ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY AS A RESPONSE TO CRITICISM

1.1 A common argumentative practice in Prime Minister's Question Time

Responding with accusations of inconsistency to criticism is a common argumentative practice in Prime Minister’s Question Time in the British House of Commons. Especially when responding to questions critical of a certain policy, action or plan of the Government, it is not at all uncommon for the Prime Minister to accuse his opponents of being inconsistent. The Prime Minister, who, more or less by definition, will not agree with the criticism expressed by Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Opposition, may rather attempt to avoid discussing such criticism. He attempts to exclude from the discussion standpoints of the Opposition in which such a criticism is expressed, and justifies the exclusion by pointing out that the current positions of the MPs are inconsistent with other positions they have assumed. The following exchange between the current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron is an example.

(1) David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):
In January last year, the Government were sent details of 4,000 dangerous foreign criminals and for an entire year they did absolutely nothing with that information. Can the Prime Minister explain how such a catastrophic failure to protect the public took place?

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):
The Attorney-General has asked the Crown Prosecution Service to conduct an inquiry into this matter. A request was made by the Dutch authorities for us to look through our DNA records. Some 4,000 names were put to us by the Dutch, and 11 cases have been discovered as a result of the investigation. The inquiry will cover all the details of what happened. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that it was possible for the Dutch to ask us to look at our DNA records only because we are keeping full DNA records. The Conservatives opposed that legislation.

(House of Commons official report, 2008b)

The exchange is about a disk that contains DNA profiles of 4,000 foreign criminals. In January 2007, the disk was sent to the British Crown Prosecution Service by the Dutch authorities. The DNA information on the disk was supposed to be checked against the British database in order to trace those foreign criminals.
who are in the United Kingdom. But the check did not start until January 2008.¹

In his question, Mr. Cameron implies that the failure of the Government to check the DNA data of 4,000 serious criminals for more than a year is catastrophic. In his answer, Mr. Brown does not address the standpoint implied. Instead, he announces that an investigation is being conducted, explains the details of the case and accuses Mr. Cameron of being inconsistent in an attempt to avoid the discussion of his standpoint. In his explanation, Mr. Brown stresses the importance for the case concerned of keeping full DNA records, and emphasises that this is a government policy which the Opposition opposed. This emphasis paves the road for the charge of inconsistency that the Prime Minister makes against his opponent.

Mr. Brown accuses Mr. Cameron of being inconsistent about the benefits of keeping full DNA records. He implies that in order for Mr. Cameron to have a right to criticise the Government for failing to check DNA data, Mr. Cameron needs to believe that keeping DNA records is beneficial. Yet, Mr. Cameron’s previous actions, namely his opposition to the government policy of keeping full DNA records, imply that he does not believe keeping DNA records to be beneficial. By means of this alleged inconsistency, the Prime Minister seems to attempt to exclude the standpoint of the Leader of the Opposition from the discussion. Mr. Brown’s non-acceptance of Mr. Cameron’s standpoint initiates an argumentative confrontation. However, instead of proceeding with the argumentative discussion of the standpoint he does not accept, Mr. Brown attempts to rule the standpoint out.²

When a discussant attempts to exclude a standpoint from the discussion by means of an accusation of inconsistency, the discussant claims that the proponent of the standpoint cannot be committed to this standpoint because he

¹ For more information about this case, see the coverage of BBC News at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7253989.stm
² The exchange of questions and answers about the DNA data check goes on for two more rounds, in which the two parties reformulate their positions and advance new ones. However, the first round, which is examined here, can be considered independently for the sake of illustrating how the Prime Minister employs a charge of inconsistency in an attempt to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition. In addition, the first round can be considered a complete independent exchange because it is very common in Question Time that the question-answer exchange about an issue is one round only. The Prime Minister takes that into account as he provides answers to the questions posed by the Leader of the Opposition.
can also be held committed to a position that is inconsistent with it. By means of the accusation of inconsistency, the discussant attempts to rule out a standpoint as untenable, lead its proponent to retract it and consequently put an end to the initial disagreement about it in the argumentative confrontation. The latter is beneficial for a discussant who does not accept a standpoint and yet finds it difficult to refute it. Also beneficial is the resort to accusations of inconsistency as a means to rule out standpoints that one wishes not to discuss. That is so at least because it seems fair to assume that a discussant cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously.

