‘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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5 THE REASONABLENESS OF RESPONDING TO CRITICISM WITH ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY

In the previous chapters, I have analysed the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring in argumentative sub-confrontations. The analysis has made clear the strategic function of the accusation by showing how the Prime Minister employs it to make an MP from the Opposition to retract his argument, and consequently, eliminate the initial disagreement concerning this argument. Even though it is necessary for a reasonable discussant to be consistent in the positions he holds, the attempt to lead a discussant to retract a current position because it is inconsistent with another one that he also assumes is not always reasonable. The *tu quoque* variant of the *ad hominem* fallacy might be the most salient example of unreasonable accusations of inconsistency employed to silence an opponent.

In this chapter I shall investigate the reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue. I start from the view that a particular instance of strategic manoeuvring is dialectically sound as long as an arguer’s attempt to lead the discussion to a favourable outcome does not overrule his commitment to the critical testing of the points of view at issue (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007c). Based on this view, I aim to formulate the soundness conditions for the particular way of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency. These conditions will be discussed in light of political institutional considerations central to the activity type of Question Time, in order to arrive at a view of the reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue that is sensitive to the institutional point of the argumentative practice.

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28 Unlike van Laar (2007), I understand that consistency in one and the same discussion is a dialectical requirement for the protagonist of a standpoint (Barth and Martens, 1977: p. 88). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst make it clear that “admitting inconsistent statements within one and the same discussion makes it impossible to resolve the dispute” (1992a: 114). I take cases of provocative thesis (Krabbe, 1990) to be exceptions, especially since, as noted by Krabbe, in such cases, the thesis does not reflect the position of its proponent but rather that the opponent is being inconsistent, if he would deny it.
concerned.

5.1 The reasonableness of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint

When viewed as instances of strategic manoeuvring, argumentative moves are considered reasonable as long as the pursuit of winning the discussion, typical of strategic manoeuvring, does not hinder the critical testing procedure (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002b). As explained earlier, in every move in an argumentative discussion, arguers manoeuvre strategically to reconcile a dialectical concern with critically testing a standpoint and a rhetorical concern with winning the discussion. When, in a particular case, the attempt to steer the discussion towards a favourable outcome constitutes a hindrance to the critical testing procedure, the strategic manoeuvring in the move is said to have derailed and the instance of strategic manoeuvring is considered fallacious (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002c, 2003b, 2007b).

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser explain that the dialectical and rhetorical concerns that arguers attempt to reconcile in their strategic manoeuvring relate to the outcome of the dialectical stage in which the manoeuvring occurs. For example, in argumentative confrontations, arguers attempt to reconcile concerns that relate to the definition of their difference of opinion as the outcome of the confrontation stage. Dialectically, arguers are assumed to be aiming at defining their differences of opinion in a way that does not hinder the critical testing procedure. Arguers are, for instance, assumed to attempt ‘to achieve clarity’ concerning the specific issues about which they have a difference of opinion as well as the positions they assume in relation to these issues. Rhetorically, arguers are expected to be aiming at steering the argumentative confrontations towards a definition of the difference of opinion that is favourable to them. Each of the arguers is assumed to pursue such a rhetorical aim by attempting, for example, to achieve a particular definition of the disagreement or to take up a particular position that would increase the chances of his own point of view being accepted (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002c). Thus, in light of van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s view on the reasonableness of strategic manoeuvring, in order for instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring to be reasonable, the attempt
to reach a definition of the difference of opinion that is opportune should not hinder the critical testing procedure.

In order for a move in an argumentative confrontation not to hinder the critical testing procedure, two requirements need to be met. First, the move needs to constitute a contribution to at least one of the definitions of the difference of opinion that are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. That is mainly because, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst observe, for an argumentative move to be sound, the move needs to further the achievement of the dialectical objective of the stage in which it occurs. A reasonable move in an argumentative confrontation needs, accordingly, to contribute to the development of the confrontation towards at least one of the possible definitions of the difference of opinion as non-mixed, mixed or as no dispute. The second requirement that a move in an argumentative confrontation needs to meet, in order not hinder the critical testing procedure, is that the move does not hinder the development of the argumentative confrontation towards any of the outcomes that are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. A reasonable move in an argumentative confrontation needs, accordingly, to let any of the definitions of the difference of opinion to come about. The two general requirements that need to be met in order for a move in an argumentative confrontation to be considered a dialectically sound instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring can be formulated as follows

(1) The move needs to constitute a contribution to at least one definition of the difference of opinion that does not hinder the critical testing procedure, and

(2) The move must not prematurely preclude any other definition of the difference of opinion that furthers the critical testing procedure.

