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

Mohammed, D.A.

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In the preceding chapter, I have described and discussed the argumentative practice of Prime Minister's Question Time and characterised it as an argumentative activity type. The characterisation of the activity type made it possible to identify a number of significant preconditions for argumentative confrontations that result from the rules and conventions of the parliamentary session. In this chapter, I shall take these institutional preconditions into account and re-examine the Prime Minister’s responses to criticism from the Opposition with accusations of inconsistency. The re-examination aims at providing a more empirically adequate (analytic) account of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. The account pursued sheds light on the institutional dimension of the attempts, whose argumentative dimension has already been captured in the characterisation of the particular way of manoeuvring in Chapter 2. As a case in point, I will re-examine the exchange between Tony Blair and Ian Duncan Smith about the National Health Service (NHS), discussed in Chapter 2, and analyse Mr. Blair’s strategic manoeuvring in view of the institutional preconditions for argumentation identified in the argumentative activity type perspective, developed in Chapter 3.

4.1 Pursuing an institutionally strategic outcome in argumentative sub-confrontations

As has become clear in Chapter 3, in this study, the sessions of Prime Minister's Question Time are to be viewed as argumentative discussions about the performance of the Government in pursuit of the institutional goal of holding the Government to account. The sessions consist of questions and answers that advance argumentation defending and attacking two main opposite standpoints: a positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard and a negative standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to
standard. Guided by this characterisation, the question-answer exchange in which Mr. Blair accuses Mr. Duncan Smith of being inconsistent in his attitude towards the NHS, discussed in Chapter 2 and included again below for the sake of convenience, needs to be reconstructed as part of such a discussion.

(1)  

Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):  

[...] The answer that he did not give to my question is that hospital beds are in short supply because they are being blocked by people who cannot get a care home or nursing home bed. The figure that he did not want to provide is that 40,000—nearly 10 per cent.—fewer care home beds are available since 1997 when he took over. Age Concern says that the care sector is in crisis. The head of the Registered Nursing Homes Association said that Government policy was to blame. The Government's policies are damaging the NHS. Is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?

Tony Blair (Prime Minister):  

Public sector investment in the health service has increased under the Government and is continuing to increase. We are roughly the only major industrial country anywhere in the world that is increasing expenditure on health and education as a proportion of national income. Is it the Conservative party's case that we are not spending enough on health and education? When we announced our spending plans, Conservatives called them reckless and irresponsible. We know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it. The clearest evidence of that came yesterday, when the Leader of the Opposition said:  

"The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated."

What an insult to the NHS and the people who work in it! Conservatives denigrate the health service because they want to undermine it. We want to increase investment, whereas the right hon. Gentleman would cut it.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

In his question, Mr. Duncan Smith defends the negative main standpoint and in his answers, Mr. Blair defends the positive main standpoint. Mr. Duncan Smith defends the negative standpoint by saying that government policies are damaging the NHS. He cites the high number of cancelled operations among those scheduled by the NHS as evidence, arguing that government policies in the care sector have caused shortage in the supply of hospital beds, which has in turn lead to a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations.

In Chapter 2, the criticism of the Government for having policies that damage the NHS, advanced by Mr. Duncan Smith, was interpreted as the critical standpoint that government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS. The interpretation was guided by the knowledge that the claim comes in the context of criticising the Government. The characterisation of the argumentative practice as an argumentative activity type allows, however, for a more precise interpretation of Mr. Duncan Smith’s argumentation. The statement by which Mr. Duncan
Smith criticises the Government for having policies that damage the NHS can be interpreted as an argument advanced in support of the negative main standpoint. The argument would be something like *government policies are damaging the NHS*, which is in fact what the Leader of the Opposition actually says in his question. As a defence of the negative main standpoint, this argument gets a justificatory power ascribed to it. The justificatory power is expressed in a linking premise like *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The blame implied in the critical position of Mr. Duncan Smith is part of the justificatory power of the argument rather than its propositional content. Therefore, in light of the activity type perspective, the argumentation of Mr. Duncan Smith, in his question, is to be interpreted as follows:

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1 Government policies are damaging the NHS

(1.1’) (If government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

As predicted by the activity type perspective, the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS* becomes a sub-standpoint as a result of the Prime Minister’s institutionally anticipated challenge, typical of this type of parliamentary session.

The insight that exchanges between the Prime Minister and his adversaries constitute sub-discussions, in which arguments are challenged and defended, often in anticipation of their being rejected (or at least not accepted) by the opponent, sheds significant light on the argumentative function of the Prime Minister’s accusation at issue. The analysis of the exchange about the NHS provided in Chapter 2 showed how the accusation attributes to the Leader of the Opposition two mutually inconsistent commitments and urges him to retract one of them. The accusation attributes to Mr. Duncan Smith a commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of* as a proposition entailed by criticising government policies for damaging the NHS, as well as a commitment to the opposite proposition, i.e. a commitment to *the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of*, on the basis of other positions of the Conservative Party that undermine the NHS. The accusation is presented in a way that directs the Leader of the Opposition to retract the first commitment and thereby retract the critical
standpoint by which the commitment is entailed. Thus far in the analysis in Chapter 2; the insights gained from the argumentative activity type perspective, however, make clearer how exactly Mr. Blair attempts to lead his adversary to retract his criticism by leading him to retract his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*.

In light of the activity type perspective, it can be seen that the commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, which is attributed to the Leader of the Opposition on the basis of his critical position, is in fact entailed by the linking premise of the argument of the Leader of the Opposition. By making Mr. Duncan Smith retract his commitment to *the NHS deserves to be taken care of*, Mr. Blair attempts to get the Leader of the Opposition to retract his commitment to the linking premise of his argument, i.e. the commitment to *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Mr. Blair’s accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Duncan Smith is therefore an attempt to dismiss an argument by dismissing its justificatory power. It is an attempt to define the sub-difference of opinion about the sub-standpoint, i.e. the argument, of the Leader of the Opposition as no dispute, in the argumentative sub-confrontation about it.

