is the voters that give them their jobs and the parties that give them their careers.’

Politicians, as public servants, should have a high moral outlook on their work, a sense of vocation rather than careerism. As a calling this should be done for its own sake; income or other material rewards are peripheral.

The language of politics is ‘cryptic’ and ‘confusing’ and part of an ‘elitist tradition’. The inability to understand what is going on is a source of great frustration to the public who feel that the system looks down on them and treats them as if they were stupid. Text box explanations or subtitles on screen during PMQs or select committees, providing a running text commentary on the issues and explaining key terms, would help citizens to understand what is going on.

Rebuilding Parliament’s reputation

Reputation is a matter of perception as much as fact and, whilst easily destroyed, it can be incredibly difficult to rebuild. It is rooted in perceptions built on past experiences as well as anticipated future behaviour. If Parliament is to repair its reputation, it needs to address four key areas:

- The sense that it is ‘out of touch’
- Concern about behaviour and values
- Questions about format and effectiveness
- A perceived lack of accountability

Because of its role at the heart of our democracy, with responsibility for scrutinising the governance and leadership of other bodies, there is a particular onus on Parliament to address its own governance short-comings.

There is a desire for clear, strong leadership. Parliament needs to be ‘under control’ if it is to have any control over the country.

Every interaction that parliamentarians have with the public affects not just citizens’ views of them and their party but also of Parliament itself. It is not clear, however, that Members sufficiently

recognise their collective obligations to the reputation of Parliament as they do to that of their party.

There is a desire for greater emphasis to be placed in Parliament on the kind of workplace standards that apply elsewhere in relation to conduct and ethics.

The public want politicians who regard service in Parliament as more of a vocation than a job, prioritise the public interest over private gain and are prepared to make sacrifices along the way. The public think there should be more oversight of MPs by ordinary people. Regional consultative groups or 'Parliamentary Councils', modelled on the BBC's Audience Councils, could help by providing a public sounding board for the institution and a means to test out ideas with the public.

Significant change in the way Parliament works, and consequently its long-term reputation, may ultimately come about because of the combined demands of physical restoration and new technology. Parliament's Restoration and Renewal Programme provides a unique once-in-a-century opportunity to fundamentally re-think the entire culture and conduct of parliamentary politics as a 21st century enterprise, and the way in which it engages with the public, through the physical restructuring of the institution.

Introduction

Politicians and Parliament are increasingly treated with public contempt. The discontent is directed at all the mainstream political class and goes well beyond particular dislike of any one party or politician. Although generally proud of our *democracy* the public detest *politics* and whilst recognising Parliament's 'essential' role at the heart of that democracy, they are deeply dissatisfied with it and with the representatives they elect to it.

There has never been a 'golden age' of public trust and respect for politicians and Parliament but over the last decade, as measured in our annual *Audit of Political Engagement*, public attitudes have remained on a downward trend from an already low base. Only 36% are satisfied with the way that Parliament works.¹ Fifty-five percent believe that it 'debates and makes decisions about issues that matter to me',² but less than half (47%) believe that it 'holds government to account',³ and only 30% think it 'encourages public involvement in politics'.⁴ Public perception of MPs is bleaker still. Only 23% are satisfied with the way that MPs generally are doing their job and only 34% say the same about their own local MP.⁵ And when their trustworthiness is ranked alongside other occupations, politicians occupy the relegation zone alongside tabloid journalists, estate agents and bankers.

So what can and should be done to repair the situation? Although the problem is clear, the specific measures that would have the most effect in shifting public perceptions and restoring the reputation of Parliament and politicians have proven illusive and difficult to identify. Successive governments have pursued a smorgasbord of political and constitutional reforms but few, if any, have had a discernible impact on public attitudes over the last decade. But although citizens are generally unable to articulate the specific reforms that would move Parliament closer to their ideal – hindered as they are by a lack of knowledge about how the system works – the way they talk about politics, Parliament and politicians does provide a series of critical clues to help navigate in the right direction.

The culture and conduct of politics

Between November 2011 and March 2012 we conducted 14 focus groups across the country, talking to 153 members of the public about their perceptions of the political system and what they would most like to change in order to improve it.⁶ What was remarkable about these discussions was that

1 Hansard Society (2013), *Audit of Political Engagement 10: The 2013 Report* (London: Hansard Society), pp.55-56.

2 *Ibid.*, pp.56-58.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, pp.53-55.

6 The focus groups were conducted jointly with Professor Colin Hay (University of Sheffield) and Professor Gerry Stoker (University of Southampton). The work was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-00-22-441, 'Anti-politics: characterising and

the participants' suggestions for reform bore so little resemblance to what the political parties and politicians talk about in terms of a political reform agenda. Constitutional changes, for example, were very low down on the list of priorities. Making politics more transparent so that it is more understandable and making politicians more accountable for their performance between elections, were much more important.⁷

A strong undercurrent in the groups was public dissatisfaction with the culture and conduct of politics: that politicians are unrepresentative; that they are out of touch and unable to relate to 'ordinary' citizens; that their behaviour is out of step with that of 'ordinary' people; that they occupy a different world from the rest of the public; and that no matter who is in office, or what they do, in the end nothing really changes.

In half of the 14 groups, participants raised, unprompted, their concerns about Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). Frequently, the analogy of the school child or the theatre was raised. MPs were dismissed in scathing terms as behaving immaturely and childishly, as if they were in a 'big noisy classroom' or a 'comedy-show'. For many of the participants the 'futile arguments', 'silly debate', 'point-scoring' and 'failure to answer a straight question' was 'unbearable'. One participant even likened what they saw to the raucous, puppet shows the Muppets and Fraggle Rock. As popular as these shows were, the analogy was not bestowed as a compliment.⁸

Serious questions about the role and effectiveness of Prime Minister's Questions have also been raised at Westminster in recent years, not least by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Describing PMQs as 'scrutiny by screech', where MPs 'yell and heckle in a thoroughly unbecoming manner', he warned that the weekly clashes are 'so stage-managed and rowdy that they are bringing the House into disrepute'.⁹

Is the culture and conduct of PMQs damaging to the reputation of Parliament and politicians? Is it a cue for negative public perceptions and if so does it need to change to help restore the reputation of Parliament? The discussion in our focus groups suggested the Speaker might be right. But given the extent to which the value of PMQs has been questioned in recent years – by politicians and journalists alike – the lack of any detailed research about what the public really think of it is stark. In the absence of any quantitative or qualitative research – remarkably there appears to have been no polling on the subject – the assumptions and opinions of the 'Westminster village' have substituted for substantive evidence.

accounting for political disaffection').

7 For details of the categories of reform identified in the focus groups, and the testing of them in our *Audit of Political Engagement* opinion poll, see Hansard Society (2013), *Audit of Political Engagement 10: The 2013 Report* (London: Hansard Society), pp.47-48.

8 The transcripts of all 14 focus groups are available at the Economic and Social Research Council Data Store. <http://store.data-archive.ac.uk/store/collaborativeCollectionEdit.jsp?collectionPID=archive%3A697>.

9 Rt Hon John Bercow MP, Speech to the Centre for Parliamentary Studies, 15 September 2010. See <http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speeches/speeches/speech-to-the-centre-for-parliamentary-studies/>

Prime Minister's Questions: the Westminster Marmite test

PMQs is Westminster's 'shop window'¹⁰ because it is the most televisual of all parliamentary proceedings and consequently is better known than any other aspect of Parliament's work. It is the most famous session of any parliament around the world, envied by citizens in other countries whose leaders are rarely held to direct account in so public a fashion. It is famous for its combative, adversarial atmosphere and often stinging wit, and is parliamentary box office for the political lobby.

But debate at Westminster about PMQs is trapped in a parliamentary version of the 'Marmite test': politicians and journalists either love it or loathe it. Its defenders argue that if it is toned down no one will watch and the public will be even more detached from parliamentary activity. Its detractors argue that watching it is so off-putting that it feeds the public's anti-politics, anti-politician mood. Its defenders contend that it provides a uniquely valuable opportunity to hold the leader of the country to account each week; its detractors consider it to be risible scrutiny.

Former political editor of *The Times*, Peter Riddell, summed up the dilemma thus: 'What may appear to be open questioning of a leader in a democracy has become a charade, but changing it may kill the spectacle.'¹¹

All can agree that PMQs is an extraordinary test of stamina, nerve, and a political leader's ability to think on their feet; but some question whether it is a valuable use of politicians' time. It is meant to be a parliamentary event but is increasingly a party-political jamboree. Some call for it to be abolished; others argue for its retention, fearing that calls for reform will play into the party leaders' hands with Prime Ministers only too willing to end their weekly inquisition.

There has long been criticism of PMQs across the political spectrum but the intensity of the criticism seems to have intensified in recent years connected to a perception that the sessions have become noisier and a more obviously shallow form of partisan point-scoring. Recent research published in *Parliamentary Affairs* by an academic team at the University of Birmingham gives credence to this perception. Analysing the opening sessions of PMQs for the last five Prime Ministers they concluded, 'our data appear to confirm that PMQs has become both rowdier and increasingly dominated by the main party leaders'.¹² They found that there has been a significant decrease in the number of questions asked at PMQs over the years, and that this correlates strongly with increases in the rowdiness of MPs and the time allocated to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition during each session. Examining the number of interruptions during each PMQs and the number of interventions by the Speaker of the House they found that together, 'these two indicators of conduct appear to lend evidential support to the notion that there has been an increase in the

10 This description of PMQs was coined by the Speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, in his speech to the Centre for Parliamentary Studies, 15 September 2010. See <http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speeches/speeches/speech-to-the-centre-for-parliamentary-studies/>

11 P. Riddell (1998), *Parliament under pressure* (Victor Gollancz: London).

12 S.R Bates, P. Kerr, C. Byrne and L. Stanley, 'Questions to the Prime Minister: A Comparative Study of PMQs from Thatcher to Cameron', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 67, No.2 (forthcoming). Available via advance access online at <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/09/24/pa.gss044.full>

rambunctiousness of PMQs over the years'.¹³

Members of Parliament – across all parties and with different lengths of service in the House – are now speaking out and demanding reform. Ben Bradshaw MP has called for Members to boycott the sessions until it improves: 'If you're actually in the chamber yourself, the cacophony is dreadful and you can't often hear what Ed Miliband or David Cameron are saying.'¹⁴

In February and July 2013, the Conservative MP Alun Cairns and the Liberal Democrat MP Tessa Munt took noise readings in the chamber for the BBC *Daily Politics* show. They recorded noise levels of between 89 and 97 decibels, or 'as loud as a food blender in one part of the chamber, and as Liverpool's football ground in another'.¹⁵

What the public hear is a filtered version of this noise: only the microphones near the person speaking are activated for broadcast purposes and consequently they don't pick up a lot of the sound across the chamber. As Glyn Davies MP noted, 'there is so much noise anticipating the arrival of the principal gladiators for their weekly joust that we struggle to hear'.¹⁶ In a survey of new MPs a few months after their election in 2010, one Member declared that the single thing that had most surprised them so far was 'the noise/banter/heckling during debates, especially PMQs'.¹⁷

Lynne Featherstone MP has noted how the atmosphere whipped up by the party managers would simply not be tolerated in other workplaces: 'the atmosphere and ethos is far too much about verbal strutting and intimidation...Can you imagine running a workplace on that basis? Judge a manager by how loudly his or her staff shout and heckle other managers at the weekly staff meeting? Bizarre. Yet this is meant to pass for normal adult behaviour in the Palace of Westminster.'¹⁸

Sir Roger Gale MP has suggested the time has come for PMQs to be scrapped: 'You would not judge the performance and discipline of a school by the behaviour of the kids in the playground break. That, though, is how hundreds of thousands of television viewers watching Prime Minister's Question Time weekly, judge the House of Commons. Because that is all they see. That the image of the Mother of Parliaments should be projected worldwide by a cross between the end-of-the-pier show and a Roman games, with the thumbs down going weekly to the loser, is a pity.'¹⁹

An increasing number of journalists and political bloggers share these sentiments. Jackie Ashley of *The Guardian* concluded over a decade ago that the time had come to call time on the 'ritual jousting'. The truth is, she argued, 'PMQs is puerile, point-scoring, yah-boo nonsense, which has done more to debase the reputation of politicians than anything else – and that includes spin

13 Ibid.

14 'MPs are urged to boycott 'rowdy' PMs Questions', *Western Morning News*, 25 June 2013, <http://www.thisiscornwall.co.uk/MPs-urged-to-boycott-rowdy-PM-s-Questions/story-19384625-detail/story.html#axzz2hyWuYury>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-23346854>

15 Glyn Davies MP quoted in *House Magazine*, 8 March 2012.

16 Hansard Society, A Year in the Life Survey of new MPs, Survey 1, Question 31 response, Summer 2010.

17 'The problem with PMQ's', *Liberal Democrat Voice*, 5 January 2008, <http://www.libdemvoice.org/prime-ministers-questions-1913.html>.

18 'Debate; Should Prime Minister's Questions be scrapped?', *Total Politics*, <http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/2873/debate-should-prime-ministers-questions-be-scrapped.shtml>

doctors, leaked e-mails and fiddled figures'.²⁰

More recently, Peter Hoskin similarly argued on the *Conservative Home* website for PMQs to be scrapped. The 'weekly carnival' has, he argued, become 'wearily predictable. The planted questions and scripted attacks. The phony applause and caterwauling. This may be fun political theatre, but it rarely casts its players in a flattering light.'²¹ Dan Hodges, political blogger for *The Daily Telegraph*, and a self-confessed parliamentary traditionalist who likes the arcane rules and pomp and splendour recently concluded that it was time to put an end to what is 'no longer a parliamentary occasion' but 'a party political one. It is not a forum for intelligent scrutiny', he argued, 'but a partisan shooting gallery. And far from acting as a showcase for British parliamentary democracy, it's making us look an international laughing stock.'²²

The headline of a review in *The Observer* by Miranda Sawyer declared, 'listening to PMQs is like being cooped up with a couple who detest each other'. PMQs, she wrote, 'seems increasingly pointless: a barrel-load of hecklers and a couple of comedians who plough through their material, no matter what. John Bercow tried his best – "the public don't want to hear this" – but to no avail. Grim, grim, grim.'²³ David Maddox, of the *Scotland on Sunday*, has expressed concern about what PMQs tells us about how MPs view their role: 'The event is not just entertainment, although it often seems to pass for that. It is a vital part of British political machinery and its recent disdainful treatment by the political elite reflects badly on how they view their own accountability.'²⁴

But for every politician and journalist who expresses frustration with PMQs and concern about the impact it has on the watching public, there are just as many politicians and journalists prepared to leap to its defence.

Many journalists, particularly those in the press gallery, love the atmosphere. 'It's undeniable', says Paul Waugh of *Politics Home*, 'that most of the Wednesday lunchtime exchanges are more theatre than substance. And the MPs' expenses scandal – and the accompanying public disgust may mean that poor conduct at PMQs feeds into a wider perception that our parliamentarians are in a Westminster bubble filled with the hot air and sound of their own voices. But personally, I like the heckling, paper-waving, braying beast that is PMQs. The noisy rabble may be worse behaved than Grange Hill fifth-formers, yet at least the event is full of life.'²⁵

The late Simon Hoggart of *The Guardian* placed value on the accountability function at the heart of the theatre. 'Amid the baiting and the silly jokes, something does emerge: an attitude, a plan, a

20 J. Ashley, 'No question: scrap PMQs', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2002.

21 P. Hoskin, 'Go on, Mr Cameron – scrap PMQs', *Conservative Home*, 31 March 2013, <http://www.conservativehome.com/theorydiary/2013/03/go-on-mr-cameron-scrap-pmqs.html>

22 D. Hodges, 'PMQs is a joke, and the world is laughing at us. Time to end it', *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 November 2013, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danhodges/100248170/pmq-is-a-joke-and-the-world-is-laughing-at-us-time-to-end-it/>

23 M. Sawyer, 'Review: Listening to PMQs is like being cooped up with a couple who detest each other: Prime Minister's Questions 5 Live', *The Observer*, 4 December 2011.

24 D. Maddox, 'Leaders need new attitude to scrutiny', *Scotland on Sunday*, 28 May 2013.

25 'Debate: Should Prime Minister's Questions be scrapped?', *Total Politics*, <http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/2873/debate-should-prime-ministers-questions-be-scrapped.html>

memorable quote – even the occasional truth. It's only half an hour a week, it's rare in the rest of the world, and we would be poorer as a nation without it.'²⁶

Alex Stevenson, parliamentary editor at *Politics.co.uk* contends that the noisy nature of the sessions is what gives them their power: 'PMQs does damage the reputation of the Commons because it shows MPs to be childish and vindictive and bad-tempered. The public may write this off but I don't think it's a bad thing. It's a good thing that we've got this confrontational kind of politics because without it we'd just get consensus and agreement and that's exactly what the government wants.'²⁷

Lloyd Evans of *The Spectator*, appalled by an unusually quiet PMQs after the last general election, shares the sentiment. The House is there, he argued, 'to examine the mettle of its leaders under conditions of maximum stress. This means shouting. It means insults. Sometimes it means mayhem too. So be it. This is what politics is – civil war refined into rhetoric. We need to see it in its natural condition.'²⁸

Stephen Pound MP dismisses the Speaker's concerns about the detrimental impact the ill-tempered clashes may be having as 'absolute rubbish'. The public, he argues, 'love it. They watch Prime Minister's Questions because it is the World Wrestling Federation without the subtlety. If there were blood pouring down the aisle they'd be even happier.'²⁹

But who is right about public attitudes to PMQs: the defenders or the detractors? The answer is important because if the current culture and conduct of PMQs is indeed contributing significantly to the public's detrimental attitude to Parliament and politicians then it cannot be left untouched by reform.³⁰

We have therefore tested, for the first time, the hypothesis that PMQs is a 'cue' for the public's wider perceptions of Parliament. Using a series of online focus groups and a subsequent battery of questions on our *Audit* opinion poll survey we set out to explore whether Parliament's 'shop window' is now a contributory factor in public disenchantment with the institution. Does it bring the House of Commons into disrepute to such an extent that it is having an adverse effect on public perceptions of Parliament and politicians more generally? If it is now inflicting reputational damage can it be left unreformed, and if not, what reforms are most likely to be favoured by the public?

26 S. Hoggart, 'A hotline to the people: despite the schoolboy rowdiness, PMQs – 50 years old next week – is an institution to treasure', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/23/pmqs-50th-birthday-hotline-people>

27 A. Stevenson, cited in 'A symbol of democracy or a noisy rabble: do we really need PMQs?', *The Metro*, 11 December 2013, <http://metro.co.uk/2013/12/11/a-noisy-rabble-or-a-symbol-of-democracy-do-we-really-need-pmqs-4225241/>

28 L. Evans, 'Bercow's screech', *The Spectator*, 7 July 2010.

29 E. Lowther, 'Do we really hate MPs getting rowdy?', *BBC Online*, 5 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21263704>

30 Apart from the decision to replace the two 15 minute weekly sessions with one 30 minute session in 1997 the format of PMQs has largely remained untouched since the late 1970s when the 'open question' was adopted. The last inquiry into PMQs was undertaken by the House of Commons Procedure Committee in 1995 but its recommendations were not taken up. See House of Commons Procedure Committee (1995), 7th Report of the 1994-95 Session, *Prime Minister's Questions*, HC 555. Some of the issues were revisited in a subsequent Procedure Committee inquiry into parliamentary questions but again no recommendations were adopted. See House of Commons Procedure Committee (2002), 3rd Report of the 2001-02 Session, *Parliamentary Questions*, HC 622. A brief history of Prime Minister's Questions is set out on pages 54-55.

About this report: method and structure

Online focus groups

In October 2013, in partnership with YouGov, we conducted four online focus groups to explore public perceptions in more detail. In these semi-structured discussions we spoke to 38 participants, aged between 19 and 84, drawing together people living in 35 different counties or metropolitan boroughs throughout the United Kingdom. Together, the four groups included people who had voted for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the UK Independence Party and the British National Party at the last general election, as well as some who did not vote. The participants were also drawn from a broad mix of educational and employment backgrounds.

We consulted a national cross-section of the public in the first discussion but wanted to explore the attitudes of those groups identified in our *Audit of Political Engagement* as more likely to be politically disengaged to see if there were any differences between them in their perceptions of Parliament, politicians and PMQs. The second of our focus groups was thus composed entirely of younger citizens, aged 18 to 34; the third included only female voters in the lower socio-economic groups (C2DEs) aged 35 plus; and participants in the final group were all people who did not vote at the 2010 general election. Further details about the make-up of the groups and the way in which they were recruited and conducted are available in Appendix II.