Once a move in an argumentative confrontation is viewed as an instance of a particular type of confrontational strategic manoeuvring, the pursuit of one particular outcome, i.e. a favourable outcome, is attributed to the move, so that the move is eventually viewed as an attempt to bring about the favourable outcome within the boundaries of reasonableness. As instances of the type of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint, the Prime Minister’s responses to
criticism with accusations of inconsistency are attempts to bring about, within the boundaries of reasonableness, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute as an outcome of the confrontation. As it has been characterised in section 2.4, the type of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint is the attempt of an arguer, who casts doubt on an expressed opinion, to lead the proponent of this opinion to take the dialectical route that leads to the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute. This outcome, favourable to the arguer, can be achieved by making the proponent retract the expressed opinion in the turn that follows (Figure 3, reproduced below for convenience).

In order for an instance of the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue to be reasonable, the actual move that functions as an expression of doubt in the confrontation needs to be a dialectically sound argumentative move.

By taking into account the particular type of confrontational manoeuvring of which an argumentative move is a case, the general requirements for a dialectically sound case of confrontational manoeuvring above can be further specified. Focusing on a particular type of confrontational manoeuvring would make it possible for example to be more specific about how a particular move contributes to a certain definition of the difference of opinion, or how it precludes another. That is mainly because in the characterisation of a particular type of strategic manoeuvring, the pursuit of a favourable outcome of the pertinent argumentative stage is expressed in terms a preference for a particular sequence of analytically relevant moves, i.e. a preference for a dialectical route that leads to the favourable outcome.

In view of the first requirement for reasonableness suggested above, a reasonable instance of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint needs to constitute a contribution to at least one definition of the difference of opinion that
does not hinder the critical testing of the point of view at stake. That is to say that the move that functions as an expression of doubt needs to be a contribution to at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. This first requirement is in fact two-fold: a sound expression of doubt needs (a) to constitute a relevant response to the expressed point of view, which I will hereafter refer to as the responsiveness requirement, and (b) to enable a continuation of at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage, which I will hereafter refer to as the continuity requirement.29

The second general requirement for reasonableness is meant to eliminate any hindrance to achieving definitions of the difference of opinion that can in principle be achieved within the boundaries of reasonableness. More specifically, the requirement is intended to guarantee that none of the definitions of the difference of opinion that are unfavourable given the type of strategic manoeuvring at issue is blocked. In the type of confrontational manoeuvring at issue, these are definitions of the disagreement as a non-mixed or a mixed dispute. The unfavourable definitions usually come into being via dialectical routes that are different from the one that leads to the favourable definition. Hereafter, I shall refer to such routes as non-preferred dialectical routes. Usually too, at the slot of analytically relevant moves that the case of strategic manoeuvring instantiates, the dialectical route followed so far branches out into preferred and non-preferred routes. In order to guarantee that none of the definitions of the difference of opinion allowed in a critical discussion is blocked by the manoeuvring, the expression of doubt should not hinder the continuation of any of the non-preferred dialectical routes that branch out from this juncture of the dialectical procedure. To this requirement, I shall hereafter refer as the freedom requirement.

To recapitulate, an argumentative move that functions as an expression of doubt that aims at defining the difference of opinion as no dispute by leading the

29 Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2006) suggest that a dialectically sound case of strategic manoeuvring needs to be (a) “chosen in such a way that it enables an analytically relevant continuation at the juncture concerned in the dialectical route [...]”, (b) “in such a way adapted to the other party that it responds to the preceding move in the dialectical route [...]” and (c) “formulated in such a way that it can be interpreted as enabling a relevant continuation and being responsive to the preceding move”. Even though I do not at this stage associate -as van Eemeren and Houtlosser do- the requirements I suggest with the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, the responsiveness and continuity requirements I suggest are meant in the same way.
ponent of an expressed opinion to retract it, is a sound case of confrontational manoeuvring if the following requirements are met:

(1a) the move needs to be an expression of doubt that is responsive to the expressed opinion;

(1b) the move needs to have the potential to bring about either the maintenance or the retraction of the standpoint in the turn that follows, in order to enable a continuation of at least one dialectical route of the confrontation stage; and

(2) the move must not preclude the possibility that the expressed opinion is maintained in the turn that follows, i.e. that the non-preferred analytically relevant response is opted for, in order to guarantee the freedom of the other party to take the non-preferred dialectical route that might lead to the definition of the difference of opinion as a non-mixed or a mixed dispute.