The definition of the sub-difference of opinion about the argument of the Leader of the Opposition as no dispute is particularly strategic in this type of parliamentary sessions. The Prime Minister’s institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government imposes constraints on the definitions of the difference of opinion allowable as outcomes of the sub-confrontation between the Prime Minister and MPs from the Opposition about arguments advanced by these MPs. In view of the Prime Minister’s institutional obligation, the outcome of no dispute is the only alternative to a definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute, often undesirable for the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister is to live up to his institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government, the Prime Minister is expected to challenge and refute arguments advanced by MPs from the Opposition, in which criticism is expressed concerning these policies, plans or actions. For example, in the case of the exchange about the NHS, Mr. Blair is expected to challenge and refute Mr. Duncan Smith’s argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS*. As a
result, their sub-confrontation is preconditioned to result in a mixed sub-dispute concerning the argument he needs to refute, unless the argument is retracted. By re-examining the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage, designed in Chapter 2, in view of the Prime Minister’s institutional obligation to defend the policies and actions of his Government, I shall show that, unless the arguments advanced by MPs from the Opposition are retracted, the argumentative sub-confrontations about them are preconditioned to result in mixed sub-disputes.

In Chapter 2, it has been shown that an argumentative confrontation between two discussants ($D_1$ and $D_2$) concerning a certain positive standpoint ($+/p$), advanced by $D_1$, can in principle result, within the boundaries of reasonableness, in any of the four following outcomes: first, a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to $D_2$’s favour, second, a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to $D_1$’s favour, third, a non-mixed dispute about the positive standpoint of $D_1$ and fourth, a mixed dispute about the positive standpoint of $D_1$ and its opposite advanced by $D_2$.

The confrontation can result in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the favour of $D_2$ (turn 3, right branch) in the case that $D_1$ retracts his positive standpoint ($+/p$) in response to the doubt of $D_2$. The same outcome can be reached in the case that $D_1$ retracts the advanced positive standpoint ($+/p$) in response to the advanced and maintained opposite standpoint ($-/p$) by $D_2$ (turn 7, right branch). The confrontation can result in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the favour of $D_1$ (turn 4, right branch) in the case that $D_2$ retracts his doubt in response to the maintained positive standpoint of $D_1$. The confrontation can result in a non-mixed dispute concerning the standpoint of $D_1$ in the case that $D_2$ maintains this doubt concerning the standpoint maintained by $D_1$ (turn 4, left branch). The same outcome can be reached in the case that $D_2$ advances the opposite standpoint ($-/p$) but later retracts it in response to the doubt of $D_1$ (turn 6, right branch). The confrontation can result in a mixed dispute in the case that both $D_1$ and $D_2$ advance opposite standpoints ($+/p$ and $-/p$) and maintain them each against the doubt maintained by the other (turn 7, left branch).
With the exchange about the NHS as a case in point, I shall show how the institutional obligations of the Prime Minister allow only for the first and the last of the outcomes above in the argumentative sub-confrontations about arguments from the Opposition. In Figure 8, below, the dialectical profile suggested in Chapter 2 is reproduced with the institutionally excluded outcomes crossed out.

Figure 8: A dialectical profile for sub-confrontations about arguments from the Opposition in Prime Minister's Question Time

1. D1

2. D2

3. D1

4. D2

5. D1

6. D2

7. D1

The outcomes that have been crossed out are excluded as a result of institutional considerations (see text).

By challenging the justificatory power of the argument from the Opposition, Mr.
Blair expresses doubt concerning the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, implied in the line of argument of his opponent, which initiates a sub-confrontation about this premise.25

In this sub-confrontation, the first outcome that is excluded is the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to the advantage of Mr. Duncan Smith (*turn 4, right branch*). If the Prime Minister is expected to defend government policies and actions, what is expected from Mr. Blair is at least that he will not accept arguments that criticise such policies or actions. The most straightforward way for him to express the non-acceptance expected is to express his critical doubt about the acceptability of the argument itself, i.e. its propositional content expressed in 1.1 in the argumentation structure. The indirect doubt cast upon the argument by doubting its linking premise (*1.1’*), however, expresses enough non-acceptance for Mr. Blair to live up to his duties as Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister should maintain his critical doubt about the linking premise implied in the line of argumentation of the Opposition. Only if he is willing to proceed into a sub-discussion about the propositional content of the argument that *government policies are damaging the NHS* can the Prime Minister retract his doubt concerning the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* and end the sub-confrontation about the latter in a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute to Mr. Duncan Smith’s advantage. In the exchange at issue, Mr. Blair’s critical doubt about the linking premise comes in fact after failed attempts to refute the propositional content of the argument (*1.1*). That would make the retraction of doubt concerning the linking premise go even more against his institutional obligations. It is, therefore, unlikely to happen.

The second outcome excluded in the sub-confrontation about the linking premise that *if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*, is the outcome of a non-mixed dispute about this linking premise. In the case that the Prime Minister does not manage to refute the propositional content of an argument from the Opposition, merely

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25 In this exchange, “p” in Figure 8 is to be interpreted as this linking premise.
doubting the justificatory power of this argument cannot lead to an adequate
defence of the performance of the Government in the institutional sense. Having
failed to refute the propositional content of the argument that government policies
are damaging the NHS, Mr. Blair’s defence of the performance of his
Government requires him to not only doubt, but also deny the justificatory power
of the argument. A competent Prime Minister would not only doubt that the
damages in the NHS referred to by the Opposition are signs that the performance
of the Government is not up to standard, but would also oppose that and argue
that the damages referred to are not signs that the performance is not up to
standard as the linking premise claims. In other words, a non-mixed dispute
resulting from the Prime Minister’s mere doubt concerning the linking premise is
excluded if the Prime Minister is to live up to his institutional responsibilities.
The outcome of a non-mixed dispute would have been even less expected, had the
sub-confrontation been about the propositional content of the argument rather
than its justificatory power. It is certainly not acceptable for Mr. Blair to merely
cast doubt upon the argument that government policies are damaging the NHS.
Unless he casts doubt on the justificatory power of the argument, Mr. Blair needs
to challenge the propositional content of the argument and further advance and
maintain its opposite, leading the sub-confrontation to a mixed dispute (the fourth
outcome, turn 7, left branch). As long as Mr. Duncan Smith maintains his critical
argument that government policies are damaging the NHS against the doubt of
Mr. Blair, advancing and maintaining the opposite argument that government
policies are not damaging the NHS seems to be the only way for Mr. Blair to live
up to his institutional responsibility is to justify and defend the performance of his
Government.

