

Prime Minister's Questions needs to change to improve Parliament's reputation with the public

By Democratic Audit

Prime Ministers appear weekly in the House of Commons to answer questions from the Leader of the Opposition and other MPs. The format and tone of Prime Minister's Questions has been criticised, however, for showcasing a confrontational style of politics. In this post **Beccy Allen** shares findings from Hansard Society research into the public's views of PMQs.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is Parliament's 'shop window', the most well known aspect of Parliament's work because of the televisual nature of the event. There has long been criticism of it across the political spectrum and politicians and journalists alike tend to love or loathe it.

But in a new report, [Tuned in or Turned off? Public Attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions](#), the Hansard Society – through online focus groups conducted in partnership with YouGov and a national opinion poll conducted by IpsosMORI – explores for the first time what the public actually think of PMQs.

The poll findings show that although there is a high level of awareness of PMQs – with half the population (54%) saying that they had seen or heard it in some form in the previous 12 months – the public are not satisfied with the format, and feel that it is an ineffective method of accountability. Attitudes toward PMQs in the focus groups were almost universally negative. Participants described it as 'childish', 'noisy', 'over the top' and 'pointless'.

Interestingly, the way in which people access PMQs makes a difference to their perceptions of it. Those that see the programme in full are much more likely to feel favourable towards it than those that just see clips. Only 28% that have seen it in full say that it 'puts me off politics' compared to 43% who say the same but have only seen clips of it.

However, of those that watch PMQs in full and say they find it exciting and informative, almost nine out of ten *still* say that there is too much political point scoring. Even amongst groups that are more disposed to PMQs there is clearly room for improvement particularly around the behaviour of MPs. In the opinion poll, only 16% of the public agreed that 'MPs behave professionally' and overall only 12% of respondents said that PMQs 'makes me proud of our Parliament'.

One of the most concerning outcomes of the focus group discussions was how what the public see at PMQs serves to emphasise the disconnect between citizens and politicians, with participants feeling that politicians were laughing at them and making light of serious problems that affect their everyday lives.

'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.' (page 31)

In addition, many participants highlighted how unacceptable this kind of behaviour would be outside Parliament:

'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.' (page 30)

Overall, PMQs appears to act as a 'cue' for public perceptions of Parliament and provides a lot of the raw material

that feeds the public's negative assumptions about politicians. The way in which it is conducted serves to emphasise the divide between the political classes and the people they represent, making it a key target for reform if perceptions of Parliament are to be improved.

So, what should be done to improve PMQs?

Party leaders have expressed a wish for change but, as Ed Milband's recent efforts to tone down his approach has demonstrated, they are hamstrung by the attitude of the media who treat PMQs as a game to be won or lost each week. 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 by one of the party leaders.

The format should be freshened up and varied. For example, in order to facilitate improved scrutiny and discussion one of the sessions each month could be extended to 45 minutes or an hour, on a trial basis, focused on just a few topical areas.

Considering that the focus groups felt public oversight of MPs in Westminster was lacking, PMQs could follow the Education Select Committee's lead and solicit public questions from Twitter.

As those that were more likely to see PMQs in full felt more positive towards it, and as current viewers are disproportionately older (69% of those aged 65+ report having seen it in the last year compared to just 35% of those aged 18-24) re-scheduling it to a prime time slot, perhaps a Tuesday or Wednesday evening could have a beneficial impact by broadening the range of people who can watch it.

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. Current penalties are 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 shouting 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. In order to be effective and to protect the independence and reputation of the Speaker there needs to be cross-party agreement on the range of penalties and the circumstances in which it would be reasonable to apply them.

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Note: This post represents the views of the author, and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/MvQqCH

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