Inheritance in PMQs:

Assessing the Development of the Prime Minister's Rhetoric during

the Questions to the Prime Minister Debate

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Abstract

This paper empirically assesses the development of the Prime Minister's rhetoric during the Questions to the Prime Minister debate (PMQs). It offers an exploratory analysis of all 4621 occasions that the Prime Minister (PM) rose to speak during the PMQs debates in the 2010-2015 Parliament. Using computer-assisted textual analysis software (Alceste), this paper presents a quantative breakdown of the key themes in the Prime Minister's responses. In short, Alceste attempts to divide textual data into classes according to the co-occurrence of lexical forms (Valles William, 2014). Stepping into a more detailed analysis, this paper then focusses on the Prime Minister's rhetoric that explicitly make reference to the previous Labour administration. I aim to build up an understanding of how this particular rhetorical tool changes over the course of a parliamentary term. This analysis finds that (1) the Prime Minister spent 35% of his responses at PMQs explicitly talking about the failures of the previous administration (2) while the rhetorical framework changes, the Prime Minister's responses across all years consistently reference the previous Labour administration (3) the Prime Minister gave his most partisan responses in 2010 and 2011.

Keywords: Prime Minister's Questions (PMQS), Prime Minister (PM), debate, rhetoric, UK Parliament, previous administration

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1. Introduction

Questions to the Prime Minister is the most well-known debate on the UK parliamentary schedule. Every week the debate captures a large audience on social media as (#PMQs) trends on Twitter and key snapshots of the debate are shared via Facebook. The key exchanges of the 'Punch and Judy' style debate are between the PM and Leader of the Opposition (LO) (Alderman, 1992).

According to parliamentary convention, Questions to the Prime Minister is an opportunity for Parliament to hold the Prime Minister of the day to account for the actions of his government.[i] In practise, the debate is widely held as an opportunity for politicians to score political points at the expense of their opponents. The perceived lack of substance of PMQs deliberation sits uncomfortably alongside its purported importance as a regular and public means of holding the Prime Minister to account for government policy. The core purpose of PMQs is to hold the Prime Minister to account through seeking responses to oral questions. The content of the PM's responses is not well-understood, nor is the debate more generally. The content of the PM's responses is likely to be influenced by the question asked, but the development rhetoric is also likely to be influenced by other factors, such as how far the PM is through his term in office. This study takes up the call for more empirical research on the 'performance of PMs throughout different stages of their premiership and the electoral cycle' (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014). [ii]

PMQs is the ' shop window of Parliament' for the general public to observe the inner workings of the legislature and behaviour of politicians (Bercow, 2010).[iii] Two things are clearly visible: the PM and LO exchange are often heated and confrontational and backbench politicians jeers loudly throughout the debate. By regularly watching the debate, it is intuitively clear that the PM makes reference to the previous Labour administration in disparaging terms with something along the lines of "we inherited a mess that we had to clear up."(Chilton, 2004)[ivv] What is less immediately apparent is how his rhetoric changes over the course of a parliamentary term. To this end, this paper seeks to objectively map the developments of his rhetorical strategy of blaming the previous Labour administration.

The exploratory nature of the first stage of this project means that key themes of the PM's responses become clear only after the content analysis. The key finding of this first stage is that referring to the previous administration is a statistically distinct dimension (class 3) of the PM's discourse that account for 35% of his responses. In the second stage, this rhetorical dimension (class 3) is submitted to another Alceste analysis to reveal (1) the policy areas referred to, and (2) the temporal significance of this rhetorical tool. The findings of this second stage are (1) the beginning of the parliamentary term (2010, 2011) saw the PM make most of his disparaging references to the previous administration, particularly related to borrowing policies (2) the remainder of the parliamentary term saw the PM refer to the previous administration's record on taxation (2012, 2013) and then the NHS (2014, 2015).

1.1   Focus on PMQs Deliberation

There is a plethora of criticisms levelled against the PMQs debate. Most importantly, the deliberative exchange (the questions and responses) are said to aim to score shallow political points instead of achieving substantive answers on current government policy. This begins with shortcomings in the questioning of the PM by Members of Parliament (MPs). On the one hand, government MPs ask questions that offer up an opportunity for the PM to give a soundbite on a government's policy and/or criticise the previous administration. On the other hand, questions from the opposition parties tend to be overly confrontational and face-threatening for the PM (Crewe, 2010). A question initiates one half of the discursive exchange between the MP and the PM. The other half of the deliberative exchange is entirely constructed by the

Prime Minister. PMQs is, therefore, best understood as a series of exchanges between the Prime Minister and the rest of the House of Commons. For his part, the Prime Minister has been criticised for not answering questions. Instead, he used his responses to perform an attack on the previous administration. On several occasions, Opposition Members of Parliament and the Speaker of the House of Commons challenged the PM on his consistent mention of the previous administration and encouraged him to refocus his responses on the current government's policy.

> "Please, Mr Speaker, will you ask the Prime Minister not continually to blame the Opposition? He is in government now-" (Ms Margaret Hodgson MP) 27th October 2010.[vi]

> "Answer the question!" (Hon. Members) 15th September 2010, 12th January 2011, 12th December 2012, 10th July 2013.

> "Order. I think I got the gist of it. We do not need to hear any more. Let me just say to the House (…) that it is now time that we got back to questions and answers about the policies of the Government." (Mr John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons) 17th November 2010.[vii]

In addition to the pleas of MPs and the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Prime Minister has publically states his disapproval of nature of the debate and urged that it "should be a useful opportunity to analyse and explain the Government's long-term economic plan and other policies" and not for political point scoring (Kelly, 2015).

The language – that's to say, the structure of an utterance relating to: pronunciation, word-form, syntax and vocabulary - is context-dependent (Chilton, 2004). The appropriateness of a linguistic tool depends on the speaker's spatial and temporal context. For instance, the geographical location (static) and the timing of the utterance (dynamic) influences on the type of language used. In regards to PMQs, the location of the debate is constant (importantly, as are the rules that govern the discursive exchanges in the House of Commons, 2010-2015). PMQs debates occur weekly over the course of a 5-year parliamentary term. This analysis seeks to map the development of one particular linguistic tool used by the Prime Minister during PMQs across a 5-year period.