Even though acting in accordance with his institutional obligations
requires the Prime Minister to adopt positions that can lead to mixed sub-disputes
about (the propositional content or the justificatory power of) arguments from the
Opposition, this outcome need not always be the one reached in actual sub-
confrontations. The response of the MP from the Opposition advancing the
argument can lead the argumentative sub-confrontation towards the definition of
the difference of opinion as no dispute favourable to the Prime Minister, instead.
Because the MP from the Opposition can retract his argument (turn 3, right
branch), the sub-confrontation can result in the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute even if the Prime Minister acts in accordance with his institutional obligation and expresses critical doubt concerning the argument from the Opposition (turn 2, right branch). The sub-confrontation can result in the same definition of the difference of opinion even after the Prime Minister advances and maintains the opposite sub-standpoint (turn 6, left branch), in accordance with his institutional obligations, namely in the case that the MP from the Opposition retracts his doubt concerning the Prime Minister’s opposite sub-standpoint (turn 7, right branch).

Compared with a mixed dispute as outcome, the outcome of no dispute is usually more advantageous to the Prime Minister. With a mixed dispute as an outcome, the Prime Minister is required to advance sub-argumentation in order to live up to his obligation to refute the Opposition’s implicit sub-standpoint, namely that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, incurred on him by his institutional obligation to refute the Opposition’s main standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. With a no dispute as an outcome, the Prime Minister is not required to do so. In cases where MPs from the Opposition retract their critical arguments, the Prime Minister has nothing against which he needs to defend the performance of his Government. In the exchange about the NHS, for example, Mr. Duncan Smith’s retraction of the argument that government policies are damaging the NHS, or equally of its justificatory power expressed in the linking premise that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, would require him to retract his standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard without the need for Mr. Blair to advance refutatory arguments. As explained earlier, the charge of inconsistency advanced by Mr. Blair against Mr. Duncan Smith is an attempt to reach such a result at the first possible occasion (turn 3), by leading Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his argument. Even though reaching the outcome at the later occasion (turn 7) also spares the Prime Minister the need to argue against an argument from the Opposition, in view of institutional considerations, achieving the outcome at the first occasion appears to be often even more advantageous. As we shall see, the exchange about the NHS
provides an example.

In the exchange about the NHS, reaching a definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute at turn 7 is less advantageous to Mr. Blair because it requires him to advance and be ready to uphold the sub-standpoint that *it is not the case that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* as the opposite of the linking premise of Mr. Duncan Smith which he challenges. The expression of such a sub-standpoint is certainly not to the advantage of Mr. Blair, if only because it can easily be interpreted as a sign that the Prime Minister tolerates the act of causing damage to the NHS, an impression that the Prime Minister would not want to give. The definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute reached at turn 3 of the confrontation is definitely the most advantageous outcome for the Prime Minister given his institutional obligations and interests.

The definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute pursued by Mr. Blair in the exchange about the NHS is advantageous, not only argumentatively, as has been shown in Chapter 2, but also institutionally, as I have made clearer above. The outcome affected by the retraction of a critical argument by an MP from the Opposition, is institutionally advantageous to the Prime Minister primarily because it allows him to act in accordance both with his institutional obligations and interests without incurring serious argumentative obligations. The outcome makes it possible for the Prime Minister to defend the performance of his Government without having to refute the argument from the Opposition which is usually necessary for refuting the standpoint of the Opposition that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.

### 4.2 Handling the institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition

In the exchange about the NHS, Mr. Blair employs an accusation of inconsistency aiming to lead Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his argument, in an attempt to handle his own institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition while incurring a minimum of argumentative obligations. Even though in the last two turns of the exchange, discussed above, Mr. Blair’s attempt is directed at the
justificatory power of the argument from the Opposition, in previous turns, Mr. Blair has attempted to address the propositional content of the argument. In this section, I shall examine the whole exchange about the NHS trying to explore an additional strategic aspect of the Prime Minister’s accusations at issue.

In his first question to the Prime Minister in Question Time session of 6 February 2002, Mr. Duncan Smith addresses the issue of cancelled operations. The passage is also quoted in 2.1.

(1a)  
*Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*  
May I join the Prime Minister in congratulating Her Majesty on the 50th anniversary of her accession? Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since he came to power?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*  
It has risen; however—[Hon. Members: "How much?"] It has risen by about 20,000; however, the number of operations as a whole has also risen by more than 500,000; 19 out of 20 operations are done on time; the average waiting time for an operation has fallen since 1997; and, therefore, although it is correct that the number of cancelled operations has risen, if we look at the number of operations as a whole—more than 5.5 million in this country—I think that the national health service has a record to be proud of.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

As always in Question Time, the argumentation in support of the main standpoints develops gradually over turns, as a result of the question-answer format of the session. In his first turn, Mr. Duncan Smith asks the Prime Minister whether the number of cancelled operations has risen or fallen since the latter came to power. The Leader of the Opposition, who knows very well that the number has risen, considerably in fact, cannot be really asking for information. By asking the Prime Minister to tell the House whether the number has risen or fallen, the Leader of the Opposition attempts to elicit information that he can use as arguments to defend his standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. Already at his first turn, Mr. Duncan Smith can be seen to imply that

(1)  
(The performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1  
There is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government

(1.1)’  
(If there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
In his response to the question, Mr. Blair does not merely provide an answer. Realising that his answer to the question serves as an argument in support of his opponent’s standpoint, he includes in his response statements that challenge the justificatory power of such an argument. Mr. Blair responds by saying that even though the number has risen, such a rise cannot really be a sign of bad performance. He argues that the rise is trivial if compared to the achievements of the Government in the health sector, and gives examples of such achievements. In other words, Mr. Blair confirms the propositional content of his opponent’s argument that there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, but rejects its justificatory power (by rejecting the propositional content of the linking premise that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard).