The Prime Minister’s responses to standpoints from the Opposition by accusations of inconsistency seem particularly opportune in the kind of parliamentary session in which they here occur. In Question Time, parliamentary rules and conventions restrict the discussants’ range of the argumentative positions they can adopt. For example, as Head of Government, the Prime Minister is required to defend his Government’s plans, policies and actions against criticism. He is, consequently, expected to assume a position in which he refutes standpoints of MPs from the Opposition whenever these express criticism of his Government. In the exchange above, for example, Mr. Brown is required to refute Mr. Cameron’s standpoint that the failure of the Government to check the DNA data of 4,000 serious criminals for more than a year is catastrophic. The exclusion of this standpoint, which is not easy to refute, is particularly beneficial to the Prime Minister in view of his institutional obligation.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister’s choice of accusations of inconsistency as a means to exclude opposition standpoints seems particularly opportune considering how crucial for public political discussions the value of political consistency is. The damage a charge of inconsistency can cause to the public image of the politician accused goes way beyond the scope of the exchange in which it occurs. Mr. Brown’s accusation of inconsistency above is an example. By implying that the Leader of the Opposition cannot be for and against keeping full DNA records at the same time, Mr. Brown attempts not only to avoid a discussion of the criticism that he cannot refute but also to damage the image of the Leader of the Opposition as a high profile politician seeking the leadership of the country. After all, a Leader of the Opposition who cannot offer a consistent
policy cannot be expected to provide better governance.

Even though it is in principle not unreasonable to request the proponent of a standpoint to be consistent, attempting to exclude a standpoint from the discussion by means of an alleged inconsistency can be a case of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The infamous *tu quoque* variant is typically associated with discussants’ attempts to silence their co-discussants by pointing out inconsistencies between the co-discussants’ words and deeds. The question may therefore be raised as for when the Prime Minister’s accusation is a reasonable attempt to rule out an untenable standpoint of the Opposition, and when it is a fallacious attempt to silence the Opposition. This question gets more complicated once institutional political considerations are taken into account. Given that holding the Government to account is central to the argumentative practice of Question Time, is it at all reasonable to rule out a standpoint in which criticism of the Government is expressed? Conversely, given that political consistency is particularly significant in government-related discussions, is it not justifiable to consider all inconsistent positions untenable and to rule them out consequently?

In order to shed light on the Prime Minister’s responses, described above, this study was undertaken.

1.2  **A pragma-dialectical approach to the Prime Minister’s accusations**

The Prime Minister’s accusations of inconsistency in response to standpoints from the Opposition will be examined from the perspective of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003a). This approach is particularly useful for the intended examination because it provides a view and tools that are instrumental for an analytically insightful and critically evaluative account of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue.

In pragma-dialectics, argumentation is viewed as “a verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 1). This view is largely a consequence of the adoption of four meta-theoretical
starting points, according to which argumentation as a subject matter is functionalised, externalised, socialised and dialectified (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 2004). As explained by van Eemeren and Grootendorst,

Functionalisation means that we treat every language activity as a purposive act. Externalisation means that we target the public commitments entailed by the performance of certain language activities. Socialisation means that we relate these commitments to the interaction that takes place with other people through the language activities in question. Finally, dialectification means that we regard the language activities as part of an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with critical norms of reasonableness (2004: pp. 52-53).

The principles of functionalisation and socialisation are particularly relevant for the study of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. These two principles contribute significantly to a view of argumentation that encompasses all the elements of argumentative discourse that are relevant to the defence or refutation of a point of view and accounts well for the interactional aspect inherent in such discourse. Both principles are necessary for the examination of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue.