5.2 Soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency

As suggested by the requirements above, an attempt of the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint of the Opposition is reasonable only if the Prime Minister’s attempt to lead the MP from the Opposition to retract his standpoint constitutes an expression of relevant critical doubt that does not prevent the MP from maintaining his standpoint, if he wishes to. By taking into account the pragmatic aspect of the actual move that functions as an expression of doubt, i.e. in the case studied here, the accusation of inconsistency, the suggested requirements can become more tuned to the evaluation of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring in which accusations of inconsistency are employed to rule out a standpoint. In order to arrive at a set of soundness conditions for this particular way of strategic manoeuvring, I shall in what follows further specify the three requirements of responsiveness, continuity and freedom in light of insights gained from the pragmatic examination of the particular way of manoeuvring at issue.
5.2.1 Requirement of responsiveness

In view of the requirement of responsiveness, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint reasonably, must be a responsive expression of doubt concerning the standpoint advanced by the Opposition to which it reacts. In line with van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs and Jackson (1993: p. 10), the accusation of inconsistency counts as a relevant response to a standpoint if it expresses any of the following: that the standpoint is understood as such, that it is accepted or that it is rejected. However, given that the accusation needs to be a relevant expression of critical doubt, i.e. an illocutionary negation of acceptance, it is the non-acceptance of the standpoint advanced that the accusation needs to express.

As the characterisation of the particular way of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency (section 2.5) shows, in this particular way of manoeuvring, the accusation attributes to the proponent of a standpoint two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, and urges him to retract one of them in order to remove the (alleged) inconsistency. The accusation attributes to the proponent of the standpoint a commitment to \( A \) on the basis of the standpoint advanced and a commitment to \( \neg A \) on the basis of another position the proponent assumes. In order for the accusation to express non-acceptance of the standpoint, the attribution of the simultaneous commitment to \( A \) and \( \neg A \) taking place in it, needs to be correct. That is to say that in order for the accusation of inconsistency to count as a non-acceptance of the standpoint it challenges, the following soundness conditions need to be fulfilled:

(i) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to \( A \) on the basis of the standpoint challenged,

(ii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to \( \neg A \) on the basis of the other position assumed, and

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30 Van Eemeren et al. (1993: 10) suggest that the relevance of a speech act can be judged according to the contribution it makes to the achievement of the communicative and interactional goals of the preceding speech act. A speech act is a relevant response to another if it expresses that the other speech act is understood (the communicative goal of the speech act) or that it is either accepted or rejected (interactional goal of the speech act).
(iii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused the commitments to A and to \(-A\) simultaneously.

In the following I shall show why each of these conditions is necessary, and together, they are sufficient, for the accusation of inconsistency to be a reasonable expression of doubt concerning the standpoint it reacts to.

Unless the accuser is justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, i.e. unless condition (i) is fulfilled, the accusation of inconsistency cannot be a relevant response to the standpoint it reacts to. The accusation of inconsistency about whether or not the National Health Service (NHS) deserves to be taken care of is relevant to the sub-standpoint that if government policies are damaging the NHS, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard because a commitment to the NHS deserves to be taken care of can indeed be attributed to Mr. Duncan Smith on the basis of this sub-standpoint.

The irrelevance of the accusation that results from failing to fulfil condition (i) is of the kind associated with the straw man fallacy. If the accuser cannot, on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, justifiably attribute to the accused a commitment to A, the accuser distorts the standpoint by making it seem as if commitment to A follows from it. Failure to fulfil condition (i) thus violates the third rule of a critical discussion, the standpoint rule, which stipulates that “attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 191). The exchange between Peter Bottomley and Gordon Brown about the EU referendum, analysed in 4.5 and included below for convenience, is an example of the straw man fallacy resulting from a failure to fulfil condition (i).

(1)

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)
As the analysis of this exchange earlier shows, Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint that if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard gets challenged by means of an accusation of inconsistency concerning whether or not referenda on EU treaties should be held. Mr. Brown challenges Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint on the ground that while the sub-standpoint commits Mr. Bottomley to the proposition that referenda on EU treaties should be held, i.e. to A, the opposition of Mr. Bottomley’s party to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty allows the assumption that Mr. Bottomley is committed to it is not the case that referenda on EU treaties should be held, i.e. to –A.