The positive records of the NHS under his Government listed by the Prime Minister not only support his opposite sub-standpoint that it is not the case that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, but also his sub-standpoint that the NHS has a record to be proud of, which he expresses at the end of his turn. In view of the over-all discussion about the performance of the Government, the latter sub-standpoint can be considered as an argument in support of the positive main standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard. Mr. Blair’s argumentation in his first turn can be reconstructed as follows:

1. (The performance of the Government is up to standard)
   1.1 The NHS has a record to be proud of
      (1.1’) (If the NHS has a record to be proud of, then the performance of the Government is up to standard)
      1.1.1a The number of operations as a whole has risen by more than 500,000
      1.1.1b 19 out of 20 operations are done on time
      1.1.1c The average waiting time for an operation has fallen since 1997
      1.1.1d The rise in the number of cancelled operations does not affect the record of the NHS significantly
      1.1.1d.1 The number of operations as a whole has increased significantly
Mr. Blair, who cannot reject the propositional content of the argument that there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, rejects the argument’s justificatory power. The Prime Minister rejects the argument’s linking premise, leading the argumentative sub-confrontation into a mixed sub-dispute about it. Furthermore, Mr. Blair attempts to defend his main positive standpoint that the performance of the Government is up to standard by an argument that is, given the rise in cancelled operations, contrary to the linking premise he rejects, namely that the NHS has a record to be proud of. With Mr. Blair’s contrary argument, the sub-dispute becomes also multiple, in a qualitative way. In this qualitatively multiple and mixed sub-dispute, Mr. Duncan Smith holds the sub-standpoint (+/p₁) that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, while Mr. Blair holds the opposite sub-standpoint (−/p₁) that it is not the case that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard and the contrary sub-standpoint (+/p₂) that the NHS has a record to be proud of.

Advancing a contrary sub-standpoint is advantageous to the Prime Minister who, because of institutional obligations, has to refute the argumentation that the Leader of the Opposition advances in support of the negative main standpoint, as well as defend his own positive main standpoint. By choosing to defend his own positive standpoint by an argument that is contrary to the argument of the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister attempts to defend his main standpoint and refute that of his opponent by means of the same sub-arguments.

By introducing this qualitatively multiple mixed dispute, the Prime Minister attempts to refute the argument from the Opposition by merely defending his own contrary argument. In the present case, a successful defence of the sub-standpoint that the NHS has a record to be proud of, i.e. one which leads

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26 In a qualitatively multiple and mixed dispute, as introduced by van Eemeren et al. (2007a, pp. 22-24), a discussant responds to a certain standpoint (+/p₁) by advancing a standpoint that is alternative to it (+/p₂), i.e. a contrary standpoint. The dispute is multiple because two different propositions, p₁ and p₂, are discussed. The dispute is mixed, because the two proposition are related in a way that commits the proponent of (+/p₂) to (−/p₁), and the proponent of (+/p₁) to (−/p₂), even when these are not explicitly advanced.
the Leader of the Opposition to accept the sub-standpoint, requires the Leader of the Opposition to retract his sub-standpoint that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard. Mr. Blair hopes that when Mr. Duncan Smith accepts that the NHS has a record to be proud of, he will also accept that the rise in the number of cancelled operations is trivial compared to the achievements of the Government in the health sector. That, if achieved, would require Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his linking premise and consequently the line of argument and the negative main standpoint it defends. Mr. Duncan Smith, however, does not do so.

In his next turn, Mr. Duncan Smith reformulates his argument in a way that allows him to maintain it against the arguments of the Prime Minister. In fact, in his second turn, Mr. Duncan Smith argues that the rise in the number of cancelled operations is not trivial.

(1b) Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):
The answer is quite correct: 50 per cent. I have to tell the Prime Minister that that is not just a figure. He talks about the rise in the number of operations done, but the numbers that have been cancelled have risen as well, and that is a real tragedy for those who have to wait. [Interruption.] Well, the reality—he may not want to hear this—is that this is not one or two cases, but 80,000 people who have had their operations cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them. That is a matter of fear and anxiety for 80,000 people—many more than when he came to power. So, as those numbers have risen and 80,000 people have had their operations cancelled, will he now tell us the reason why?

Tony Blair (Prime Minister):
As I explained a moment ago, far more operations have been done by the national health service—about 500,000 more. Less than 2 per cent. of operations are cancelled, which should put the matter in perspective. The only answer is indeed to increase the capacity of the health service, including more nurses, doctors and consultants, as well as other staff, and more beds. That is precisely why we are increasing investment in the national health service. The right hon. Gentleman is in favour of cutting that investment. Therefore, whatever the problems of cancelled operations—I say that they should be put in perspective—the remedy that he has, which is to cut that investment, is the wrong remedy. The remedy that we have—invest and reform—is the right one.

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

Mr. Duncan Smith defends his argument by saying ‘this is not one or two cases, but 80,000 people who have had their operations cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them’. Furthermore, in this same turn, Mr. Duncan Smith asks the Prime Minister about the causes of the problematic rise. By means of the question-like imperative ‘will he now tell us the reason why?’ Mr. Duncan Smith subtly suggests that the causes of the problematic change are so clear that they can only be told, rather than explained or discussed. In light of the activity type
perspective on Question Time, the imperative can be further interpreted as an argument that relates to government policies and supports a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government.

