‘The honourable gentleman should make up his mind’ : strategic manoeuvring with accusations of inconsistency in Prime Minister’s Question Time
Mohammed, D.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Mohammed, D. A. (2009). ‘The honourable gentleman should make up his mind’ : strategic manoeuvring with accusations of inconsistency in Prime Minister's Question Time
In the previous chapter, the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to the criticism expressed by the Opposition were characterised as a particular way of strategic manoeuvring. This characterisation highlighted the strategic argumentative function of the responses as attempts to rule out, in what is in principle a reasonable way, a standpoint that is not accepted. Because institutional considerations are central to the discussants’ attempts to win discussions within the boundaries of reasonableness, an adequate account of the strategic function of the responses at issue cannot be achieved without taking into account characteristics of the institutional context in which the responses occur. In this chapter, I shall, therefore, discuss the institutional context in which these attempts occur, i.e. that of the parliamentary session of Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons.

I shall start by discussing the concept of argumentative activity types (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005) in terms of its contribution to a more empirically adequate account of argumentative exchanges that occur in institutionalised contexts. Then, I shall describe and discuss the argumentative practice of Question Time and characterise it as an argumentative activity type, in order to shed light on the opportunities and constraints that the rules and conventions of the session provide for arguers’ confrontational manoeuvring. The insights gained from the activity type perspective will, in the next chapter, be integrated into the analysis of attempts of the Prime Minister to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion, in order to provide an empirically adequate analytic account of the Prime Minister’s attempts at issue.

3.1 Towards an empirically adequate account of institutionalised argumentative practices

The integration of institutional considerations into the analysis of argumentative exchanges is essential for an empirically adequate account of these exchanges. As
van Eemeren and Houtlosser observe, argumentation typically takes place in contexts that are to a greater or lesser degree institutionalised. The contexts in which argumentative exchanges typically occur are regulated by rules and conventions that establish preconditions for those argumentative exchanges. These preconditions eventually shape argumentative exchanges by creating opportunities and constraints for the arguers’ strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006). For example, as a consequence of the convention of not allowing arguments from analogy in a Dutch criminal trial, certain strategic possibilities are closed off, mainly in relation to the evidence furnished by the prosecution, and at the same time other strategic possibilities open up, mainly for the defence (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009).\(^{17}\) It is in the pursuit of tracing the influence of institutional considerations such as these that van Eemeren and Houtlosser introduced the concept of argumentative activity types.

Within the pragma-dialectical framework, the concept of argumentative activity types was introduced to represent the more or less institutionalised communicative practices in which argumentation plays a central role and which manifest themselves in more or less fixed formats that are culturally established (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005, 2009; van Eemeren & Garssen, 2008). Van Eemeren and Houtlosser discuss the institutionalised argumentative practices of mediation, adjudication and negotiation as examples of argumentative activity types. They describe each of these practices in view of its aim and the means to reach this aim given the rules and conventions that regulate it. Starting from this description, they identify the resulting conventional preconditions for argumentative exchanges that take place as part of the practices concerned. For example, the activity type of negotiation is described as the argumentative practice that is triggered by a conflict of interests and which aims at a compromise.

As van Eemeren and Houtlosser observe, the acceptable starting points, the allowable argumentative means and the possible ways to determine the outcome of the discussion are preconditioned by the rules and conventions that regulate negotiation practice. For example, the interests of the negotiating parties and their concessions are conventionally accepted as common starting points. So

\(^{17}\) More examples can be found in van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005: pp. 80-83).
are the laws, conventions and agreements that are relevant to the issues that are being negotiated; for instance, international trade agreements are typically the source of much of the common ground in a session of international trade negotiation. Also typical of negotiation is the practice of embodying arguments in exchanges of bids and offers, and their achieved outcome in a mutually accepted compromise.18

Using the concept of argumentative activity types, preconditions that apply to conventionalised argumentative practices can be methodically identified. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser identify the general preconditions that are applicable to the argumentative exchanges in the activity types of adjudication, mediation and negotiation by characterising each of the conventionalised argumentative practices at issue in terms of the four stages of critical testing. They identify preconditions that apply to (a) the initial situation which triggers the argumentative exchanges in the conventionalised practice, viewed in terms of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, (b) the procedural and material starting points that are mutually accepted in the practice concerned, viewed in terms of the opening stage, (c) the argumentative means allowable and employed by the arguers in the practice examined, viewed in terms of the argumentation stage, and (d) the possible outcomes of the argumentative exchanges in the practice at issue, viewed in terms of the concluding stage of a critical discussion. The preconditions so identified are represented in the table below.

---

18 On the basis of van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), Mohammed (2007b) presents an elaborate account of the argumentative activity type of negotiation as the argumentative practice in which negotiators externalise their interests in positions that they adopt, and engage in an argumentative discussion about the contribution of these positions to a compromise that satisfies the maximum of their conflicting interests. The characterisation of the activity type of negotiation suggested had been kept general to cover the different variants of negotiation encounters. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2008) observe, negotiation encounters can have different formats, each with their own more specific rules and conventions. The parties are usually free in their choice of the format they follow, but once the choice is made, they are bound to such specific rules and conventions.
### Three types of argumentative activity related to the model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005: p. 79)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Discussion</th>
<th>Confrontation Stage</th>
<th>Opening Stage</th>
<th>Argumentation Stage</th>
<th>Concluding Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Types</strong></td>
<td><strong>Initial Situation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Starting Points</strong> (Material, Procedural)</td>
<td><strong>Argumentative Means</strong></td>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argumentative Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Difference of opinion; decision up to the parties</td>
<td>Largely implicit intersubjective rules; implicitly and explicitly shared concessions</td>
<td>Argumentation defending standpoints in critical exchanges</td>
<td>Resolution difference of opinion by joint decision or parties return to initial situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjudication</strong></td>
<td>Dispute; 3rd party with jurisdiction to decide</td>
<td>Largely explicit codified rules; explicitly established concessions</td>
<td>Argumentation based on interpretation of concessions in terms of facts and evidence</td>
<td>Settlement of dispute by sustained decision 3rd party (no return to initial situation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mediation</strong></td>
<td>Disagreement; 3rd party with no jurisdiction to decide</td>
<td>Implicitly enforced regulative rules; no explicitly recognized concessions</td>
<td>Argumentation conveyed in would-be spontaneous conversational exchanges</td>
<td>Conclusion of disagreement by mediated arrangement parties or provisional return to initial situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negotiation</strong></td>
<td>Conflict of interests; decision up to the parties</td>
<td>Semi-explicit constitutive rules of the game; changeable sets of explicit concessions</td>
<td>Argumentation incorporated in exchanges of offers, counter-offers and other “commissives”</td>
<td>End of conflict by compromise parties, mutually accepted agreement or return to initial situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The identification of institutional preconditions for argumentative practices, achieved in the characterisation of argumentative activity types in terms of the four stages of critical testing, sheds light on the potential effects that the pursuit of institutional aims has on the different stages of argumentative exchanges. Similar to Stephen Levinson’s activity types, argumentative activity types are structured through rules and conventions that are adapted to advance the
realisation of a goal that the participants have in the specific context of the activity at issue. As Levinson (1992) puts it, the “structural elements [of activity types are] […] rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question, that is the functions that members of the society see the activity as having” (p. 71). Given that argumentative activity types describe the argumentative practice in contexts that are to a greater or lesser extent institutionalised, an argumentative activity type is structured through rules and conventions that are adapted to advance the realisation of an institutional goal that can be attributed to the arguers in the specific context of the activity at issue. For example, the rules and conventions of a negotiation encounter are adapted to the goal of reaching a compromise that satisfies the maximum of the parties’ conflicting interests, which is the point of the activity. As arguers get engaged in a negotiation encounter, their argumentation is supposed to be geared towards the satisfaction of this goal. In light of such a view, one can say that what the theory of argumentative activity types actually describes is the conventionalised argumentative practices in terms of their institutional aims and the argumentative means available to realise these aims given the institutional rules and conventions of the practice concerned.