However, Mr. Brown is not justified in attributing to Mr. Bottomley the commitment to referenda on EU treaties should be held, at least not on the basis of the sub-standpoint that if the Government has cancelled the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard. The commitment to A does not follow from Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint. What follows from Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint is in fact a commitment to a promised referendum should be held rather than a commitment to referenda on EU treaties should be held. By over-generalising the commitment that follows from the sub-standpoint, Mr. Brown’s accusation distorts the sub-standpoint. Mr. Brown casts doubt on a sub-standpoint that is not advanced by Mr. Bottomley, namely that if the Government has cancelled the referendum on an EU treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard. The standpoint to which the accusation reacts is easier to attack than the one indeed advanced. The accusation of inconsistency would, hence, have been stronger as an attack on this sub-standpoint than on the one actually advanced by Mr. Bottomley.

Unless the accuser is also indeed justified in attributing to the proponent of the standpoint a commitment to –A simultaneously with his commitment to A, i.e. unless conditions (ii) and (iii) are also fulfilled, the accusation of inconsistency cannot count as an expression of critical doubt concerning the standpoint it responds to. Again, this is mainly because the accusation must express the unacceptability of the standpoint it responds to in order for it to count as an expression of critical doubt concerning that standpoint, i.e. in order for it to
function as an illocutionary negation of acceptance (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984), the accusation must express the unacceptability of the standpoint. The accusation conveys such unacceptability by implying that a commitment to the standpoint cannot be held simultaneously with a commitment that is inconsistent with it.

The accusation of inconsistency functions as an expression of doubt on the basis of the assumptions that there is a commitment which is inconsistent with the standpoint challenged and which can indeed be attributed to the proponent of the standpoint on the basis of the other positions he has assumed, and that the proponent is holding the two commitments simultaneously. Unless these assumptions are defended by the accuser, the assumptions are taken to be starting points acceptable for the accused. Hence, unless the accuser is justified in assuming that the other position of the proponent of the standpoint commits the proponent to –A now, casting doubt by means of the accusation would count as a case of considering as an accepted starting point something that is not an accepted starting point. In that sense, failure to meet conditions (ii) and (iii) results in the violation of the sixth rule of a critical discussion, the starting-point rule, which stipulates that “discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 193).31

The need for the two inconsistent commitments to be held simultaneously, expressed in condition (iii), has already been highlighted by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003b). In their discussion of the soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring by pointing out an inconsistency, they explain that ‘from a pragma-dialectical point of view, an inconsistency between something that is presently said and something that was said on a different occasion matters only if it involves an inconsistency in one and the same critical discussion’. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser suggest criteria for determining whether or not it is possible to take as parts of the same discussion what is presently said and something that was

31 Even though the starting point rule pertains usually to the argumentation stage (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: pp. 149-157), the rule can also be applied to exchanges that exemplify argumentative confrontations. Especially in argumentative exchanges that occur in institutionalised contexts, arguers do not enter confrontations with an empty commitment store. Reference to commonly accepted starting points is therefore possible in argumentative confrontations. The starting point rule is accordingly applicable.
said on a different occasion. According to them, it is possible to take two pieces of argumentation as parts of the same discussion if the pieces are aimed at resolving the same difference of opinion and have the same material and procedural starting points (2003b: p. 7). Even though van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s conditions are primarily formulated for pointing out inconsistencies as a means of justifying the non-acceptance of a certain proposition as a starting point, their criteria can be very helpful in evaluating the accusations employed to rule out a certain (sub-)standpoint from the discussion.

In view of van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s criteria for what counts as part of one and the same discussion, Gordon Brown’s accusation against David Cameron in the exchange about the police investigation, analysed previously in section 4.5 and included below for convenience, seems to fail to fulfil condition (iii).

(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 criticised the performance of the Government by reference to an alleged misuse of public funds by Lee Jasper, the London Mayor’s Senior Policy Advisor on Equalities. According to the findings of section 4.4, 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

Mr. Brown’s response, that the accused is no longer in employment, can be seen as an attempt to deny that the accused is supported by the Government, which is in turn an attempt to refute Mr. Cameron’s argument 1.1b above. Yet, as argued earlier, considering the support quoted by Mr. Cameron, Mr. Brown’s answer does not seem to amount to a solid refutation. It is to compensate for this weak refutation that Mr. Brown points out the alleged inconsistency in Mr. Cameron’s position, aiming to avoid the discussion of the argument that he cannot properly refute. He suggests that 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, considering that the Conservative candidate running for the post of the Mayor of London expressed plans to cut expenditure on policing in case he would win. The two positions are presented as inconsistent regarding the attitude towards the police. While the criticism of the Government entails support for the police, the Conservative candidate’s position implies the opposite, Mr. Brown suggests.