Thus, the Leader of the Opposition can be viewed as suggesting that government policies are the cause of rising numbers of cancelled operations. A suggestion to which the Prime Minister responds in the turn that follows, as he compares the policies of his Government with those proposed as a solution to the problem by the Opposition. In his second turn, Mr. Duncan Smith’s argumentation in support of his negative main standpoint seems to develop to convey the following:

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
1.1a There is a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government
1.1a’ (If there is a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
1.1b (Government policies are responsible for the problematic rise)
1.1a.1 80,000 people suffered fear and anxiety as a result of their operations being cancelled on the day when they were expecting to have them

Even though he accepts that the rise of cancelled operations can be considered a problem, Mr. Blair is not willing to accept it as a sign that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. As he asserts that ‘whatever the problems of cancelled operations […] they should be put in perspective’, the Prime Minister is trying to say that once the problem of cancelled operations is put in perspective, the other records of the NHS would indicate that the performance of the Government is up to standard. Again, the Prime Minister is faced with an argument the propositional content (1.1a) of which he cannot challenge and, therefore, he challenges the argument’s justificatory power instead (1.1a’).

Mr. Blair needs to respond also to the implicit argument that government policies are responsible for the problematic rise. Even though the argument is only implied, yet the Prime Minister has to address it. As the characterisation of the activity type of Question Time has shown, the exchanges in a Question Time
session are (supposed to be) about government plans and policies and the Prime Minister is expected to address the critical reaction to these plans and policies if he is to live up to his responsibility as Head of Government. That makes it very hard for the Prime Minister to ignore an argument about the responsibility of the government policies for the problematic rise of cancelled operations, even if this argument is only suggested in his opponent’s question. Yet, because the argument has only been suggested and not expressed explicitly, Mr. Blair can afford to address it indirectly. Instead of opposing the argument that government policies are responsible for the rise of the number of cancelled operations, Mr. Blair chooses to argue that government plans, unlike those of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations. By means of this argument, Mr. Blair attempts to change the topic of the sub-confrontation. Instead of addressing the argument from the Opposition, he addresses a closely related alternative. The topic shift is advantageous to Mr. Blair not only because it might allow him to avoid discussing an argument from the Opposition that he cannot refute, but also because his alternative argument contributes directly to the defence of his positive main standpoint. In this turn, Mr. Blair can be viewed to argue that

(1) (The performance of the Government is up to standard)

1.1 The government policy of increasing investment in the NHS, unlike policies of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations

1.1.1 Increasing investment in the NHS would increase its capacity

1.1.1.1a Increasing investment in the NHS would increase the number of nurses, doctors and other staff

1.1.1.1b Increasing investment in the NHS would increase the number of beds

In this turn, it is clear that the Prime Minister is not only defending the performance of his Government, but also arguing that this Government, rather than one led by his opponent, is capable of solving the problem. His arguments as Head of Government can be also useful for him as party leader. The arguments do not only support a standpoint that expresses a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government, but also a standpoint that defends the fitness of his party for solving the problems of the country. The latter is to be understood as presenting an argument in the simultaneous discussion about the competence of political parties providing good leadership for the country, a discussion which the
activity type perspective (section 3.4) showed to be central to Question Time.

The comparison the Prime Minister makes between his policies and those of the Opposition can be considered to be his first, mild, attempt to do away with discussing his opponent’s argument. As explained in the activity type characterisation, the Prime Minister is under the obligation to refute the Opposition’s negative main standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. Mr. Blair portrays the Opposition’s alternative plans as incapable of solving the problem of cancelled operations, thereby suggesting that the Opposition cannot really criticise the way the Government is dealing with the problem when their own policies would not have prevented it. The Prime Minister suggests that Mr. Duncan Smith cannot really maintain his argument that *there is a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government* and can therefore not maintain his standpoint that *the performance of the Government is not up to standard* either. By attempting to make his opponent retract his argument, Mr. Blair aims to do away with the opponent’s standpoint without discussing his argument.

Up to this point, Mr. Blair could afford to address the argument that *government policies are responsible for the problematic rise* only indirectly. In his next turn, however, the Leader of the Opposition asserts his claim very explicitly: *government policies are damaging the NHS*, he argues, forcing Mr. Blair to be more direct as well.

(1c)  

*Ian Duncan Smith (Leader of the Opposition):*

[…] The answer that he did not give to my question is that hospital beds are in short supply because they are being blocked by people who cannot get a care home or nursing home bed. The figure that he did not want to provide is that 40,000—nearly 10 per cent.—fewer care home beds are available since 1997 when he took over. Age Concern says that the care sector is in crisis. The head of the Registered Nursing Homes Association said that Government policy was to blame. The Government's policies are damaging the NHS. Is not the Prime Minister's real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?

*Tony Blair (Prime Minister):*

Public sector investment in the health service has increased under the Government and is continuing to increase. We are roughly the only major industrial country anywhere in the world that is increasing expenditure on health and education as a proportion of national income. Is it the Conservative party's case that we are not spending enough on health and education? When we announced our spending plans, Conservatives called them reckless and irresponsible. We know that the right hon. Gentleman wants to run down the national health service because he does not believe in it. The clearest evidence of that came yesterday, when the Leader of the Opposition said:
"The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated."

What an insult to the NHS and the people who work in it! Conservatives denigrate the health service because they want to undermine it. We want to increase investment, whereas the right hon. Gentleman would cut it

(House of Commons official report, 2002)

With this point being made clear, Mr. Duncan Smith’s argumentation in support of the negative main standpoint can be reconstructed as follows:

1 (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1 Government policies are damaging the NHS

1.1.1’ (if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1.1a Government policies in the care sector have caused shortage in hospital bed supply

1.1.1b Shortage in hospital bed supply has lead to a problematic rise in the number of cancelled operations among those scheduled by the NHS

It is in response to the explicit accusation that government policies are damaging the NHS that the Prime Minister responds by an explicit attempt to exclude the argument from the Opposition from the discussion. In his next turn, the Prime Minister challenges the justificatory power of his opponent’s argument by accusing him of being inconsistent in his attitude towards the NHS. The accusation is an attempt to lead this sub-confrontation concerning the linking premise of the challenged argument (1.1’) to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, as an outcome which allows the Prime Minister to avoid the argumentative obligation to refute an argument from the Opposition, without compromising his institutional obligation to defend his Government.