By highlighting the significant role that institutional aims play in shaping argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types contributes to an empirically adequate analysis of institutionalised argumentative practices. Because the empirical aims of arguers, i.e. the aims that they actually pursue in practice, play an important role in shaping argumentative exchanges, a more realistic examination of argumentative exchanges needs to take those empirical aims into account. In the pragma-dialectical pursuit of a more realistic account of argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types complements the concept of strategic manoeuvring. While the concept of strategic manoeuvring provides the means to highlight the role that the arguers’ empirical aim of being rhetorically effective plays in shaping argumentative exchanges, the concept of argumentative activity types highlights the role that institutional aims play in shaping arguers’ strategic manoeuvring, i.e. their pursuit of balancing reasonableness and effectiveness.
As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2006) explain, the concept of strategic manoeuvring came in response to the realisation that arguers are usually not only concerned with being reasonable but also with being effective (p. 383). In view of the concept of strategic manoeuvring, arguers’ concerns with reasonableness and effectiveness are translated into dialectical and rhetorical aims respectively. The dialectical aims are specifications of the normative aim of critical testing and each of these aims pertains to a particular point in a stage of the procedure for critical resolution of a difference of opinion. They embody the obligations that the parties of a difference of opinion need to meet in order for the aim of critical testing to be achieved. The general dialectical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion by critically testing the points of view at stake. The rhetorical aims are specifications of the descriptive aim to get one’s own point of view accepted. In pragma-dialectical terms, the general rhetorical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion to one’s own favour. Similar to the dialectical aims, rhetorical aims that relate to each of the stages of critical testing can be formulated. Such aims are characterised as counterparts of the dialectical aims. For every dialectical aim that is derived from the arguers’ normative concern with critical reasonableness there is a rhetorical complement that is derived from the arguers’ descriptive concern with rhetorical effectiveness.\footnote{An account of the specification of the dialectical and rhetorical aims according to the stages of critical resolution of differences of opinion can be found in van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002c). Even though the pragma-dialectical rhetorical aims originate from a descriptive assumption about the practice of argumentation, these aims are not entirely descriptive; they are in fact a normative conceptualisation of the descriptive aim of pursuing rhetorical effectiveness, performed in light of the dialectical ideal aim of critical testing.} Despite their different origins, dialectical and rhetorical aims are both empirical aims that are attributed to arguers in argumentative practice.

Dialectical and rhetorical aims are aims that arguers are assumed to have in all argumentative exchanges. Whether they are arguing in a negotiation, mediation, adjudication encounter, or in a parliamentary debate, arguers should ideally be attempting to critically test their points of view, and they are usually also attempting to get their points of view accepted. Dialectical and rhetorical aims of the arguers can thus be considered to be the intrinsic aims of argumentation. In contrast, institutional aims, which are attributed to arguers as they engage in argumentative exchanges in a specific conventionalised context,
vary from one context to another. For example, the aim of reaching a compromise that satisfies the maximum of the parties’ interest is an aim that arguers are assumed to have only when they argue in a negotiation encounter, and the aim to convince a judge to resolve a disagreement to one’s own favour is specific to adjudication encounters. Unlike dialectical and rhetorical aims, institutional aims are in this sense extrinsic aims of argumentation. They are derived from the context in which argumentative exchanges occur and they relate to the function that argumentation is supposed to have in that context. In view of the concepts of strategic manoeuvring and argumentative activity types, argumentative exchanges are perceived as the result of the interaction of, on the one hand, the dialectical and rhetorical *intrinsic* aims of argumentation, and on the other hand, the institutional aims, as one of the main *extrinsic* aims of argumentative exchanges.\(^{20}\)

The integration of rhetorical and institutional insights into the dialectical framework enhances the empirical adequacy of the examination of argumentative exchanges. A dialectical framework that incorporates rhetorical insights enables the analyst to capture elements of the argumentative discourse that are motivated by the concern for effectiveness, in addition to those elements that are motivated by their concern for reasonableness. By incorporating institutional insights, the framework enables the analyst to capture also those elements that are motivated by institutional concerns, i.e. concerns that are related to the function that argumentation fulfils in the more or less institutionalised context in which it occurs.