Each group discussion was framed around a series of broad open questions about Parliament in relation to three key reform areas identified in our earlier 2011-2012 focus groups: namely accountability, accessibility and transparency. How did the public understand the concepts and how did they view them in relation to parliamentary activity in the chamber and in committee? To explore public attitudes in detail we showed all the participants a series of video clips of Prime Minister's Questions, and, by way of comparison, the Prime Minister's appearances before the Liaison Committee, and select committee scrutiny in action.

Audit of Political Engagement opinion poll

In order to test the key themes and findings that emerged from the four focus groups we then ran a series of questions on our *Audit of Political Engagement* opinion poll. Between 6 and 12 December 2013, Ipsos MORI conducted face-to-face interviews at home with a representative quota sample of 1,286 adults aged 18 or above living in Great Britain. Further detail about the *Audit* opinion methodology is contained in Appendix IV.

This report contains the combined findings of these four online focus groups and the national opinion poll.

Presentation of data

The transcript of an online focus group captures all the original typographical errors made by the participants. In this report we use many quotes from the discussions. Where the participant's intention was clear we have tidied up these mistakes for clarity and ease of reading. However, in the interests of transparency and so that others may use them for research purposes, we are making the original transcripts available – in anonymised form – via our website (www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

The PMQs section of the *Audit* dataset will also be made available on our website. Further detailed analysis of the opinion poll findings in relation to PMQs will be available in the *Audit of Political Engagement 11: The 2014 Report* to be published in the spring. At this point the full *Audit* dataset will then be published and made available on our website.

We will also be lodging both the focus group transcripts and the *Audit* dataset with the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex for use by future researchers.

Structure

Chapter one sets out the findings of the focus groups in relation to Parliament and politicians generally. It sets the context for the participants' perception and understanding of the institution particularly in relation to the key themes identified in our earlier 2011-12 focus groups as priority areas for reform namely accountability, accessibility and transparency.

Chapter two details the response of the focus group participants to PMQs, the Liaison Committee and select committees, comparing and contrasting the views of the different groups to each aspect of parliamentary activity.

The results of the *Audit* opinion poll test of the focus group findings about PMQs are set out in chapter three. It then explores how any future reform of this flagship parliamentary event might be shaped to address public concerns evident in both the qualitative and quantitative research.

Beyond PMQs, the fourth and final chapter addresses the range of other potential reform areas highlighted in the focus groups. It explores the key areas of reform needed to address public perceptions that Parliament is 'out of touch', concern about its behaviour and values, questions about the format and effectiveness of parliamentary activity, and weaknesses in accountability.

Finally, the report concludes with a series of appendices setting out further methodological information about the qualitative and quantitative research used in this study.

1. Public attitudes to Parliament and politicians

What does 'Parliament' bring to mind?

Following some warm-up discussion about politics and current affairs the participants in each focus group were asked 'what comes to mind' (words, thoughts, feelings, emotions) when the word Parliament is mentioned to them. The responses, unsurprisingly, were largely negative.

In Group 1 (a national cross-section) the words 'traditional', 'pomp and ceremony', 'money', and 'old-fashioned' were all offered up. One participant admitted to feeling 'a mixture of national pride and despair' whilst another agreed that he had 'some pride in democracy at work'. The term 'self-serving' was also raised by several participants with one explaining that he thought 'too many are there for what they can get out of it not what they can give'. He acknowledged that this was not true of all MPs 'but they seem keen to fall into well-paid directorships'. Another participant chose 'ordinary people' but explained that this was because she didn't think MPs 'are thinking of the general public when they're arguing amongst each other'.

In Group 2, the younger voters, the word 'liars' was used, and that politicians 'just say what they think you want to hear'. The perception of Parliament as an 'old institution' and 'bureaucracy' also emerged, a place that perhaps 'hasn't changed with the times'. For one participant, when she thought of the Houses of Parliament, it was 'as a place to visit in London/a tourist attraction'. A number in this group emphasised their perception of Parliament as a 'waste of time', a place where 'old men sat around moaning and groaning' or of 'old men jeering and pretending to work'. The sense that politicians are out of touch was also raised: for one participant Parliament, to him, meant 'power mad posh heads that are totally disconnected to the real world', to another it meant 'men in suits who do not know a thing about the "real world"', and for yet another it was a place inhabited by 'toffs'. When pushed only one particularly positive response was forthcoming: Parliament, it was acknowledged, at least 'forces the debate/review into issues'.

In Group 3, all women C2DE voters, reference to the heritage theme was again echoed. For one participant it meant 'grandeur, pomp, historical', for another 'rules' and 'London, Big Ben and the Thames'. As one summed it up, 'I like the historical "Britishness" but that's about it!'

But it was the 'out of touch' theme that was predominant in this group. For one participant, Parliament meant 'people who think they are better than Joe Public – posh – elitist, out of touch'. For another it was filled with 'useless people, sleeping on the benches not interested in us ordinary folk' and, for yet another, 'a lot of useless people earning a fortune to mess up the country'.

The theme was emphasised still further by another: 'Rich people with other careers already well established who think they know best but aren't strong enough to prove it to the voters, they fear the majority who are, unfortunately, less well off, educated and politically aware.' Concluded one, 'the MPs seem to be all from public school environments – they think that because they are well off then everyone is – they just don't seem to grasp how hard it is for ordinary people in their day-to-day lives. None of them have to pay extra for their bedrooms, or council tax – or have to fight to get disability benefits – they just have had an easy ride all their lives.'

Only one participant in this group was more upbeat, pushing back during the debate at suggestions that MPs were 'useless'. Parliament was, in her view 'something that affects everyone in the country', 'they pass Acts and laws that apply to us all, even if you don't agree with them'.

In Group 4, the non-voters, the out of touch theme also reared its head. 'Two sets of people with their head in the clouds who have never lived in the real world' was one response. For one participant 'hot air!' came to mind, for another it was 'irritation and anger'. Reflecting both the themes of heritage and disaffection, other associations raised included 'Guy Fawkes!', 'gunpowder' and 'The Levellers'.

In this group, the sense that Parliament is about 'playground arguing' was particularly pronounced. It was 'a game between two parties slagging each other off', and had 'too much shouting rather than any action. Pontificating fools.' The participants also referenced 'lying', 'bitching' and 'bickering children', and rather more rudely 'smelly dirty apes fighting and laughing in a room that should be demolished'.

Others were more inclined to a balanced view: 'At its worst, baying politicians on the benches, scoring points off one another rather than debating real issues. At its best, representatives of the people with real conviction, fighting our corner.' Reading the focus group transcripts, however, one cannot escape the feeling that for many of the participants across all the groups, Parliament is rarely at its best.

At the end of this period of discussion we presented the groups with a randomly organised list of commonly used words or phrases about Parliament and asked them to highlight the ones they felt best summed up their own views. The first group – the national cross-section – was presented with a list of words/phrases some of which could be considered 'positive' in tone, some to be 'negative' and a few to be 'neutral'. In addition to these they could, if they chose, add their own words to the list. Overall, the first group had more positive words than negative ones to choose from. Building on the knowledge gleaned from the discussion and word selection of this first group, we then added a number of additional words/phrases for the other three groups thereby broadening the choice available. (These additional words are marked with an asterisk below.)

Box 1 – Word selection when thinking about Parliament

Positive

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| proud | inspired | informed | accountable* |
| relevant | democratic | fair | honest |
| open | transparent* | in touch | serious |
| challenging | important | interesting | accessible* |

Negative

| | | | |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|
| stuffy | elitist | irrelevant* | uninteresting |
| out of touch | inaccessible* | ineffective* | dishonest* |
| trivial* | boring | difficult | weak* |
| old-fashioned | control | closed | hard to understand |

Neutral

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|-------|
| guardian | tradition | heritage | power |
| ordinary people | | | |

Looking at the responses of the first national cross-section group, the word cloud in Figure 1 highlights the phrases selected by the participants. The size of the words correlates with the number of participants who chose it from the full list of options available. The word cloud is a qualitative measure not a quantitative one. The selection of words by all groups was not an exact science and given the size of the groups the number of times each word was chosen was small. But it provides an interesting snap-shot of the participants' views.

Figure 1 – Words most commonly associated with Parliament – Group 1

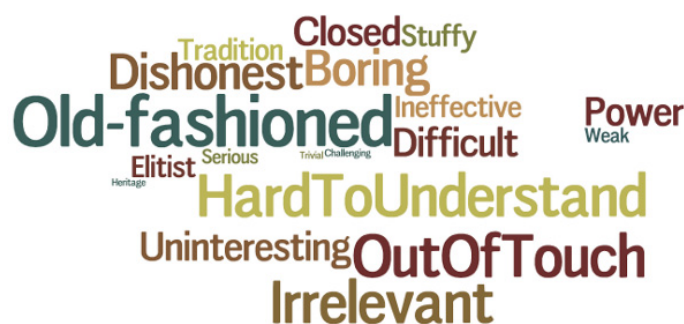


Overwhelmingly, the sense that Parliament is old-fashioned and elitist prevails. A number of more positive words were chosen but, as the discussion both before and after made clear, this largely reflected the participants' belief that Parliament lacked these more desirable qualities. (For example, several participants chose the phrase 'ordinary people' but from the discussion it is clear that this was because they felt that Parliament should but does not represent and include 'ordinary people'.)

Comparing the word choices of the other three groups separately, also, reveals some interesting differences in emphasis as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Words most commonly associated with Parliament for Groups 2-4

Group 2 – 18-34 year olds



Group 3 – Women C2DEs aged 35+



Group 4 – Non-voters at 2010 general election



Throughout the discussion, many of the contributions of those in the younger voter group were scathing in tone. Among this group there was a strong feeling that politicians have too much power and are unaccountable to them. The C2DE women in contrast focused more heavily on language than the other groups; there was greater focus on the sense that Parliament is 'inaccessible' and 'hard to understand'. As the discussion went on, it became clear that they failed to connect with Parliament and politicians as the language and process went over their heads. This was in part linked to the perception that politicians cannot effectively communicate with them because they, the politicians, are not perceived to be ordinary people.

Among the non-voters, 'dishonest' featured more strongly than in any of the other groups and the discussion showed that much of this was linked to recollections of the parliamentary expenses scandal. As a group they considered Parliament to be 'important' but also 'inaccessible' and 'irrelevant'. This group also considered Parliament to be 'ineffective'. This was largely because they didn't perceive there to be any clear resolution of issues and because parliamentary debates were rarely considered constructive.

This group, more than any other, also felt powerless. Elections were not perceived to represent any real degree of accountability and for most of them their disengagement was a deliberate decision to opt out in the absence of what they perceived to be any real differences between the political parties. They are not willing to engage unless and until the parties offer them a real alternative.

The impact of a citizen's distance from the centre of power at Westminster can also be detected in the groups. A sense of frustration with the 'way things are going', for example, could be found in all the groups especially among the C2DE women. But this was particularly true of those participants

who lived further away from London.³¹

Accountable?

When we asked the participants whether they thought Parliament was accountable it was clear that they had a strong sense of what they thought the concept should mean but felt that Parliament fell woefully short of this ideal.

Throughout the groups, four key, inter-related strands of thinking emerged. Firstly, for most of the participants it was unclear to whom Parliament could and should be accountable. As it is the institution that makes the laws many felt there was no one to whom it could be accountable. In constitutional terms, although Parliament is of course the 'supreme legal authority',³² it is accountable to the public through the election of the representatives in Parliament. The problem, very clearly evidenced in these discussion groups (and also reflected in the earlier 14 focus groups we conducted in 2011-2012) is that the public do not consider a general election to be a particularly strong and useful accountability mechanism. The prevailing view was that an election doesn't fundamentally change the direction of the country and therefore doesn't provide any real accountability. This fits with the participants' wider view that there are no real differences between the parties for the public to choose from, and that MPs are fundamentally all the same – members of an out of touch elite – regardless of party. As one put it, 'We have no way to get rid of them really or stop them...the power isn't ours, we simply THINK we have power to elect... when really we tick a box and then what? Same old stuff, different day.'

Secondly, a number of participants thought about accountability in Parliament through the lens of their own personal experience of accountability in the workplace. And in contrast, Parliament came up short. The performance management systems and league tables they encountered at work each year – some imposed upon them by politicians, often by law – do not exist for parliamentarians themselves. Some participants acknowledged the limited value of such mechanisms, particularly league tables. But nonetheless, they clearly appreciated that there are no mechanisms – beyond an election – for the public to hold them to account. This was perceived as further evidence of how MPs are different from and separate to ordinary people.

Thirdly, it was felt that MPs, who should be accountable to the public, have split loyalties and therefore do not put the public first. As one participant summed it up, 'MPs are slaves to two masters – their voters and their parties. It is the voters that give them their jobs and the parties that give them their careers.' Believing that politicians are too often motivated by self-interest rather than the public interest, MPs were therefore deemed more likely to heed their party than the public.

Finally, a discernible concern throughout the groups was that there could not be any real

³¹ Analysis of the *Audit of Political Engagement* dataset shows that there is some evidence of a north-south divide in people's attitudes to Parliament. On a range of core political engagement indicators, respondents in London have been noticeably more positive than those in other regions. See Appendix I for further detail.

³² <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/sovereignty/>

accountability unless there were 'consequences'. The discussions indicated that the public believed that within the system there was no provision for either collective or individual accountability. Although MPs might come under pressure and have to defend themselves both in Parliament and particularly in the media, ultimately, as one participant described it, 'the worst thing that ever happens is they get voted out'.

Such comments are illustrative of the gulf that has built up between politicians and their electors. For MPs being 'voted out' means a loss of career, income, and reputation and an excruciating sense of failure and rejection at the hands of their constituents after many years of dedication, hard work, and personal and family sacrifice. For MPs, a general election is a merciless, often profoundly unfair form of accountability of a kind that few of their constituents will face on such a regular basis in their own workplaces. Performance in office has little to do with the result. In contrast, the public appear to see it very differently: they want politicians, as public servants, to have a high moral outlook on their work, a sense of vocation rather than careerism. As a calling this should be done for its own sake; income or other material rewards are peripheral.

Accessible and transparent?

The groups' understanding of the concepts of accessibility and transparency were somewhat intertwined. There was a clear recognition that Parliament is both more accessible and transparent than it has been in the past. It was variously noted, for example, that the public can sit in the gallery and watch debates or read a record of them in *Hansard*, that Parliament is televised, that the public can now sign petitions, that they can meet their local MP at a constituency surgery and that social media provides a lot of information about politics and politicians. However, all of these examples were seen as fairly basic, instrumental examples of accessibility and transparency and, as some pointed out, information resources might exist but the public had to know where to find them and this was not always simple or straightforward.

Ultimately, many did not feel Parliament was truly transparent: as one participant noted somewhat regretfully, if it were, 'we wouldn't be struggling to understand it'. A perceived lack of transparency was also inextricably linked with the participants' views on accountability. The public might be able to get the debates via *Hansard* or watch them on television, but what use was this if 'it's never clear how things are implemented and about decisions made outside of the debating chamber'. Many of the participants expressed sympathy with the view that too many decisions are made behind closed doors. In order to be transparent, the parliamentary process would need to be easy to follow and the public would have to have access to all the details.

Concerns about understanding and language were clearly intertwined with the broader, negative perception of Parliament as an old, outdated, historic institution and MPs as a class apart from ordinary people. The language of politics was described as 'cryptic' and 'confusing', part of an 'elitist tradition' that was 'not for normal society to be part of'. Some of their ideas are hard to understand because 'they are coming from the rich elite school of thought' said one. For another,

it felt 'like a closed society – it's run on unwritten traditions and protocols like all the British establishment'.

The participants' inability to understand what is going on in Parliament was a source of intense frustration and many of the comments indicated that they felt looked down upon and made to feel stupid. As one put it, politicians 'treat me as some sort of imbecile'. This was perceived by some to be deliberate in order to evade public scrutiny: politicians 'talk in a way that less intelligent people can't understand them so they are not asked any questions'. Rather than dressing it up 'in fancy words' what they wanted was 'straight talking and clear answers' that were 'understandable to the man in the street'. Throughout the discussion there was an underlying sense that the participants felt they were being manipulated by politicians, as summed up by one man when he said, 'they are not dishonest but just don't express the truth'.

2. How the public view the House of Commons chamber and committees

Prime Minister's Questions

The one element of parliamentary activity with which the participants in the four online focus groups were most familiar was Prime Minister's Questions. For defenders of PMQs in its current form this is its great advantage: it is the one bit of Parliament that the public are aware of and have likely seen on the television news. In our *Audit of Political Engagement* poll, 54% claim to have seen PMQs – either in full (16%) or in clip form (38%) – in the last 12 months.³³ But, as our focus groups show, heightened awareness of PMQs should not be mistaken for approval. Indeed, given their thoughts on PMQs, its very prominence is a problem because it seems to be commonly assumed that PMQs is how Parliament works all the time.

During the focus groups we showed the participants clips from two PMQ sessions in the last year. We sought to show one session that was particularly partisan and rowdy, offset by another that was calmer in tone. In reality, we were spoilt for choice in selecting the former but struggled to find a clip reflecting the latter. The calmer moments, such as they have been, tend to be linked to the announcement of the death of a member of the armed forces in Afghanistan or the death of a fellow Member of the House; sombre, non-partisan moments that do not represent the norm for PMQs. One clip showed a question to the Prime Minister from the Leader of the Opposition on 11 September 2013, the other a question from both an opposition and government backbencher on 5 June 2013.³⁴

But well *before* we introduced the videos or even mentioned PMQs to the groups the participants made clear their views. In the words of one participant in the national cross-section group, PMQs was 'just an excuse to slag each other off'. One made clear that on the subject of improving Parliament 'less arguing and acting like spoilt big kids would be a good start'. For another, Parliament should work 'in an open and honest manner without all the raucous shouting etc that goes on'. Among the women in the third group one participant said she had watched it 'only the once, terrible, just acting, doing NO work!' Another woman said that 'it really stresses me too when they shout. There needs to be order and a way to, agenda, the debate.'

One participant said she was just not interested in watching it because 'I don't find it informative... it appears to be a continuation of public school debate. More of interest to the politicians than the public and does not really seem to achieve much.' Some acknowledged that, sometimes,

33 See Chapter 3 for further analysis of the Audit survey results.
34 PMQs, 11 September 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqoR_nPLSFE. PMQs, 5 June 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf1B0HIV9X0>

good questions were asked but, overall, PMQs 'is like a pantomime'. One concluded: 'I don't think it serves any purpose any more – it is supposed to hold the PM to account but is now just a pantomime.'

A non-voter described PMQs as a 'pathetic spectacle', at which the MPs 'just seem to be point-scoring and not really thinking'. Such 'infantile behaviour' was like 'primary school'. One participant disagreed: 'no, children behave better, they are normally quiet in class'.

When shown the videos of PMQs, the responses did not change. The overwhelming reaction was one of alienation. Most of the participants correctly identified what they were seeing as PMQs; only among the younger group (18-34s) did the majority of them initially not realise that it was PMQs that they were watching.

One participant made clear he had no idea what he had just watched as there was 'too much noise to understand' whilst another confessed to feeling 'frustrated and irritated' by the scenes.

In the non-voter group another participant confessed to being 'confused', one described it as 'more offensive than engaging' and another described themselves as 'uncomfortable' because of 'the shouting – the obfuscation'. Several others said they were 'annoyed' by what they had witnessed. One felt 'ashamed' by what he had seen, an emotion reiterated by several of the non-voters. Concluded one: it's 'Great Britain no longer great.'

'This is everything that's wrong with politics' said a participant in the national cross-section group, 'MPs groaning like they're in panto, MPs NOT LISTENING to each other, the PM refusing to answer simple yes or no questions and reading from a script like some kind of actor. I mean, what were they even talking about?' One woman in the second group expounded on the theme: 'I found that most of the MPs just sat jeering at everyone and not actually listening to what people were saying – just what my image of Parliament is in my head.' Another confessed to being 'annoyed that they are incapable of answering a simple question and that they shout and sneer while other people are talking. It's all show.'

One participant described what he had seen as 'hilarious'. When asked to clarify what he meant – did he view it positively or negatively – he continued, 'it is just a waste of time. Like a scene from a school playground. They wonder why people do not take them seriously.well, I guess they do not wonder, evidently.'

As with the discussion of Parliament we subsequently showed all the groups a randomly organised list of words/phrases commonly used to describe PMQs and asked them to select a few that best summed up how they would describe it.

| Positive | | | |
|-------------|---------------|--------------------|--------------|
| interesting | engaging | informative | important |
| open | honest | clear | exciting |
| lively | down to earth | | |
| Negative | | | |
| boring | dishonest | unclear | out of touch |
| dull | over the top | irrelevant | noisy |
| pointless | childish | hard to understand | |
| Neutral | | | |
| drama | theatre | | |

Looking at the responses of all four groups collectively, the word cloud below highlights the phrases selected by the participants. The size of the words again correlates with the number of participants who chose it from the full list of 23 options. Again, this is only a qualitative indicator which provides a snapshot of the participants' views.