Knowledge of institutional considerations relevant to the argumentative practice in Question Time helps us see Mr. Blair’s accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Duncan Smith as an instance of a recurrent attempt of the Prime Minister to avoid discussion of arguments from the Opposition he has the institutional obligation to address but has difficulty refuting. In the exchange about the NHS, the accusation of inconsistency seems to be the strongest among

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27 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b, being cumulatively coordinatively connected, are expressed in the ironic question is not the Prime Minister’s real achievement after five years to have increased both the queue to get into hospital and the queue to get out?
the Prime Minister’s attempts. Prior to it, the Prime Minister tried, first, to avoid the direct refutation of the sub-standpoint that if there is a rise in the number of cancelled operations under this Government, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, by advancing the contrary sub-standpoint that the NHS has a record to be proud of. Second, the Prime Minister attempted to change the topic of the sub-confrontation about the sub-standpoint that government policies are responsible for the problematic rise into a sub-confrontation about the closely related sub-standpoint that government plans, unlike those of the Opposition, can solve the problem of cancelled operations. The resort to the accusation of inconsistency, the strongest of the attempts, does not come before other attempts have failed.

4.3 Making strategic choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices

Knowledge of institutional considerations sheds significant light not only on the strategic dimension of the outcome pursued by the accusation and the gradual development of it, but also on the way the outcome is pursued. Knowledge of the rules and conventions of Question Time and the preconditions they create for argumentative exchanges provide significant insights into the strategic choices of topics, audience frames and style the Prime Minister makes as he attempts to reach the favourable definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute.

In Chapter 2, the analysis of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring employed by Mr. Blair in order to avoid discussing Mr. Duncan Smith’s standpoint, later reconstructed as an argument cf. p.45) that government policies are to blame for damaging the NHS unravelled the strategic function of Mr. Blair’s choices from the topical potential, audience frames and stylistic devices available to him. These choices were strategic in the sense that they contributed to at least one of the following: (a) attributing, beyond any doubt, a certain commitment to Mr. Duncan Smith based on another position he has assumed, (b) directing Mr. Duncan Smith towards maintaining this commitment and/or (c) portraying the current position of Mr. Duncan Smith to entail a commitment that is inconsistent with, and therefore cannot be maintained together with, the other
commitment attributed. For example, the choice of attributing a commitment through quotation is a strategic choice of stylistic device because quotation gives a high degree of credibility to the attribution. The choice of referring to a position of Mr. Duncan Smith that is central to conservative policy, such as the Tory’s opposition to investment in the health sector, is a strategic choice of topic because it makes it quite hard for Mr. Duncan Smith to retract the commitment. The choices are strategic in the sense that they contribute to leading Mr. Duncan Smith to retract (the linking premise of) his argument and thereby to eliminating any disagreement about it, to the advantage of Mr. Blair.

Mr. Blair’s choices would appear to be even more strategic, once institutional considerations and the resulting argumentative preconditions of the argumentative activity type of Question Time are taken into account. For example, once it is taken into account that differences of opinion about the leadership competence of political parties run simultaneously with the main difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government, one becomes aware of an extra strategic aspect of the choice of the Prime Minister to refer to the Tory’s opposition to investment in the health sector in particular. As explained in Chapter 3, in Question Time, simultaneous to the main difference of opinion about the performance of the Government, there are concurrent differences that relate to the competence of the different political parties in providing good leadership. Because Question Time sessions are supposed to be about the performance of the Government, simultaneous differences of opinion can be addressed only indirectly, by addressing the main initial difference about the performance of the Government. The choice of referring to the Conservatives’ position concerning investment in health becomes more advantageous in view of such a precondition. The choice of topic is opportune not only in the discussion about the performance of the Government, but also in the discussion about the competence of the Conservative party in providing good leadership. By emphasising the bad consequences that can result from the Tories’ opposition to investment in health care, Mr. Blair defends the point of view that the Conservatives cannot provide good leadership to the country.

Taking into account the concurrent differences of opinion sheds significant light on the choice of the accusation of inconsistency as a stylistic
device to express doubt concerning Mr. Duncan Smith’s argument as well. The accusation can play a role in the discussion of at least two differences of opinion. In the dispute concerning the performance of the Government, the accusation can lead in a potentially reasonable way to an outcome that is desirable to Mr. Blair. By appealing to the principle that one cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, Mr. Blair attempts to direct Mr. Duncan Smith to retract his commitment to the NHS deserves to be taken care of, and consequently retract government policies are (to blame for) damaging the NHS as a line of argument advanced in support of the standpoint that the performance of the Government is not up to standard. In the dispute over the political competence of the Conservative party, the accusation of inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of a standpoint such as Conservatives cannot provide good leadership. After all, a political party that is inconsistent cannot provide good leadership.