### 3.2 The argumentative practice of Question Time

Prime Minister’s Question Time in the British House of Commons is the parliamentary session in which the Prime Minister provides oral answers to questions of his fellow MPs. The practice of having a regular session in which the

---

\(^{20}\) In contrast to other approaches, where the institutional aims are integrated into the rhetorical aims of the arguers (see Jacobs 2002), pragma-dialectics maintains a distinction between the aims of being rhetorically effective and being institutionally effective. Such a distinction allows for tracing the influence of extrinsic characteristics of argumentative discourse, basically those derived from its context-dependent institutional aims, on the ways of realising its intrinsic aims, being to argue both reasonably and effectively.
Prime Minister provides oral answers to questions from the House of Commons started in 1961. Until Tony Blair became Prime Minister in 1997, Prime Ministers used to answer questions from MPs twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, at a session of fifteen minutes on each day. However, since Wednesday 21 May 1997, which was Mr. Blair’s first Question Time session as a Prime Minister, Prime Minister's Question Time has become a weekly session of thirty minutes. The new ‘arrangement’, which was highly criticised by the Opposition who saw it as a way for the Prime Minister to reduce his presence in the House of Commons, was presented by the new Government as a reform that would provide MPs with the chance ‘to probe the Prime Minister in depth’ (House of Commons official report, 1997). In either of the arrangements, for almost 50 years now, Prime Ministers and MPs have been engaging in sessions of heated argumentative exchanges that are conveyed by means of questions and answers. The highly confrontational sessions, described by the BBC as ‘the modern equivalent of the Roman games, only more brutal’, are among the most media-covered parliamentary events. They are among the most attended sessions in the House, as well.

The procedure of Question Time is regulated mainly by Standing Orders, which are the rules made by Parliament in order to regulate its procedure. Other sources for regulating parliamentary procedure are practice, which refers to the general understanding established over the centuries and not necessarily written down, as well as the House of Commons Rulings from the Chair, which refer to the clarifications provided by the Speaker of the House regarding decisions on procedure. Both can be found in the regularly revised Erskine May’s Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament (UK Parliament Web Site, 2006).21

Two central provisions regulate parliamentary questions (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002). First, questions must either press for action or seek information, and second, questions that have been recently answered may not be asked again. The report further explains that the other rules

---

21 In addition to the three sources mentioned, Rogers and Walters mention Acts of Parliament as a fourth source for Parliamentary Procedure (2006: 185-186). There are, however, no Acts of Parliament that regulate matters related to Prime Minister's Question Time; the acts regulate legislation procedures mainly.
that regulate the practice of parliamentary questions “depend on these central provisions and are intended to ensure that orderly questions are not crowded out by those relating to matters of debate for which other parliamentary opportunities are available” (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 11).

In Question Time sessions, the Prime Minister provides oral answers to tabled as well as supplementary questions. Tabled questions are submitted to the Clerks in the Table Office of the House of Commons at least three sitting days before the session. Because the number of submitted questions usually exceeds the number of questions that can realistically be expected to get answers, the submitted questions are put to a random shuffle and only fifteen of them are printed in the Commons Questions Book to be actually asked during the session. When asked in the House, every tabled question is followed by at least one supplementary question in which the MP who tabled the question can follow up on the same topic. After the first supplementary question has been answered, MPs who would like to pose more supplementary questions stand up trying to ‘catch the eye’ of the Speaker who decides who next will be given the chance to pose a question. The Speaker is also to decide when enough supplementary questions have been addressed. Because the Prime Minister is given prior notice of tabled questions, his answers to them are prepared in advance. In contrast, his answers to supplementary questions require some improvisation, since no prior notice is required for these questions. However, prior to Question Time sessions, the Prime Minister receives briefings from Government departments on the most topical matters of high political significance (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 10). Consequently, even though MPs have the chance to ask the Prime Minister questions without prior notice, supplementary questions hardly ever surprise the Prime Minister or get him to make up a completely ‘improvised’ answer.

Depending on the specificity of their content, questions for oral answer can be either open or closed. Closed questions ask for specific information about a specific policy or action of the Government. In contrast, open questions address government policies or actions generally. As a result of a prime-ministerial practice of transferring closed questions to departmental ministers in the 1960s and the early 1970s, open questions have become dominant in Question Time
(House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 18). Even though the transferring practice ended in the late 1970s, open questions remain dominant in Question Time, today. Such dominance contributes significantly to the argumentative nature of the question answer exchange in Prime Minister's Question Time. Not only is it much easier for MPs to convey opinions about government policies and actions by means of open questions, it is also easier to ask supplementary political questions about almost anything that falls under the responsibility of the Government when these supplementaries come after open questions.

The first tabled question in every Question Time session is the engagements question, which is a routine question about the Prime Minister’s official engagements of the day. Both the question and the answer to it are conventionally standardised: an MP asks the Prime Minister to ‘list his official engagements’ for that day, and the Prime Minister replies: ‘This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further meetings later today’. Often, though, the Prime Minister starts with a brief official statement, also on behalf of the House of Commons, addressing occasions of national or international interest, such as expressing congratulations or condolences or paying tribute. Below is an example of Gordon Brown’s answer to the engagements question on 5 November 2008, the morning after the presidential elections in the United States of America:

(1) Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):
I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our profound condolences to the family and friends of the soldier from 2nd Battalion the Royal Gurkha Rifles who was killed in Afghanistan yesterday. In the week leading to Remembrance Sunday, we should remember the debt of gratitude that we owe to all those who have laid down their lives in service of our country.
Before I list my engagements, I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our sincere congratulations to Senator Barack Obama on winning the presidency of the United States and writing a new chapter in history in doing so. The bonds that unite the United States and the UK are vital to our prosperity and security and I know from talking to Senator Obama that he will be a true friend of Britain. The Government look forward to working with the new Administration as we both help people fairly through the downturn. I also want to pay tribute to Senator McCain, who has shown the characteristic dignity that has marked a lifetime of service to his country.
This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

(House of Commons official report, 2008f)
After the Prime Minister’s answer to the engagements question, the room is open for MPs to ask supplementary questions. Even though the engagements question is in itself a mere routine, the question is important because of the supplementaries that follow. The engagements question is a special open question that arose out of the prime-ministerial practice described above, of transferring specific questions to ministerial departments, and was maintained after this practice was abandoned. As Rogers and Walters (2006) explain, in order not to lose their chance of receiving an answer from the Prime Minister, which would happen if the latter transferred their questions to the responsible Government departments, MPs started asking the Prime Minister one of two main tabled and open questions: whether he would list his engagements for the day or whether he would visit their constituencies (pp. 229-230). Given that such a question cannot be transferred, asking it would guarantee that MPs get answers after which they have the chance to pose supplementary questions. The latter would be the real questions they wanted to ask, and for which they would receive an answer because supplementary questions are non-transferable either.