According to the conditions set by van Eemeren and Houtlosser, the mutually inconsistent attitudes towards the police attributed to Mr. Cameron do not seem to occur in one and the same discussion. The two attitudes are not expressed in the course of discussing the same difference of opinion. Lack of support for the police is attributed to Mr. Cameron on the basis of a policy of cutting expenditure on policing promoted by the Conservative Party, and can therefore be considered a commitment of Mr. Cameron in the context of a
difference of opinion that relates to a matter of policy: something about the budget or police reforms. The commitment to an attitude that supports the police is held in the context of a difference of opinion that relates to a matter of accountability: the police is investigating the conduct of the Government.

The two attitudes seem to be related to two different disputes. While the commitment to a supportive attitude towards the police, i.e. commitment to a proposition like the police should be supported, is held in relation to a difference of opinion regarding accountability, the commitment to a non-supportive attitude towards the police, i.e. commitment to a proposition like it is not the case that the police should be supported, is held in relation to a difference of opinion regarding expenditure. Being related to two different differences of opinion, the two commitments cannot be considered to be held in one and the same discussion: they cannot therefore be considered to be held simultaneously. Mr. Brown’s accusation would function as an expression of critical doubt only by virtue of the two commitments being held simultaneously. By falsely presenting this to be the case, the accusation violates the starting point rule and fails accordingly to be a reasonable instance of the strategic manoeuvring at issue.32

5.2.2 Requirement of continuity

In view of the requirement of continuity, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to rule out a standpoint reasonably, must enable a continuation of at least one of the dialectical routes of the confrontation stage. For that, the accusation needs to be performed in a way that has the potential to bring about a response that functions as either the maintaining of the standpoint or the retraction of it. In an argumentative interaction in which an accusation of inconsistency functions as an expression of doubt, the maintaining or the retraction of the standpoint that the accusation doubts are realised through the perlocutionary effects of the accusation. The standpoint can be maintained by

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32 The exchange can also be analysed as a failure to meet condition (ii). The analysis would take a commitment to A to be a commitment to the police should be supported in their investigations. In this case, the previous position of Mr. Cameron does not imply commitment to the opposite, since opposing investment in policing cannot be taken to imply a commitment to it is not the case that the police should be supported in their investigations. However, in my analysis I opt for a more general reconstruction of the commitments the Prime Minister attributes to his opponent, i.e. I take a commitment to A to be a commitment to the police should be supported, which I think is what Mr. Brown attempts to convey.
means of any of the two following perlocutionary effects: first, the accusation of inconsistency is not accepted by the proponent of the standpoint, and second, the accusation is accepted and the accused prefers to retract commitment to \(-A\) rather than retracting his commitment to \(A\).

If the accused does not accept the accusation, he has no obligation to retract anything. An accused who does not accept the accusation of inconsistency responds in such a way that the minimal perlocutionary effect non-preferred by the accuser is achieved. He can express his non-acceptance by denying that his standpoint commits him to \(A\), that his other position commits him to \(-A\) or that his commitments to \(A\) and \(-A\) are held simultaneously. By doing so, the proponent of a standpoint attempts to justify that his position is consistent in order to be able to maintain his current standpoint.\(^{33}\)

Maintaining the standpoint is also possible if the accused accepts the accusation of inconsistency. By accepting the accusation, the accused admits the alleged inconsistency as well as the necessity to repair it by retracting, at least, one of the inconsistent commitments, i.e. he commits himself to act in accordance with the optimal perlocutionary effect of the accusation. Such a commitment would be in line with van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s characterisation of (the perlocutionary illocution of) accepting the speech act of argumentation as expressing concurrence with the preparatory conditions of the speech act accepted (1982: 14). By retracting the commitment to \(-A\), the proponent of the standpoint challenged eliminates the inconsistency by conveying that he has changed his mind about his previous position in order to be able to maintain the current standpoint. The acceptance of the accusation can also lead to the retraction of the standpoint by the accused. A proponent of a standpoint challenged, who accepts the accusation of inconsistency against him, can eliminate this inconsistency by retracting his commitment to \(A\). By retracting his commitment to \(A\), the accused retracts the standpoint and avoids having to retract the other position he assumes.

