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House of Lords Constitution Committee
Inquiry into the Constitutional Implications of COVID-19

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Constitutional Implications of COVID-19: Operation of PMQs* pre and post-COVID-19

We address, in part, the following questions raised by the committee:

Virtual proceedings

1. What effect have virtual proceedings had on different types of parliamentary business? Have some things worked better than others? E.g. Oral questions, statements and debates, bills and statutory instruments, committees.

2. Have virtual proceedings changed which members participate and the form and style of debates? Have they become more, or less, inclusive?

3. First, we measure the **number of questions per 1000 words, the number of unique/individual MP contributions per 1000 words** and the proportion of questions by **party** and **gender** in a sample of 10 PMQs (15th January 2020- 25th March 2020) pre-lockdown (usual PMQs) and 10 PMQs (22nd April 2020 – 1st July 2020) post-lockdown (virtual/hybrid PMQs).

4. We find:
   - **Number of questions per 1000 words** = 7.6 pre-lockdown versus 5.9 post-lockdown.
   - **Number of unique/individual MP contributions per 1000 words** = 4.5 pre-lockdown versus 3.1 post-lockdown.
   - **Female MPs** = 34% of MPs. Pre-lockdown they contributed 27% of questions, post-lockdown they contributed 32% of questions.
   - **Party representation:**
     Conservatives = 56% of seats. Pre-lockdown they contributed 50% of questions, post-lockdown they contributed 50% of questions.
     Labour = 31% of seats. Pre-lockdown they contributed 27% of questions, post-lockdown they contributed 25% of questions.
     SNP = 7% of seats. Pre-lockdown they contributed 12% of questions, post-lockdown they contributed 15% of questions.

5. Second, we measure **counter-questioning by the PM**. Our recent research, published in The Journal of Legislative Studies, and featured in the London School of Economics online British Politics and Policy Blog, focuses on a frequent form of non-answering and adversarial behaviour adopted by PMs during PMQs, which we refer to as counter-questioning (PMs asking questions back during PMQs).

   We find:

6. **Before lockdown: 0.16 mean incidence of counter-questions by the PM per 1000 words (of which: 0.14 was critical of the opposition).**

7. **After lockdown: 0.12 mean incidence of counter-questions by the PM per 1000 words (of which 0.08 was critical of the opposition).**

8. The Covid crisis appears to have made PMQs slightly more consensual (in terms of PM counter-questioning).

9. *Our previous research has shown methodological flaws in empirical assessment of **Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)**. Primarily, previous research has looked at the rate of questions (and answers) using the averages across sessions. However, though the session is intended to run for a 30-minute interval, in practice this often has exceeded this period, often running for 45 minutes or more on occasions. Applying a control for duration, we weight the frequencies of recorded behaviour during the procedure based on occurrences per 1000 words, using the formatted transcripts made available by The Hansard Society.