Even now, after the transferring practice has been abandoned, the engagements question remains important. Because the supplementary is a follow-up question, its scope depends on the scope of the original question. Since the scope that the engagements question covers is so wide, a supplementary question after the engagements question has an almost unlimited scope (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: 9). Supplementaries after the engagements question can be about almost anything that falls under the responsibility of the Government. That allows MPs to tackle topics of the highest current significance in their contributions. The exchange below, which includes the engagements question and answer as well as the following supplementaries, is an example. In the first supplementary, a Labour MP asks the Prime Minister about the measures that the Government is taking to save small businesses during the global financial crisis, which was the prime topic of discussion at the time of the session. While this supportive contribution gives the Prime Minister the chance to present the efforts and achievements of his Government in addressing the crisis, the next supplementary comes from the Leader of the Opposition to pressure the Prime Minister to defend his Government against an accusation of incompetence.
Adrian Bailey:
If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 29 October.

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):
This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Bailey:
Small businesses, which are essential to jobs in my constituency, are suffering from high raw material prices, high energy prices and, in some cases, reduced demand. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the support that we have given to the banks is reflected in the support that banks give to small businesses during this difficult time?

Mr. Brown:
My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Central to the recovery of jobs is the resumption of lending by banks to businesses. I discussed that not only as a national problem, but a problem in many countries, with President Sarkozy when I met him last evening. We have all taken measures to recapitalise our banks and to ensure stability. We continue to work on increasing access to funding. Having recapitalised the banks, we want to ensure that they will extend availability of credit at competitive prices. Further announcements will be made tomorrow when we have a meeting with the banks.

We are also considering new mechanisms by which, for example, the European Investment Bank can give financial support where traditional institutions are not able to do so. We urge banks not to change the terms and charges for existing lending to small businesses in our country. The President and I also talked about the role of fiscal policy in the future. I have been discussing that with other leaders. It is right that fiscal policy supports monetary policy at this time.

David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):
If the Prime Minister wants to help small business, he can start by cancelling his plan for putting up the rate of corporation tax for small business.

In the past fortnight we have learned that housing repossessions are up 71 per cent., unemployment is rising at its fastest rate for 17 years and the economy is shrinking. Will the Prime Minister now finally admit that he did not abolish boom and bust?

(House of Commons official report, 2008e)

In fact, for a few weeks before and after this session, the Leader of the Opposition made use of his right to ask supplementary questions in order to criticise the reaction of the Government to the financial crisis, as he did in the exchange above.

After the supplementary questions are over, the Speaker moves to the second tabled question by calling the number of the question and the name of the MP who has tabled it. After the answer of the Prime Minister, the MP who has advanced the question gets the opportunity to ask a supplementary question, as a follow up to his initial question, which the Prime Minister then answers as well. More supplementary questions and answers follow, until the Speaker announces the next tabled question. This goes on until Question Time is over (House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Pérez de Ayala 2001; Rogers & Walters, 2006: pp. 229-232).
In view of the purpose of this study, the most interesting parts of Question Time are the question-answer encounters between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It is in these encounters that the Prime Minister’s attempts to exclude opposition standpoints from the discussion by means of accusations of inconsistency, the focus of my interest in this study, are most recurrent. The encounters, which always start by a supplementary that the Leader of the Opposition poses, often after the engagements question as in the example above, are also the most confrontational of all the exchanges in Prime Minister's Question Time. They can go up to six rounds in which the Leader of the Opposition continues to supplement one question after the other, criticising the Prime Minister and his Government, while the Prime Minister responds by defending his Government and often also by attacking the Opposition. Although it is often these exchanges that are meant when Prime Minister's Question Time is criticised for being a “partisan joust between the noisier supporters of the main political parties” (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 18), it is also acknowledged that in these encounters between the Head of Government and the Leader of the Opposition the most important political argumentative exchanges take place. The encounters between the Prime Minister and the leader of the third largest party are also important. These can go up to three rounds, as parliamentary conventions restrict the number of contributions for the leader of the third largest party to a maximum of three questions.

Even though Prime Minister’s Question Time proceeds via a sequence of questions and answers, the session is so argumentative that it has been widely considered as a mini-debate about the performance of the Government (Beard, 2000; House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Rogers & Walters 2006; Wilson, 1990). In fact, Question Time can hardly be considered as an information seeking session. It is almost always the case that the questions of MPs are posed in such a way that an answer cannot really be expected. As Wilson (1990) observes, the questions are usually preceded by a set of assertions (both presuppositions and propositions) that constitute argumentation in defence of a standpoint, which is usually left implicit. The question itself is most of the time formulated in a way that makes any direct answer commit the Prime Minister to the preceding assertions (pp. 131-178). In addition to the argumentative nature of
questions, the debate-like character of Question Time is also manifested by the way the questions of MPs are divided: MPs in favour of the Prime Minister’s policies pose supportive questions, and MPs against him pose challenging ones. The Speaker of the House is expected to keep a balance between the two sides as he invites MPs to take the floor (House of Commons Information Office, 2005).

By emphasising the overall argumentative nature of Question Time one does of course not exclude the occurrence of non-argumentative exchanges. Such exchanges are, however, very infrequent and marginal, especially when considering supplementary questions. As described by Civil Service Guidance, supplementaries are the means for MPs from the Opposition to put the Minister questioned ‘on the defence’ (Rogers & Walters, 2006: p. 317); they are occasions to make political points. The supplementary questions posed by the Leader of the Opposition always convey a critical point of view about some policy or action of the Government. Because of their undisputed argumentative nature as well as their dominantly confrontational characteristics, the encounters between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are the prime subject of examination in this study.

3.3 The institutional aims of the argumentative practice

The function of parliamentary questions is generally expressed as to seek information, or to press for action, in order to hold the Government to account (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 1; House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002; Rogers & Walters, 2006: pp. 311-312). The House of Commons Information Office factsheet on parliamentary Questions (2005) explains that addressing questions obliges “Ministers to explain and defend the work, policy decisions and actions of their departments” (p. 2). It is through this obligation to explain and defend policies and actions that the Government is held to account by MPs as representatives of the general public of voters.

Over the years, the nature and function of questions for oral answer have diverged considerably from those of questions for written answer. While both are aimed at holding the Government to account, questions for written answer have been mainly concerned with obtaining information and questions for oral answer
have become more and more concerned with pressing for action. As explained earlier, the latter concern contributes significantly to the argumentative nature of oral questions and answers. In order for MPs to press for a certain course of action effectively, it is usually necessary to justify the promoted course of action, and often also to criticise the actions that need to be replaced. Similarly, in order to respond properly to such questions, Ministers need to justify their actions and sometimes even argue against the alternative actions proposed by MPs.