The interplay between political and argumentative roles, typical of Question Time, renders even more strategic the choice of Mr. Blair to address Mr. Duncan Smith in the audience frame of the Leader of the Conservative party. In Question Time, as in most parliamentary sessions, arguers conventionally (and in virtue of their political party obligations) adopt argumentative positions in line with the positions of their political parties. Being the leader of one’s party makes the obligation to stick to party positions even stronger. The previous position of Mr. Duncan Smith to which Mr. Blair refers is strategically chosen to be one that is central to Conservative policy: to reduce investment in the public sector. Had the previous position been more of a personal opinion of Mr. Duncan Smith and less of a position of the Tories, Mr. Duncan Smith would have had more freedom to retract his commitment to it and maintain his commitment to his current point of view, namely that the NHS deserves to be taken care of. But because the leader of the Conservative party cannot publicly renounce a central Conservative position without the risk of great political loss, Mr. Blair has more chances to get his opponent to maintain his previous commitment and thus to have no other option but to retract the commitment to the NHS deserves to be taken care of and therefore to the linking premise that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard.
Mr. Blair takes advantage of the preconditions for argumentation imposed by the format of Question Time to reach this result. The Prime Minister has the last word, so Mr. Duncan Smith cannot respond by choosing which commitment to maintain, and the exchange is on view to a public that would, given the centrality to the Conservatives’ political program their opposition to investment in health to is, attribute to Mr. Duncan Smith the commitment Mr. Blair wants him to maintain. Had Mr. Duncan Smith been given the chance to respond to Mr. Blair, it is unlikely that he would have retracted any of his commitments, especially not his commitment to the NHS deserves to be taken care of, if only because such a retraction would work against him in the discussion about the competence of his party in leading the country. However, by lack of response, the retraction can easily be attributed to him by the public watching the session. The commitment attributed to Mr. Duncan Smith, by Mr. Blair, namely that it is not the case that the NHS deserves to be taken care of, works in favour of Mr. Blair in the concurrent dispute about the political competence of the Conservatives, too.

4.4 Characteristics of a particular way of confrontational manoeuvring

The examination of the exchange about the NHS sheds light on three main characteristics that are central to the particular way of strategic manoeuvring that is subject of this study. First, the exchange about the NHS shows that the Prime Minister can aim at leading MPs from the Opposition to retract the arguments he needs to refute, but wishes not to discuss, by challenging the commitment of his opponents to the justificatory power of the arguments after attempts to refute the arguments’ propositional contents have failed. Second, the case also shows that in the particular activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time, the retraction of the argument by the MP from the Opposition saves the Prime Minister from ending up with a mixed dispute about the argument from the Opposition, which can be institutionally undesirable to the Prime Minister. Third, the NHS case shows that the accusation of inconsistency is not only an argumentatively opportune choice of style in the discussion of the performance of the Government, but also an institutionally opportune choice: the alleged
inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the Prime Minister’s position in the concurrent discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country. With the help of some other exchanges in which this particular way of manoeuvring occurs, I shall show that the three characteristics above are not particular to the NHS case.

In the exchange below, the first part of which was also examined in Chapter 2, Gordon Brown, the Labour Prime Minister, responds to the criticism of David Cameron, the Conservative Leader of the Opposition, by an accusation of inconsistency.

(2) 

David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition): 
There are currently six police investigations under way into the conduct of government in London. The most recent allegations are that the London Mayor’s director for equalities and policing has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that that is completely unacceptable?

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister): 
As on any occasion when a matter referring to a police investigation is raised, I have to say this is a matter for the police. It should be fully investigated, but it is not a matter for this House until the police complete their investigations.

Mr. Cameron: 
The point is that while these accusations are going on and this investigation is under way, the Mayor—the Labour Mayor—has said that he “trusts Lee Jasper with his life”, and last night he said that he is already planning to reappoint him. Does not every element of the Prime Minister’s moral compass tell him that this is wrong?

Mr. Brown: 
As I understand it, the person whom the right hon. Gentleman is talking about has resigned and is no longer in that employment. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to support the police in their investigation, why does his candidate for the Mayor of London say that the first target for cuts is transport and policing? That is the Conservative party—cutting transport and cutting policing.

(House of Commons official report, 2008c)

Mr. Cameron’s question to the Prime Minister addresses the conduct of the Government in London in light of a heated controversy over an alleged misuse of public funds by Lee Jasper, the London Mayor’s Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities.

In his first question, Mr. Cameron argues that

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
1.1 The conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations
1.1.1 The London Mayor’s director for equalities and policing [Lee Jasper] has been channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies

An initial disagreement is triggered in relation to Mr. Cameron’s argument, which Mr. Brown is expected not to accept. Nevertheless, Mr. Brown attempts to avoid a discussion about the argument by appealing to the Parliament’s *sub judice rule*: the case mentioned should not be the subject of a discussion in Parliament because it is being investigated by the police, he argues.

In response to the *sub judice rule*, Mr. Cameron reformulates his argument taking into account that the matter is under investigation. He reformulates the argument as *the London Mayor’s director for equalities and policing has been accused of channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies* (1.1a.1 below), and in order to support this line of argument, which has become weaker, he complements it with the argument that *the Government (London’s Labour Mayor) supports the accused director* (1.1b below). Mr. Cameron implies that the support for the accused is in itself a sign of bad governance. In his second turn, Mr. Cameron argues that

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1a The conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations

(1.1a’) (If the conduct of the Government in London is under serious allegations, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1b The Government (i.e. London’s Labour Mayor) supports the accused director for equalities and policing

(1.1b’) (If the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

1.1a.1 The London Mayor’s director for equalities and policing has been *accused of* channelling public funds into organisations run by friends and cronies

In his response, Mr. Brown reports that the accused is no longer in employment. Viewed as a response to the criticism, the Prime Minister’s answer can be interpreted as pointing out that the accused is no longer part of the Government in order to reject any association between what he does and the conduct of the Government. The answer can also be interpreted as an attempt by Mr. Brown to deny that the accused is supported by the Government in an attempt
to refute Mr. Cameron’s argument 1.1b above. Yet, this is not a real refutation, especially considering the support quoted by Mr. Cameron. To compensate for this weak refutation, Mr. Brown resorts to the accusation of inconsistency to exclude from the discussion the argument that he cannot refute.

Mr. Brown accuses Mr. Cameron of an inconsistency in relation to the issue of police investigation: while the Opposition opposes investment in policing, the Leader of the Opposition now claims that the police should be supported in their investigation. The Prime Minister suggests that the Conservative’s opposition to investment in policing implies that they do not support the police. Since Mr. Cameron’s party does not care to support the police, Mr. Cameron cannot claim that if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, Mr. Brown argues.