Understanding the content of discursive exchanges is core to building a more comprehensive understanding of the debate. The speeches, of course, exists as part of a much wider context that is hidden from view by analysing the words spoken during the debate. Furthermore, within the realm of discourse, this paper considers only one dimension of many. In this case, the elephant in the room is certainly the jeering and unsolicited interruptions by backbench MPs during the debate. This jeering is acknowledged in Hansard by a simple parenthesised term e.g. [Interruption], [Laughter], [Right Hon. Members: "Answer the question"] (Schegloff, 1972). The phrase "Interruption" is particular interesting because this denotes the occasions when the clerks have recorded that elevated noise levels during the debate have delayed the politician addressing the House of Commons. This phrase appeared 814 times in Hansard records of PMQs over the course of the 2010 – 2015 Parliament. This is a clear avenue for future empirical research to investigate more fully. A second dimension to PMQs discourse is the parliamentary language which is governed by rules and conventions. Most notably, MPs must talk to each other indirectly by addressing their question to the Speaker of the House of Commons and refer to each other as Right Hon. Gentleman/ Lady. There are sanctions for MPs who repeatedly violate these rules – ranging from a correction by the Speaker to expulsion from the Chamber that day's sitting (Hand Book of House of Commons Procedure, 9.3.13, p. 78). This rule-governed, ritualised dimension of PMQs remained constant over the 2010 – 2015 Parliament so is

unlikely to account for any changes in the PM's language, despite being important for the political culture of the House of Commons (Chilton, 2004). I observed the regimented nature of behaviour in the House in practise as MPs left to leave the Chamber they turned 180 degree on the spot to bow to the Speaker of the House of Commons before exiting). To summarise, there are three dimensions to the PMQs deliberation: the substantive content, the ritualised and the unsolicited. This paper's focus is on the subsection of the PMQs substantive content that is offered by the Prime Minister.

1.2 Assessing the Debate Empirically

The analysis offered in this paper is an attempt to put sentiment aside to address questions pertaining to the quality of PMQs in an entirely empirical way. Here (Bates, et al., 2014)'s comparative analysis of PMQs has proven foundational and instructive because it is the first attempt to understand the debate through an empirical lens. Usefully, Bates offers several avenues for future research on PMQs. In particular, this study takes up Bates et al.'s call for more empirical research on the 'performance of PMs throughout different stages of their premiership and the electoral cycle.'[viii] To this end, this paper seeks to build up an understanding of whether there is a temporal significance to the rhetorical strategies used by the PM.

There has been little research that attempts to pick up the longer-term trends of the PMQs debates (Bates et al., 2014). Although the analysis offered in this paper is not a long-term study, it fits in-between a necessarily narrowly focussed discourse analysis of a few passages of the debate and a longitudinal content analysis of numerous parliamentary term. This paper's focus is entirely on the Prime Minister's responses. The reason for this focus is that PMQs importance as an accountability mechanism relies in part on whether the act of asking a question is followed up by a considered and reasoned response. It seems reasonable to suggest that the impact of the question should incorporate an understanding of the structure of the responses given in reply.

1.3 PMQs Literature

Questions to the Prime Minister has not been the focus of much academic attention, perhaps because of the perceived emptiness of the debate. PMQs is an important area of academic interest for four reasons. First, PMQs is a uniquely regular occasion for Parliament to publically scrutinise the leader of government about matters for which they are responsible.[ix] The only other occasion that the House of Commons has to scrutinise the Prime Minister is a bi-annual meeting with the Parliamentary Liaison Committee. Second, the public interest in this debate marks it out from all other debates. The debate makes up most of the coverage of Commons proceedings and this should be accompanied by rigorous academic analysis to support / refute our intuitions surrounding the debate. Third, on methodological grounds, the easy access to all PMQs transcripts makes it ripe for academic study (Lovenduski, 2012). Fourth, the regularity of the debate means that key political issues of the day are likely to be debated (Valles William, 2014).

In the last two years (2014, 2015) concerted efforts have been made to empirically explore the content and purpose of PMQs from the viewpoint of the question asker. True to form, PMQs divides opinion in the literature. The divide is between those who believe PMQs is a useful opportunity to press the government on its policy (Bevan & John, 2016) and those who believe that it encapsulates everything wrong with Westminster-style of politics (Bates, et al., 2014), (Lovenduski, 2012). Either way, the content of PMQs ought to be better understood empirically for us to be able to evaluate our intuitions.

(Bates, et al., 2014) frame PMQs as 'a focal point for shallow political point scoring' as opposed to serious scrutiny of the Prime Minister and his government. This framing is based on a discourse analysis of the first 10 PMQs in each parliament from Margaret Thatcher (in 1979) until Gordon Brown (in 2010). The Prime Minister's responses were manually coded as full reply; non-reply; intermediate reply then further broken down into partial reply, deferred reply or referred reply. (A similar typology adopted by Bull's discourse analysis of PMQs (Bull, 1994). The key findings suggest that the Prime Minister uses his responses to dominate the debate in terms of the percentage of PMQs time his/her responses account for during PMQs. For Margaret Thatcher spoke for 40% of the time allotted for PMQs while David Cameron spoke for 60% in 2010. The cause of this reduction is a recent tendency by the Opposition Leader to use his full allocation of 6 questions to the PM (Alderman, 1992).

Conversely, (Bevan & John, 2016) argue that PMQs are a forum for the LO and MPs on the opposition backbenches to put pressure on the Prime Minister to address issues that he would not otherwise wish to discuss. Ultimately, the pressure of parliamentary questions permits the opposition to set the policy agenda by shifting attention away from issues the government owns. Bevan & John interpretation of PMQs stresses the importance of parliamentary questions as a tool for shifting the policy agenda Questions at PMQs. The questions are considered to be important regardless of the completeness of the Prime Minister's answers, indeed, the aim of their study is to "throw more light onto the practise and impact of questioning." (2016, p. 60). This is a depiction of PMQs that stresses the importance of the opposition's ability to set the policy agenda through opportunities to debate and challenge the government (Adonis, 1993). This is an important contribution to our understanding of the impact of questions on the government policy agenda over the long-term. However, by focussing entirely on parliamentary questions it only explains the significance of half the story of PMQs discourse. Bevan and John's analysis tells us nothing about the significance of the responses given by the Prime Minister. We need a better empirical understanding of the discursive behaviour of the Prime Minister given his increasing prominence during the debate and how he responds to scrutiny. Crucially, neither interpretation of PMQs aims to assign one purpose to PMQs. Instead, there exist two competing aims for what *most* characterises the debate. To review, PMQs is both a forum for rhetorical discourse and an accountability mechanism for the opposition to scrutinise government policy.

1.4   Particularities of the 2010 -2015 Parliament

1. PMQs remained procedurally unchanged during the 2010 -2015 Parliament. There has been continuity in the structure of PMQs since 1997, with only minor changes made to the pre-debate procedure in 2003.[x] This 5-year term, therefore, provides a stable setting for the analysis. The formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is the notable uniqueness of the 2010 – 2015 Parliament. The significance of coalition government on the procedure of the PMQs debate is that David Cameron and Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrat Party represented the government at PMQs. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, represented the coalition government at almost all PMQs and Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats, conducted a handful of PMQs.[xi] The PM spoke the most frequently and across the entire 5-year period. This paper seeks to objectively analyse the development of the Prime Minister's rhetoric over the course of a parliament. With this in mind, the infrequency with which these additional respondents spoke at PMQs makes them ill-suited for analysis compared to David Cameron. In regards to the tone of the PM's responses, at no moment during the 2010 – 2015 Parliament was there a notable change akin to the one instigated by Jeremy Corbyn during the early PMQs of the re-elected Conservative government in 2015.[xii]

2. The 2010 – 2015 parliamentary term is a suitable time period because it follows a handover of government after the 2010 General Election defeat of the Labour Party. The 13 years of Labour government came to an end when defeated in the 2010 General Election by a coalition between the Conservative Party and Lib Dem Party. An implication of this long period in opposition for the Conservatives is that the Prime Minister's mention of the previous administration is likely to refer back to points along the entire 13 years of Labour government.