Furthermore, within the category of oral questions, Prime Minister's Question Time and ministerial departments’ Question Time have also diverged. The Select Committee report on parliamentary questions notes that the “distinction between Prime Minister’s Questions and departmental Question Time is sufficiently fundamental that special provisions for the former would be justified” (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 19). As the report explains, the distinct nature of Prime Minister's Question Time is dictated by the scope of the Prime Minister’s responsibilities. On the one hand, the Prime Minister’s responsibility is vast: he is the Head of Government and is therefore responsible for all that is done in the name of it. But on the other hand, the Prime Minister’s immediate responsibility is so general that there are very few things for which he has a direct administrative responsibility (p. 18). The vast and yet general nature of the responsibility for the policies and actions of the Government that the Prime Minister has, limits the specificity of the actions that MPs can press for when posing questions for oral answer to the Prime Minister. This limitation, in turn, dictates a certain scope for the accountability of the Prime Minister that can be pursued through questions for oral answer: when questioning the Prime Minister in a Question Time session, MPs try to hold the Prime Minister accountable for the general performance of his Government. The scrutinising argumentative question-answer exchanges in which MPs press for action and the Prime Minister defends and justifies the actions and policies of his Government are eventually aimed at holding the Government to account for its general performance.

Because it is the purpose for which Question Time was established, the aim that the Government should be held to account can be attributed to MPs and the Prime Minister as participants in this kind of parliamentary sessions. Many of
the rules and conventions that regulate the practice of Question Time are intended to further the achievement of this aim. For instance, one of the main rules mentioned in the Erskine May's Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament in relation to Prime Minister's Question Time is that questions need to address the responsibilities of the Prime Minister in his capacity as Head of Government only, and not in his capacity as a party leader, for example (McKay et al., 2004). Another rule proscribes questions that address matters of legal controversy, the discussion of which does not contribute to holding the Government to account (House of Commons Information Office, 2005: p. 4). The Speaker of the House as well as the Clerks in the Table Office see to it that the practice adheres to the rules and lives up as much as possible to the expectations ensuing from such an aim.

The Clerks make sure that all tabled questions are in conformity with the relevant rules and conventions and the Speaker of the House sees to it that supplementary questions as well as answers are so, too. The exchange below is an example. In it, Mr. Duncan Smith asks Mr. Blair a question that seems to violate the rules of Question Time by not being related to the responsibilities of the Head of Government.

(3) Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):
[…] The truth is that the Prime Minister has had to climb down. Let us ask why. Perhaps the Prime Minister can tell us, as leader of the Labour party, how much money the unions gave his party last year.

Tony Blair (Prime Minister):
In no shape or form are we giving way on the reform programme in the health service and the education service. [Hon. Members: "How much?"] Well, the amount of money given to the Labour party—thanks to the procedures we introduced—is there for people to see.
It is important that we carry on with the reforms in health, education, transport, and law and order, but the reforms should be matched by investment. I will take on either people like the right hon. Gentleman who want to cut investment, or people in the trade union movement or elsewhere who want to halt the advance of reform. "Invest and reform" is right. Now perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will tell us what his position is.

Mr. Duncan Smith:
The Prime Minister took a long time not to answer the question. Let us now give him the answer. The figure is £8 million, in a six-month period last year—and in the case of two unions that are either on strike or about to strike, it is nearly £1.25 million.

22 Not all the rules applying to the practice of Question Time are intended to further the process of holding the Government to account. Some rules are motivated by a concern about other processes, which are external to Question Time. For example, the sub judice rule, which does not allow parliamentary discussions of matters that are under police investigations, is intended to protect the independence of police investigations. Such rules are usually not specific to Question Time, but are rules that apply to all parliamentary practice including that of Question Time.
Mr. Speaker:
Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the Leader of the Opposition, but I must tell him that the Prime Minister is here to answer questions as Prime Minister, not as leader of the Labour party. [Interruption.] Order. I am talking about the rules of the House, which the House has given me to protect. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition could ask another question.

Mr. Duncan Smith rose—[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker:
Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

Mr. Duncan Smith:
This issue goes right to the heart of the Government. While I fully respect what you say, Mr. Speaker, I must point out—[Interruption]—if I may—that it is about what is happening on the railways and in the Post Office. I am simply raising an issue, and asking a question about whether there are links with and reasons for government policy. I would like to pursue that line if you are agreeable, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps I can ask the question—[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker:
Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

Mr. Duncan Smith rose—[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker:
Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

Mr. Duncan Smith:
Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

Mr. Speaker:
Order. Please allow the Leader of the Opposition to ask his question.

Mr. Duncan Smith:
I will certainly ask the question, Mr. Speaker, but perhaps in a slightly different way. No wonder the Prime Minister grovels to the trade unions after having attacked them, from one day to the next. The truth is—this is the reality for the present Government, so heavily linked to the trade unions—that five years ago the Prime Minister used to talk about "24 hours to save the health service": on Monday, it was 24 hours to save his donations. Instead of briefing and retreating, attacking and withdrawing, why does the Prime Minister not cut his links with the strikers and the wreckers?

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

The exchange above is an example of common interventions that the Speaker of the House makes in order for the practice of Question Time to be a contribution to the aim of holding the Government to account. In this case, the Speaker does not see the relevance of the question that the Leader of the Opposition asks about the donations that the Labour Party received from trade unions to the performance of the Government. Mr. Duncan Smith responds by claiming that his question is definitely about the performance of the Government: it is about ‘links with and reasons for government policy’. In other words, as he reformulates it, Mr. Duncan Smith’s questions is about the reasons that made Mr. Blair change his mind, as Head of Government, about the trade unions on strike.

Even though Question Time was established for the purpose of holding the Government to account, there are a number of other aims that can be associated with the argumentative practice of these prominent parliamentary
sessions. In addition to their collective aim that the performance of the Government is scrutinised, MPs and the Prime Minister have been using their argumentative exchanges in Question Time to pursue a multitude of other individual institution-related aims. Professor the Lord Norton of Louth, academic advisor for the House of Commons Procedure Committee, mentions a few. In the Select Committee report on parliamentary questions, Lord Norton is quoted to say:

Question Time used to be an opportunity for backbenchers to seek information from Ministers. It has in recent decades become more an opportunity for frontbenchers to intervene and for opposition Members to try to catch Ministers, as well as for government backbenchers to support Ministers and put questions about Opposition policy. This change in nature has been a feature especially of Prime Minister’s Question Time. (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: pp. 11-12)

Furthermore, the Select Committee report on parliamentary questions observes that MPs have also been using Question Time as a means of ‘partisan point-scoring, of self-promotion, of promoting external interests’ (House of Commons Procedure Committee, 2002: p. 11). As observed in the report, MPs often use their questions to convey political statements that promote their party’s policies or to attack those of their adversaries, and similarly in his answers the Prime Minister often conveys pride in the achievement of his party’s policies or criticism of those of the Opposition.