Figure 3 – Words most commonly associated with PMQs



Disaggregating the results by individual group highlights some interesting differences in emphasis.

Figure 4 – Words most commonly associated with PMQs

Group 1 – National cross-section

Group 2 – 18-34 year olds



Group 3 – Women C2DEs aged 35+

Group 4 – Non-voters at 2010 general election



Across all four groups there was a strong reaction to PMQs as 'childish'. The interaction between the politicians – equated with that of bickering children or 'squabbling bairns' in the playground 'behaving like a child in a tantrum to get their opinion heard' – was considered uncivilised and disrespectful. Among the C2DE women, one participant noted that 'my grandchildren have more manners than our politicians'. Said another: 'I think you'll find the behaviour in a playground is quite unlike this.'

Such behaviour encapsulated how MPs are different from ordinary people. As one put it: 'They do argue like children. I mean can you imagine any other sphere of adult life where one would act with so little respect?' Another participant in the 18-24 group reiterated the theme: 'If I went off like that in my job I would be sacked', whilst a participant in the female C2DE group concluded: 'It's a poor example of how to behave in public.' Such behaviour would not, it was noted, be tolerated in a court of law.

The level of noise, the degree of disrespect, combined with what is perceived to be a lack of structure and control to the discussion leaves the public cold. The level of laughter was regularly commented on in a negative context and overall the process was seen as 'pointless', 'a waste of time' or, as one described it, an exercise in 'futility'. 'A lot of noise and not getting much done' concluded one. Another participant noted that many of the MPs 'look bored and uninterested which makes me feel the same as it is evident nothing will happen as a result of the shouting'.

PMQs, in principle, was considered to be an 'essential' part of the democratic process because of

the opportunity to hold the government to account. But PMQs in practice – the perceived failure to answer a ‘straight question’ coupled with the tactic of party point-scoring – was infuriating to many of them. As a participant in the national cross-section group put it, ‘it’s a poor way’ (to hold the government to account), ‘because it’s all about point-scoring not answering questions thoughtfully’.

A non-voter highlighted how this behaviour distinguishes MPs in the public mind as separate, different and a repository of distrust: ‘in the real world if you knew a person who would never give a straight answer to a question you would suspect they had something to hide or were dishonest’.

Several participants described the conduct as ‘tit for tat’ with one asking ‘why do they just pick at each other’s ideas rather than focusing on their own! Frustrating.’ As another put it, ‘Prime Minister’s Questions should be for the PM to be able to answer what the government’s policies are not for point-scoring’. Yet another was put off by the fact that the point-scoring was ‘often cringe-worthy’.

Those who defend PMQs in its current form argue that it is great parliamentary drama, unique to British politics and envied by the public in many other countries around the world. The focus groups show that the public recognise the ‘drama’ and the unique nature of the event; but they do not consider the former in a positive light, and the merit of the latter does not outweigh their wider criticisms. As one participant put it, PMQs is ‘great for tourists, crap for the country’.

With just a couple of exceptions, all the participants who referred to PMQs in the context of ‘drama’ or ‘theatre’ did so for negative reasons. In the words of one of the female non-voters, ‘A rousing speech, and passionate conviction is a good thing. This was noise and bluster and showing off – theatrical, but not good.’ The few who welcomed seeing ‘some passion’ at PMQs were outweighed by those who felt, on the contrary, that they would prefer what one participant described as ‘controlled action’.

Another woman in the 18-34 group said of PMQs, ‘it’s negative for me. It’s not like real life. It’s like watching a drama on the TV!’ Another likened the drama to being ‘like one of the TV soaps’. One of the women in the C2DE group found nothing positive, it was ‘just take centre stage and act away’. As another disparagingly put it, ‘it was a joke. Would be better advertised as “Roll Up, Roll Up – come and see DC’s Free for All – the funniest thing on the telly”.’ Yet another agreed: it’s ‘theatre as in farce drama to see who can out do the other’. A woman in the national cross-section group didn’t think PMQs was ‘a bad way per se’ to hold the government to account but ‘it’s become a bit of a farce and is now just expected to be full of hecklers and stupid remarks/comments/noises’.

A number of the participants were also *suspicious* about the theatrical and dramatic aspects. Some queried whether the Prime Minister knows the questions in advance, whether the whole of PMQs is scripted beforehand, and each of the key players merely acts out their assigned role. ‘I wonder’ said one of the non-voters, ‘if they put on a big show for the cameras, then go off down the pub together and have a good laugh at us’. The laughter and joking by MPs was a concern; it was felt that they were ridiculing situations that affect the lives of ordinary people rather than taking the issues

seriously.

Some of the non-voters suggested that PMQs is rehearsed. Expounding on the pantomime theme, one woman acknowledged that, 'it's a tradition that opposite sides shout and make fun of each other. It's a pantomime. Some are best friends away from the debating chamber.' This sense that what goes on in PMQs is false, that the MPs are acting out a role, and once it's over go back behind the scenes and act very differently – are even friends with each other – permeated a number of the contributions. Such suspicions about the authenticity of what they see contributes to the viewers' sense that PMQs is 'dishonest', something that was particularly felt by the female C2DE and non-voter groups.

Although it is deemed an important opportunity to question the Prime Minister, the value of PMQs is undermined precisely because the public do not perceive this is what MPs are actually doing and their behaviour conveys the impression that they 'do not take things seriously'. As one young woman in the 18-34 group put it: 'I find it hard to believe that they truly care about the issues they are discussing and how it affects ordinary people.' In the words of another, 'topics which are meant to be taken into consideration; are in fact taken as a joke'. Yet another commented, 'they enjoy bitching at one another, they don't really care'. As one of the 18-34 group put it, there were 'no positives' to PMQs, it was 'just childish old men playing with our lives'. 'It seems' said another, 'to be who can score over the other one. It's not a competition, it's our lives.'

A number of the participants felt insulted: it 'treats the public as simpletons' said one. Another participant complained, 'They talk to us as if we know exactly what they are talking about. Not sure how others feel, but I for one find that they are talking over me and treating me as some sort of imbecile.'

What needs to change?

A number of core themes emerged in the discussion when participants were pressed about what they thought should be done differently.

There was above all a clear desire that MPs curb their behaviour and conduct themselves in a more serious and mature manner, or as one participant put it, introduce 'a bit of decorum'. A majority of the participants wanted them to tone down the aggression and argumentative nature of the sessions. Reducing the noise was a priority as this would 'certainly make it easier to follow what's going on'. Most participants also wanted them to eradicate the petty point-scoring.

How this might actually be achieved was rather less clear. Some suggested plain English, well-focused questions, with the responses timed so that the discussion was concise. A number of participants indicated that the sessions should be chaired in a more effective and orderly fashion. Other suggestions included turning PMQs into a 'University Challenge' style Q&A to test the

Prime Minister's knowledge with the PM regularly subjected to 'Paxman' style questioning.³⁵ One participant thought that the PMQs format was useful but could be supplemented by 'more thorough, written responses' that would then be published. Many were sceptical that the point-scoring and evading of direct answers at PMQs could ever be changed but the introduction of a bit of civility would at least be an improvement.

A number of participants suggested that the public should have some role in the process, both submitting questions and being able to question the Prime Minister more directly themselves in a more open setting outside Parliament. Others hinted that a small group of members of the public should be in the audience at PMQs, perhaps to act as a reminder to the participants about why they were there, perhaps even to ask questions themselves.

The desire to see the questioning take place in a different, 'smaller setting', emerged a number of times. One woman in the C2DE group found the culture of PMQs unsettling because 'there's something very uncomfortable to me about watching one person get "attacked" by so many people'. She thought a smaller setting would perhaps help address this. Others also commented that the size and design of the chamber contributed unhelpfully to the drama: 'the large crowded room goes a long way towards it being theatre-ish'. Desiring a 'more conversational tone', some participants suggested that the format should be changed with the discussions held across a table in a more 'measured, civilised setting'. As a non-voter put it, 'I would like to see a proper conversation rather than a staged and practised speech, where questions are answered without a background of shouting.'

Liaison Committee

To gauge reactions to an alternative form of questioning of the government and Prime Minister in the House of Commons we showed each group a clip of his appearance before the Liaison Committee. Two videos were used with alternate groups. In one the Prime Minister was questioned about the Big Society and the protests outside St Paul's Cathedral on 8 November 2011; the other showed the PM discussing events in Syria on 10 September 2013.³⁶

When asked to identify what was happening no one recognised or identified the questioning as being specifically before the Liaison Committee. A few assumed or guessed it was an appearance before a select committee but only one participant believed he had seen this form of questioning before, briefly on the news. Most were completely unaware that the Prime Minister was ever questioned in this way; indeed, they thought this kind of questioning only happened when problems like the phone-hacking scandal or the conduct of BBC executives were being investigated.

Interestingly, the contribution of a number of participants in different groups suggested that they

35 A reference to Jeremy Paxman, the presenter of BBC 2's week-night current affairs programme, *Newsnight*, and a well-known inquisitor of politicians, with an abrasive but incisive interview style.

36 Liaison Committee 8 November 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RUqy3qA76c>. Liaison Committee: 10 September 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVMXXGzg9eY>.

did not associate what they were seeing with Parliament. As one participant put it, the Liaison Committee form of questioning 'feels better than being done in Parliament', whilst another commented 'being in House of Commons is a completely different kettle of fish to that!' Concluded another, 'I definitely think it is a lot more effective than debating in Parliament'. Such remarks suggest that they thought it was being held in a place other than Parliament.

That the participants see Parliament through the prism of the House of Commons chamber reinforces the extent to which PMQs and what they witness there so overwhelmingly influences their perception of the institution as a whole. The almost complete absence of the House of Lords from the focus group discussions also reinforces the extent to which it is the House of Commons that is key as far as Parliament's reputation is concerned.³⁷

The reaction to the Liaison Committee model was largely positive and the converse of that for PMQs. The few participants across the groups who had been least critical of PMQs were less well-disposed to the committee model than everyone else. The female participant in the third group who liked the 'passion' of PMQs didn't like this format: 'it's transparent but boring, as it's not a debate'. Another noted, almost apologetically, that although what he had just seen was better, 'I do love a good Dennis Skinner barbed PMQ quip'.

A few others who had been critical of PMQs were also cautious about reaching a judgement on what they had seen, tending to be sceptical and suspicious of MPs generally. But the majority of the participants were pleasantly surprised by and complimentary about the Liaison Committee approach.

The calm, quieter, more serious atmosphere was particularly remarked upon. 'This one was a lot more civilised' said one participant. It was 'definitely a better way to conduct it and a lot easier to understand what is going on' said another.

After viewing the video clips and a period of discussion, we presented all the participants with the same randomly organised list of words/phrases that we had shown them in relation to PMQs and asked them to select a few that best summed up how they would describe this alternative form of questioning and scrutiny.

Figure 5, highlighting the phrases selected by the participants, starkly illustrates the difference in their perception of the Liaison Committee model compared to PMQs. As previously, the size of each word correlates with the number of participants who chose it from the full list of 23 options (Box 2), and should be treated only as an indicator of their views and not a quantitative assessment.

37 Those that did mention the Upper House in the focus group discussions did so in fairly ambivalent terms and largely in relation to the fact that Peers are not elected.

Figure 5 – Words most commonly associated with the Liaison Committee



Overwhelmingly, the participants made positive associations with what they had seen. Disaggregating the results by individual group highlights the differences in emphasis between them. However, the responses were more uniform across all the groups than was the case with PMQs precisely because the participants focused so much more on positive associations thereby narrowing down their choice of words.

Figure 6 – Words most commonly associated with the Liaison Committee

Group 1 – National cross-section

Group 2 – 18-34 year olds



Group 3 – Women C2DEs aged 35+

Group 4 – Non-voters at 2010 general election



Many participants described what they had seen as 'informative' and this was particularly emphasised in three out of the four groups. They found it easier to follow and understand what was happening; and because they could more clearly follow what was being said they found it more engaging and interesting. The lack of noise and disruption also had a marked impact on their perception of the importance and seriousness of what they were witnessing. One participant admitted he didn't know what he was seeing but 'it was much more mature'; another remarked

'something sensible and grown up is happening', whilst another noted that it was 'so much calmer and more professional'. 'If I have this right,' said another, 'it was a committee where proper serious discussions and questions were in progress'. 'Formal, respectful, frank', said another. 'It's what PMQs should be' concluded one of the non-voters to which there was widespread agreement in the group.

The more conversational nature of the engagement also stood out positively to the participants. 'I did think it was more engaging and clear – it felt more like a dialogue' said one. 'This was engaging for all the reasons that PMQs isn't. It's analytical' said a non-voter.

With just a few exceptions, the participants did not view this form of scrutiny in terms of drama or theatre. This contributed to a greater sense of authenticity: it was 'honest – it's not so over the top and theatrical' said one. 'It felt more natural and spontaneous, less rehearsed' said another.

Several of the participants noted that this format did not descend into the partisan point-scoring they so deplored at PMQs. As one concluded, 'it showed that he (the PM) could talk without trying to score points'. Several noted, in surprised tones, that the question had actually been addressed and answered. This in turn helped to convey a greater sense of honesty and authenticity to the watching audience.

A few participants still found the format adversarial with one likening it to an appearance in court, although this was not necessarily deemed a negative factor. But, for the majority of participants, it was more organised and structured. 'It feels', said one, 'more directed and honest and less like bullying'. Another noted that 'where I've seen it get heated before it doesn't feel right as its essentially lots of people ganged up against one person. This worked well though.' It was perceived to be a better model of holding the Prime Minister to account because 'he can't hide and wriggle out of questions'. As one of the participants in the younger group noted, 'it is a better form of questioning, more productive and if he's not explained himself well he can be challenged, without being jeered at'.

The lack of noise combined with more direct answers and less point-scoring lends itself to a more 'informative' and 'engaging' exchange than PMQs which is simply over the top and unclear. In contrast, the absence of theatre at the Liaison Committee allows the viewer to focus on and understand the often complex issues being debated, about which they may have no prior knowledge. As one participant put it, the PMQs' clip 'all seemed to be about bravado – there was none of that in this video, it was more about the substance'.

It was also noticeable that in stark contrast to the discussion around PMQs, no participant commented negatively on the language used as being too complex, over their heads, jargon, or the language of the elite. In the absence of noise and clamour the viewers found it possible to understand what was being discussed – the language and format were more readily accessible. In contrast, PMQs was so overpowering and disconcerting to the majority of participants that they focused more on the spectacle than the issues. As a non-voter remarked: 'I think it is far more

engaging as you can actually listen without getting totally annoyed with all the bullsh*t of PMQs.'

The absence of theatre and its negative associations with farce and dishonesty, serve to bridge the chasm between politicians and the watching public. Whereas PMQs reinforces the public's view of politicians – posh, elitist, arrogant and out of touch – the Liaison Committee format, which lends itself to a focus on the content of the discussion leaves a more positive impression. That said, the nature of the Liaison Committee format focuses the viewers' thoughts and emotions entirely on the Prime Minister because he is so front and centre. For those less well disposed to the government or the PM himself this means that any expression of irritation and frustration is directed entirely at him whereas at PMQs the public's ire is directed at MPs as a collective group.

When asked who they would expect to be doing the questioning at this event most participants said MPs but a few made alternative suggestions. 'Some honest and good QC' was one, whilst others favoured a mixed group of questioners, with one proposing 'MPs, big wigs and members of the public (selected at random like jury duty)'.

But would the participants ever be willing to actually watch the Liaison Committee? One participant confessed she was 'not sure where I would go to be able to watch something like this'. Views elsewhere were mixed. Some were honest enough to admit they probably wouldn't watch it. Others said they would perhaps watch it if they knew they were discussing a big issue or it was on a topic that was of interest to them.

Select Committees

In each group there was much greater awareness of select committees than of the Liaison Committee, but overall there was quite limited understanding of their role and function, powers, and membership.

When asked what the term 'select committee' brought to mind, and what the purpose of such committees was, the responses were often vague. A C2DE woman was blunt: 'another fuzzy term we cannot understand'. The group of younger voters particularly struggled. 'A selected number of relevant people to sit on a committee', 'people who have been chosen to represent certain people/companies', 'a mix of relevant people' were a few of the suggestions proffered by the participants. 'I assume this is a group of specially selected individuals that are chosen to challenge/investigate what's going on' one concluded. One of her fellow participants thought it was 'government committees exposing financial inaccuracies' another that it was 'a parliamentary sub-committee that deals with specific issues'. A non-voter concluded it was 'a multi party committee and possibly experts in the field as well'.

Participants variously described the purpose of select committees as being 'supposedly to root out all the naughty people', 'digging deeper for answers', to 'get to the truth and report back their findings to the full Parliament', to 'make sure the government departments follow the rules' and

'hopefully to ask the questions I would want answering'.

Each group were then shown an example of a select committee in action in order to explore their responses in detail. High profile committees were deliberately chosen in order to heighten the possibility that the participants might have some prior awareness of the committee's activity. Two videos were used with alternate groups. In one, the Secretary of State, Iain Duncan Smith MP, was questioned by the Work and Pensions Select Committee about the universal credit system on 10 July 2013; the other showed the Public Accounts Committee questioning BBC executives on 9 September 2013.³⁸

'I had no idea this sort of thing happened' declared one young voter. Another was reassured: 'now that I have found out about the select committees I feel like there is someone who will at least challenge what is happening without just trying to score points like what happens in Prime Ministers Questions'.

As with the Liaison Committee, the format of select committees was largely seen to be orderly, engaging, respectful and clear to understand. However, the high profile nature of those giving evidence to the committees, and their alleged involvement in wrong-doing often of a financial nature – the BBC, Amazon, Rupert Murdoch, bankers – meant that the frustration and anger felt by the participants with those being questioned dominated their response to and perceptions of the select committees. The discussion thus had a more cynical tinge to it than had been the case in relation to the Liaison Committee.

Many of the participants recognised the value of select committees but their comments betrayed a number of reservations about their effectiveness. They are important, said one participant, 'but must not be allowed to be overrun with grandstanding MPs – that happens sometimes'. Other participants pointed to concerns about whether they had the powers to really make a difference; for example, if the committees lacked the power to send people to jail, then what good was subjecting the bankers and others accused of financial wrong-doing to scrutiny? The attitude of the non-voters was that whilst it was good that committees held them to account, if the money had gone and couldn't be recovered then the committee's only real purpose was to look for scapegoats and ensure it doesn't happen again. Although the groups recognised that select committees could be important in getting at the facts, in reality the perceived limit on their ability to hold the government or other organisations to real account was a driver in their overall sense of frustration with them. As one non-voter put it, somewhat fatalistically: 'Amazon still don't pay tax, the bankers got off with their bonuses and nothing will change at the BBC.'

Some feared that committee inquiries could dilute and delay people taking responsibility for their actions and that long-running investigations would absorb a lot of public money and lead to people losing interest. As one young voter put it: 'I think the select committees are good but most of them

38 Work and Pensions Select Committee, 10 July 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uod_4agwpMU. Public Accounts Committee, 9 September 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHt1ML0WTyl>.

take so long that by the time the results are published they are no longer relevant or the public has lost interest.’ There was also a sense that the issues being discussed by the committees were not necessarily relevant to their lives: ‘their important issues are very different to mine’ said one participant.

In all the groups most respondents seemed very unclear about who sits on a select committee. Many didn’t associate them with MPs and many of those that did nonetheless expected experts and specialists, even in some cases civil servants, also to be members. They thought that in order to successfully challenge and interrogate those appearing before them, other skills and expertise would be needed. When asked who they thought should be members of such committees a number of participants suggested that the presence of ‘ordinary people’, affected by the issues raised, would improve them. Again, the analogy of ordinary people taking part in the committee, ‘like a jury’ does in a court of law, emerged. However, as is often the case, many of those speaking of a role for ordinary people were very reluctant to say they would be prepared to play such a part themselves. Others suggested that only experts in the field of investigation should be deployed, thereby providing for a ‘trial by peers’. Those with the ability to question rigorously, with expertise in the area under consideration and in a position to be independent and impartial were all suggested as better options than MPs.

3. Reforming PMQs: Scrutiny and spectacle

The focus group research clearly suggests that whilst citizens recognise the value of PMQs in theory, they are put off by the way in which PMQs plays out in practice. The groups provide us with valuable insights into the scope and nature of public concerns but they do not enable us to assess the extent to which these attitudes are held by the wider public. We therefore tested our focus group findings in our 11th annual *Audit of Political Engagement* poll conducted in December 2013.