The principle of functionalisation allows for an analysis of the Prime Minister’s responses as part of an argumentative discourse. In spite of their importance in argumentative practice, the Prime Minister’s responses at issue would not be taken into account by many approaches to argumentation. Because they are attempts to avoid the discussion of a standpoint, rather than to provide a defence of it, the Prime Minister’s responses at issue would fall outside the scope of examination of product-oriented approaches, the subject matter of which is restricted to the constellations of statements that constitute a defence of a point of view. In contrast, because the pragma-dialectical approach adopts a functionalised view of argumentative discourse, in this approach, the subject matter includes the whole process through which points of view are defended or refuted. The subject of investigation in a pragma-dialectical approach encompasses all the speech acts that are functional to the defence or refutation of a point of view. These include not only the speech act complex of argumentation, but also speech acts such as asserting a standpoint and expressing doubt about it.

The interactional aspect of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue can be accounted for in a pragma-dialectical examination thanks to the meta-theoretical starting point of socialisation. The view that argumentation is aimed at
convincing, rather than merely justifying or refuting, takes argumentation to involve not only a party that defends a point of view, but also a party that needs to be convinced of this point of view, i.e. the critic. Argumentation can thus be seen as a dialogic exchange of speech acts between a party that defends a standpoint and a party that doubts it underlies. The speech acts performed by both parties communicate information, incur commitments and obligations that guide the development of the interaction and shape the argumentative discourse accordingly. Such a social and interactional view of argumentation allows for investigating the Prime Minister’s accusations of inconsistency in a way that does justice to their function in discourse, i.e. as critical responses to standpoints expressed by the Opposition.

In addition to the beneficial view of argumentation that the pragma-dialectical approach offers, the approach provides theoretical tools that are useful for the investigation of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. Three of such tools are particularly relevant for this study: first, the ideal model of a critical discussion designed to describe the different stages an ideal argumentative discourse needs to pass through and the dialectical obligations according to which ideal arguers need to act (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984); second, the concept of strategic manoeuvring coined to account for the tension between arguers’ ideal dialectical obligation and their actual concern with being rhetorically effective (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999); and third, the concept of argumentative activity types, introduced to address the (mostly institutionalised) conventional aspects of argumentative practice (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005).

The pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion is a procedural model that describes how argumentative discourse would be structured were such discourse to be solely aimed at resolving differences of opinion. The model spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion, i.e. the resolution of a dispute by means of critically testing the standpoints at issue. In the first stage of a critical discussion, the difference of opinion needs to be externalised: clarity must be achieved as to which standpoints are to be defended and what doubt or criticism has to be overcome (the confrontation stage). It also needs to be established what the material and
procedural starting points of the discussion are \textit{(the opening stage)}. The arguments advanced in support of the standpoint(s) at stake need to be systematically tested \textit{(the argumentation stage)} based on which the outcome of the discussion can be established \textit{(the concluding stage)}. For each of the stages, the model specifies the types of speech acts that can contribute to the resolution of the difference of opinion. On the basis of these types, the discussant’s dialectical obligations pertinent to each of the dialectical stages are specified. For example, in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, the party who challenges an expressed standpoint needs to express clearly what kind of challenge is involved: it should advance either the speech act of casting doubt upon the standpoint expressed or the speech act of advancing the opposite standpoint.\footnote{According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), the speech act of casting doubt is an illocutionary negation of a commissive speech act by means of which a speaker expresses his non-acceptance of the speech act he reacts to.}