Using contributions in Question Time for such party-political purposes has increased significantly as a result of the wide media coverage of the House’s proceedings. The fact that the questions and answers can be followed by an external public made Question Time become an opportunity for both MPs and the Prime Minister to address and appeal to the general public of voters. In fact, it can sometimes be very obvious that a certain question by an MP or an answer by the Prime Minister is primarily concerned with conveying party-political statements to the public of voters. The following is an example:

(4) Mr. MacGregor

As rail privatisation completes its final stages, does the Prime Minister agree that it already demonstrates substantial benefits for both passengers and taxpayers? Is not its success one of the main reasons why the Labour party, which bitterly opposed rail privatisation through all its parliamentary stages, as it did with nearly every other privatisation, is all at sea over its policy?
Mr. John Major:

It is undoubtedly the case that the Labour party has not supported a single privatisation until it has proved to be a success, at which point it pays lip service to it. Under Labour, none of the privatisations would have taken place. It certainly bitterly attacked rail privatisation, which has now increased investment, increased rolling stock, improved services, provided extra service and saved the taxpayer a substantial amount. [Interruption.] It is, in short, a success, and no doubt that is why the Labour party wishes to shout it down.

(House of Commons official report, 1997)

In the exchange above, which came shortly before the general elections as a result of which Labour came to power, Mr. John Major, the Prime Minister at the time, responds to a question by a fellow Conservative MP about the Government’s disputed policy of privatisation. In his response, Mr. Major advances argumentation in support of the standpoint that Conservatives, unlike Labour, are capable of providing good leadership for their country. He presents Labour as incapable, or even unwilling, to support policies that would bring good to the general public.

Party-promoting contributions are not limited to the Prime Minister; the Leader of the Opposition also makes use of questions in order to appeal to the public of voters. The following is an example:

David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):

I think that people watching this will just conclude that this Prime Minister cannot answer a question and cannot make a decision. People are starting to say about this Government, “Never mind the complete lack of vision, never mind the relaunches; just focus on keeping us safe.” In a week when the prisons adviser says that they have got no prisons strategy, when President Musharraf says that they have no terrorism strategy and when the only good idea that they have about police reform has come from the Conservative party, should he not just accept that people are not safe under Labour?

(House of Commons official report, 2008a)

In this exchange, Mr. Cameron, the Leader of the Conservative Opposition, employs his criticisms of the Government to support the standpoint that Conservatives, unlike Labour, would be able of keeping the British people safe. Starting the question with a reference to the ‘people’ watching makes it quite obvious that the main target of the Leader of the Opposition is the public rather than the Prime Minister. In questions and answers such as the above, which are very common in Question Time, both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition employ argumentation to convince the voters that their own party is the one that deserves voters’ support. In spite of the importance of institution-
related aims such as the above, I will, in this study adopt a perspective in which the aim of holding the Government to account concerning its general performance is considered to be the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of Question Time.

This choice of perspective is motivated primarily by my interest in accounting for the interaction between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. My concern with providing an adequate account of the Prime Minister’s attempts to exclude the criticism of the Leader of the Opposition from the discussion requires me to focus my attention on the discussion in which the two politicians address each other rather than the simultaneous discussions in which each of them addresses third parties. Adopting a perspective in which the aim of promoting party interests is considered the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of Question Time would place the answers of the Prime Minister, in which he accuses the Leader of the Opposition of an inconsistency, in a discussion between him and the general public of voters. In this discussion, the Prime Minister attempts to convince the voters that his party is the one that is capable of leading the country. The Leader of the Opposition is, strictly speaking, not an arguer in this discussion. Even though one can think that the Prime Minister is trying to convince the voters by reporting to them the results of his discussion with the Leader of the Opposition, the relevance of an accusation of inconsistency to this discussion is far less obvious than its relevance in the discussion in which the Prime Minister directly defends the performance of his Government against the criticism of the Leader of the Opposition.

The choice of the discussion to focus on is a mere choice of perspective – made in view of a particular analytic interest– from which the argumentative practice of Question Time is to be examined. It does not, by any means, allege that the questions and answers of the Leader of the Opposition and of the Prime Minister contribute exclusively to either a discussion that is aimed at holding the Government to account or a discussion that is aimed at promoting their political parties. In fact, the different discussions run simultaneously and the aims are often pursued by means of the same exchanges. Yet, the discussions can be analytically distinguished so that one of the discussions and the aim pursued in it becomes more prominent.
The choice of a perspective in which the argumentative practice of Question Time is aimed at holding the Government to account is not only beneficial to the examination of the argumentative move with which I am concerned. The choice is also instrumental to a critical examination of the institutional effectiveness of the argumentative practice of Question Time to achieve the purpose for which Question Time was established. Very often, failures to be argumentatively reasonable result in failures to achieve institutional aims. That is because the argumentative quality of the exchanges can be indicative, to a high extent, of their institutional quality. That this should be so can be supported by considering that in cases where argumentative exchanges are the primary means for achieving institutional aims, one may expect the institutional effectiveness of the exchanges to be highly dependent on the quality of the critical testing achieved in them. For example, if in Question Time the Government is held to account primarily by means of argumentative exchanges that scrutinise its performance: the more critical the exchanges that scrutinise the performance of the Government are, the better the Government is held to account.²³ Of all the aims pursued in Question Time, the aim of holding the Government to account can be considered the purpose for which the institution was established. Therefore, the focus on this aim makes the examination of argumentative reasonableness in fact telling for the extent to which the practice of Question Time is instrumental for the achievement of the aim for which such a parliamentary session was established.

Moreover, the adopted perspective can also be useful for a critical evaluation of the parliamentary procedure that regulates Question Time. Since, as mentioned earlier, some of the rules that regulate Question Time are motivated by concerns in processes other than holding the Government to account, it is very much possible that some of these rules and conventions do in practice obstruct the pursuit of the aim for which the institution was established. At least at first sight, the convention that allows the Prime Minister to refuse to address a particular question if that ‘would not be in the public interest’ is an example. Through the examination of the effects that similar rules and conventions have on the critical

²³ See Mohammed (2007b) for a discussion of how the quality of the critical testing of standpoints in a negotiation encounter can be indicative of the institutional effectiveness of the exchange, i.e. of the quality of the resolution of the conflict of interests.
testing procedure, it can be examined to what extent rules and conventions that regulate Question Time promote the holding of the Government to account.