In order for the accusation to have the potential to bring about any of the perlocutionary effects above, it needs to be performed in a recognisable way. That is to say that it is necessary that the accusation of inconsistency is performed in

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\(^{33}\) Dissociation is one of the ways to express non-acceptance of the accusation. By means of dissociation, the alleged inconsistency is denied by dissociating between different interpretations of the commitments attributed, one of which involves no inconsistency.
an understandable way if any of the perlocutionary effects is to be rationally expected. The expectation of any of the perlocutionary effects above is not justified if the accused does not understand that commitments to A and to –A are attributed to him simultaneously and that he is required to retract one of them to eliminate the inconsistency. In other words, a clear performance of the accusation is necessary in order for any relevant continuation of the confrontation. In order to ensure the continuation of any of the dialectical routes of the confrontation stage, the accusation of inconsistency therefore needs to fulfil the following soundness condition.

(iv) The accusation of inconsistency needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him commitments to A and to –A simultaneously and demands him to retract one of them to eliminate the alleged inconsistency.

Failure to fulfil the condition can be associated with violations of the tenth rule of a critical discussion, the language usage rule, according to which “discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulations” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 195). Clarity, as required in the rule, does by no means rule out indirectness and implicitness as unreasonable (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987: pp. 293-296). In fact, advancing an accusation of inconsistency to express critical doubt is in itself an instance of indirectness that is not unreasonable as such. And as long as the speech act is identifiable, implicitness is no obstacle to critical testing. However, lack of clarity can have direct consequences for the critical testing procedure, for example, by masking failures to meet other requirements for reasonableness.

The exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron, about the police in London, is an example of insufficiently clear formulations of the accusation can for example mask failures to meet other soundness conditions. The vagueness in expressing the commitments attributed to Mr. Cameron makes it more difficult to detect that the alleged inconsistency is unreasonable as a result of failure to meet not only condition (iii) as discussed in section 5.2.1, but also condition (i), as it will be shown below. By means of the accusation, Mr Brown attributes to Mr. Cameron mutually inconsistent attitudes in relation to the police. The Labour
Prime Minister attributes to the Leader of the Conservative Party a commitment to a supportive attitude towards the police on the basis of the latter’s criticism of the Government, and a commitment to a non-supportive attitude on the basis of plans of Boris Johnson, the Conservative candidate for the Mayor of London, to cut expenditure on policing. On the basis of Mr. Johnson’s plans, Mr. Brown attributes to Mr. Cameron commitment to it is not the case that the police should be supported. He argues that in view of such a commitment, his opponent cannot be committed to the sub-standpoint 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 because such a sub-standpoint entails the opposite commitment.

Mr. Brown seems to take supporting someone who is under police investigation for alleged corruption, i.e. not supporting the police in their investigations, to mean merely not supporting the police. He consequently distorts his opponent’s sub-standpoint by attributing to him a more generalised version of it. However, the distortion is not easy to detect because Mr. Brown does not make it sufficiently clear what the inconsistency is about. All he says is that ‘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?’ It is not clear whether the alleged inconsistency is about the general attitude towards the police, i.e. something like the police should be supported, or about the attitude towards police investigation in particular, i.e. something like the police should be supported in their investigation. In fact, Mr. Brown’s accusation conveys a combination of the two, which makes it difficult for his opponent to recognise the unreasonableness of the alleged inconsistency.

The mere recognisability of the accusation of inconsistency is sufficient for a justified expectation of only the non-acceptance of the accusation of inconsistency. The accusation needs to be also acceptable in order for it to have the potential to bring about the other, optimal, perlocutionary effects, i.e. a retraction of one of the two mutually inconsistent commitments. Given that the acceptance of the accusation of inconsistency commits the accused to the preparatory conditions of it, the accuser can be justified in expecting his
accusation to be accepted only if the preparatory conditions of the accusation are acceptable to the accused. The conditions need to belong to the commonly accepted starting points, in order for the accuser to be justified in expecting the accused to retract one of the allegedly inconsistent commitments. The latter, as I have argued earlier, is necessary for the continuation of the dialectical route towards the retraction of the standpoint. Soundness conditions (i), (ii) and (iii), above, see to it that this requirement is met.

5.2.3 Requirement of freedom

In view of the requirement of freedom, the accusation of inconsistency, employed by the Prime Minister to reasonably rule out a standpoint, must not preclude the possibility for the accused to maintain rather than retract the standpoint in the turn that follows. That is to say that the accusation must preclude none of the accused’s options to perform a non-preferred response to the accusation. As explained earlier, the non-preferred (analytically relevant) response of maintaining the standpoint, by the accused, can be realised either by not accepting the accusation of inconsistency or by accepting the accusation but retracting the commitment to \( \neg A \). In response to the accusation, the proponent of a standpoint must be allowed to express either of the two.