As a heuristic and analytic tool, the model provides a template against which argumentative practice is to be compared in order to recover its underlying argumentative organisation. In a pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative exchanges, actual exchanges are first reconstructed in terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion. The reconstruction reveals the argumentative function of the different contributions discussants make as part of an argumentative exchange.\footnote{Elaborate discussions of the merits and problems of reconstruction can be found in \textit{Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse} (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs & Jackson, 1993).} The Prime Minister’s responses at issue respond to a standpoint of the Opposition by casting doubt on it. Because the responses do not provide arguments in support of standpoints but cast doubt on them instead, the argumentative function of the responses might not be easily recognisable. Viewed in light of the ideal model, the responses can be seen to occur in those parts of argumentative exchanges in which differences of opinion come about and which are to be reconstructed as part of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, hereafter \textit{argumentative confrontations}. Seeing the responses as part of argumentative confrontations reveals the role they play in the definition of the difference of opinion, and traces the effect they can have on the argumentative resolution of the difference of opinion.
As a critical evaluative tool, the model provides a template against which argumentative practice is to be compared in order to assess its reasonableness. In the ideal model, the exchange of speech acts is regulated by a discussion procedure motivated by a dialectical notion of reasonableness, in which reasonable argumentative discourse is taken to be geared towards a resolution of the difference of opinion that is achieved by critically testing the standpoints at stake (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: pp. 135-157). The procedure incorporates fifteen rules that need to be followed in order for a discussion to proceed reasonably. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst explain, “the rules specify in which cases the performance of certain speech acts contributes to the (critical) resolution of the difference of opinion” (2004: p. 135). In a pragma-dialectical evaluation of a piece of argumentative discourse, reasonableness is assessed by checking the extent to which actual argumentative moves adhere to the rules for a critical discussion and contribute positively to the resolution of the difference of opinion. In light of this dialectical conception of reasonableness, argumentative moves such as the Prime Minister’s responses at issue would be judged as reasonable moves whenever they constitute argumentative contributions that further the critical testing of points of view. If they constitute contributions that hinder the testing, they will be judged as fallacious. Given that critical testing can be highly instrumental in achieving political accountability by subjecting the performance of the Government to the utmost of scrutiny, it will be particularly beneficial to judge the reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue on the basis of their contribution to the critical testing of the standpoints that are being discussed.

While the ideal model of a critical discussion provides a tool to take into account the discussants’ interest in critically testing standpoints, when analysing and evaluating the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, the concept of strategic manoeuvring provides a tool to do justice to the discussants’ interest in winning the discussions in which they get involved. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003a) observe, discussants in actual argumentative practice are not only

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5 The pursuit of a critical resolution of differences of opinion is not merely ideal. In a number of studies, van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels (e.g. van Eemeren et al. 2009) have shown that the dialectical norm is intersubjectively valid among normal language users. In other words, the critical resolution of differences of opinion is an ideal the pursuit of which can be attributed to discussants in actual argumentative practice.
concerned with critically testing their standpoints, but they are also concerned with getting these standpoints accepted (p. 391).

The concerns with critical reasonableness and with rhetorical effectiveness can be at odds with each other. It is not unusual that critical testing steers the discussion away from the favourable outcome of getting one’s point of view accepted: a standpoint might not pass the critical testing, in which case it is to be retracted rather than accepted. Neither is it unusual that discussions are steered towards a favourable outcome by hindering the critical testing procedure: standpoints might get accepted as a result of silencing critical reactions rather than addressing them. And yet, balancing the two concerns is not out of the question: it is perfectly possible for discussants to win discussions by means of reasonable argumentation. It is the pursuit of such balance that van Eemeren and Houtlosser call strategic manoeuvring.

According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2000, 2002c, 2006), in argumentative practice, discussants attempt to strike a balance between (dialectical) reasonableness and (rhetorical) effectiveness with every move they make. In every move, discussants make opportune choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices in an attempt to critically test the standpoints at issue and steer the discussion towards a favourable outcome. This view sheds significant light on the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. Seen from the perspective of strategic manoeuvring, the Prime Minister’s resort to an accusation of inconsistency can be viewed as a potentially reasonable and opportune choice. The accusation has the potential to steer the discussion towards the favourable outcome of ruling out standpoints of the Opposition in a reasonable way: it declares them untenable on the –in principle– reasonable ground that one cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously.