From a perspective in which the argumentative practice of Question Time is viewed to be aimed at holding the Government to account, I will, in the next section, characterise the argumentative practice as an argumentative activity type. Following van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), the characterisation will highlight the different preconditions that result from the rules and conventions of Question Time. These preconditions apply to the initial situation that triggers the argumentative exchanges, to the procedural and material starting points that are mutually accepted by MPs and the Prime Minister, to the allowable argumentative means employed by them, and to the possible outcomes of their argumentative exchanges.

3.4 The argumentative activity type of Question Time

In the argumentative activity type of Question Time, the argumentative confrontation is triggered by the controversial nature of the performance of the Government typical of Question Time. While the Prime Minister and the MPs from his party are in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government, MPs from the Opposition are in favour of a negative evaluation.24 The controversy about the performance of the Government underlies all argumentative exchanges of Question Time. In their questions, MPs imply and defend points of view in favour of either a positive or a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government. In his answers, the Prime Minister implies and defends a standpoint in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of his Government. So, for example, when the Leader of the Opposition questions the Prime Minister about alleged corruption, as he does in the exchange between Mr.

---

24 While it is usually the case that MPs from the party of the Prime Minister are in favour of a positive view of the performance of the Government that need not always be the case. Unlike the Prime Minister, MPs from his party have no parliamentary obligation to defend the Government: their obligation is rather a party-obligation observed by whips, who are MPs appointed by each party to maintain party discipline. But in spite of the strictness of the whipping system, cases of no support for government decisions from MPs of the ruling party are not impossible. In 2002, for example, Labour MPs have openly criticised the decision of the Labour Government to go to war against Iraq. Although possible, cases of opposition from MPs from the ruling party are not standard; they are rather a manifestation of a ruling party in crisis.
Cameron and Mr. Brown about the police in London discussed in Chapter 2, the Leader of the Opposition implies that because of the alleged corruption the Government is not doing a good job. Also, when the Prime Minister answers by denying and refuting the allegations or by boasting about the achievements of his Government, as he does when he responds to Mr. Duncan Smith in the exchange about the National Health Service (NHS) also discussed in Chapter 2, the Prime Minister is in fact implying that, because of the achievements mentioned, his Government is doing well.

The controversial performance of the Government is in fact a preconditioned topic for the initial disagreement that gives rise to argumentative confrontations in Question Time. The rules and conventions of this kind of parliamentary sessions require MPs to address in their questions only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister as Head of Government. As a result of the general and broad nature of the Prime Minister’s responsibilities and the practice of transferring specific questions to ministerial departments, both explained earlier, it has become conventional that the questions and answers express and defend standpoints in relation to the general performance of the Government. Over the years, the initial situation in the argumentative confrontations of Question Time has grown into an initial disagreement about whether or not the performance of the Government is up to standard. The answers that the Prime Minister gives defend a positive standpoint, i.e. *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, against the critical doubt of the Opposition. Also often, the Prime Minister’s answers attempt to refute the negative standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, which is defended by questions from MPs from the Opposition. Even though this initial disagreement underlies all argumentative exchanges of Question Time, the disagreement is seldom made explicit in the questions or in the answers.

When in their questions and answers MPs or the Prime Minister address the public of voters and promote their parties, there seems to be a different initial situation: a disagreement that relates to the competence of a political party in leading the country. MPs from the Opposition seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership*, and MPs from the ruling party and the Prime Minister seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the
Opposition, our party can provide good leadership. However, as a result of rules and conventions of Question Time, this difference of opinion cannot be independent of the difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government discussed above. Because questions of MPs and answers of the Prime Minister have to address the latter’s responsibilities only, MPs and the Prime Minister can eventually address the difference of opinion concerning the competence of a political party in leading the country only through addressing their difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government. So an MP from the Opposition would need to base his defence of the standpoint that unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership mainly on a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government, and the Prime Minister or an MP from his party would need to base his defence of the standpoint that unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership mainly on a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government.

In addition to the preconditions they create for the topics of the initial disagreements, the rules and conventions of this kind of parliamentary session create preconditions for the types of disputes, i.e. the definitions of the differences of opinion that result from the argumentative confrontations between the parties as well. The Prime Minister has a parliamentary obligation to defend his Government, and MPs have party-obligations to either support him in defending the performance of the Government, in the case that they belong to his party, or to oppose him and criticise the performance of the Government, in the case that they belong to the Opposition. That means that, argumentatively, the Prime Minister and the MPs from his party are expected to advance and uphold the positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard and the MPs from the Opposition are expected to advance and uphold the negative standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. Consequently, the dispute that results from the confrontation is institutionally expected to be mixed: two opposite standpoints are advanced and upheld. Especially in the case of the argumentative exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, which are at the focus of my interest in this study, the argumentative confrontation is evidently preconditioned to result in a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute. As a result of his
prominent political role, the Leader of the Opposition cannot be expected to do less than doubting the positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard and advancing and upholding the negative standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. When MPs from the Prime Minister’s party ask questions, the dispute might not appear to be mixed. However, taking the argumentative exchanges of Question Time as a whole makes the mixed dispute more apparent.