2. Procedure and Practice of PMQs
2.1   Rules and Conventions

Below is a review of the rules and conventions that govern the debate. See (Rogers & Walters, 2015.) for a more detailed history of PMQs and (Evans, 1989) for an outline of processes of the debate. There is a plethora of rules governing the framing of questions. The House of Commons Clerks make sure that the purpose of the question fits with the expectations of a parliamentary question. For example, the main thrust of a question must seek information and/or press for action and to hold Government to account (Kelly, 2015). MPs have to make sure their questions accord with the constraints of 'parliamentary language' (Perez de Ayala, 2001). The questions not permitted in the House of Commons are those "seeking an expression of an opinion, or which contain arguments, expressions of opinion, inference or imputations, unnecessary epithets, or rhetorical, controversial, ironical or offensive expressions are not in order" (Erskine, 1989). There are no specific recommendations for how the Prime Minister ought to conduct himself in the House of Commons.

3. Methodology

3.1   Why Alceste?

Computer-assisted textual analysis software (Alceste) is a useful tool for building up an objective mapping of the key themes in a text. The most useful application of this automated analysis software is providing a quantative structure to a data set that is voluminous and qualitative. Alceste attempts to categorise words into classes that are maximally associated internally while being minimally associated with others word classes (Valles William, 2014). Alceste assumes that words are organised to convey an opinion – word choice is authored, not random. So a particular subject area, such as taxation, is likely to be associated with a particular type of lexical form – a distinct vocabulary. Alceste's classification of the text is an attempt to map out the distinct vocabularies of a text according to the co-occurrence of words. The results of this analysis are then assigned a subject area by the researcher. The researcher provides a narrative to explain the substantive meaning that threads together the statistically associated words and phrases grouped into classifications.

In comparison to other ways of conducting content analysis, the main advantage is that the automated approach ensures the reliability of the analysis. The possibility of coder bias is removed entirely as the researcher makes no contribution to the categorisation of the text. Alceste is blind to the meaning of the words and relies on the co-occurrence of words to discern themes in the corpus (Steiner, Bachtiger, Sporndli, & Steenbergen, 2004). The ability of computer-assisted content analysis to process voluminous corpora far exceeds the ability of a researcher conducting a manual coding with limited

time. Using computer-assisted software makes the results entirely replicable as the transcripts are widely available and a sample was not necessary (King et al. 1996).[1]

The next step Alceste completes by dissecting the text into elementary context units (ECUs) which is a sentence or group of sentences that are segmented according to word length and punctuation. For a detailed explanation of the mechanisms behind an Alceste analysis see (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2013).

3.2   Building the Corpus

Hansard Online website is the repository for all parliamentary debate transcripts from the House of Lords and House of Commons. Hansard Online transcripts are not a verbatim text (Chilton, 2004). The version of the debate available on Hansard Online is a perfect account of what is said in the Chamber. The House of Commons clerks aim to give an unblemished record of the speeches made in the House of Commons so any imperfections are removed or amended. For example, the Ums and Rs and repetition of phrases that are common in spoken language are removed.[2] For two reasons Hansard is a useful source of what is said at PMQs. The accessibility of all transcripts on the UK Parliament website makes this much less time consuming than transcribing audio from the debates. The perfect account offered by Hansard also aligns with the methodological attempts this paper makes to objectively build up a picture of the content of the Prime Minister's responses.[xiii] The imperfections in the Prime Minister's language are not the primary focus of an analysis of his rhetoric and its removal is therefore useful for the Alceste analysis.

3.4   Modifying the Corpus

The corpus includes all utterances from the Prime Minister's responses at PMQs 2010 - 2015. The entire corpus was modified to make the identification of each separate utterance clear and operational. Each speech-act was tagged with a line of text that defines the key characteristics chosen by the researcher. Each speech-act was tagged with the Prime Minister's name and the year in which the speech-act took place. For example

****name_PM *year_2010

All terms that the Prime Minister could use to refer to the previous administration were changed to "prev_admin" (see Appendix B). The word "Labour" was changed to "lab_party" to account for the dual meaning of the word Labour.[xiv xv] The questions were deleted from a complete Hansard transcript of everything said at PMQs 2010-2015 to leave only the occasions when the Prime Minister stood up at the dispatch box. The remaining text is all the Prime Minister's responses. The lack of a systematic means of extracting the Prime Minister's responses from the main body of the text could lead to error through omitting some of the PM responses. To reduce the likelihood of this error, a process of deleting around the Prime Minister's responses was adopted instead of attempting to repot every single one of the PM's responses into a separate document.

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[1] For a test of the reliability of the software see Bara, J., Weale, A., & Biquelet, A. (2007). Analysing Parliamentary Debate with Computer Assistance. *13*(4), 577-605.
[2] The terms modified to fit under the umbrella of (prev_admin) are not among those that are standardised by the clerks.

4. Analysis

4.1 Basic Structure of PM's Responses

Table 1. Basic Statistics for Prime Minister's Responses at PMQs

	2010 - 2015
Total word count	489062
Unique Words Analysed	12153
ICUs (= number of times the PM rose to speak)	4921
- 2010	608
- 2011	1082
- 2012	913
- 2013	1004
- 2014	990
- 2015	182
Passive Variables	2
Classified ECUs	8526 (= 90% of the retained ECU)
Lexical classes	5
Distribution of classes (%) and thematic content	1 (14) International Affairs
	2 (12) Government Policy
	3 (35) Previous Labour Administration
	4 (20) Constituency Affairs
	5 (19) Crime & Courts

Table 1. summarises the basic statistics from the Prime Minister's responses at PMQs. The entire corpus includes 489062 words from 4921 separate occasions the PM rose to speak. There is some variation in the number of times that the Prime Minister rose to the dispatch box over the course of the 2010 – 2015 Parliament. [xvi] Notably, the PM rose to respond to questions on fewer occasion in 2010 (608) and 2015 (182) compared to in 2011 (1082), 2012 (913), 2013 (1004), and 2014 (990). This is explained by General Elections taking place in 2010 and 2015 which resulted in less time being scheduled for debate. This classification into thematic content has captured the essence of a large proportion of the PM's utterance because these 5 classes account for 90% of ICUs. This is a high classification rate (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2013).[3]