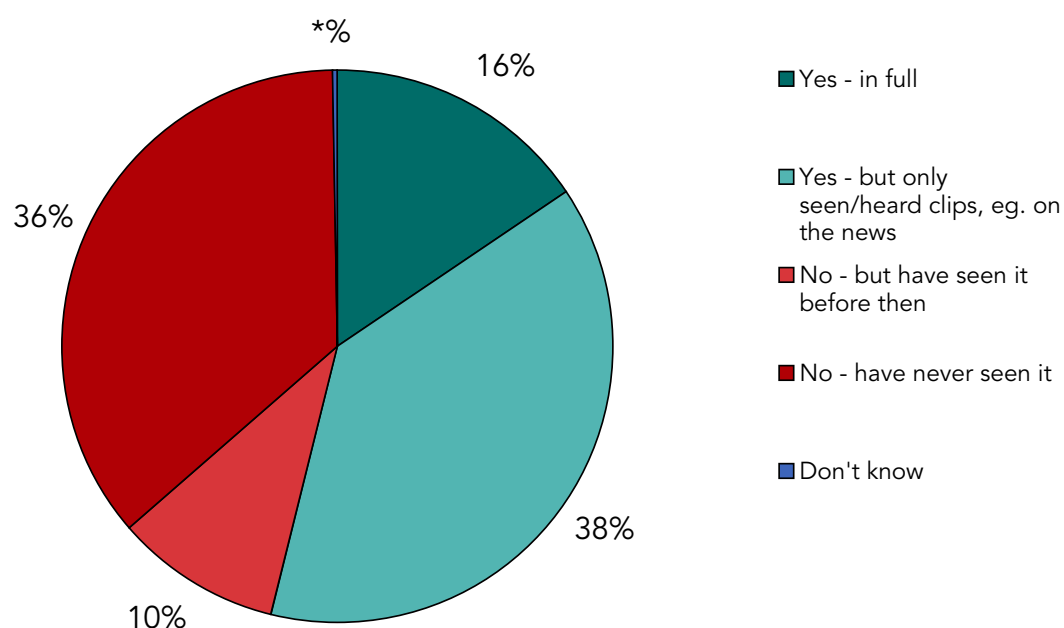
Who watches or listens to PMQs?

We first asked participants whether they had 'ever watched or seen/heard any of Prime Minister's Question Time'. It is widely accepted that PMQs is the most visible aspect of Parliament and that more people see or hear PMQs on TV and radio than they do any other element of parliamentary activity. But accurate viewing and listening figures are hard to come by. PMQs is shown live on BBC 2's *Daily Politics* show with a reputed audience of 350,000 people, significantly above viewing figures for the show on any other day of the week. It is also broadcast live on BBC Radio 5 Live, shown live on BBC Parliament and the BBC's 24 hour news channel, and clips from the session are often the headline story in the day's news bulletins. Parliament also streams the sessions live on www.parliamentlive.tv and makes them available afterwards via its You Tube channel.³⁹ But this array of outlets means the total audience is difficult to quantify.

In the *Audit* poll 16% of the public said they had seen a full session of PMQs in the last year, and 38% said they had seen clips. Thirty-six percent said they had never seen it, and a further 10% said they had seen it before but not in the last year. All told, then, half the population (54%) said they had seen or heard PMQs in some form in the previous 12 months.

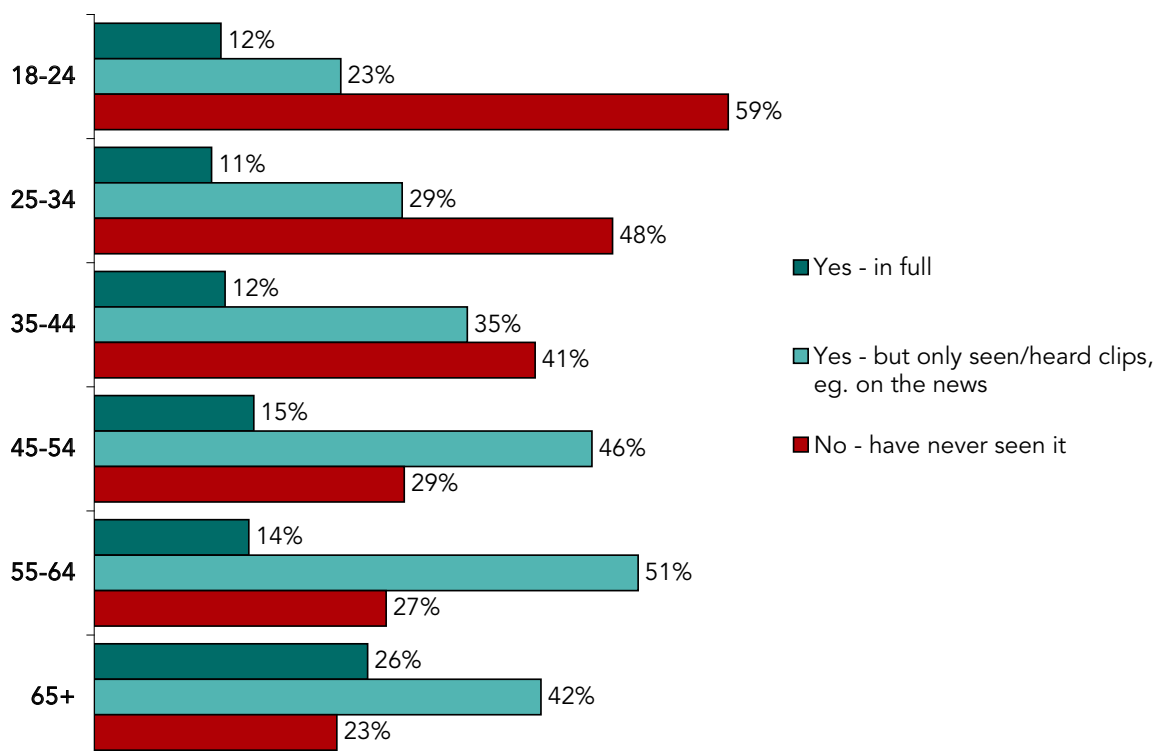
The composition of that 54% of the population is heavily skewed towards older citizens, particularly those of retirement age who are of course more likely to be able to watch it given that PMQs takes place during the day when younger age groups are at work. Sixty-eight percent of those aged 65+ had seen or heard PMQs in some form in the last year compared to just 35% of those aged 18-24, 40% of those aged 25-34, and 47% of those aged 35-44.

Figure 7 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

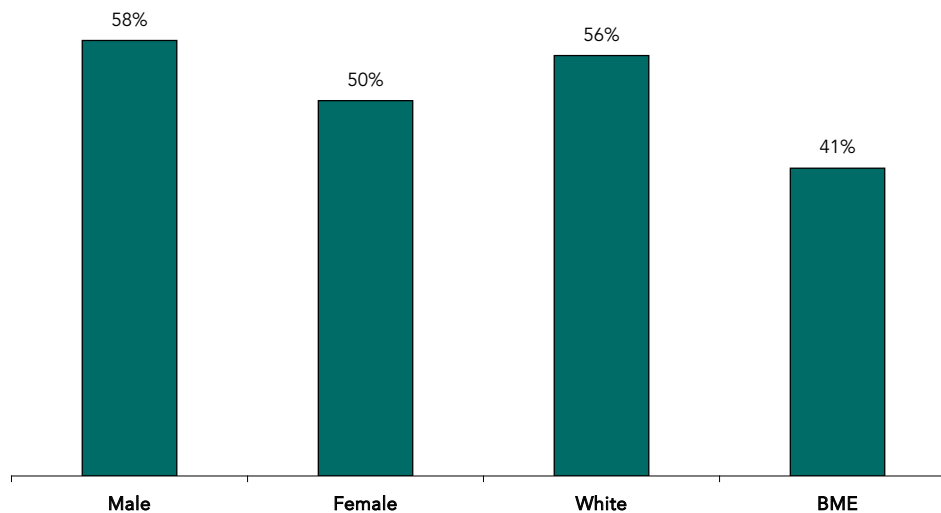
Figure 8 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs by age



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

PMQs is more likely to be seen by men than women. Just 50% of women had seen PMQs in some form in the last year, compared to 58% of men who said the same. White respondents (56%) were also much more likely to have seen it during the last year than Black and Minority Ethnic individuals (41%).

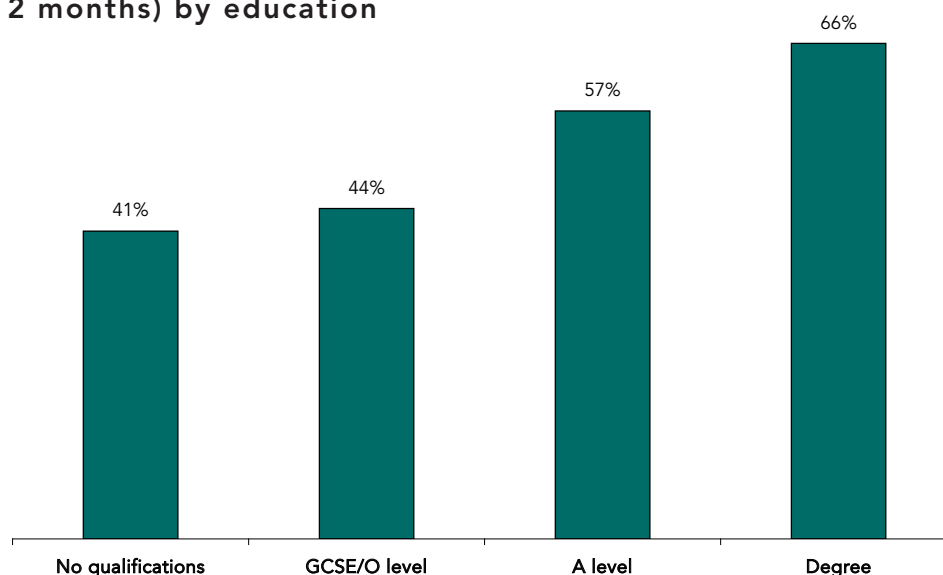
Figure 9 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs (in full or in clips in the last 12 months) by gender and ethnicity



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

Unsurprisingly, there is also a distinct association between viewing of PMQs and educational attainment levels. People with a degree were much more likely to have seen PMQs in some form in the last year (66%) than were those with no qualifications at all (41%). Similarly, 44% of those only educated to GCSE/O Level claim to have seen/heard PMQs, rising to 57% for those whose highest qualifications are at A Level standard.

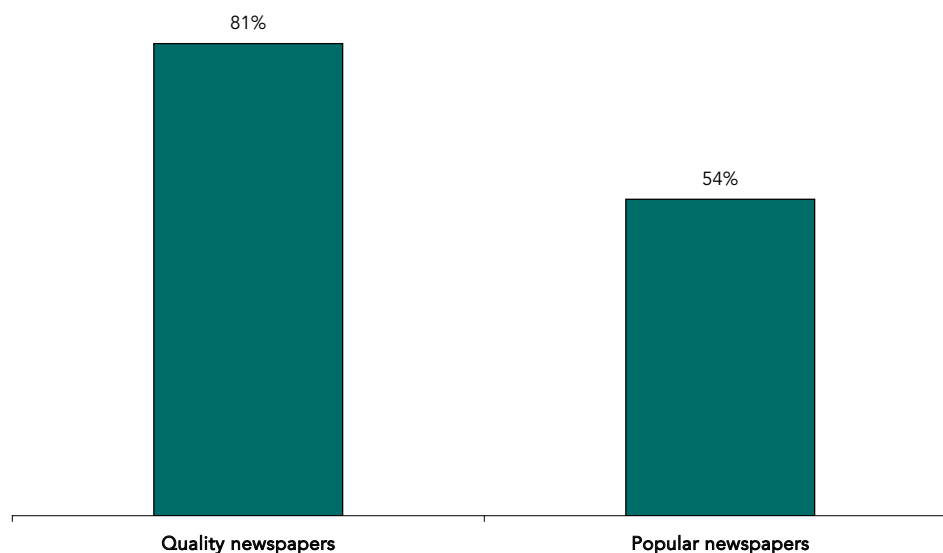
Figure 10 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs (in full or in clips in the last 12 months) by education



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

Citizens who say they regularly read a broadsheet newspaper are also much more likely to have seen PMQs in some form. Eighty-one percent of those who read broadsheets have seen it in the last year compared to just 54% of readers of popular newspapers who claim the same.⁴⁰

Figure 11 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs (in full or in clips in the last 12 months) by newspaper readership

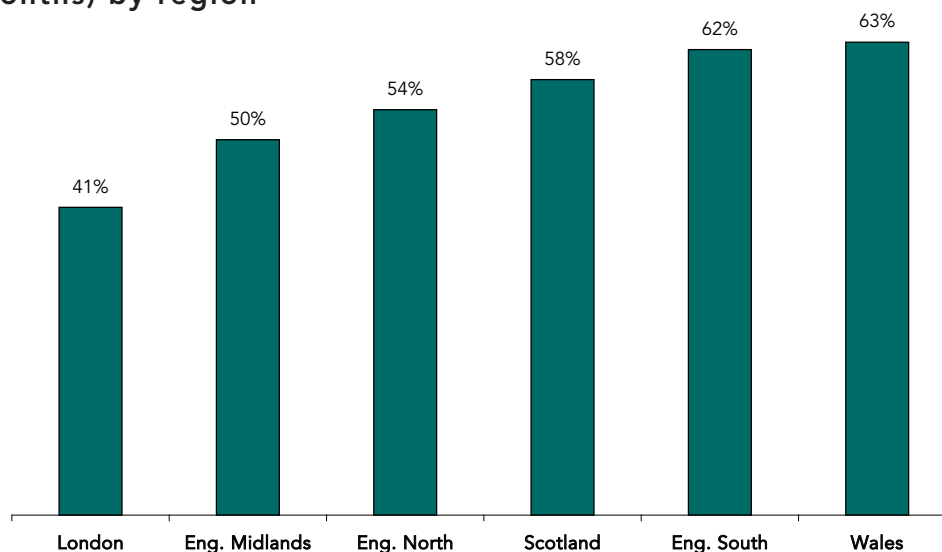


Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

There are highly divergent differences in viewing and listening at the geographical level. Interestingly, despite devolution, more citizens in Wales claim to have seen/heard PMQs in the last year than in any other region of Great Britain. Sixty-three percent of Welsh people say they have seen at least clips of PMQs, compared to just 41% of Londoners who say the same.

40 Popular newspapers include mid-market newspapers (e.g. *Daily Mail*; *the Daily Express*) and tabloid newspapers (e.g. *The Sun*, *The Mirror*)

Figure 12 – Proportion of the public who have watched/heard PMQs (in full or in clips in the last 12 months) by region



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

But what do the public think of PMQs and do they have different attitudes depending on the extent to which they have seen or heard it in recent times?

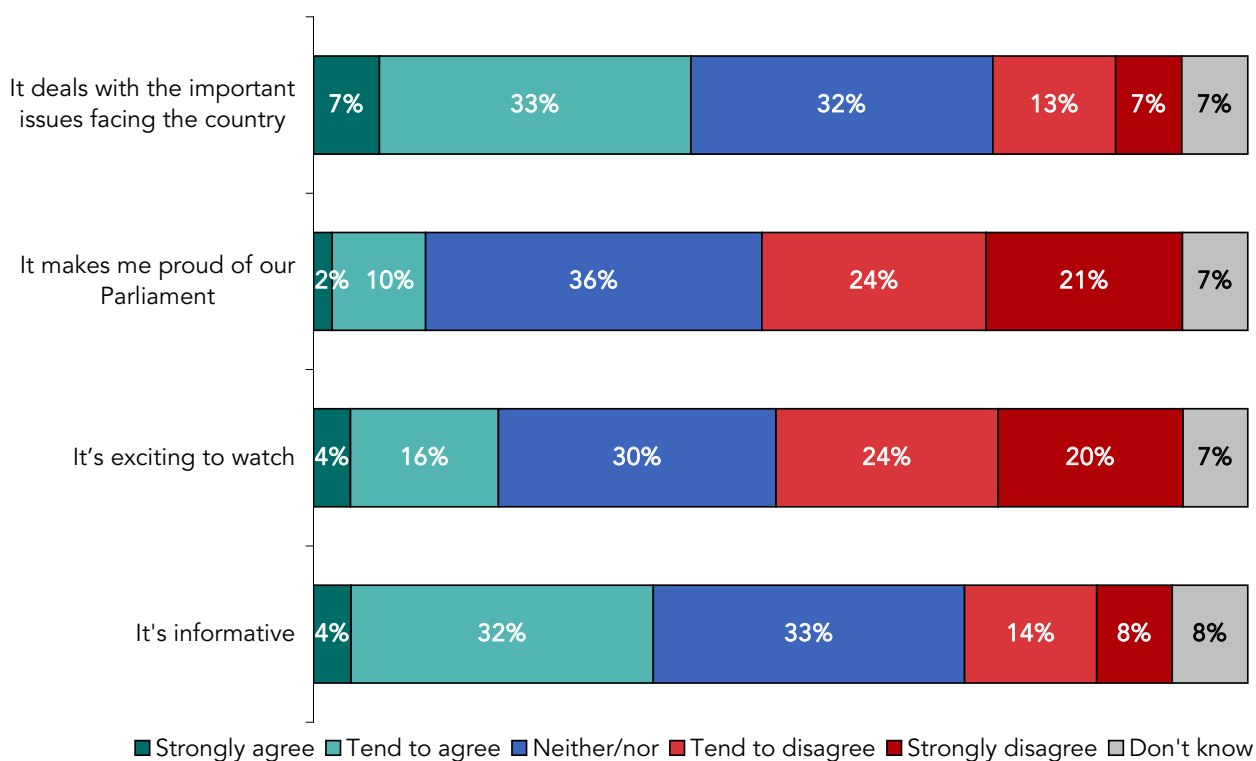
What do people think of PMQs?

Using what we learnt from the 2012 and 2013 focus groups we constructed eight different statements about PMQs and asked respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed with them.

- It deals with the important issues facing the country
- It makes me proud of our Parliament
- There is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question
- It's exciting to watch
- It puts me off politics
- It's informative
- It's too noisy and aggressive
- The MPs behave professionally

Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed that 'there is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question': 67% agreed and just 5% disagreed.

Forty-seven percent of the public agreed that PMQs 'is too noisy and aggressive' with just 15% disagreeing. Four in 10 people (40%) agreed that PMQs 'deals with the important issues facing the country' whilst two in 10 people (20%) disagreed. However, a slightly lower proportion (36%) agreed that PMQs is 'informative' whilst two in 10 (22%) disagreed. And just 20% agreed that 'It's exciting to watch' whilst 44% disagreed with this assessment.

Figure 12 – Attitudes to PMQs Part One

Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

But the results that should perhaps most worry MPs relate to perceptions of their own conduct and the impact of PMQs on wider perceptions of Parliament. Just 16% of respondents agreed that 'MPs behave professionally' at PMQs, with almost half the population (48%) disagreeing with this statement. And given that a common defence of PMQs in its current format is that it is a unique parliamentary occasion envied by citizens around the world, it should be a wake up call to MPs that just 12% of the British public say PMQs 'makes me proud of our Parliament', whilst 45% feel quite the opposite. Fully one third of the public (33%) agree that PMQs 'puts me off politics', with another third expressing no view either way, and a further 27% disagreeing with this assertion.

Does consumption of PMQs affect attitudes?