An accusation that is made in a reasonable way should not violate the freedom of the accused to express his non-acceptance of the accusation. The accused should be allowed to (justifiably) deny that his standpoint commits him to \( A \), that his other position commits him to \( \neg A \) or that his commitments to \( A \) and to \( \neg A \) are simultaneously held. Nor should the accusation violate the freedom of the accused to maintain the commitment to \( A \) in case he accepts the accusation and is willing to retract the commitment to \( \neg A \) and acknowledge that he has changed his mind about the other position he assumes. In order for the accusation not to constitute such a violation, the following condition needs to be fulfilled:

\[
\text{(v) The choice of topic, audience frame, and stylistic devices of the accusation of inconsistency must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to } \neg A \text{ in case the accusation is accepted.}
\]
Exactly because the accuser makes his choice of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices so that the accused is directed towards retracting commitment to A, it should be observed that such a choice does not violate the freedom of the accused to opt for a different response.

An accusation of inconsistency that fails to fulfil the condition specified above violates the first rule of a critical discussion, the freedom rule, which stipulates that “discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 190). The violation results in a case of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The exchange, below, between David Cameron and Gordon Brown is an example. The exchange forms part of a discussion about the Government’s policy to tackle the effects of the global financial crisis on the British economy. Mr. Cameron, who has repeatedly blamed the Government’s borrowing policy to combat the recession, now opposes the Government’s plan of unfunded tax cuts. He argues that such cuts cannot be made possible without further borrowings, which would only add to the problem since the current unfunded cuts can only be compensated by later tax rises.

(3)

David Cameron (Leader of the Opposition):

[…] He was asked about the Government’s claim that this recession was largely not of their making. His answer was that that was “largely drivel, frankly”. That is what he said. Let me use some words that the Prime Minister might be very familiar with. They are these: “unfunded...tax promises...simply do not add up”.

They mean “tax cuts before the election”, leading to tax rises after an election. That is what he said as Chancellor just a few years ago. If he does not agree with his employment Minister, if he does not agree with his Chancellor and if he does not agree with his Trade Secretary, perhaps he can tell us—does he agree with himself?

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):

[…] only a few days ago the Leader of the Opposition himself was saying that borrowing had to be allowed to happen. Then he changed his mind, and he is depriving people of real help for businesses and families. The issue will come down to this: do we want to help people through difficult times, a downturn that every country in the world has faced? It is a downturn, by the way, that even the Americans agree started in America. Do we want to help people through difficult times, or do we want to take the advice that was followed in the 1980s and 1990s by the then Conservative Government and do absolutely nothing to help people in time of need? […]

(House of Commons official report, 2008g)

To the criticism advanced by Mr. Cameron, Mr. Brown responds by accusing the Leader of the Opposition of an inconsistency: Mr. Cameron is now criticising the
Government’s borrowing policy while a few days ago he himself said that *borrowing had to be allowed*. The Prime Minister goes on by attacking the Conservative Opposition for what is according to him a refusal to help the needed in a time of crisis. He attempts to justify his Government’s policies but without directly addressing the criticism expressed by his adversary. 34

Viewed in the context of discussing the performance of the Government, Mr. Cameron’s question can be interpreted as expressing the following line of argumentation:

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

1.1 The Government’s borrowing policy contributes to the recession

(1.1’) (If the Government’s borrowing policy contributes to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

Mr. Brown challenges the justificatory power of Mr. Cameron’s argument by the alleged inconsistency he attributes to him. The Prime Minister reminds his opponent that he had previously expressed the point of view that *borrowing had to be allowed*, and suggests that, therefore, he cannot be now claiming that *if the Government’s borrowing policy contributes to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. By means of the alleged inconsistency, Mr. Brown urges Mr. Cameron to retract his current position in order not to hold two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously. After all, Mr. Cameron cannot think that *borrowing should not have been allowed* (commitment to A, entailed by his current criticism of the Government) and that *borrowing had to be allowed* (commitment to –A, expressed a few days ago) at the same time.