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[3] As a rule of thumb, a classification rate of over 70% is desirable. Both analyses in in this study attained 90%.
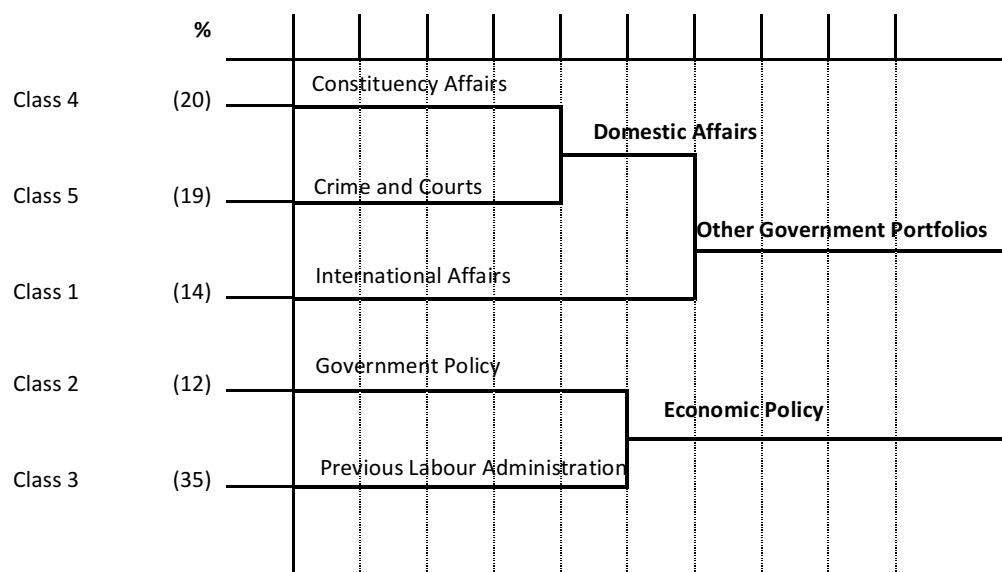
Fig 1. Tree graph of the classes from Prime Minister's responses at PMQs transcript (2010 – 2015)

This tree graph (Fig. 1) shows a breakdown of the basic structure of the Prime Minister's responses and the relationship between classes. Reading the graph from right to left: the text first divides between (Economic Policy) and more broadly (Other Government Portfolios). Under Economic Policy, the PM's responses divide between (Government Policy) and (Previous Labour Administration Policy). Under Other Government Portfolios, the text divides between (International Affairs) and (Domestic Affairs). A final division is made within Domestic Affairs between (Crime and Courts) and (Constituency Affairs).[xvii] The key dimension of the PM's responses that reveals itself through this exploratory analysis is the presence and significance of the PM's rhetoric concerning the previous administration. So far, the empirical excavation of the text has found a subsection of the PM's responses pertaining to economic policy that explicitly refers to the previous Labour administration in disparaging terms. This classification shows the extent of the Prime Minister's explicit reference to the failures of the previous administration as accounting for 35% of his responses to questions at PMQs. A more detailed explanation of the motivations behind the labels assigned to the classes is offered in Table 3.

Table 3. Class Labels, Significant Words and Statistically Significant ECUs 2010 - 2015

Class 1: International Affairs (Defence)

Most statistically associated words: Afghanistan, arm, force, afghan, milit, northern, president, Ireland, secur, world, unit, role, troop, kingdom, Syria, play, combat, peace. This accounts for 14% of the Prime Minister's utterances during PMQs. Within this class and across all 5-years the term prev_admin was mentioned 14 times.

Top 2 statistically associated E.C.U.s (Khi2)

(87) before listing my #engagements, I am sure that #the #whole house will #wish to #join me #in #sending #our #best #wishes for #christmas to #our #brave #armed #forces #in #afghanistan #and #elsewhere. to #their #families, #who will be #missing #them, #and to #the #servicemen #and women around #the #world, you are always #in #our #thoughts, we #owe you a #deep debt #of gratitude, #and we #send #our heartfelt #thanks at #christmas time.

(57) A clear #message is coming out #of #afghanistan #and #pakistan to #all #those #who are #engaged #in #violence to give up that #violence #and #join a #political #process. there is #strong #support for that across #the arab #world, particularly #in #the #middle east. we need to give that #process every possible #support #and #send a clear #message to #the #taliban: whether it is #our #troops #or #afghan #troop #who are there, #the #taliban will not #win on #the battlefield.

Class 2: Government Economic Policy

Most statistically associated words: unemploy, economy, job, emply, businesses, youth, private, sector, growth, fall, apprentice, small, growth, export, claim, manufactur, figure, business, rate, down. This accounts for 12% of the Prime Minister's utterances during PMQs. Within this class and across all 5-years the term prev_admin was mentioned 41 times.

Top 2 statistically associated E.C.U.s (Khi2)

(77) it #is #worth pausing for a moment #over what these #statistics #show #today. they #show #youth #unemployment #coming #down, #long #term #unemployment #coming #down, the #claimant #count #coming #down, and #unemployment #overall #coming #down but above all, what #we #see #today #is the biggest ever #quarterly increase in the #number of #people in #work in our #country.

(68) I am grateful for what my hon. friend says, #because an absolutely #key part of our #long #term #economic #plan #is to #see a #growing #number of #people in #work in our #country. #we #see 1. 2 #million #more #people in #work. in the #west #midlands, #employment has #risen by 60, 000 #since the #election. #private #sector #employment #is #up 64, 000.

Class 3: The Previous Labour Administration

Most statistically associated words: labour, tax, cut, bill, spend, shadow, deficit, opposition, mess, earn, tell, welfare, borrow, chancellor, benefit, income, leader, pension, debt, budget. This accounts for 35% of the Prime Minister's utterances during PMQs. Within this class and across all 5-years the term prev_admin was mentioned 205 times.

(37) I will #tell #you #what this #government have done, and that is to #put in place a£ 2. 5 #billion #bank #levy, raising more #than #labour #s #bonus #tax #every #single #year, but I have to #say that, #if #opposition #members want to see #irresponsible people who are #earning a-lot-of #money #pay proper #taxes, #perhaps #they will #explain this:

(31) first of all, #let #us #just #remember #what happened in 2008, #when the #right hon. #gentleman #was #sitting in #government the #biggest #banking #bust in our history, the build up of the #biggest #deficit in our history. all the #mess that we have to #deal with #now #was delivered #by him and #his henchmen in 2008. before we #go on to the #spare #room #subsidy, #let him get to #his #feet and #apologise for the #mess that #he #left in this country.

(31) the #top rate of #tax will be #higher in #every #year of this #government #than it #was in any #year #under the #prev_admin. #let #me #explain how it works in the hon. lady #s #party: the #trade unions give #labour #money and that #buys the #policies, it #buys the #candidates, it #buys the Mps and it #even #buys the #leader.

(31) in the end the #truth is this: the #top 1%of #taxpayers in our country are #now #paying 30%of the #total #income #tax take. as I #said, the #richest #taxpayers are actually #going to be #paying more in #every #year of this #government #than #when those #two on the #opposition #front #bench #sat in the #treasury and made such a #mess of our economy.

(34) #if the #right hon. #gentleman is in #favour of a mansion #tax, #why #did #he #not #introduce #one in the 13 #years #he #was in #government? #if #he is so passionate about #social #housing, #why #did #he #not build any #when #he #was in #government? #if #he thinks we are #spending too much on #housing #benefit #he has #just #said that the #bill is #going up #why #does #he #oppose #each and #every attempt we make to get the #welfare #bill #under (control?

Class 4: Constituency Affairs

Most statistically associated words: local, friend, happy, look, careful, health, issue, import, communit, hospital, know, depart, meet, children, raise, school, area, constituenc, discuss, improve. This accounts for 20% of the Prime Minister's utterances during PMQs. Within this class and across all 5-years the term prev_admin was mentioned 54 times.