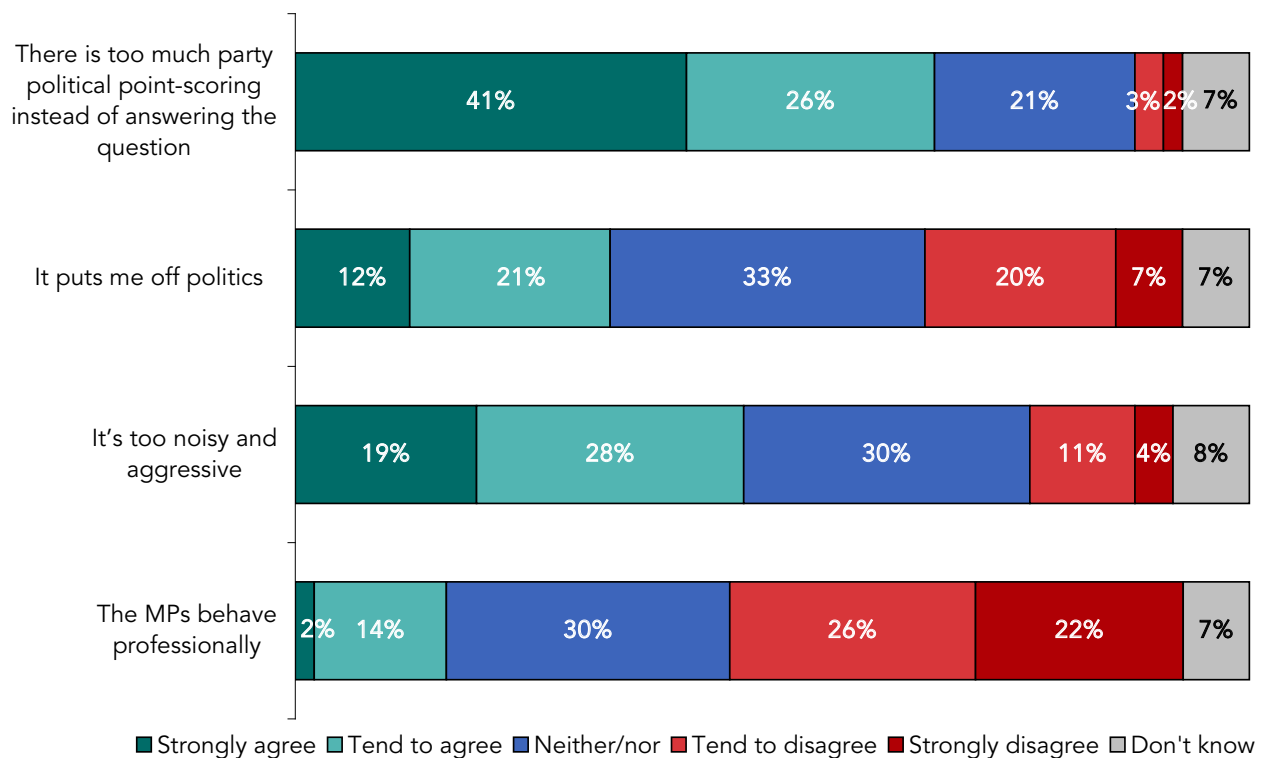
There are some important differences in perception dependent upon the extent to which citizens have seen or heard PMQs. Those who report having seen it in full in the last year are more engaged by it than those who have seen only clips, but both groups share, almost equally, the negative perception of MPs' behaviour.

Those who report having seen PMQs in full are much more likely to consider it to be 'exciting to watch' (46%) than those who have seen only clips (22%). They are also more likely to consider it to be 'informative' (61% versus 51%). However, it does not seem to have the same positive effect on those who have only seen clips: 43% of those who have seen clips say that PMQs 'puts me off politics' compared to just 28% of those who have seen it in full.

In light of this finding it is worth noting again here that our focus groups were only shown clips

of PMQs and three of the four groups were composed of those demographic groups that tend to be more disengaged. The *Audit* results suggest that they are therefore more likely to have had a negative reaction than might have been the case had we shown them an entire 30 minute PMQ session. However, more than twice as many citizens consume PMQs in clip form than in full so the research model was consistent with the way in which most people encounter PMQs, and in each of the focus groups the participants began discussing PMQs unprompted, and in largely negative terms, before we steered the discussion in this direction with the video clips.

Figure 13 – Attitudes to PMQs Part Two



Base: 1,286 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates 6-12 December 2013.

On the issue of party political point-scoring, attitudes are almost exactly aligned. Eighty-eight percent of those who have seen clips of PMQs in the last year agree with this statement and 87% of those who have seen it in full say the same. On this score, there is also a much higher level of agreement (43%) among those who report never having seen PMQs than there is on any of the other seven statements.

On the remaining five measures there is little statistically significant difference in attitudes between those who watch or hear PMQs in full or in part.

Men are somewhat more likely than women to say PMQs is exciting (23% compared to 17%), as are readers of quality newspapers (31%) in contrast to consumers of popular titles (19%). BMEs (32%) are also much more likely to find PMQs exciting compared to white respondents (18%), and less likely to be put off politics as a result of it (24% versus 34% of whites). The most regular consumers of PMQs are the older age groups and they are also the age group that is most likely to say that it puts them

off politics.

Those who watch PMQs in full are more likely to find it exciting, informative and more likely to think MPs behave professionally. But they also hold very negative perceptions: almost nine in 10 of them think that there is too much party political point-scoring and less than two in 10 say that what they see or hear makes them proud of Parliament.

These findings suggest that the way in which PMQs is viewed or listened to in clip form has an impact on their perceptions: they are less likely to find it interesting and more likely to say it puts them off politics than are those who have viewed the question sessions in their entirety. Given that more than twice as many people view PMQs in clip form than in full this raises challenging questions for both politicians and the media about how PMQs is both conducted and portrayed.

Shaping reform

PMQs is a significant 'cue' or 'building block' for public perceptions of Parliament and it provides a lot of the raw material that feeds the public's negative assumptions about their politicians. But what, if anything, can and should be done about it?

Too often the debate about reform of PMQs has fractured along two linear arguments: the status quo versus abolition. It's clear that the public don't like the status quo, but equally they value the principle and concept of PMQs. They like the theory of it but object to its current practice. Rather than abolition, what is therefore required is a re-think of the role and purpose of PMQs in our modern parliamentary system? What do we want out of PMQs and what therefore needs to change to achieve this?

At present there are a number of contradictory objectives and practices at the heart of PMQs that undermine its effectiveness. Its main virtue is that the Prime Minister must attend the House of Commons once a week when the House is sitting to answer questions for half an hour on any issue that Members wish to direct at him or her. In theory, this is one of the most important political mechanisms available to Parliament to hold the Executive to account. In practice, however, the Prime Minister is rarely subjected to a searching examination. Too many of the questions are planted by the party whips, the range of subjects covered is too broad to be anything but a shallow form of scrutiny, and the nature of the 'open question' means that the answer from a Prime Minister who has anything short of a photographic memory is almost guaranteed to be limited. There are occasions when an MP who wants a substantive response gives prior warning of their question in order to facilitate an informed answer but these are relatively rare.

PMQs is nonetheless valuable as a 'testing ground' for our party leaders. In the cauldron of the chamber the public can see their capacity to think on their feet, their resolve and nerve, their confidence and manners and the extent to which they can command the House. Sometimes it can define perceptions of a party's leader – notably in recent times following Vince Cable's mockery of

Gordon Brown's transformation 'from Stalin to Mr Bean', and David Cameron's noting that Tony Blair 'was the future once'. But more often than not, although a poor performance at the despatch box can break a career it is now rarely enough to make one.

At its best PMQs can act as both a parliamentary barometer – testing and measuring attitudes to the party leaders – and as a parliamentary thermometer – gauging the importance of issues. Some question whether taking up 30 minutes plus the necessary preparation time in a Prime Minister's busy diary is a good use of their time in the modern age. But whilst enormously demanding of them personally, Prime Ministers – most notably Mrs Thatcher – have used it as an effective tool to hold Whitehall departments to account.

But the scrutiny and accountability function is undermined by the extent to which the questioning in the chamber regularly descends into a litany of predictable party insults.⁴¹ Indeed, what often emerges, masquerading as questions and answers, are new sound bites or lines of attacking argument being tested out by the respective parties. Rather than a serious act of scrutiny focused on the public interest, it often descends into a shouting match in which party interests and the boosting of morale on the backbenches has precedence. It is increasingly inward-looking and self-referential.

To address public concerns a series of overlapping cultural and institutional changes are therefore needed. But these must be done carefully in order, as much as possible, to avoid killing all sense of spectacle.

Firstly, the behavioural issues need to be addressed. Both main party leaders have previously expressed a desire to change the tone of PMQs and the wider culture of parliamentary life. On his election as Conservative Party Leader in 2005, David Cameron declared, 'we need to change, and we will change, the way we behave. I'm fed up with the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name calling, backbiting, point-scoring, finger pointing.'⁴²

The Labour Leader, Ed Miliband, also spoke of the need for a change in tone. 'Politics is already too removed from people's lives and the public does not want to see out of touch politicians having a go at each other, or trying to score cheap points. They want to see the bread and butter issues debated and discussed in a serious way. So, PMQs should always be focused on the political, not the personal.'⁴³

But both party leaders have struggled to break old habits. In the early sessions following the 2010 general election, both seemed to adopt a more constructive and conciliatory tone, but the results were widely derided by the press as dull, lifeless and lacking excitement.⁴⁴ This more sedate tone

41 See S.R Bates, P. Kerr, C. Byrne and L. Stanley, 'Questions to the Prime Minister: A Comparative Study of PMQs from Thatcher to Cameron', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 67, No.2 (forthcoming). Available via advance access online at <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/09/24/pa.gss044.full>

42 Speech by David Cameron following his election as leader of the Conservative Party, December 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4502652.stm.

43 <http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/153702/pmqs-exclusive-interviews-with-pm-miliband-and-clegg.shtml>

44 See for example, L. Evans, 'Bercow's screech', *The Spectator*, 7 July 2010; Q. Letts, 'Squeaker Bercow is talking balls. Really, the man is the

and approach was quickly abandoned.

The Prime Minister acknowledged that he had failed: 'I have to hold my hands up that ending 'Punch and Judy' at PMQs was a promise I wasn't able to deliver. I tried a quieter approach and frankly, it didn't really work. The Commons can be a bit of a bear pit at times, so you have to be robust.'⁴⁵ And by late 2013 his attitude had taken a somewhat fatalistic turn: rather than being concerned that the public deplored the Punch and Judy atmosphere, he concluded that the public 'enjoy' PMQs because it's 'like the Coliseum' and they get to see 'the Christians eaten by the lions'.⁴⁶

In the early sessions of 2014 it became apparent that the Labour leader Ed Miliband was trying again to adopt a different strategy, with some journalists reporting that a new approach – a more 'sombre and serious tone', eschewing party point-scoring in favour of focused policy questions – was being trialled.⁴⁷

However, it is clear that any unilateral attempt to reform PMQs by one of the protagonists is likely doomed to failure. The media's coverage of the Labour leader's performances were largely negative, his performances judged 'subdued', 'ineffective' and 'weak'. As Andrew Sparrow of *The Guardian* explained, 'the gravitational pull of the confrontation, yah-boo bear pit is very strong and, although Cameron was probably not quite as aggressive as normal, his verbal duffing up of Miliband sounded effective. It felt like a win for him.'⁴⁸ Others, notably in the *Financial Times*, were left questioning the purpose of a 'quiet' Prime Minister's Questions.⁴⁹

Part of the problem is the way in which the media treat PMQs as a game, not too dissimilar to the way their colleagues in the sports department treat football or cricket. An array of commentators issue snap judgements, score the performances and award points. *The Evening Standard* even declares the winner in its 'Match of Today' column. The performance rather than the substance of debate largely takes precedence, an outcome undoubtedly fed by the politics of the playground played out in the chamber by the Members themselves. If MPs themselves don't take the event seriously and set a low threshold for respect and expectation, then they can hardly complain that others follow suit.

But the attitude of the press means that for any change to be truly effective it will have to be agreed by the parties together, in concert with the Speaker, rather than through unilateral action. It is clear that self-denying ordinances by party leaders are not enough to bring about change. And rather than modest changes in tone and behaviour a more significant change to the format is needed in order to shake up public perceptions and persuade citizens to take a fresh look.

most perfect fool', *Daily Mail*, 8 July 2010; S. Hoggart, 'You cannot be serious Mr Cameron', *The Guardian*, 3 February 2011; J. Forsyth, 'Consensus reigns over PMQs', *The Spectator*, 2 February 2011.

⁴⁵ <http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/153702/pmqs-exclusive-interviews-with-pm-miliband-and-clegg.shtml>

⁴⁶ D. Cameron interview, *ITV*, 7 October 2013, reported in 'PMQ's sketch: enter the lion', *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10367015/PMQs-sketch-Enter-the-lion.html>

⁴⁷ Emily Maitlis, *BBC Newsnight* and Nick Robinson, *BBC Political Editor*.

⁴⁸ Andrew Sparrow, 'Politics Live Blog', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2014/jan/15/george-osbornes-speech-on-eu-reform-politics-live-blog>

⁴⁹ Kiran Stacey, 'What's the point of a quiet PMQs?', *The Financial Times*, 8 January 2014.

Suggestions for reform

As those who see only clips of PMQs are less well disposed towards it than those who see it in full, and as the current format disproportionately enables only those aged 55+ to watch it in full, consideration should be given to changing the timing of PMQs. Moving it, for example, to prime-time on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening might widen the possible viewing public.⁵⁰ Realistically PMQs won't garner huge audiences but a significantly changed format might stimulate the attention of some citizens.

The format should also be freshened up and varied. For example, in order to facilitate improved scrutiny and a more informed discussion one of the sessions each month could be extended to 45 minutes or an hour, on a trial basis. At this session, a more discursive approach could be adopted by pursuing genuine debate focused on just a few topical areas with one selected by the Opposition and the other three or four perhaps by select committee chairs via the Liaison Committee or by the Backbench Business Committee. Alternatively, topics and therefore questions could rotate, as per departmental questions, or they could be selected by ballot. Whatever approach is adopted, the choice of topics would need to be monitored to see how best a balance between policy areas can be maintained and topicality retained. Rules regarding interventions in the debate by all Members would also need to be adopted and reviewed as necessary.

The current 30-minute Q&A format could be retained for the other sessions each month providing for coverage of a broader range of issues. But reliance on the open question could be reduced with renewed emphasis on closed, subject-specific questions from backbenchers. One option could be to introduce the departmental question time model to PMQs: a proportion of the questions listed for debate are closed questions (around three quarters for most departmental question sessions) with the remainder being open, topical questions.

The Procedure Committee inquiry in 1995 concluded that the test of PMQs was that 'the purpose of a question is to obtain information or press for action'.⁵¹ The culture of PMQs needs to shift more towards this objective and away from partisan attempts to merely trip up or embarrass the Prime Minister. It is unlikely that party whips will ever refrain from trying to manage the sessions by providing questions to their backbenchers, but if there were to be more public interest in this new model PMQs then it is to be hoped that some backbenchers might be more likely to resist wasting their rare opportunity to question the Prime Minister on a pointless and obviously planted question.

The number of questions asked by the Leader of the Opposition should be reduced in order to free up time for more questions from backbenchers across the House. As previous Leaders of the Opposition have found, if they cannot land a blow on the Prime Minister in their first two questions then further attempts are likely to have diminishing returns.

⁵⁰ The current Chief Whip and former Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young MP, has previously suggested moving PMQs to a Thursday evening in order to force MPs to stay at Westminster for the whole of Thursday rather than rushing back early to their constituencies.

⁵¹ House of Commons Procedure Committee (1995), 7th Report of the 1994-95 Session, *Prime Minister's Questions*, HC 555.

There is also a good case for considering how to engage the public in the process. What is clear from our focus groups is that citizens want some form of 'public' oversight of the politicians at Westminster because they do not feel that MPs are currently accountable to them. Citizens could be invited, once a month, to submit questions to the House for consideration at PMQs. New technology means this can be done in simple and cost-effective ways.

This has already been done by select committees: in January 2012 the Education Select Committee, crowd sourced questions to the Secretary of State via Twitter using the #AskGove hashtag. The Committee received over 5,000 tweets most of which were genuine questions on substantive education policy issues. Committee staff grouped questions by subject and in the first half of the session Members asked questions, informed by the tweets, on a range of themes. In the second half of the session, the Secretary of State 'was asked rapid-fire questions, including many direct from the public, with Members selecting the tweets from the subject groups or from the full list of questions received'.⁵² Clips of the minister's responses were subsequently tweeted back to the questioners many of whom then re-tweeted them to their followers. This approach was considered such a success that other committees have expressed a desire to hold similar sessions.

A small body of Members could be established – or an existing body, such as the Backbench Business Committee could be utilised – to either select the questions for PMQs from those submitted or simply draw them in a public ballot with the Members of that body posing the questions to the Prime Minister in the chamber.

There will undoubtedly be resistance to this in some quarters but Twitter has already found its way onto the floor of the House with tweets being cited in PMQs in real-time to cause disruption and embarrassment. A far more effective and mature use of such tools could engage the public in the process and serve to enhance public interest in PMQs generally. And rather than focusing on the Westminster Village's 'scoring' of the outcome, the media might be more likely to look outwards and focus more on citizens' genuine policy interests and concerns.

Finally, whatever reforms are made to the format of PMQs these need to be buttressed by much clearer and stronger rules on conduct and behaviour, linked to the Members' Code of Conduct. In the focus groups there was a real sense of frustration with the extent to which PMQs was perceived to be out of control. The participants wanted a degree of order to be imposed and wondered why no one was doing so. In this problem lies the potential for future reputational damage to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Speaker's first responsibility is to maintain order but he cannot do so if MPs persist in wilfully misbehaving week after week. The Speaker needs to be empowered – with cross-party agreement – to take a tougher stance when Members misbehave and thereby bring the House of Commons and Parliament into disrepute.

The Code of Conduct clearly states that Members 'shall never undertake any action which would

52 See <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news/secretary-of-state-ev-session/>

cause significant damage to the reputation and integrity of the House of Commons as a whole, or of its Members generally'.⁵³ Many at Westminster have operated for far too long under the illusion that the public like, even love, the current form of PMQs. Our research – the first time qualitative and quantitative analysis of public attitudes to PMQs has been undertaken – should put an end to this myth. Some people like the tone and format of PMQs but they are a minority; for most citizens the behaviour witnessed at PMQs fosters negative perceptions of Parliament and damages the reputation and integrity of the House of Commons and MPs.

The Speaker currently has three options to deal with 'Order in the House'. Standing Order (SO) 43 allows him to order any Member 'whose conduct is grossly disorderly to withdraw immediately from the House during the remainder of that day's sitting'.⁵⁴ Alternatively, under SO 44 he can 'name' a Member 'immediately after the commission of the offence of disregarding the authority of the chair, or of persistently and wilfully obstructing the business of the House by abusing the rules of the House'.⁵⁵ In these circumstances the Member will be suspended from the House, in the first instance for five sitting days, for 20 days in the event of another suspension, and should they be named a third time the length of the penalty is left to the decision of the House. Members lose their salary for the duration of the suspension. Finally, under SO 46 the Speaker can, 'in case of grave disorder; adjourn the House if necessary' or 'suspend the sitting for a time to be named by him'.⁵⁶

The Speaker thus has at his disposal a range of penalties to punish poor behaviour and encourage better conduct. In practical terms, however, the Speaker applies such penalties mindful of precedence and conventions in the House. And ordering Members out of the chamber, 'naming' them and suspending the sitting during PMQs has not been conventional practice. It would also be particularly difficult to apply given that the poor behaviour is so widespread across all sides of the House and is actively encouraged and facilitated by the leading players in each party.

The penalties are also quite inflexible in that they require a Member to be removed from the House for a minimum of the rest of the day. This could be considered a disproportionate penalty for the act of shouting and behaving in excited fashion in the chamber. What is needed is a 'sin-bin' approach that would allow the Speaker to name a Member for disorderly conduct and require them to remove themselves from the chamber for the remainder of PMQs, or at his discretion, to impose a time limit penalty up to a set number of hours (perhaps three or four) during which time they would be barred from the chamber.

But to be effective, and to both protect the reputation and independence of the Office of the Speaker, and in turn strengthen his ability to act to protect the reputation of the House, there needs to be cross-party agreement on the range of penalties and the circumstances in which it would be reasonable to apply them.

53 House of Commons (2012), *The Code of Conduct together with the Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members*, HC 1885, p.5.

54 Standing Orders of the House of Commons, Public Business, 19 December 2013, SO 43, p.46.

55 Standing Orders of the House of Commons, Public Business, 19 December 2013, SO 44, pp.46-47.

56 Standing Orders of the House of Commons, Public Business, 19 December 2013, SO 46, p.48.

The History of PMQs

PMQs in its current form is a relatively modern invention. The model has changed and developed over the years but often to the government rather than Parliament's advantage.

In the 19th century, questions to the Prime Minister were treated no differently to questions put to any other minister; they could be asked on any day when ministers were present, without notice, and were dealt with in whatever order MPs rose to ask them.

A series of piecemeal changes were introduced from the late 1880s onwards largely as a matter of practical and administrative convenience rather than any explicit desire to achieve specific political or scrutiny objectives.

As a courtesy to the elderly Prime Minister, William Gladstone, it was agreed in 1881 that questions would be placed last on each day's list so that he might attend the House late. In the years that followed, the combination of an increase in the number of questions to all ministers, a growth in the popularity of supplementary questions, and restrictions on the time available meant that questions to the Prime Minister were rarely reached. In 1904 it was therefore agreed that they should begin no later than Question 45 on each day's list but this still meant that in practice they were often not reached. With the exception of the period between 1919 and 1922 when they were moved to begin no later than Question 25, this situation prevailed until 1953. Then, again as a courtesy to an elderly and ailing Prime Minister, it was agreed that Winston Churchill would answer only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a convention that was subsequently adopted by Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. But oral questions to the Prime Minister remained infrequent as question 45 was rarely reached.