As in the exchange about the NHS, the Prime Minister challenges the justificatory power of an argument from the Opposition after he has proved incapable of refuting its propositional content. Also, as in the NHS case, the Prime Minister attempts to direct his sub-confrontation about the linking premise challenged towards the outcome of no dispute in order to avoid the institutionally undesirable outcome of a mixed dispute in which he has to advance and maintain the opposite of the linking premise he challenges. But it is not hard to see that Mr. Brown cannot commit himself to the opposite of the linking premise even though he challenges Mr. Cameron’s commitment to it.

In fact, as a Prime Minister, Mr. Brown cannot advance the sub-standpoint that it is not the case that if the Government supports someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard, without the risk of a considerable political loss among the general public of voters. Unless Mr. Cameron retracts the linking premise, Mr. Brown would have either to accept the premise and fail in his institutional responsibility to defend his Government, or to oppose the linking premise and run the risk of losing the general public of voters. Taking such considerations into account, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute pursued by the accusation of inconsistency becomes particularly favourable for the Prime Minister. By appealing to the commonly accepted
principle that one cannot commit oneself to two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, Mr. Blair attempts to eliminate the argumentative obligation to refute a challenged argument without failing in his institutional obligation to address arguments from the Opposition. After all, if his opponent retracts his argument, Mr. Brown has nothing to refute.

Also, similar to the NHS case, the strategic dimension of the accusation of inconsistency is central to the concurrent discussion about the competence of the Opposition in leading the country. The accusation of inconsistency counts as an opportune choice of a stylistic device to express the doubt of Mr. Brown regarding the commitment of Mr. Cameron to the linking premise. The alleged inconsistency of the leader of the Conservative party constitutes an argument in favour of the point of view that the Conservatives cannot provide good leadership to the British people. This is the main standpoint Mr. Brown adopts in the discussion concurrent with the discussion about the performance of the Government.

The three characteristics above, central to the way of strategic manoeuvring at issue, can also be observed in the case below about the EU referendum.

(3)

Peter Bottomley (MP, Conservative Party):
To return to the European treaty, what polling or survey evidence did the Prime Minister have on what the result of a referendum would have been?

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):
The one poll that people look at is an actual referendum. In 1975 there was a referendum that recorded a yes vote, with more than two thirds of the population voting yes. I remind Conservative Members that most of those who were here in 1992 walked through the Lobby to oppose a referendum on Maastricht, and now they want a referendum on a treaty that is far less significant. They should think again about their position.

(House of Commons official report, 2008d)

This short exchange comes after a long and heated exchange between Mr. Brown and the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, about the Government’s decision to cancel a referendum on the ratification of the Lisbon treaty and to have the decision taken by Parliament instead. In the exchange between Mr. Cameron and the Prime Minister, the former fiercely criticised the Government for cancelling the referendum they had promised in their election manifesto. Mr. Cameron even suggests that the Prime Minister cancelled the
referendum because he was not confident that he would win it. Mr. Bottomley’s question above comes to add to the same discussion. In his question, the MP from the Opposition suggests that a referendum would have shown that British people oppose the EU treaty. He implies that because the Government plans to ratify the treaty against the preference of the British people, the performance of the Government can be judged as not up to standard. In light of earlier discussions about the referendum, the question of the MP from the Opposition also implies that the Government’s unwillingness to organise the referendum on the treaty is in itself an indication that its performance is not up to standard, especially since the Government has, in its elections manifesto, promised that they would hold a referendum on the EU treaty. Mr. Bottomley’s argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

(1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
1.1 The Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people
(1.1’) (If the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
(1.2) (The Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty)
(1.2’) (If the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

In his answer, Mr. Brown tries first to refute the argument that the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people. He rejects the suggestion that a referendum would have shown that the British people oppose the treaty on the ground that the results of surveys and polls cannot be considered a reliable source of evidence; only the results of actual referenda can be such a source, he argues. He then refers to the referendum of 1975, which showed that British voters were in favour of UK’s membership in the European Economic Community. Mr. Brown implies that if one considers those results, one would tend to think that British voters would approve the new EU treaty if a referendum were to take place.

The Prime Minister also needs to refute the argument that the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Given that the cancellation of the referendum is a fact that cannot be denied, the Prime Minister
can defend his Government only by challenging the justificatory power of the argument. In fact, the heated discussion between the Prime Minister and Mr. Cameron was about the linking premise that *if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In that discussion, Mr. Brown tried repeatedly (without success) to argue that *it is not the case that if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard* because *the Lisbon treaty does not have any constitutional nature anymore*. Mr. Brown’s attempts did not seem to succeed and Mr. Bottomley’s question implies the same argument.

In response to the argument from the Opposition about cancelling the referendum implied in Mr. Bottomley’s question, Mr. Brown responds with an accusation of inconsistency. Mr. Brown accuses the Conservatives of being inconsistent concerning referenda: they have voted against having a referendum on the Maastricht treaty in 1992, and now they claim that not holding a referendum is an indication of bad government performance. Mr. Brown distrusts the Opposition’s belief in referenda given their previous actions, and suggests that because the justificatory power of the arguments from the Opposition entails such a belief, the MP from the Opposition cannot maintain his linking premise, and therefore, has to retract the argument he has advanced. By means of this accusation, the Prime Minister attempts to direct the sub-confrontation about the linking premise of Mr. Bottomley’s argument towards the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute, which is advantageous to him.

In this case as well, the Prime Minister employs the accusation of inconsistency in an attempt to exclude from the discussion the linking premise of his opponent’s argument after failing to refute the argument’s propositional content. In this case, unlike in the exchanges about the NHS and the London police, the Prime Minister has no political interest in avoiding commitment to the opposite of the linking premise. However, Mr. Brown’s failure to refute the linking premise in his earlier exchange with the Leader of the Opposition makes the definition of the difference of opinion as a mixed dispute still undesirable. Also, in this case, by attributing two inconsistent commitments to Conservative MPs, the accusation not only helps the Prime Minister lead his opponent to retract
an argument which he would have had to refute otherwise, but it also contributes
to the Prime Minister’s defence of his position that the Conservatives cannot
provide good leadership.