Top 2 statistically associated E.C.U.s (Khi2)
(31) #I #will #look #very #closely #at the #case the #hon. gentleman #raises. #I #know there have #been #particular #issues #around #foundation trusts in the #area he #represents, and #I #will #make #sure #that the #health #secretary #looks into the matter and writes #to #him about it.

(35) #my #hon. #friend is absolutely right #to #raise this question. #I #am #well #aware of #how bad the #flooding was and #I went #to buckfastleigh #to see #how #badly the #town had #been #flooded #for #myself. #I #know #that #my right #hon. #friend the #secretary of #state #for #transport #has

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#discussed the recent #flooding with #network #rail s #chair and chief #executive, and he #will visit the #area #soon #to #look #at this.

Class 5: Crime and Courts

Most statistically associated words: inquir, investing, police, law, justice, leveson, media, criminal, court, referendum, judge, independent, view, offence, crime, debate, clear, Europe, prosecut, reference. This accounts for 19% of the Prime Minister's utterances during PMQs. Within this class and across all 5-years the term prev_admin was mentioned 60 times.

Top 2 statistically associated E.C.U.s (Khi2)

(42) friend the #former #chief whip #gave #a #full explanation of what #happened. the #police in the meeting said that he #gave no explanation. #it is now #clear, #reading the #independent #police #complaints #commission #report, that the #police need to make an #apology. the #officers concerned and the #chief #constables are coming to the #house today.

(41) what is absolutely #clear is that #phone #hacking is not only #unacceptable #but against the #law. #it is #illegal; #it is #a #criminal #offence, and I would urge the #police and the #prosecuting authorities to #follow the #evidence #wherever #it leads. that #must #happen #first, and we #must not let #anything get in the way of #criminal #investigations.

These 5 classes account for 90% of analysed text of the Prime Minister's responses at PMQs. The remaining 10% of the corpus was not categorised by Alceste.[xviii]

4.2 Government Economic Policy, Crime and Courts, Defence Policy, Constituency Affairs (Classes 1, 2, 4, 5)

A dedicated viewer of PMQs might be able to conjure up the key themes of PMQs identified at this stage. However, this intuition is not empirically grounded or known in any concrete terms. This analysis has offered a mapping of the thematic content of the PM's responses in an empirical and objective way. Class 1. covers the breadth of issues relating to the UK's strategic interests abroad. Most notably, this is the PM striking a sympathetic tone as he announces the death of soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The tone of his responses is clear (#owe, #gratitude, #heartfelt) is clear from the most statistically associated words. This categorisation accounts for 14% of the PM's utterances at PMQs. PMQs is a rare opportunity for backbenchers to highlight a specific constituency issue with the Prime Minister. Class 4. captures the PM's typical response to such a constituency-based question. This class contains ECUs that strike a sympathetic tone as the PM wants to show that he is in touch with the grassroots and with the grievances of ordinary people. Such language includes "I'll happily meet with…" or "I will look carefully at…" Class 5. relates to responses the PM gave on matters concerning the Courts and Crime, this accounted for 19% of the PM's utterances. Class 2. captures the PM's discourse around the current challenges facing the UK economy and his government's economic policy. This accounts for 12% of the PM's utterances. This class is the most closely associated with Class 3. The distinction between the classes is discernible from the two top ranking ECUs which relate to the effects of his current government policy on unemployment rates. In comparison, class 3's top ECUs show the explicit mention of the economic policies of the previous administration. Of course, it is possible that there is some overlap between the two classes. However, this analysis seeks to map the development of the most explicit partisan responses to the previous administration.

4.3 Previous Labour Administration (Class 3)

Class 3. is the most interesting dimension of the PM's responses for understanding his rhetoric during the debate. The class captures the content of the PM's responses where the previous administration is mentioned in disparaging terms. This is illustrated by the top words most associated with this class are: #Labour, #deficit, #opposition, and #prev_admin also appears statistically and nominally significant (prev_admin was mentioned on 205 occasions within this class). Looking at the ECUs with the highest Khi2 values, this class captures negative references to the previous administration with words such as (mess, irresponsible and deficit) being statistically associated with this class. This preliminary analysis provides an objective overview of the existence and extent of the PM's reference to the previous administration.

4.4 Mentions of the Previous Administration 2010 - 2015
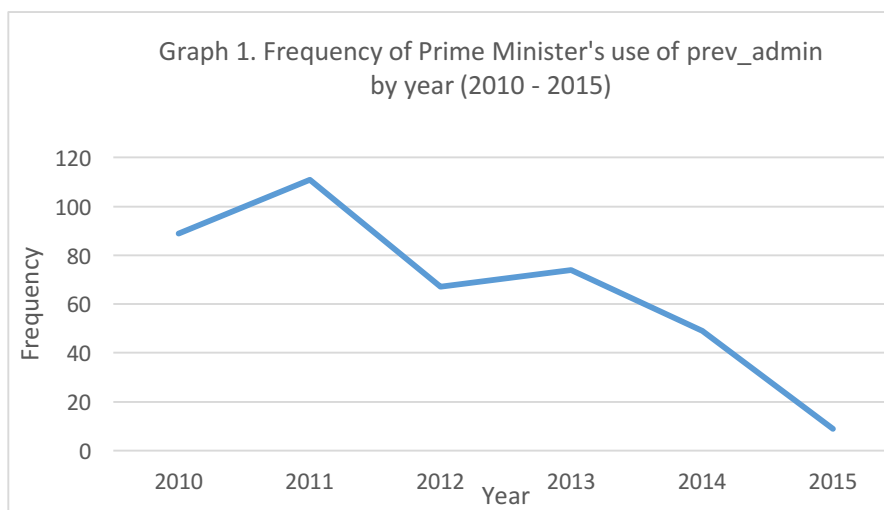
The last finding of this stage of analysis comes from a word frequency search of the term (prev_admin). The frequency remains persistently high for 2010 - 2011, falling in 2012 before rising slightly in 2013 and then falling significantly in 2014 – 2015. The most significant change in frequency occurred between (2010, 2011) and (2012-2015). The beginning of the parliamentary term (2010) merits particular attention because the Prime Minister mentioned the last Labour government 88 times despite the reduced number of PMQ sessions that year.

So far this text analysis has given an interest thematic excavation of the key themes of Prime Minister's responses at PMQs. The key points to draw from this analysis are that Class 3. is typified by its reference to the failures of the previous administration and that there appears to be variation in Prime Minister's rhetoric over the course of the parliamentary term (according to the word frequency results).

What follows is a more detailed analysis of the Prime Minister's responses to understand if he consistently referred to the previous administration in disparaging terms or whether it's a more mixed bag of references. The corpus of ECUs from Class 3 was submitted to another Alceste analysis. This is the initial stepping stone to more detailed analysis of Class 3 to understand (1) the policy areas referred to, and (2) the temporal significance of this rhetorical tool.