The concept of strategic manoeuvring does not only refine the pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative practice, but also the evaluation of such a practice. The pragma-dialectical view of fallacies as argumentative moves that hinder the critical testing of standpoints can be refined in view of the tension inherent in the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness. In view of the concept of strategic manoeuvring, fallacies can be viewed as the result of failing to balance the pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness
with that of dialectical reasonableness and allowing the former to override the latter. In such cases, where the balance is distorted in favour of rhetorical effectiveness, a discussant’s strategic manoeuvring is said to have derailed (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b). Seeing unreasonable argumentative moves as derailments of strategic manoeuvring allows for a more adequate evaluative account of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. It then becomes possible to explain why the Prime Minister’s responses at issue are reasonable in some cases and unreasonable in others: in principle, the response can be a sound instance of strategic manoeuvring when the accusation is employed in an attempt to rule out an untenable standpoint without obstructing the critical testing procedure. It can, however, also be an instance of derailed strategic manoeuvring if the accusation silences the proponent of a standpoint and hinders the critical testing procedure.

While the ideal model of a critical discussion and the concept of strategic manoeuvring provide insight into the argumentative dimension of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, the concept of argumentative activity types (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005) provides insight into the institutional dimension of the responses. The concept was introduced into the pragma-dialectical framework in order to account for those aspects of argumentative practice that are conventionalised, typically as a result of rules and conventions of a more or less formalised institutional context in which argumentation takes place. As introduced by van Eemeren and Houtlosser, argumentative activity types are “cultural artifacts that can be identified on the basis of careful empirical observation of argumentative practice” (2005: p. 76). Van Eemeren and

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6 According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003b), an argumentative move is reasonable as long as the critical testing of standpoints is not hindered by the discussants’ pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness, i.e. as long as the balance between dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness is not disturbed in favour of the latter. In the case that it is the pursuit of dialectical soundness that overrules the pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness, van Eemeren and Houtlosser do not talk of unreasonable moves, but of misfires instead.

7 In their article ‘Theoretical Construction and Argumentative Reality’, where they introduce the concept of argumentative activity types into the pragma-dialectical framework, van Eemeren and Houtlosser state that they view argumentative activity types as somehow different from Levinson’s (1979, 1991) activity types (2005: p.76). Levinson’s concept of activity type refers to

[a] culturally recognised activity, […] a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions

In spite of the similarity between the two—they both describe conventionalised communicative rule-governed practice—, the concepts refer to descriptions that differ in their degree of abstraction and the extent to which they are ‘empirical’.
Houtlosser observe that rules and conventions of the contexts in which argumentation occurs create preconditions for argumentation that constrain arguers’ strategic manoeuvring. The rules and conventions limit the arguer’s choice of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices. Consequently, some of the arguers’ possibilities to steer the discussion in their own favour in a reasonable way are closed off while other possibilities open up (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007b).

Taking the rules and conventions of Prime Minister's Question Time into account seems of major importance when studying the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. It is crucial, for example, that the Prime Minister has the institutional obligation to defend his Government against the criticism of his fellow MPs. Such a convention seems to close off the Prime Minister’s –usually open– possibility to accept opposition standpoints without challenge. The Prime Minister’s attempt to rule out opposition standpoints seems more opportune in view of such a limitation. By shedding light on the institutional dimensions of the strategic function of the Prime Minister’s response at issue, the concept of argumentative activity types contributes to an empirically adequate analytic account of the responses at issue. The concept provides insight that can also refine the evaluative account of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. Rules and conventions can be the source of criteria for assessing the reasonableness of argumentative moves. In the case of the Prime Minister’s response at issue, it seems for example plausible that, in order to judge whether the inconsistencies alleged by the Prime Minister are relevant to the discussion of opposition standpoints or not, one needs to consider the extent to which discussants are expected to be consistent in the specific context of Question Time.