Starting points in the argumentative activity type of Question Time, material and procedural alike, are highly preconditioned by parliamentary rules and conventions. All parliamentary rules and conventions, the general ones as well as those which are specific to Question Time, are mutually accepted as starting points for these argumentative exchanges. For example, the content of both questions and answers is preconditioned to conform to parliamentary conventions regarding parliamentary language and respect for the Crown, the judiciary and Members of the two Houses of Parliament. As a result, arguments hardly ever doubt the honesty or the motives of any of the arguers directly. The rules and conventions also prescribe a clear procedure and impose a clear assignment of roles. The Prime Minister is the main protagonist of the positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard, since he has the parliamentary obligation to defend his Government. MPs from his party are commonly assigned the same role since they are conventionally expected to support him. MPs from the Opposition and the Leader of the Opposition in particular are assigned the role of the protagonist of the negative standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard, since they are conventionally expected to attack the performance of the Government. Furthermore, the question-answer format determines the division of the burden of proof. In general, the format stipulates that the argumentation is exchanged in an equal number of turns between MPs and the Prime Minister, and that the MPs advance their argumentation first while the Prime Minister concludes the exchanges. Accordingly, in the mixed dispute between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, for example, the latter needs to defend his negative standpoint first.
Rules and conventions make it also clear what kinds of contributions are allowed in the argumentative practice of Question Time: MPs pose questions and the Prime Minister provides answers. Argumentative means are thus preconditioned: MPs need to advance their argumentation in the form of questions that literally address the Speaker of the House, and the Prime Minister should formulate his argumentation in the form of answers that address the Speaker, too. Consequently, as observed by Wilson (1990: pp. 131-178), MPs’ argumentation is conventionally embodied in sets of assertions that precede the literal questions, and the Prime Minister’s argumentation is conventionally embodied in sets of assertions that constitute his answers. The fact that arguers defend their standpoints by means of arguments that either defend or criticise government policies and actions is a result of a conventional precondition created by the parliamentary rule that requires questions to relate only to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister, mentioned earlier. As explained, it is conventional that every question posed in Question Time conveys an argument about a certain policy or plan of the Government, advanced in support of either the implicit positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard or the likewise-implicit negative standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard.

MPs, who rightly expect that their arguments will be faced with challenge, rarely leave their arguments unsupported by further arguments. In other words, MPs usually anticipate that sub-disagreements will arise in relation to their arguments, and that they might need to engage into argumentative exchanges aimed at critically resolving such sub-disputes. Eventually, the arguments, which usually express an evaluation of a government policy or action, become sub-standpoints about which a sub-disagreement develops. The following is an example. The exchange was also quoted in 1.1.

(6) **David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):**
First, may I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Corporal Damian Lawrence, who was killed in Afghanistan on Sunday? He died serving our country. May I also take the opportunity to wish the Prime Minister a happy 57th birthday? [ Interruption.] Enough of that. 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)

In this exchange, the Leader of the Opposition defends a negative standpoint about the performance of the Government by means of an argument concerning a lack of government actions to protect the British public. Mr. Cameron anticipates that the Prime Minister will not accept his argument that the government is failing to protect the people, so he presents, as an argument that supports it, the case of the Government’s failure to act upon information that was given by the Dutch authorities about 4000 foreign criminals. His argumentation can be reconstructed as following:

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
1.1 The actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure
1.1.1 For an entire year, the Government has not done anything with the DNA information it has concerning 4000 foreign criminals

Mr. Cameron rightly anticipates that Mr. Blair does not accept his argument that the actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure and that a sub-disagreement concerning this argument, which then becomes a sub-standpoint, will arise. The Prime Minister does not only reject the sub-standpoint, but he also advances his own (contrary) sub-standpoint in which he claims that the Government is adopting policies that protect the public and defends the latter by mentioning the example of the government policy of keeping full DNA records as a sub-argument.

The response of the Prime Minister, above, is a good example of the kind of attempts to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition that I am interested in. Upon presenting the sub-argument that the Government is keeping full DNA records as a policy that protects the public, Mr. Brown emphasises that the Conservatives have opposed this policy. The Prime Minister attempts to avoid discussing the sub-argument of Mr. Cameron by claiming that the latter cannot criticise the Government for not dealing properly with DNA records because he has in the
past opposed the government policy of keeping full DNA records. In doing so, the Prime Minister implies that one cannot oppose a government policy and then criticise the Government for not implementing it. A detailed analysis of the case will follow in Chapter 4; for the moment I will restrict my attention to the sub-disagreements that are institutionally anticipated in the argumentative practice of Question Time.

Unlike the main dispute concerning the performance of the Government, the sub-disputes about government policies and plans are most of the time explicit. These sub-disputes are also often multiple and not necessarily mixed. Supportive questions, usually asked by MPs from the ruling party, give rise to non-mixed and sometimes multiple sub-disputes. Typically, supportive questions advance and support a sub-standpoint in which a positive evaluation of a certain government policy or action is expressed as an argument in support of the positive main standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard. The Prime Minister’s response to this kind of question is usually to advance further arguments in support of the sub-standpoint expressed in the question. In such cases, the Prime Minister and the MP do not disagree about the sub-standpoint which they both defend against anticipated doubt. Sometimes, instead of further supporting the sub-standpoint advanced by an MP from his party, the Prime Minister advances and defends another sub-standpoint in support of the positive main standpoint. The Prime Minister’s sub-standpoint needs to be related to the same issue as that addressed by the sub-argument of the MP. Together, the two sub-standpoints constitute a multiple sub-dispute.

Unlike the sub-disputes arising from supportive questions, sub-disputes arising from critical questions are usually mixed. A critical question, usually asked by an MP from the Opposition, advances and supports a sub-standpoint in which a negative evaluation of a certain government policy or action is expressed in support of the negative main standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. In order to defend his Government, the Prime Minister is expected to refute the sub-standpoint advanced. He can do so by adopting and then defending an opposite sub-standpoint, in which case the sub-dispute that arises is mixed. However, it is typical that the Prime Minister responds to critical questions by advancing a contrary sub-standpoint instead.
That leads the argumentative confrontation towards a multiple and mixed dispute.

The responses of the Prime Minister, that are the subject of this study, occur most of the times in the course of sub-disputes of the second kind. For example, in response to the sub-standpoint that government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS, as part of the exchange between Mr. Blair and Mr. Duncan Smith about the NHS discussed in Chapter 2, Mr. Blair responds by advancing a contrary sub-standpoint that the NHS has a record to be proud of. The exchange between Mr. Cameron and Mr. Brown about foreign criminals discussed above is another example. In response to the sub-standpoint that the actions of the Government to protect the public are a catastrophic failure Mr. Brown advances the contrary sub-standpoint that the Government is adopting policies that further the protection of the public.

The way in which outcomes of argumentative exchanges are determined is highly preconditioned by the purpose and the format of Question Time. The main difference of opinion is hardly ever expected to be actually resolved. That is not only because of the limited time of the session, but also as a result of the institutional goal. In order to maximise political accountability, the performance of the Government needs to be scrutinised as clearly as possible, and that requires the highest possible degree of critical testing of the points of view concerning the performance of the Government. In some cases the sub-differences about certain policies or plans can be resolved, but such cases are rare. Often, the Prime Minister concludes his answers by presenting the sub-dispute as having been resolved, which he can do because the question-answer format gives him the advantage of having the last word. However, rarely do these claimed resolutions reflect actual critical resolutions.