5. Detailed Analysis of Previous Labour Administration (Class 3)

Table 3 Basic Statistics for Previous Labour Administration (class 3)

Total word count	16948
Unique Words Analysed	1742
Passive variables (tagged indicators)	2
I.C.U.s (= number of times the PM rose to speak)	292
Classified ECUs	420 (= 90% of the retained ECU)
Lexical classes	3
Distribution of classes (% and thematic content)	1 (28) Taxation
	2 (60) Borrowing
	3 (12) National Health Service (NHS)

These 3 classes account for 90% of analysed text of the Prime Minister's responses that mention the previous administration at PMQs. The remaining 10% of the corpus was not be categorised by Alceste
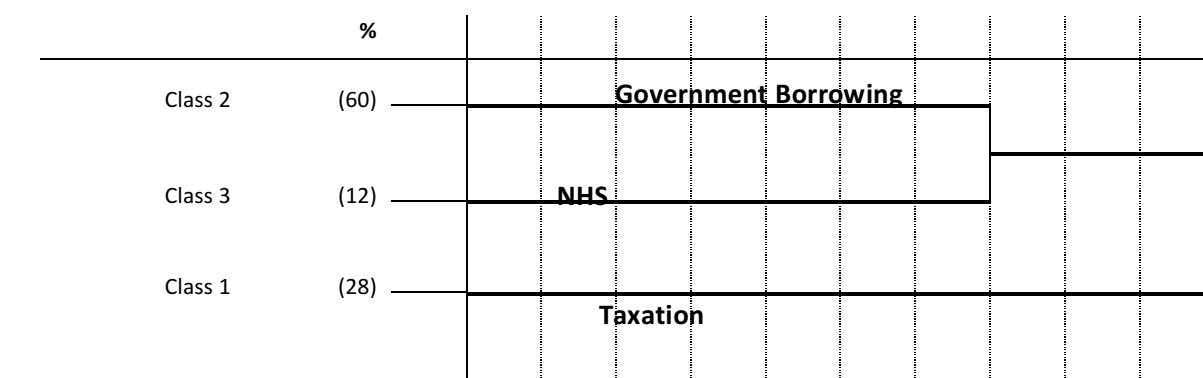
Fig 2. Tree graph of the classes from Prime Minister's responses that mention Previous Labour Administration(2010 – 2015)

Fig. 2 shows where the text divides within the PM's disparaging references to the previous administration. Class 1. is best understood as denoting occasions when the Prime Minister is criticising the previous administration's inability to raise revenue for the government through competitive taxation levels. The other branch relates to government expenditure and accounts for 72% of the Prime Minister's reference to the previous Labour government. This class segments into government borrowing (60%) and expenditure on the National Health Service (NHS) (12%). A more detailed explanation of the motivation behind these labels is given in Fig. 2.

Table 5. Labels and Significant Words in Alceste Classes of Previous Labour Administration

Class 1: Taxation

The words most statistically associated with this class are: tax, income, high, rate, million, people, increase, wage, fuel, child, altogether, minimum, pay, earn, top, work, duty, winter, rich, lift

Top ECUs
what we #have #done is #increase #tax #credits #for the #lowest #paid #people #in our #country, and we #have #actually #lifted #over 1 #million #low #paid #people #out #of #income #tax #altogether by raising the personal #allowance.

it is prev_admin that #got #rid of the 10p #tax the biggest attack on the #working #poor. it is #this #government #who #have #taken 1. 1 #million #people #out #of #tax, #who #froze the #council #tax, cut the #petrol #tax, #introduced #free nursery care #for #two, #three and #four #year #olds, and are putting up the #child #tax #credit #by #pounds$

Class 2: Previous Government Borrowing

The words most statistically associated with this class are: part, deficit, bank, welfare, housing, borrow, control, nothing, leave, leader, complete, member, reform, chancellor, poli, single, to, say, deal

Top ECUs
the reason we #had #to put #up VAT is that we were #left the #biggest #budget #deficit anywhere in #europe. it was #bigger than greece s, #bigger than spain s, #bigger than portugal s the #complete #mess #left by labour.

that compares with what we were #left by the labour #party: the #biggest #bust, the most indebted households, and the #biggest #budget #deficit in #europe, and never once an #apology for the #mess that it #left this country in.

Class 3: National Health Service

The words most statistically associated with this class are: wales, health, doctors, into, irresponsible, extra, nurses, money, wait, secretar, meet, list, target, advice, patient, bureaucracy, number, power, apologise, put

Top ECUs
they #are also a #contrast with the #number of #managers doubling under the #labour party; a #contrast with #labour s last year in #power, when the #number of #NHS #managers #rose six #times as fast as the #number of #nurses: #and a huge #contrast with the situation in #wales, #where #labour #is #cutting #NHS #spending.

#it has #not #met an #NHS #target #on cancer or #waiting #times #since 2008. the #NHS in #wales #is in trouble #and #that #is #not #because of hard working #doctors #and #nurses, but #because of a #labour administration who #cut the #NHS #and #failed to reform #it.

These 3 classes account for 90% of analysed text of the Prime Minister's responses at PMQs within class 3 of Table 1. The remaining 10% of the corpus could not be categorised by Alceste.

Fig. 3 Dendrogram presenting Thematic Breakdown of the Prime Minister's Discourse at PMQs and the Pathway of his Rhetoric
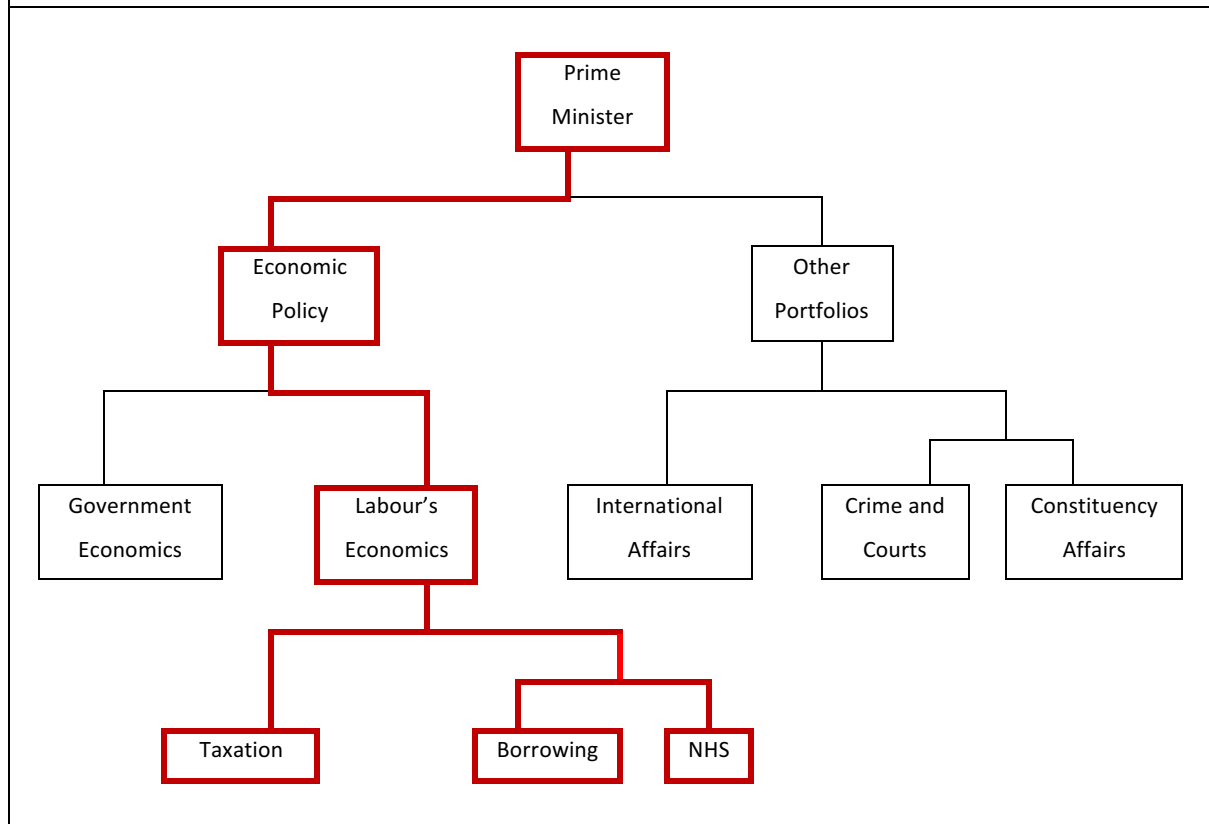
6.   Evaluations