It was only in 1961 that Prime Minister's Questions as we recognise it today was introduced following an inquiry by the Select Committee on Procedure and on the advice of the then Leader of the House, R.A. Butler MP. PMQs took place for 15 minutes twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays until replaced by a 30-minute slot on Wednesdays in 1997.* But in the early years of its twice-weekly incarnation the Prime Minister did not routinely answer questions about the full gamut of government policy, opting to direct questions to the appropriate departmental minister. This only changed during James Callaghan's premiership when the 'open' question, 'if he will list his engagements today?' was devised. This was not a transferable question and could be followed up by a supplementary question on any topic.

Until recently, the questions were also largely posed by backbenchers. It was widely accepted that the Leader of the Opposition could be called on both days and pose a supplementary but until the 1980s the occupants of the post did not always take up their full entitlement. If Mrs Thatcher, for example, was due to participate in another debate on a Tuesday or Thursday she would often not participate at all in that day's session. Neil Kinnock, however, asked a much

higher proportion of questions as Leader of the Opposition and John Smith was the first to take a full allocation of three questions per 15 minute session, a precedent now followed by his successors.

* This brief historical overview draws on G.W. Jones, 'The Prime Minister and Parliamentary Questions', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 26, 1972-73, pp. 260-273; S.R Bates, P. Kerr, C. Byrne and L. Stanley, 'Questions to the Prime Minister: A Comparative Study of PMQs from Thatcher to Cameron', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 67, No.2 (forthcoming). Available via advance access online at <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/09/24/pa.gss044.full>; and House of Commons Procedure Committee (2002), 3rd Report of the 2001-02 Session, *Parliamentary Questions*, HC 622, paras. 49-62.

4. Rebuilding Parliament's reputation

Reputation is a matter of perception as much as fact and, whilst easily destroyed, it can be incredibly difficult to rebuild. It is a deeply embedded emotional response rather than a purely rational one, and is rooted in perceptions built on past experiences as well as anticipated future behaviour.

These research findings in this report – particularly in relation to public perceptions of PMQs – shine a light on how the public's knowledge, assumptions and impressions of Parliament currently inform their interpretation and understanding of the institution, both good and bad. They help identify a number of key underlying themes and factors – positive and negative – that need either to be accentuated or ameliorated if the reputation of Parliament is to be rehabilitated in the future.

But reputation can only be improved if the measures put in place to address problems are perceived to be authentic by those external to the organisation. This is particularly true of an institution such as a legislature that is subject to much greater on-going scrutiny than many other bodies. The public must perceive that the reforms undertaken by the institution are informed by a genuine set of values and beliefs rather than an act of mere expediency. Change needs to be genuine rather than a veneer.

Fix the symbolic issue

Institutions facing reputational challenges often look to address 'symbolic' issues in order to disrupt the direction of public perceptions and force people to look again with fresh eyes. Political parties are particularly familiar with this approach: the Labour Party with its 'Clause 4' moment and the Conservative's 'compassionate conservatism' agenda.

For Parliament the culture and conduct of Prime Minister's Questions is the single most 'symbolic' issue that acts as a cue to wider public perceptions of the institution. Changing PMQs in some way would provide a high profile reform to disrupt settled assumptions and clearly signal to the public that the political leaders 'get' the problem and are seeking to do something about it. Precisely because PMQs is so dominant in public perceptions of Parliament it would exemplify that a real and serious process of change was underway. Conveying an authentic acceptance of the public's criticism, it would be both a cathartic and contritional act.

Face the truth or perish

Any organisation or institution that successfully manages to improve its reputation does so only

after much soul-searching and a willingness to confront uncomfortable home truths and hard, often unpalatable choices. They do not minimise the impact and importance of perception even if they regard it to be unjust or simply inaccurate.

A good example of this is the approach adopted by Her Majesty the Queen following the *annus horribilis* of 1992. The Royal Family privately commissioned MORI to conduct opinion polls to explore various aspects of the public's regard for the Queen and other senior members of the family. This reportedly concluded that the public deemed them irrelevant and poor value for money, perceptions that then shaped the Royal Family's response.

What followed were policies to pay income tax, reduce the size of the civil list, open Buckingham Palace to the public, shelve plans for a new Royal Yacht, overhaul the programme of public events undertaken by senior royals, and professionalise staffing in key areas of the Royal Household, particularly in the areas of communications and finance. Today, Her Majesty the Queen has a net satisfaction rating of +83% compared to +51% in 1997; public satisfaction with the work of Prince Charles has increased from 42% in 1997 to 78% by June 2012. And faith in the institution of monarchy has remained steadfast at around 70-80% throughout this period.⁵⁷ Crucial to their turn around in fortunes was a willingness to accept the value and validity of the research, confront hard truths and make difficult decisions.

Parliament needs to adopt a similar mindset. It does not want to be known among the citizens it serves as an out of touch, elitist, ineffective, dishonest, childish, pointless body. But this will not change unless it is prepared to confront the reality of public perceptions and deal with them head on, however unfair such perceptions are deemed to be by Members or officials. And it also has to accept the additional burden of knowing that more is expected of it than other institutions and organisations precisely because of its role at the apex of our democracy.

The parliamentary expenses crisis drained Parliament's pool of reputational capital; there is little in reserve should there be another scandal of some kind. It is therefore imperative that Parliament acts with a greater sense of urgency to address its reputational problems before a new crisis breaks. It must shift the dynamic from a reactive to a proactive stance, recognising that the costs of inaction are incalculable.

And our focus group findings suggest public attitudes could deteriorate still further if left untreated. Much emphasis has rightly been placed on the important work of select committees in recent years. But our findings suggest that their work may pose a new, unintended reputational challenge for Parliament in the medium term. The participants' response to the work of committees was underwhelming in some respects, particularly regarding their powers and resources. But more potently, unless Parliament puts its own house in order – addresses its own behavioural, cultural, and governance challenges – then the sight of select committees berating the chief executives and

57 See Ipsos MORI, Royal Family/Monarchy Trends – Index Page, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2423>

chairs of banks, public bodies, energy companies, and media companies for their organisational and management inadequacies could backfire. There is a real risk that the House of Commons specifically and Parliament generally may be accused of hypocrisy; a charge that will stick all too easily and damagingly in public perceptions. (For an example of this risk, see the case study – Parliament and the national game – page 67-70.)

Reputation is the result of a combination of reality and perception so there needs to be a close alignment of both factors at all times. There is real risk for an organisation in being perceived to be 'better' than what they suggest through their words and deeds. Conversely, however, when what is perceived of an organisation is worse than it really is, as is currently the case with Parliament, then a 'zone of opportunity' opens up, presenting new, challenging but exciting possibilities to address the gap between perception and reality.⁵⁸

Our findings suggest that those opportunities for Parliament fall into four key areas. It must address:

- The sense that it is 'out of touch'
- Concern about behaviour and values
- Questions about format and effectiveness
- A perceived lack of accountability

Out of touch

The perception of Parliament as out of touch – a place for the wealthy, public school elite – is intrinsically, and unavoidably, linked to the current make-up of the House of Commons. It may be more pronounced a problem at present because so many of the senior politicians in Parliament so readily fit the stereotype and therefore give it added force. It's possible that this problem will thus resolve itself over the course of the next decade with the ebb and flow of the electoral cycle; but ultimately, only if the political parties take action to select candidates that better reflect the social make-up of the country. The focus groups didn't provide a clear indication of how this should be done but there was a clear preference for politicians who were less career orientated and more independently minded. Some commented on the need for electoral reform in order to bring about change.

The sense of being 'out of touch' also manifests itself in relation to the lack of civility on display in Parliament. The behaviour they witness is simply not like that seen in most other walks of life and is considered unprofessional. They want passion and commitment in the debating chamber, but not misbehaviour.

The focus group participants inferred from such behaviour that MPs themselves lack self-respect and pride in their work. But more importantly they were frustrated and angered by the pantomime theatre and the partisan point-scoring on the serious issues which affect their daily lives. The

evasiveness, finger-pointing, and perceived lack of seriousness undermine what is said and give the impression that the politicians look down on the public.

It is ironic that, in the eyes of the public, the political class is so poor at communications, which is after all one of the key skills of their profession. The problem is not just one of language – although clearly the adoption of straightforward, down to earth language was desirable – but one of mood and tone. The lack of context to parliamentary debate is also problematic, particularly when combined with the noise of the Commons chamber. The focus group participants felt that much of what happened in Parliament pre-supposed some level of prior knowledge. It was suggested that text box explanations or subtitles on screen during PMQs or select committees, providing a running text commentary on the issues and explaining key terms would be helpful. Placing greater emphasis on keyword links to explanations and related content to enable interested citizens to follow issues and questions online was also suggested. This would also address the viewers' sense of feeling stupid and looked down on: they could access the information without having to admit that they need it.

The perception of Parliament as an old, elitist building, steeped in ceremony, ritual and tradition also contributes to the perception that Parliament has an inward-looking culture. It is recognised as a great institution but it doesn't touch the public emotionally in the way it perhaps did in the past. However, this presents a clear opportunity for Parliament. Many other organisations find heritage to be an effective communications tool to underpin their reputation by introducing people to them in new ways.

The sports company, Nike, for example, has invested heavily in corporate 'storytelling' since the 1970s in order to build an association between its heritage – the sense of purpose that created the organisation – and its future vision. Here, the stories they tell about their past shape their future and create a culture built on a real sense of purpose. These stories are not about the super-star athletes but about the three founders of the company. All new staff at the company undertake a two-day induction programme and the company's heritage is always the number one item on their agenda. The 'storytellers' develop archetypes that people inside and outside the organisation can learn from, that help build an emotional connection to the organisation and the sense that it is a unique place to work.

Parliament is perceived to be an increasingly soulless institution that fails to touch citizens at an emotional level. Its rich heritage provides the necessary material for curating stories that could bring together information and experiences to promote the concept and tell the story of democracy, enlisting support from citizens through stories they already care about such as health, education, transport, or sport. Parliament's own history could be utilised in the service of its future, acting like a third party endorser of the kind used in the corporate world. The Magna Carta and de Montfort Parliament anniversaries in 2015 provide the platform for such an approach.

Behaviour and values

As a physical building the Palace of Westminster, more than most, carries profound ideological symbolism in relation to probity and integrity based on implicit understandings about the nature and morality of law. Yet the public do not believe that the politicians who inhabit it are generally men and women of probity and integrity. It should be a matter of profound concern to parliamentarians, MPs in particular, that the positive personal and political values they espouse and share fail to make any impression on the public, lost as they are amidst the partisan bickering.

It is MPs (and Peers), not 'employees' of the institution, that have the closest association with the public of any group within Parliament. The role and conduct of individual parliamentarians is thus vital: every interaction they have with the public affects not just citizens' views of them and their party but also of Parliament itself.⁵⁹ It is not clear, however, that Members sufficiently recognise their collective obligations to the reputation of Parliament as they do to that of their party.

Many of the participants in the focus groups evoked their own workplace experiences when reflecting on the conduct and professionalism of MPs. What they desired was for politicians to be guided by the standards that apply elsewhere. This would point to greater emphasis on standards and ethics training as part of a continuing professional development programme. This does not exist at Westminster at present. It is doubtful that all MPs can recite the Seven Principles of Public Life laid down by the Committee for Standards in Public Life; they are not embedded in the daily life of Parliament in the way that mission and values are embedded by the most effective companies in the workplace.

Certain professions have to publicly demonstrate their commitment to a shared set of values and principles, to ethical behaviour and integrity. Police officers swear an oath when they join the police service, doctors take the Hippocratic oath and lawyers also swear an oath to ethical conduct. MPs do swear an oath at the start of the Parliament but this is one of loyalty to the Crown. Increasingly the concept of a 'duty of care' is now being discussed in relation to those sectors that have suffered an egregious loss of reputation in recent years, including banks and the media. Hitherto the concept of a 'duty of care' has related entirely to the idea that an obligation was owed to elements of civil society such as the armed forces or the elderly. However, it is now being extended to other sectors.

Lord Puttnam has argued that a duty of care 'for our shared but fragile democratic values' should be developed in relation to the media, focusing on standards and values such as honesty, accuracy and impartiality.⁶⁰ Similarly, John Studzinski, Senior Managing Director of The Blackstone Group has called for the development of a 'duty of care' in the banking sector that would require employees to 'demonstrate a certain type of ethical and moral fibre'.⁶¹ He has suggested that bankers

59 By way of example, in our 2011-12 focus groups a number of participants had positive stories to tell about MPs, but these were almost all due to personal interactions or second hand stories of other family and friends who had contacted an MP or Councillor. And the quality of this interaction – regardless of the outcome – was vital to their perception of the wider political scene.

60 Lord Puttnam, speech at the Institute of International and European Affairs, Dublin, 22 March 2013.

61 J. Studzinski, keynote speech to the annual You Gov-Cambridge Forum, 12 September 2012, in You Gov-Cambridge Forum, 'Public trust in banking', Spring symposium, April 2013, p.28.

should be required on their first day of work to raise their hand and swear a duty of care oath. It would, he argues, be a powerful symbol to drive people to take their profession more seriously. Parliamentarians ought to set an example, recognising that they have a 'duty of care' to the core institution of our democracy by augmenting the current oaths used in the House of Commons and Lords to incorporate a public declaration to ethical conduct and integrity by all parliamentarians.

The concept of setting an example was a theme that ran through all the focus groups. Participants felt MPs have enormous power and influence at their disposal and make important decisions that affect the lives of ordinary people but consistently fail to set an example in doing so. What the public want are politicians who regard service in Parliament as more of a vocation than a job, prioritise the public interest over private gain and are prepared to make sacrifices along the way.

Linked to this, the public sense that today's politicians lack the courage to properly engage with them about the serious issues facing the country. The combination of culture and communication – the unwillingness to answer a straightforward question, the evasiveness and finger-pointing – feeds the sense that people are being deceived, manipulated and kept in the dark. The onus is on political leaders to find a way to engage with the public in more effective, authentic ways.

Format and effectiveness

One way to facilitate this would be to focus the work of Parliament increasingly away from the chamber. Size and scale matters to the public. Respondents in the focus groups wanted to see Parliament operate in smaller groups, as this was perceived to be a more effective means of reaching compromise. PMQs so dominates public awareness of Parliament that it gives viewers the impression that this is the only format in which Parliament operates. But the participants could not understand how any work could be done effectively in a room holding up to 650 people. The number of MPs present is seen as a barrier to effective debates – with many of the participants quoting examples of having seen MPs 'dozing off'.⁶² A shift towards committee focused work has been underway for several years. But this needs to be augmented and new ways found to open up the work of committees to the public. There needs to be much greater emphasis on outcomes and results from committee work in order to convey to the public that this form of parliamentary activity is valuable. At present, the public do not really know what Parliament does so it is difficult for them to have a view as to whether it is effective.

There was also a desire for clear, strong leadership. The need for Parliament to be under control if it was to have any control over the country was evident in a number of the groups.

Across a range of sectors it is estimated that the person in charge of a body can affect the reputation of an organisation by up to 50% and by extension changing the identity of that person can provide a significant uplift in reputation in the event of a problem. It is the Chief Executive that

⁶² In fact, due to the amount of noise in the Chamber, many MPs rest their heads backwards in order to hear what is being said, as there are discreet speakers set into the benches to aid them. This may be misinterpreted by some members of the public as MPs sleeping. Reducing the noise in the Chamber would reduce the likelihood of this negative misperception.

drives the culture and behaviour of an organisation, sets the tone, embeds its values in all that it does, and provides strategic oversight of its reputation. Leaders have a defining role in shaping the contours of reform; unless the leader of an organisation 'buys into' any changes reform will ultimately be ineffective.

This represents a significant challenge for Parliament because it does not have a single 'leader'; it is a headless body. The governance architecture of Parliament is complex and there is no central decision-making body or process of a kind that can be found in companies, charities or public sector bodies. The Speaker of the House of Commons is the 'chief officer and highest authority' of the House but the powers of the position are carefully constrained and he cannot act unilaterally in a number of areas where the reputation of Parliament is at stake, including, for example, behaviour at Prime Minister's Questions.⁶³ Indeed, while Speaker Bercow has been active in chiding Members for their behaviour, his efforts have not been wholly supported.

The administration and services of the House of Commons fall under the auspices of the House of Commons Commission. This is comprised of elected Members who delegate day-to-day operations to officials through the House Management Board. Similarly in the House of Lords, the Lord Speaker has a prominent ceremonial and ambassadorial role but her authority is more limited than her counterpart in the Commons. Operational matters lie with the House Committee with authority delegated day-to-day to the House of Lords Management Board. But in both Houses, political leadership provided by Members and parties is crucial. There is a 'leader' in both Houses who sits in Cabinet, as well as the respective party leaders. The party leaders do not directly 'lead' Parliament but when a crisis hits, as it did in the expenses scandal, it is they who provide the visible response. However, they speak from a position of party interest rather than the collective needs of Parliament as a whole. This provides a governance and cultural challenge for the institution in communicating with the public generally, but particularly at times of crisis.

This governance and accountability model inhibits the pursuit of a clearly agreed reform strategy, and is largely reactive rather than proactive. In other organisations, a 'committee' or 'sub-group' would be tasked with exploring and implementing reforms. The Leader of the organisation would be a member of the group or it would report to them, reflecting the 'buy in' at the top of the organisation. The Royal Family established 'The Way Ahead' group consisting of members of the family and a number of senior advisers who met several times a year to address its reputational concerns. Companies and public sector bodies will frequently set up task forces or working groups to address similar challenges. 'Special situation' teams that can be readily activated to co-ordinate an effective response in the event of a crisis are set up, and companies have stand alone 'reputation management departments' whose remit is to embed consideration of reputational matters throughout the organisation.

In Parliament, there is no equivalent body. Reform comes through a number of disparate channels: in

the House of Commons, for example, the Leader of the House, the Speaker, the House of Commons Commission, the Liaison Committee, the Procedure Committee, the Standards Committee, and Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards all play a role in relation to broad matters pertaining to the House's reputation. There is no single body, either on a unicameral or bicameral basis within Parliament with a clear remit to address reputational risk and push through much needed reforms. As a consequence, there is a vacuum at the political (if not the officer) level in terms of prioritising and co-ordinating action to address reputational matters within the institution. This needs to be addressed.

Lack of accountability

There is also a damaging sense of unaccountable leadership because the public generally do not perceive that MPs are accountable to them, even at elections. They are not in favour of direct democracy apart from greater use of referendums;⁶⁴ what they want is a better political class and level of leadership. But in the meantime they no longer trust their elected representatives to represent them and want an oversight role for the public and/or experts, as long as that role does not have to be taken up by them personally.

This desire for a role for ordinary members of the public or experts in particular fields manifests itself in two key ways. There is some interest in having a presence on committees in order to ensure that 'users' or people affected by particular policies are part of the policy discussion on a par with MPs. This is seen as a route to greater effectiveness. Experts and members of the public – particularly service users – are of course invited to give evidence to select committees on a regular basis and there are now three independent members of the public on the House of Commons Standards Committee. But awareness of these provisions is extremely low outside the confines of Westminster. The second route is through a public question time model that would enable members of the public to ask questions in a format like BBC *Question Time* or the party leaders' debates. But these are non-parliamentary events so careful consideration would need to be given to what kind of parliamentary format could be adapted to facilitate more direct one-to-one questioning of particular MPs or groups of MPs.

Parliamentary Councils

One way to engage the public, and to help in addressing reputational issues, would be to establish a series of regional consultative groups or 'Parliamentary Councils' to advise the House of Commons and House of Lords on future reform. Many public and private sector bodies develop on-going consultation mechanisms with communities of interest, consumers and stakeholders in order to inform their thinking and help them develop their ideas in the long-term. Such bodies are used as a way to test ideas or products, calibrate expectations and explore how reasonable the organisation's proposed approach is deemed to be. They are also used to help inform communications, ensuring that expectations – internal and external – are managed and the organisation does not overpromise and thereby unwittingly inflict further reputational damage on itself.

64 Hansard Society (2012), *Audit of Political Engagement 9: The 2012 report: Part One* (London: Hansard Society), p.62.

For Parliament, the BBC's regional Audience Councils provide a model format for consideration. Four Councils – for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – advise the BBC Trust, providing 'informed insights on the views, needs and interests of audiences in their respective nations, and on how well the BBC is serving these audiences and delivering its public purposes'.⁶⁵ The Councils consist of independent volunteers aged 16+ who are appointed to three-year terms. Each member of the national panels leads a sub-panel in their own region – e.g. Yorkshire and Humberside, East of England. Certain categories of people are ineligible (office holders in political parties, senior public servants, BBC staff etc). The time demand is around 12 days per year.⁶⁶ They produce an annual report to the Trust, review services and policies, and play a role in helping to identify issues of importance to local audiences.

Rather than a traditional open recruitment process that is likely to attract an unrepresentative group of citizens, consideration could be given to trying to recruit more representative Councils through selection of citizens to an agreed quota, in much the same way that 66 citizens were recruited to serve as part of the Irish Constitutional Convention.⁶⁷

Parliament could thus benefit from non-expert advice from members of the general public, using the Councils as a sounding board and a means to test out reform ideas and priorities.