1.3 Objectives and organisation of this study

This study comes as part of a larger pragma-dialectical project to examine argumentation in institutionalised contexts. Like the other studies in the project, it examines the influence of the rules and conventions of institutionalised contexts on arguers’ attempts to balance dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness. In particular, the study aims to offer a detailed account of the Prime Minister’s
attempts to balance dialectical soundness and rhetorical effectiveness when he responds by accusations of inconsistency to opposition standpoints in the particular context of Question Time in the British House of Commons. The account to be given will encompass an analytic view of the responses, in which their strategic function as a particular way of manoeuvring is spelled out, as well as an evaluative view, in which the conditions are specified that need to be fulfilled in order for the response to be considered reasonable.

To achieve the main objective of this study, I shall first give an account of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring in which a discussant responds to a standpoint he does not accept by an accusation of inconsistency. By taking the pragma-dialectical approach to activity types as a starting point for a thorough examination of the argumentative practice of Prime Minister’s Question Time, I shall then systematically derive institutional insights for the analysis and evaluation of this way of strategic manoeuvring. Finally, these institutional insights will be applied in the analysis and evaluation of the Prime Minister’s responses to opposition standpoints by accusations of inconsistency, leading to a more empirically adequate and consequently more critically insightful account of these recurrent argumentative moves.

I intend to achieve the main objective of the study by answering the following research questions.

(1) What strategic function can in general be ascribed to accusations of inconsistency that come in response to contested standpoints?

(2) How is the arguers’ simultaneous pursuit of critical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness in defining their difference of opinion constrained by the rules and conventions of Prime Minister's Question Time?

(3) What is, in the specific context of Prime Minister's Question Time, the strategic function of the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to standpoints from the Opposition?

(4) Under which conditions are the Prime Minister’s responses at issue reasonable?

The study is divided accordingly into six chapters. Except for the introductory and concluding chapters, each chapter addresses one of the research questions formulated above.
In order to answer the first question, Chapter 2 characterises accusations of inconsistency that come in response to critical standpoints, such as the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, as instances of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring that occurs in argumentative confrontations. The responses are examined in the context of the discussants’ pursuit of defining their differences of opinion in a way that is at the same time both reasonable and favourable to them. Responding to a standpoint by an accusation of inconsistency is in this chapter analysed as a way of expressing doubt in an attempt to make the proponent of the standpoint retract his standpoint, and consequently, terminate the dispute about it at the early stage of argumentative confrontation. The accusation is discussed as an opportune choice by means of which a discussant attempts to steer the argumentative confrontation about a standpoint that he does not accept towards the favourable outcome of an elimination of the initial disagreement about this standpoint, in what can in principle be a reasonable way.

In Chapter 3, the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time is examined as an argumentative activity type. The practice is described, discussed and characterised in terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion. Special attention is devoted to the argumentative confrontations in Question Time. The characterisation is intended to identify the preconditions for argumentation that result from the rules and conventions of the parliamentary session.

In Chapter 4, the Prime Minister’s responses at issue are particularly examined in view of the insights gained from Chapter 2 about the argumentative strategic function of responses to standpoints by accusations of inconsistency, combined with the insights gained in Chapter 3 about the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time. The examination is aimed at providing a detailed analytic account of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, in which the institutional dimension of their strategic function is highlighted.

In Chapter 5, the reasonableness of the response at issue is discussed. First, pragmatic and dialectical perspectives on reasonableness are combined in the investigation of the reasonableness of accusations of inconsistency as an expression of doubt in response to contested standpoints. Starting from the dialectical view that a certain instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring is
sound if the pursuit of a favourable definition of the difference of opinion does not override the pursuit of a definition that furthers the critical testing of points of view (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003a), and taking the characteristics of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency into account, general soundness conditions are set for the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue. By also taking characteristics of the activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time into account, the soundness conditions will be made more specific. By formulating these soundness conditions, I aim at providing a critically insightful evaluative account of the Prime Minister’s response at issue.

In the last chapter of this study (Chapter 6), the findings of the previous chapters will be discussed. These findings are summarised and their significant implications are pointed out and assessed, based on which suggestions for further research are made.