6.1   Deliberation

Graph 4. Spatial Representation of Themes from Previous Labour Administration

2010 – 2015. #01 (Taxation) #02 (Borrowing) #03 (NHS)

```
     +-----|---------|---------|---------+---------|---------|---------|-----+
 18  |                    *year_2010     |                                   |
 17  |                                   |                                   |
 16  |                                   |                                   |
 15  |            #02*year_2011          |                                   |
 14  |                                   |                                   |
 13  |                                   |                                   |
 12  |                                   |                                   |
 11  |                                   |                                   |
 10  |                                   |                                   |
  9  |                                   |                                   |
  8  |                                   |                                   |
  7  |                                   |                                   |
  6  |                                   |                                   |
  5  |                                   |                                   |
  4  |                                   |                                   |
  3  |                                   |                                   |
  2  |                                   |                                   |
  1  |                                   |                                   |
  0  +----------------------------------*name_PM-------------------------+
  1  |                                   |                                   |
  2  |                                   |                                   |
  3  |                                   |                          #01      |
  4  |                                   |                          *year_2012|
  5  |                                   |                                   |
  6  |                                   |                                   |
  7  |                                   |                                   |
  8  |                                   |                                   |
  9  |                                   |                                   |
 10  |                                   |                                   |
 11  |                                   |                   *year_2013      |
 12  |                                   |                                   |
 13  |                                   |                                   |
 14  |                                   |                                   |
 15  |            *year_2015             |                                   |
 16  |                                   |                                   |
 17  |                                   |                                   |
 18  |                    #03            |                                   |
 19  |                                   |                                   |
 20  |                         *year_2014|                                   |
     +-----|---------|---------|---------+---------|---------|---------|-----+
```
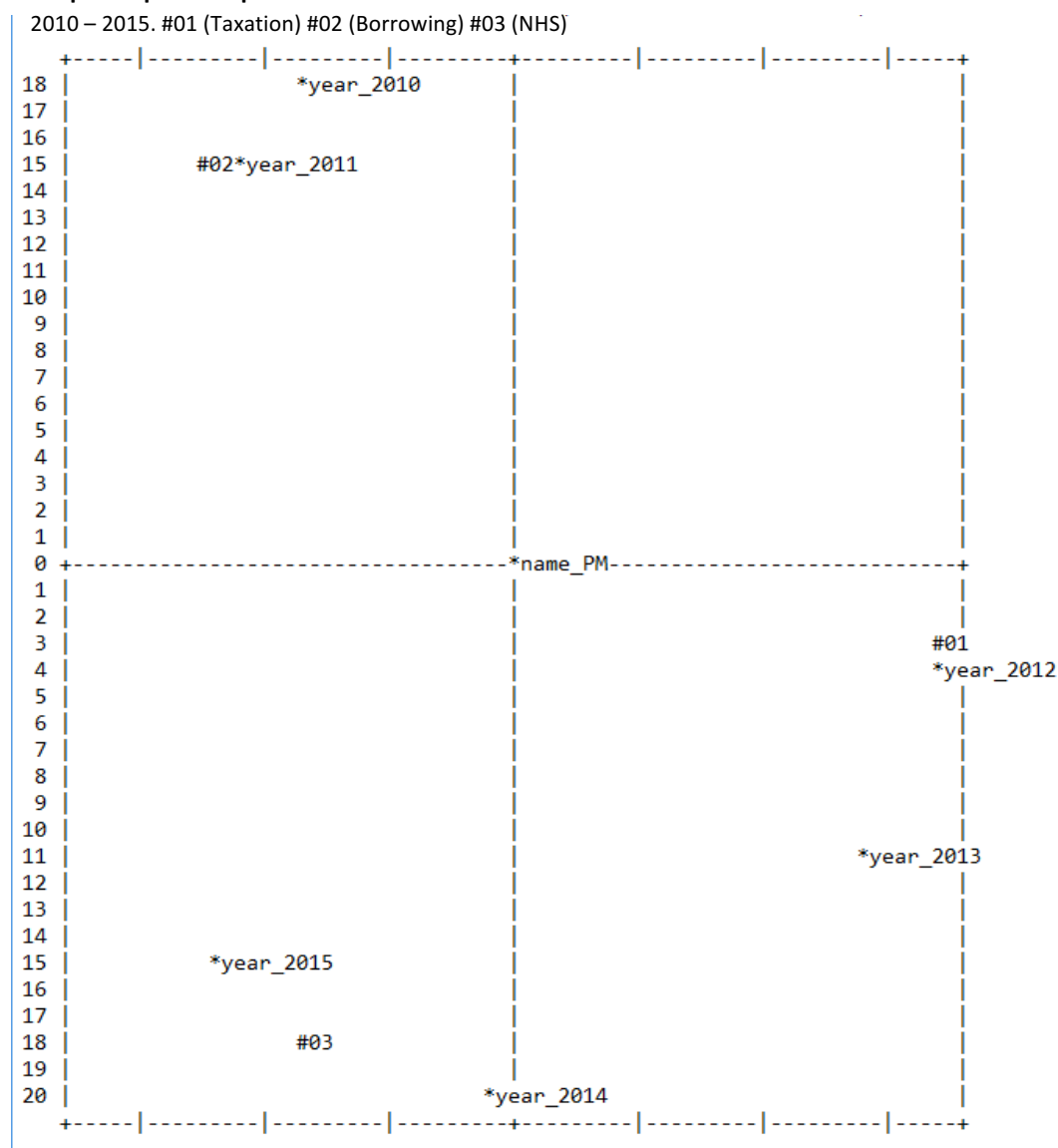
Graph 4. illustrates the temporal significance of the Prime Minister's reference to the previous administration. The implications of this mapping are discussed in the following section.