Restoration and renewal

Looking to the future, the Restoration and Renewal Programme may also provide a unique opportunity for Parliament to think more imaginatively than ever before about how it engages with the public and what principles like 'accountability', 'accessibility' and 'transparency' should mean in a 21st century legislature. If the option of moving out of the Palace of Westminster is adopted in order to facilitate a major programme of restoration work, then this would open up a huge array of possibilities arising from the decision about where to locate both Houses in the intervening years.

A different building would mean that public access and engagement with the work of the legislature could be developed in entirely new ways, there could be more focus on parliamentary activity outside London – for example, select committee visits or regional MP question time sessions – and a much greater integration of new technology to support this engagement work. Decanting out of the building might also facilitate a re-design of some of the interior of the restored Palace of Westminster to improve public access in the future, enabling Parliament to conduct its business in new ways that are more mindful of public perceptions of the institution.

Throughout our focus groups we sensed that the participants felt powerless and daunted by the scale of their dissatisfaction with Parliament and politicians. There were suggestions at times that they recognised that the problems with the political system are now so significant that small, incremental changes won't solve the problems facing the country and that perhaps the time has

65 http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/who_we_are/audience_councils/
 66 http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/audience_councils/ac_role_description.pdf
 67 <https://www.constitution.ie/Documents/BehaviourAndAttitudes.pdf>

come for radical measures and a complete overhaul.

The Restoration and Renewal Programme offers the possibility of a rare, *once in a century* opportunity to fundamentally re-think the entire culture and conduct of parliamentary politics as a 21st century enterprise through the physical restructuring of the institution at the apex of our democracy.

Case study: Managing reputation: Parliament and the national game

Complex constitutional architecture and governance and multiple sources of leadership all with different aims and priorities are one of the regular explanations as to why Parliament struggles to respond to its reputational problems and reform itself. 'Parliament is different' is a regular refrain.

There are no perfect analogies but there are nonetheless examples in other sectors of institutions or organisations that have brought about a rehabilitation of their reputation from which Parliament could learn. For example, the restoration of the Royal Family's reputation following the work of 'The Way Ahead' group or companies such as Marks and Spencer⁶⁸ that manage to maintain high reputations despite facing declining consumer sales in particular areas of their business.

But another example – football – makes for an interesting case study. Our national game, like Parliament, faces complex governance and leadership challenges, is riven with vested interests, and is the object of ongoing, highly-charged media scrutiny. Its reputational problems have not been eradicated but they are different today from what they were 20 years ago.⁶⁹ In the 1980s, football was blighted by hooliganism, racism and tragedy. By the late 1990s, the reputation of the game had been transformed: safe and family-friendly, it became a multi-billion pound industry and the Premier League attained the status of the pre-eminent league in international football.

Throughout these years the national game has been an enduring source of political interest and a number of current or former politicians have had leadership roles in the game at either national or club level.⁷⁰ Both the national game and Parliament have a complex governance infrastructure in which not all of the component parts share a common interest and pull in the same direction. The House of Commons and the House of Lords each have their own interests and objectives and consequently they do not always act in concert. There are 650 MPs and 800+ Peers in each House respectively, each with their own role and their own perspective on the challenges facing Parliament. The activities of each House are also influenced by the differences between government and opposition, and between the political parties (as well as the cross-benchers and Lords Spiritual in the House of Lords). The array of committees that play a role in the reform agenda, and the different bodies that provide for the delegation of operational responsibilities to parliamentary staff, add further layers to the complex organisational structure (see pages 62-63). Similarly, in football, the FA has responsibility for governance of the game at all levels but the Premier League and the Football League are highly influential. Within each League there are 20+ clubs who each have

68 See for example, Reputation Institute, UK RepTrak® Pulse 2013, Reputation Survey results, UK report, 17 April 2012.

69 Today, the background and intentions of billionaire club owners, the stratospheric salaries commanded by leading players, the managerial merry-go-round, and behaviour on the pitch at all levels are more of a concern.

70 For example, Andy Burnham MP, Lord Reid of Cardowan, Lord Sugar, Lord Triesman and Lord Burns.

their own interests and concerns and at each club managers and players upon whose shoulders sits considerable responsibility for the overall reputation of the game.

It is a paradox of modern politics that MPs spend more time in their local constituency than any generation of politicians before them but are deemed by the public to be ever more out of touch. Similarly, in football, clubs have a strong corporate social responsibility commitment and players are more engaged in charitable activities than ever before, but little of this is actually perceived by the public and the ethics and integrity of the game remain under the microscope. In politics, as in football, money washes through the system and yet the political parties and football clubs are more indebted than ever and serious questions continue to be asked about access and undue influence being exercised by a small number of people within the system. This coupled with a more market-oriented approach to their work has corrupted relationships and clubs and political parties are increasingly detached from their local communities and have a fractured relationship with their fans and members respectively. Politics is beset by ministerial reshuffles in the same way that football is marred by the managerial merry-go-round; and the way in which players and managers fail to support, indeed actively undermine, the authority of referees is mirrored in politics by the conduct of MPs in the House of Commons chamber, particularly at PMQs. And of course, both politics and football attract an extraordinary level of highly-charged media attention with politics increasingly treated like a game and conversely the national game treated like a political football.

Today governance and regulatory responsibilities are a prime focus of political interest in the national game. Most recently an inquiry by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee was highly critical of the Football Association (FA), concluding that it was a dysfunctional body that did not respond quickly enough to challenges and which was unable – in conjunction with the Premier League and Football League – to agree a common vision for the long-term health of the game.⁷¹ Governance structures, it argued, had not kept pace with the change in the global popularity of the game and the accompanying rise in public expectations. Since then the Sports Minister, concerned at the slow response of the governing bodies, has threatened to legislate to address the problems.

The thrust of the select committee's critique may be broadly correct but it raises an interesting question about Parliament's role: couldn't the same charges of dysfunction, slow-response to problems, and a lack of collective vision apply equally as much to it as to the FA? And if so, doesn't Parliament risk an accusation of hypocrisy if it is seen to be doing little to address the problem? Indeed, precisely because of its role at the heart of our democracy with responsibility for scrutinising the governance and leadership of other bodies, there is a particular onus on Parliament to ensure that it acts expeditiously to address its own difficulties and short-comings.

Looking at the way reputations evolve, however, the shift in the perception of football since the 1980s also poses some interesting thoughts for Parliament, for the change can be traced back to a combination of tragedy and technology, timing and investment.

71 See House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2011), 7th Report of Session 2010-12, *Football governance*, HC 792; and House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2013), 4th Report of Session 2012-13, *Football governance – follow-up*, HC 509.

The aftermath of the Heysel stadium disaster obliterated football's traditional revenue model when English clubs were banned from European competition. The Taylor Inquiry into the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster then demanded the physical reconstruction of the game with an emphasis on increased safety through new all-seater stadia. However, none of the clubs could afford the infrastructure changes and as a consequence the government subsidised them, disguising its investment of public money by routing football pools tax through the Football Trust (previously called the Football Grounds Improvement Trust). It then provided much of the capital revenue required by the clubs to upgrade their facilities. And by the time the leading clubs had agreed to form the Premier League in the early 1990s, satellite technology was well established with Sky as the dominant player in the television market and therefore able to offer a lucrative deal for the new television rights. A few years earlier, and the infancy of the technology combined with greater competition in the television market, might have resulted in less money flowing to the game and the history of what followed might therefore have been very different.

This poses two interesting lessons. Firstly, the quality of the national game would not have been enhanced without significant public investment in the form of infrastructure subsidy. In contrast, today the prevailing mantra of the political class is that the cost of politics must be cut. At a time of austerity it is right to focus on waste, ensure value for money and that funds are not being siphoned off for personal gain as with the parliamentary expenses system of a few years ago. But if public investment in the national game can be justified by successive governments, then such investment in our democratic system must surely be a similarly justifiable outlay in the future? A strong case can be made across a range of areas – parliamentary committee resourcing, the election system, citizenship education in schools to name just three – where modest investment to 'upgrade' the quality of our democratic infrastructure could make a real difference. And the restoration and renewal project for the Palace of Westminster itself will require significant public investment to physically reconstruct the home of parliamentary democracy (see page 65).

Secondly, technology and timing combined to force the pace of change in football and it largely happened in spite of, not because of, the governors of the national game. The FA, perceived to be an old-fashioned, out of touch body, saw the Premier League as an opportunity to 'castrate' the influence of the Football League, which it saw as a competitor, rather than develop a collective vision for the game. The consequence of its short-sightedness was that it helped birth a new, and ultimately far more influential rival, in the Premier League itself. The risk for Parliament is that unless it responds effectively to public discontent it will find its legitimacy increasingly in question. And if it does not act in time to take greatest advantage of new technology – to shape and lead change – it will be dragged along in its wake. The change will happen to Parliament, rather than with it and the consequences may prove deeply discomfiting to the parties and parliamentarians on all sides.

The Speaker's recent announcement of a Commission on Digital Democracy is an important recognition of the challenge technology poses but this came about as a personal initiative of the Speaker and is focused on the House of Commons. Such big, strategic questions that go to the heart of the future influence and reputation of Parliament should be forthcoming at the initiative of,

and with more collective engagement and commitment from, the political leadership in Parliament, across both Houses.

The drivers that forced change in football, and thereby brought about a change in its reputation, can be explained by a simple equation:⁷²

$$\frac{\text{Tragedy (Heysel and Hillsborough)}}{\text{Technological revolution (satellite TV)}} = \text{Change}$$

Looking at the challenges facing Parliament, a good case can be made that its equation might be:

$$\frac{\text{Restoration and renewal}}{\text{Technological revolution}} = \text{Change}$$

⁷² Interview with Dr Rogan Taylor, Director of the Football Industry Group, School of Management, University of Liverpool, July 2013.

Appendix I: The North-South divide

Analysis of *Audit* data⁷³ shows that there is some evidence of a north-south divide in people's attitudes to politics and Parliament.

On a range of core political engagement indicators, respondents in London have been noticeably more positive than those in other regions over the course of the last few years, closely followed by people from the South East, the South West and the East of England. From the Midlands, Wales and north to Scotland, attitudes towards politics have been markedly worse.

Where knowledge of Parliament is concerned, Londoners have stood apart in feeling knowledgeable about Parliament, perhaps explained by their geographic closeness to the Palace of Westminster. Respondents in the South East, South West and East of England have also all felt more knowledgeable about Parliament than those in regions in the north of England. Comparison with knowledge of local councils also serves to underline the point.

Figure 14 below shows the aggregate percentage values for those who feel they know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about Parliament and local councils, minus those who feel they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about them. It illustrates that the differences between the regions are not uniform but there is a clear geographical pattern. Although, as the graph shows, people in the North East are a rare exception to the rule in feeling more knowledgeable about local government than anywhere else outside London.

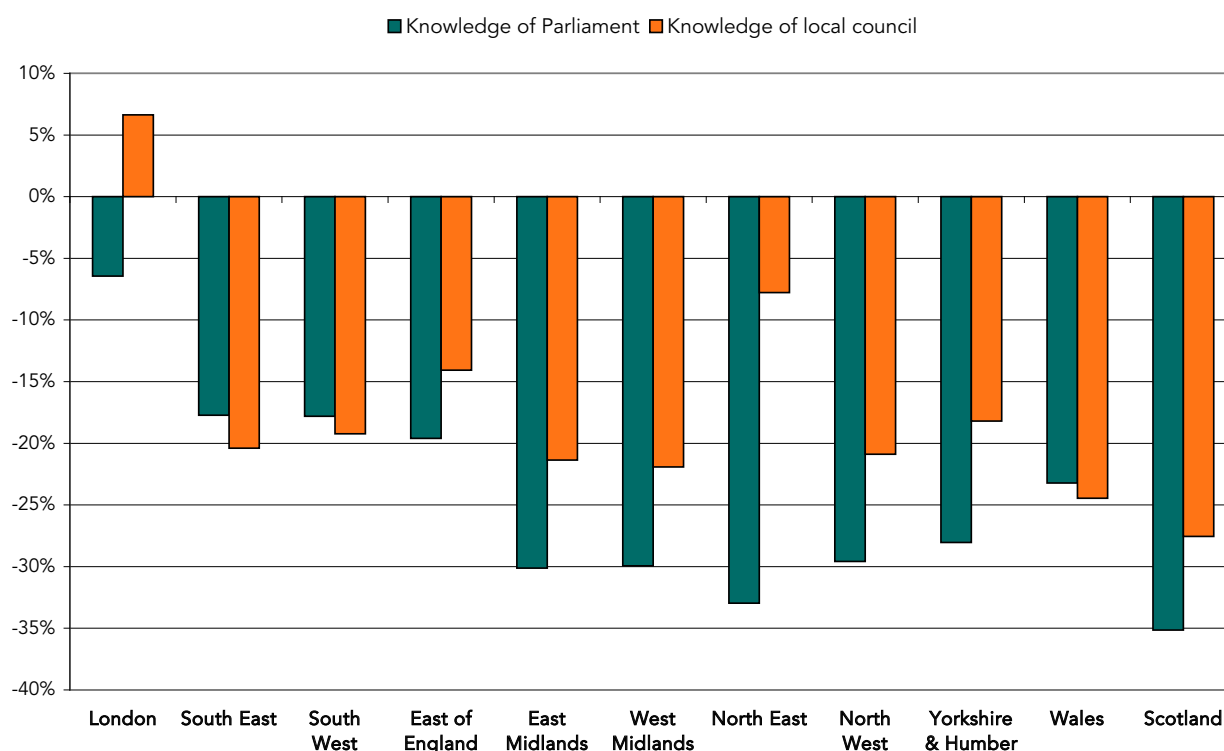
⁷³ A dataset combining the data from the first 10 years of *Audit of Political Engagement* opinion polls can be found at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/public-attitudes/audit-of-political-engagement/>

Figure 14: Knowledge of Parliament and local councils

Q. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about...

- the UK Parliament? (Asked as 'Westminster Parliament' from 2003-2009)
- your local council?

Aggregate percentage values for those who feel they know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about Parliament/local council minus those who feel they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all'



Parliament Base: 7,931 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2012. See Appendix IV.

Local Council Base: 4,432 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2009. See Appendix IV.

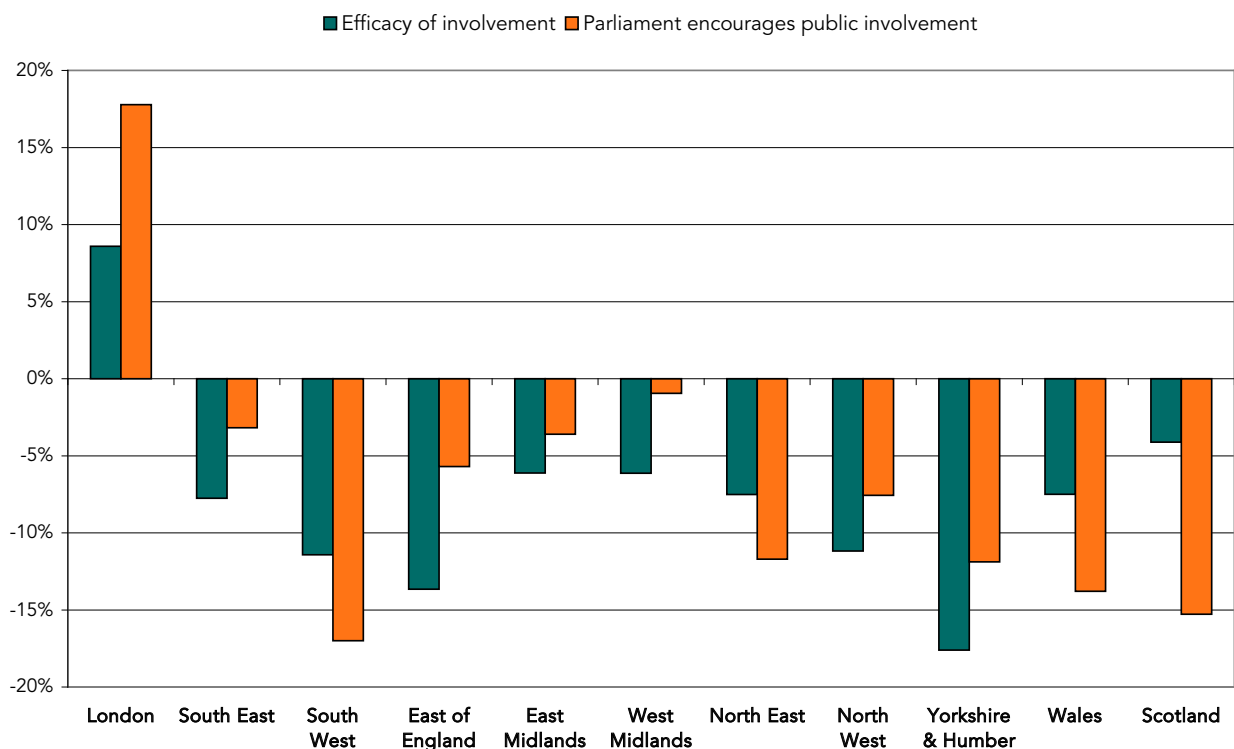
Londoners, in the last couple of years, have also been significantly more positive in their belief that getting involved in politics can be effective, and that Parliament encourages such involvement. They are dramatically more likely than people anywhere outside the capital to agree with these statements, and are the only ones to have positive aggregate scores for them. Here, however, as Figure 15 shows, the extent of the north-south divide between the southern regions outside London and those in the north is less apparent regarding involvement than it is in relation to knowledge. Indeed, over the course of the last decade, respondents in the South West have been some of the least positive about the efficacy of getting involved in politics and among the most dismissive of Parliament's efforts to encourage greater public involvement.

Figure 15: Involvement and Parliament

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

- When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run
- The UK Parliament encourages public involvement in politics

Aggregate percentage values for those who 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' minus those who 'tend to disagree' or 'strongly disagree'.



People like me Base: 12,231 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2012. See Appendix IV.

UK Parliament Base: 2,298 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2009. See Appendix IV.

Looking at satisfaction with Parliament and MPs, Londoners have been, once again, more satisfied than citizens in any other region and they are a bit less unhappy with our system of governing overall. Again, the geographical pattern is not uniform but outside London, citizens in the East of England and West Midlands record positive aggregate scores for satisfaction with Parliament over the course of the last decade. People in the South East, South West and East of England have been marginally less dissatisfied than those in northern regions, but the differences are slight. As Figure 16 shows, respondents in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber and Wales have been more negative than those in other areas.

Figure 16: Satisfaction with system of governing, Parliament and MPs

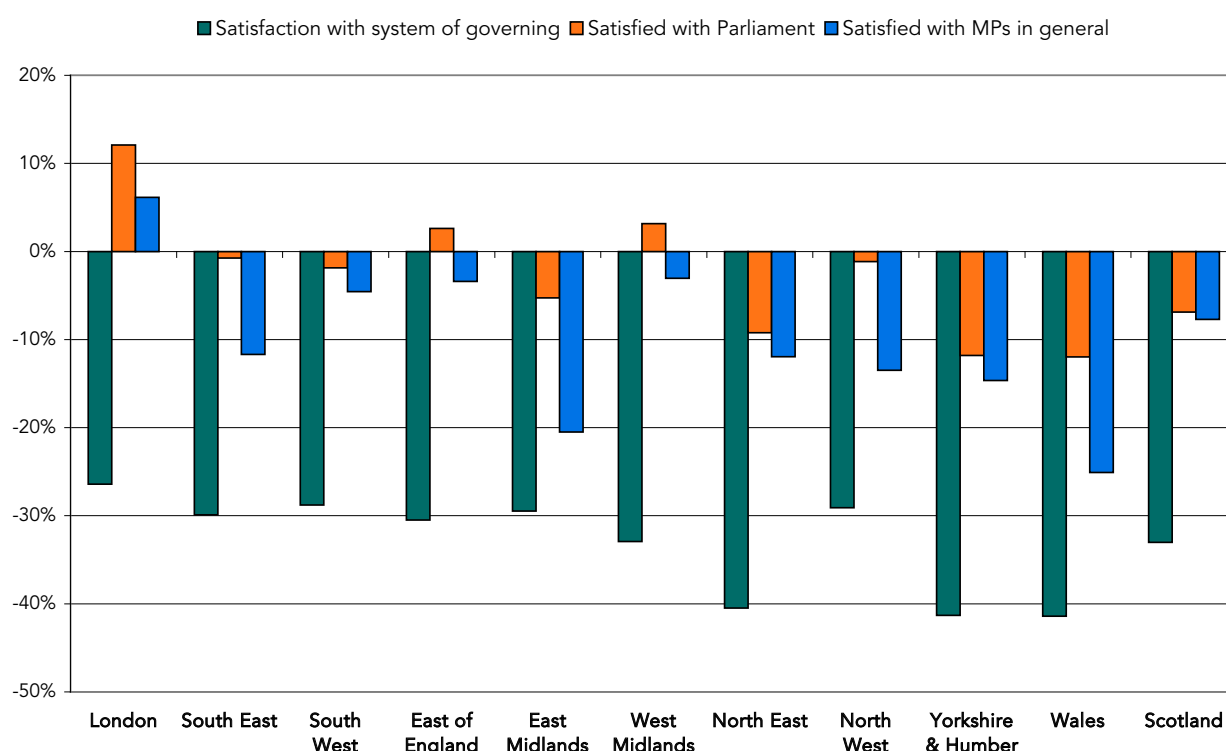
Q. Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?

Q. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that Parliament works?

Q. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their job?

Aggregate percentage values for those who say the system 'works extremely well and could not be improved' or 'could be improved in small ways but mainly works well' minus those who say it 'could be improved quite a lot' or 'needs a great deal of improvement'.

Aggregate percentage values for those who say they are 'very satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' minus those who say they are 'not very satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied'.



Present system of governing Base: 12,234 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2012. See Appendix IV.

The way Parliament works Base: 6,766 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2012. See Appendix IV.

The way MPs in general are doing their job Base: 5,565 GB adults, aged 18+. Fieldwork dates 2003-2012. See Appendix IV.

Appendix II: Focus group recruitment overview

Four online focus groups were conducted by YouGov on 8 and 10 October 2013.

Thirty eight respondents took part ranging in age from 19 to 84 and from a broad mix of educational and employment backgrounds. They were drawn from 35 different counties or metropolitan boroughs throughout the United Kingdom. The groups included people who claimed to have voted at the last election for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the UK Independence Party, and the British National Party as well as those who did not vote at all. Each participant received a gift voucher after the discussion as a small token of thanks for their participation.

| Group | Date & Time |
|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. National cross-section | Tuesday 8 October: 6:00 – 8:00pm |
| 2. Younger audience (18-34s) | Tuesday 8 October: 7:45 – 9:00pm |
| 3. Females C2DE – 35+ age skew | Thursday 10 October: 1:00 – 3:00pm |
| 4. Non-voters (at the 2010 general election) | Thursday 10 October: 6:00 – 8:00pm |

Group 1 – National cross-section

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Gender | 6 x men; 3 x women |
| Age | 24-84 |
| Social class | 4 x B 3 x C1 2 x C2 |
| Working status | 5 x working full-time (30 hours or more per week) 1 x working part-time (9-29 hours a week) 2 x retired 1 x full-time student |
| Education | 5 x University or CNA A first degree 2 x GCE, A Level or Higher Certificate 1 x No formal qualifications 1 x Don't know |

| | |
|--|---|
| Certainty to vote at next general election (10= absolutely certain; 1 = absolutely certain not to vote) | 2 x 10 3 x 9 1 x 8 2 x 7 1 x 6 |
| Location (based on Local Education Authority) | Conwy, Essex, Enfield, Hampshire, Lewisham, Nottingham, Solihul, Staffordshire, Tower Hamlets |

Group 2 – Younger audience (18-34s)

| | |
|--|--|
| Gender | 3 x men; 7 x women |
| Age | 10 x 20-34 |
| Social class | 6 x C1 3 x C2 1 x D |
| Working status | 8 x working full-time (30 hours or more per week) 1 x working part-time (9-29 hours a week) 1 x full-time student |
| Education | 4 x University or CNAAB first degree 2 x GCE, A Level or Higher Certificate 1 x CSE grade 1, GCE O level, GCSE, School Certificate 2 x Other technical, professional or higher education 1 x Clerical and commercial |
| Certainty to vote at next general election (10= absolutely certain; 1 = absolutely certain not to vote) | 2 x 9 2 x 8 2 x 7 2 x 5 2 x 4 |
| Location (based on Local Education Authority) | Blackpool, Derbyshire, Durham, Manchester (x2), Nottinghamshire (x 2), Redbridge, Sheffield, Suffolk |

Group 3 – Females C2DE – 35+ age skew

| | |
|--|---|
| Gender | 10 x women |
| Age | 2 x 30-35; 8 x 50-70 |
| Social class | 4 x C2 2 x D 4 X E |
| Working status | 2 x working full-time (30 hours or more per week) 1 x working part-time (9-29 hours a week) 3 x not working 4 x retired |
| Education | 4 x University or CNAA first degree 2 x GCE, A Level or Higher Certificate 1 x CSE grade 1, GCE O level, GCSE, School Certificate 1 x recognised trade apprenticeship completed 1 x nursing qualification (e.g. SEN, SRN, SCM, RGN) 1 x no formal qualifications |
| Certainty to vote at next general election (10= absolutely certain; 1 = absolutely certain not to vote) | 5 x 10 2 x 9 2 x 8 1 x 2 |
| Location (based on Local Education Authority) | Aberdeenshire, Cheshire, East Sussex, Essex, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Northern Ireland, York |

Group 4 – Non-voters (at the 2010 general election)

| | |
|--|--|
| Gender | 5 x men; 4 x women |
| Age | 21-55 |
| Social class | 1 x A 3 x B 2 x C1 1 x C2 2 x D |
| Working status | 8 x working full-time (30 hours or more per week) 1 x working part-time (9-29 hours a week) 1 x full-time student |
| Education | 6 x working full-time (30 hours or more per week) 2 x not working 1 x full-time student 4 x University or CNA first degree 2 x City and Guild Certificate 2 x Other technical, professional or higher qualification 1 x GCE, A Level or Higher Certificate |
| Certainty to vote at next general election (10= absolutely certain; 1 = absolutely certain not to vote) | 3 x 5 2 x 4 1 x 3 1 x 2 2 x 1 |
| Location (based on Local Education Authority) | Cumbria, Fife, Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Somerset, Swansea, Torbay, Wirral |

Appendix III: Focus group discussion guide

Section 1: Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Objective: explaining the process of the group and introductions.

- Reassure respondents around the research process – no right or wrong answers.
- Explain format of the session – the session will last up to two hours.
- Introduction: To start off, can everyone please introduce themselves to the group? Please tell me your age, what you do (if you're working), who's in your household, which part of the country you live in and also a bit about what your main sources of news are?
 - o Probe: do you read any newspapers? If so, which ones? Paid for? Free ones?
 - o Probe: what (if any) online media sources do you access? What type of content do you tend to look for online?
 - o TV news?

Section 2: Warm up – news stories (15 minutes)

Objective: Understand how politics and Parliament is referenced in a broader context.

- In preparation for this online focus group you've all completed a pre-task. In the pre-task you were asked to tell us about a news story that has stood out to you or gripped you over the last few weeks. Please can you tell us which story you picked and why? How did you follow this story (which media).
 - o Probe: How does this story relate to you?
- If you read a paper or watch the news, which sections/features do you tend to interest you most?
 - o Moderator to show images of newspaper sections/types of news on the whiteboard:

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Arts & Culture | Politics |
| International news | Breaking news |
| Entertainment | Travel |
| Business and financial news | Sports |
| Local/regional | |

- Which of these sections do you tend to focus on most? Why?
 - Any sections that you tend to skip over? Why?
 - And what about politics? Is this something you follow? Avoid? Why?
 - Can you think of any political stories that have stood out to you over the last few weeks?
 - If so, what made this story stand out to you? Have you been following it through?
 - If not, why not?

Section 2b: Political news stories (10 minutes)

Objective: Gaining an understanding of the types of political stories that people take notice of and what they take out from these stories as well as the language used to describe these stories.

- Moderator to show a range of news items on the whiteboard.
 - What do you take out from these stories?
 - Are these political?
 - Who do you think they are aimed at?
 - Are they relevant to you? Why/why not?
 - Which are more relevant/interesting?
 - If not, what makes these stories less relevant to you?
- Moderator to take note of the language used to describe these stories – how are PMQs and select committees described by participants do they relate to them.

Section 3: Parliament and MPs (20 minutes)

Objective: Understanding people's associations with Parliament and MPs and the role they see for Parliament.

- Moderator to show images of Parliament on the whiteboard. When you see the words 'Parliament' what comes to mind? Any words/ thoughts/ emotions/feelings?
 - Probe: what are the positives?
 - Probe: and what are the negatives?
- How do you feel about Parliament? Why?
 - Moderator to open the whiteboard and show a range of words (below):
 - Please tick the words that you associate with Parliament. Any words that are missing?

proud/inspired/informed/guardian/elitist/ordinary people/relevant/power/control/democratic/fair/honest/open/closed/transparent/boring/stuffy/old-fashioned/in touch/serious/challenging/difficult/hard to understand/out of touch/important/tradition/heritage/interesting/uninteresting/accessible/inaccessible/weak/ineffective/irrelevant/dishonest/trivial

- Please now tell me why you have picked these words?
- Discuss some key words and examples
 - Transparent
 - Accountable
 - Accessible
- How do these words relate to Parliament/parliamentary process? Examples of how/why they fit or don't fit.
- Moderator to run a couple of quick polls:
 - How much do you feel you know about how Parliament works (from I feel I know a lot, to I know nothing about it)?
 - How well do you think the parliamentary process works?
- Moderator to discuss the outcomes and reason for response in detail.
- How much do you feel you know about Parliament?
 - Probe: Is it clear and understandable how things work? Why/why not?
 - Probe: how do you find out about how Parliament works?
- Why do we have Parliament?
 - Probe: who is it for?
 - Ideally, how should Parliament work?
 - How does that compare to Parliament as we know it?
 - Probe: do you feel that Parliament represents you? Why/why not?
- What do you see as the role of Parliament?
 - Show respondents a description of the role of Parliament if respondents are struggling:

'Parliament is made up of MPs and Peers who have been elected or chosen to represent the people. They adopt laws and hold the government to account. It is a place where national policies are forged and conflicts in society are resolved through dialogue and compromise. It is the central institution of our democracy.'
 - Do you feel Parliament is fulfilling this role? Why/why not?
- How does Parliament go about checking the work of the government?
 - Probe: do you feel that Parliament challenges government effectively? Why/why not?

- If not mentioned spontaneously – what do you think the role of MPs is in relation to Parliament?
 - Moderator to pick up on any mentions of MPs' conduct and behaviour (e.g. expenses scandal) and probe around transparency and accountability.

Section 4a: Prime Minister's Questions (15-20 minutes)

Objective: Understanding people's associations of PMQs and whether they feel it is an effective way to challenge the government.

- Moderator to show two clips of Prime Minister's Questions (WITHOUT INTRODUCING THEM AS PMQs) – show one and discuss before moving onto the next.
- Please have a look at the following video and don't type anything yet
 - Please can you tell me what is going on in the video?
 - What do you take out of this video?
 - How does watching this make you feel?
 - Is this relevant to you? Why/why not?
- What words would you use to describe what you've just seen?

Interesting/boring/engaging/informative/important/open/honest/dishonest/clear/unclear/out of touch/dull/exciting/lively/down to earth/drama/theatre/over the top/hard to understand/irrelevant/noisy/pointless/childish

- Moderator to probe in detail around the words picked.
 - What do you think about the process of Prime Minister's Questions? What is the purpose?
 - Probe: is it important?
 - Do you think PMQs is an effective way for challenging the government? Why/why not?
 - Positives and negatives.

- Moderator then to show the following description of PMQs on the whiteboard:

Prime Minister's Question Time (from UK Parliament website)

'Question Time in the House of Commons is an opportunity for MPs to question government ministers about matters for which they are responsible. Prime Minister's Question Time, also

referred to as PMQs, takes place every Wednesday that the House of Commons is sitting and gives MPs the chance to put questions to the Prime Minister.'

- How well does this describe what you have seen in the clip?
- Do you think this is a good way to question the Prime Minister? Why/why not?
- Is this a good way of holding the government to account? Why/why not?
- How would you like to see the Prime Minister answer questions – where should this be done, what sort of setting, by who?

Section 4b: Prime Minister appearing before the Liaison Committee (10 minutes)

- Moderator to show footage of Liaison Committee.
- Please have a look at the following video and don't type anything yet.

Please can you tell me what is going on in the video?

- o What do you take out of this video?
- o How does watching this make you feel?
- o Is this relevant to you? Why/why not?
- o What words would you use to describe what you've just seen?

Interesting/boring/engaging/informative/important/open/honest/dishonest/clear/unclear/out of touch/dull/exciting/lively/down to earth/drama/theatre/over the top/hard to understand/irrelevant/noisy/pointless/childish

- Moderator to probe in detail around the words picked.
- Time permitting: moderator to show footage of another Liaison Committee clip and ask respondents to compare this to the other video.
- How does this compare to Prime Minister's Questions? What are the differences?
 - o Moderator to probe: is this more less/lively than the Prime Minister's Questions? Why?
 - o Probe: is that a good/bad thing? Why?
 - o Probe: is this a better/worse method of holding the Prime Minister to account? Why?

Section 5: Select Committees (15 minutes)

Objective: Understanding people's associations of select committees.

- Moderator to share two examples of high profile select committees. Show each in turn and then discuss each individually.
- Looking at the stories and images on the whiteboard – what comes to mind? (WITHOUT USING THE DESCRIPTION OF SELECT COMMITTEES)
 - What is going on here?
 - What do you understand by this process?
 - Is this a good thing? Why/why not?
- When you see the words 'select committee' on the whiteboard, what comes to mind? What are your top of the mind associations?
 - Any thoughts/words/emotions feelings?
- What do you think the role of select committees is?

'Select committees are responsible for the scrutiny of policy, administration and spending of government departments and other public bodies. They hold inquiries and publish reports which the government and other bodies have to respond to.'

- Moderator to show footage of two select committees – moderator to probe:
 - What's going on here? What do you take out from this video?
 - After seeing this video – how would you describe a select committee now?
 - Probe: Are there any surprises?
 - What do you see as the role of the select committee in this instance?
- Do you feel select committees are important? Why/why not? Do they do an important job?
- Do you feel select committees are an effective way of checking the work of the government? Why/why not?

Section 6: Summary and close (10 minutes)

Objective: Understanding what could get people to view Parliament differently and what would make them want to engage more.

- What would get you (more) interested and involved in what your MP is doing?
 - What could MPs do to make you more interested in Parliament?

- And what would make Parliament more interesting to you?
 - Probe: what could make Parliament more accessible to a wider audience?
- How could Parliament be different? Any thoughts/ideas?
- Moderator to show the word exercise again – now that we have discussed Parliament in more detail – which words would you select now to describe Parliament? Any words that are missing from the whiteboard?

proud/inspired/informed/guardian/elitist/ordinary people/relevant/power/control/democratic/fair/honest/open/closed/transparent/boring/stuffy/old-fashioned/in touch/serious/challenging/difficult/hard to understand/out of touch/important/tradition/heritage/interesting/uninteresting/accessible/inaccessible/weak/ineffective/irrelevant/dishonest/trivial

- Of all the things we have discussed today what has stuck with you most?
- Final thoughts and close.

Appendix IV: Quantitative survey methodology

Ipsos MORI conducted face-to-face interviews with a representative quota sample of 1,286 adults aged 18 or above living in Great Britain. The interviews took place between 6 and 12 December 2013 and were carried out in respondents' homes. The interview total includes booster interviews, which were undertaken in order to make comparisons between different regions and between the white and BME populations more statistically reliable. In total, therefore, 202 interviews were conducted with respondents living in Scotland, 91 with respondents living in Wales, and 264 with respondents from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) cultural backgrounds.

Statistical reliability

The respondents selected to take part in the survey constitute a sample of the total adult population of Great Britain. Quotas were used to ensure that those interviewed were representative of the overall population. This means we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have had if everybody in Britain had been interviewed (the 'true' values). All results are consequently subject to sampling tolerances. This means that not all differences are 'statistically significant'; in other words the difference in the survey data may not be big enough to be confident that it reflects a real difference in the population as a whole, given the margin of error.

The variation between the sample results and the 'true' values can be predicted from the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which this prediction can be made is usually chosen to be 95% – that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' value will fall within a specified range.

The data has been weighted to be representative of the profile of Great Britain. This reduces the 'effective base size' from 1,286 to 959. In practice, this means that the additional interviews conducted in Scotland, Wales and with BMEs have no effect on the statistical reliability of the *overall* dataset, but they do mean that comparisons with the overall data (or other sub-groups) that involve Scotland, Wales or BMEs are *more* statistically reliable. All statistical reliability has been calculated using this effective base size.

The table below illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the '95% confidence interval'.

| Size of sample on which survey result is based | Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels | | |
|--|---|------------|----------|
| | 10% or 90% | 30% or 70% | 50% |
| | +/- | +/- | +/- |
| 100 interviews | 6 | 9 | 10 |
| 200 interviews | 4 | 6 | 7 |
| 400 interviews | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 500 interviews | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| 600 interviews | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 959 interviews | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 1,000 interviews | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 1,200 interviews | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 1,300 interviews | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 1,400 interviews | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| 1,500 interviews | 2 | 2 | 3 |

For example, with an effective base size of 959, where 50% give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the 'true' value (which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of +/- 3.5 percentage points from the sample result (i.e. between 47% and 53%).

When results are compared between separate groups within a sample, different results may be obtained. The difference may be 'real' or it may occur by chance (because not everyone in the population has been interviewed). To test if the difference is a real one – if it is 'statistically significant' – then the size of the samples, the percentage giving a certain answer, and the degree of confidence chosen are considered. If the '95% confidence interval' is assumed, the differences between the results of two separate groups must be greater than the values given in the table below.

| Size of samples compared | Differences required for significance at or near these percentage levels | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------|-----|
| | 10% or 90% | 30% or 70% | 50% |
| | +/- | +/- | +/- |
| 100 and 400 | 6 | 9 | 10 |
| 200 and 400 | 5 | 8 | 9 |
| 300 and 500 | 4 | 7 | 7 |
| 300 and 700 | 4 | 6 | 7 |
| 400 and 400 | 4 | 6 | 7 |
| 400 and 700 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| 400 and 1,000 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 500 and 500 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| 500 and 1,000 | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| 700 and 1,000 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 800 and 1,000 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

| Size of samples compared | Differences required for significance at or near these percentage levels | | |
|------------------------------------|--|-----------|-----------|
| 1,000 and 1,500 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| 1,000 and 1,500 | 7 | 9 | 10 |
| 173 (BMEs) and 305 (Whites) | 8 | 11 | 11 |
| 119 (18-24s) and 234 (65+s) | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 458 (men) and 502 (women) | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Combined Audit data

The charts in Appendix I are based on combined data from the first 10 years of Audit of Political Engagement surveys. Methodological details for all the surveys and a copy of the dataset can be found at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/public-attitudes/audit-of-political-engagement/>

Appendix V: Audit of Political Engagement (APE) Poll topline findings

The results are based on 1,286 interviews face-to-face interviews conducted by Ipsos MORI with a representative quota sample of 1,286 adults aged 18 or above living in Great Britain.

The interviews took place between 6 and 12 December 2013 and were carried out in respondents' homes.

Data are weighted to the profile of the population.

An asterisk (*) indicates a finding of less than 0.5% but greater than zero.

Where percentages do not add up to exactly 100% this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of 'don't knows', or because multiple answers were permitted for a question.

Data in this report has been analysed using SPSS to one decimal place and rounded accordingly.

Q. In the past twelve months, have you ever watched or seen/heard any of Prime Minister's Question Time?

| | % |
|---|-----------|
| Yes – in full | 16 |
| Yes – but only seen clips | 38 |
| No – but have seen it before then | 10 |
| No – have never seen it | 36 |
| Don't know | * |
| <i>Seen some PMQs in last 12 months</i> | 54 |

Q. Thinking about what you see and hear of Prime Minister's Questions, to what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

| | Strongly agree | Tend to agree | Neither/nor | Tend to disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know | Agree | Disagree |
|---|----------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------|------------|-------|----------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| It deals with the important issues facing the country | 7 | 33 | 32 | 13 | 7 | 7 | 40 | 20 |
| It makes me proud of our Parliament | 2 | 10 | 36 | 24 | 21 | 7 | 12 | 45 |
| There is too much party political point-scoring instead of answering the question | 41 | 26 | 21 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 67 | 5 |
| It's exciting to watch | 4 | 16 | 30 | 24 | 20 | 7 | 20 | 44 |
| It puts me off politics | 12 | 21 | 33 | 20 | 7 | 7 | 33 | 27 |
| It's informative | 4 | 32 | 33 | 14 | 8 | 8 | 36 | 22 |
| It's too noisy and aggressive | 19 | 28 | 30 | 11 | 4 | 8 | 47 | 15 |
| The MPs behave professionally | 2 | 14 | 30 | 26 | 22 | 7 | 17 | 48 |

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