PMQs is a forum for adversarial discourse. It is argued that the "argumentative lines have been fixed before the debate" in parliamentary democracies as party discipline tends to prevail (Steiner, Bachtiger et al. 2004, p. 85). This study has provided empirical evidence to show that the content and extent of the Prime Minister's contribution to the partisan discourse and how this changes over the course of a parliamentary term. In short, the Prime Minister mentions the previous administration less and for different reasons as the parliamentary term progressed. A broad characterisation of the PMQs debate as a forum for adversarial discourse hides statistically significant and substantive developments of the

rhetorical tools used. By analysing the debate in an empirical way, this study provides an additional level of detail to our understanding of the adversarial nature of the debate. Most importantly, the year by year mapping of the content and extent of the PM's rhetorical discourse suggests that the PM became less partisan as the parliamentary term progressed. To review, 35% of his responses at PMQs were attacks on the previous administration. In 2010 and 2011, the Prime Minister's responses that mentioned the previous administration are characterised by an attack on Labour's past spending policies. This accounts for a huge (60%) of his rhetorical discourse. This is explained as an attempt by the PM to defocus attention away from current affairs (the domain of his government) and towards an alternate reality that focusses attention on the failures of the previous administration. The prevalence of this rhetorical tool in the first two years of the parliamentary term suggests that the PM's aim was to delegitimise the Labour Party's scrutiny during the debate. The real question the PM was answering in the 2010 and 2011 was: how can the unscrupulous be fit to scrutinise this government's policy?

2012-2013 is most closely associated with reference to the current government's tax regime. While 2014-2015 closely aligns with discourse on the NHS. This shift away from government borrowing and towards two of the Conservatives flagship policies signifies a shift away from overtly partisan responses. At the very least, we can say that the PM is engaging with current government policy. The reason these responses appear in Class 3. Is because of the mention of the previous administration. These utterances are distinct from the dimensionality of 2010 and 2011 because the previous administration is used to evaluate his own policies. As the Prime Minister accumulates policy history, the need to refer explicitly to the previous administration reduces. This is most likely because the criticisms of the previous administration lost salience after 2 years in Parliament. Instead, these results indicate that the first exchanges of the parliament are when the PM gave his most partisan responses. The major line of response in the initial exchanges at PMQs was to blame the spending policies of the previous administration. Whereas, in 2012 and 2013, the Prime Minister's responses shift to a focus on raising revenue through taxation.

6.4   Accountability

Parliamentary questions are primarily a tool for MPs to scrutinise the government's policies (Martin, 2011). Of course, elections are the key accountability mechanism, but in-between elections, parliamentary questions are an opportunity to retrieve information from the government and can therefore act as an ex-post control mechanism (Saalfeld, 2000). More specifically, the function of parliamentary questions is 'to obtain information or to press for action.' The correlative function of the PM's responses is therefore to provide information or to address a press for action. This is emphatically not bore out in the results of this study, particularly for the first two years of the parliament. Instead of addressing the appeal for information and/ or action, the Prime Minister used his responses to project an alternative worldview to the one projected by the Labour Party. With this in mind, 2010 and 2011 were particularly low points for government accountability at PMQs. In comparison, 2012 – 2015 did return responses that were relating to government policy, albeit with the consistent adversarial tone. Over the remainder of parliament, the PM blamed the previous administration less and in different ways. During the mid-term period, the PM used his own policies to guide his references to the previous administration.

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7. Conclusions

First, this study has provided an objective mapping of the key themes in the Prime Minister's responses at PMQs in 2010 - 2015. The Prime Minister was shown to use most (35%) of his utterances at PMQs to refer to blame the previous administration. The PM's reference to the previous administration is a statistically significant and dimensionally distinct section of discourse Second, this paper demonstrated the temporal significance of this rhetorical tool in two key ways (1) the Prime Minister referred to the previous Labour administration the most in 2010 and 2011 (2) the rhetorical framework that the Prime Minister used to refer to the last Labour government changed over the course of the parliamentary term – the references developed from an overtly partisan remark to a tool for evaluating the government's own policy. The implications of this study are (1) the accountability mechanism was least successful, in deliberative terms, when the aim to scrutinise government was in tension with the PM's aim to refocus attention away from current affairs.

By looking over the course of an entire parliament, this analysis sheds light on the temporal significance of the Prime Minister's most partisan rhetoric. As a result, (Bates, et al., 2014) focus on the first 10 PMQs of each parliamentary term for multiple PMs is likely to have captured the most partisan discourse, based on this study of the PM's rhetoric across an entire parliamentary term.

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9. Appendix 1.

Table 1. Standardisation of Key Phrases

Original	Standardised Phrase
Previous Administration	
- previous administration	prev_admin
- previous government	
- previous Labour Government	
- last Government	
- last Labour Government	
- last administration	
- his government	
- previous Prime Minister	
- last Prime Minister	
Labour Party	lab_party

Adonis, A. (1993). *Parliament today* (2nd ed. ed.): Manchester University Press.

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[i] According to convention outlined in Erskine May, the Handbook for Parliamentary Procedure

[ii] Broadly speaking, Bates calls for more research to be conducted on PMQs and for future research to compare long-term trends in the debates.

[iii] Tuned in or Turned off? Public attitudes to Prime Minister's Questions. (2014). from http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Tuned-in-or-Turned-off-Public-attitudes-to-PMQs.pdf

[iv] Prime Minister during PMQs on the 27th November 2010. For the full transcript see https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2010-11-17

[v] I attended a PMQ debate on March 9th 2016 and I regularly watch the debate. As is noted in Lovenduski, J. (2012). Prime Minister's questions as political ritual. *British Politics, 7*(4), 314-340. the public galleries are crammed full.

[vi] http://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2010-10-27/debates/10102752000028/Engagements

[vii] http://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2010-11-17/debates/10111744000026/Engagements

[viii] Broadly speaking, Bates calls for more research to be conducted on PMQs and for future research to compare long-term trends in the debates.

[ix] This is the description of PMQs given on the UK Parliament YouTube channel description.

[x] Upon the recommendation of the Parliamentary Procedural Committee, the amount of notice an MP had to give for tabling a question was reduced to 3 sitting days.

[xi] William Hague MP was asked to represent government at PMQs while the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister were campaigning in the lead up to the Scottish Independence referendum in September 2014.

[xiii] Here is an example of how the Hansard transcript differs from the verbatim transcript transcribed from the video recording of the debate accessible here:

[xiv] For example, Prime Minister: "There are two ways of measuring youth unemployment: first, the International Labour Organisation definition, which includes both full and part-time students and gives a figure of just over 1 million"

[xv] To ensure that the Prime Minister's reference to the Labour Party is analysed as distinct from his reference to Labour markets I manually changes Labour Party to lab_party.

[xvi] The dispatch box is the box in the House of Commons next to which the ministers stand when speaking

[xvii] For a clear explanation of how to interpret a tree graph see: Schonhardt-Bailey, C. (2013). *Deliberating American Monetary Policy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. P. 202

[xviii] As a rule of thumb, a good Alceste analysis will classify above 70% of UCIs. Both of the analyses in this paper classified 90% of UCIs.