The way Mr. Brown presents the accusation of inconsistency violates Mr. Cameron’s freedom to choose how to respond to it. In his attempt to avoid a discussion of the criticism against his Government, Mr. Brown attempts to direct Mr. Cameron towards the retraction of the commitment to A, as a way to lead him to retract the linking premise he challenges. By presenting the commitment

34 It is interesting that Mr. Cameron’s criticism of the Government involves an accusation of inconsistency, too. The Government’s plan criticised is presented as inconsistent with Mr. Brown’s previous opposition to unfunded tax cuts. However, because in this study I am interested in accusations of inconsistency retorts, I shall restrict my attention to the accusation expressed by Mr. Brown in response to Mr. Cameron’s criticism.
to A (borrowing should not have been allowed) as a commitment that would deprive families and businesses of real help, Mr. Brown makes Mr. Cameron’s option of maintaining a commitment to A almost impossible. Given that politicians are required to care about people’s problems, Mr. Cameron’s choice to maintain a commitment to A and retract a commitment to –A instead can be considered almost precluded by the association Mr. Brown makes between the commitment to A and insensitivity towards people’s problems. The association puts pressure on Mr. Cameron. It restricts his freedom of choosing the way to eliminate the alleged inconsistency concerning whether borrowing had to be allowed or not, and consequently violates his freedom to express the point of view that if government policies contribute to the recession then the performance of the Government is not up to standard.35

5.3 Institutional considerations for reasonableness

In applying the conditions formulated above, characteristics of the activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time need to be taken into account in order for the evaluation of the particular way of manoeuvring at issue to be sensitive to the institutional point of the argumentative discourse examined. An important element that needs to be taken into account, which has to do with the political nature of the parliamentary session, is that in the political context, actions, policies, and plans are discussed in relation to available alternatives. That is to say that, in Question Time, the performance of the Government is often judged in comparison to the alternative provided by the Opposition. Another important characteristic that needs also to be taken into account is the political basis for the assignment of roles and the attribution of commitments. Government policies, actions and plans are defended by MPs from the ruling party against the criticism of MPs from the Opposition, each attempting to promote their party as the more competent leader of the country. In the context of such a discussion, namely the

35 Mr. Brown’s accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Cameron is combined with an appeal to emotions. By associating the commitment to A with insensitivity towards people’s problems, Mr. Brown appeals to his adversary’s fear of being associated with insensitivity in order to lead him to retract the commitment to A. The unreasonableness of the accusation is in fact a result of this combination.
discussion about the leadership competence of political parties, it seems necessary to hold MPs accountable for commitments derived from positions assumed by other MPs from their parties. For the sake of maximising the accountability of political parties, it can even be claimed that the positions assumed by individual politicians are in fact positions that can be attributed to their political parties. In what follows, I shall discuss the implications of the considerations above for the general conditions formulated earlier, hoping to make the conditions more tuned to the context in which they are to be applied.

In line with van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2004), I take it that the political context in which the Prime Minister’s accusations occur determines to a great extent whether the Prime Minister is indeed justified in attributing to his adversaries the commitments he attributes to them on the basis of the positions he refers to. For example, considering that political plans and actions are to a great extent judged in relation to the alternatives provided by rivals, what appears like an over-generalised interpretation of the standpoint challenged might well be a justified interpretation. That is to say, that when applying soundness condition (i), i.e. that the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged, one needs to take into account that the performance of the Government is often discussed in relation to the alternative that the Opposition would provide, had it been the party in power.

For example, Mr. Brown’s accusation of inconsistency regarding the police, discussed earlier, does not necessarily distort Mr. Cameron’s position even if it derives from it a slightly over-generalised commitment. As long as the performance of the Government is being discussed independently of what the Opposition would have done had it been in power (as it has been done in section 5.2.1), the attribution to the Opposition of a general commitment to the police should be supported will count as distorting the sub-standpoint advanced by the Opposition. The attribution generalises the sub-standpoint 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 to something like if the Government does not support the police, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard. However, in a context of discussing the performance of the Government in comparison to what the Opposition would do if it were to take
over governance, the over-generalisation seems to be justified. Mr. Brown’s accusation is an attempt of the Prime Minister to argue that, given that the Tories plan to cut expenditure on policing, the police would not have been better supported had the Conservatives been in power. That, consequently, undermines the criticism the Tories advance concerning the performance of the Government with respect to supporting the police in their investigations. That does not mean that the Prime Minister is justified in disregarding the Opposition’s criticism of the Government, but his accusation can be viewed as an attempt to discuss the criticism advanced by the Opposition in perspective.

The extent to which it is justifiable for the Prime Minister to derive a certain commitment from a certain other position of the Opposition (soundness condition (ii)) is also highly influenced by the perspective from which Government policies are discussed in relation to the alternative offered by the Opposition. For example, Mr. Blair seems to be justified in attributing to Mr. Duncan Smith a commitment to the NHS does not deserve to be taken care of on the basis of his quoted words that ‘The health service doesn't serve anybody . . . It doesn't serve doctors or nurses. It doesn't help the people who are treated’ in the context of Question Time. But the attribution might not have been so justified had it happened in another context where the discussion is not about policy.

For the application of soundness condition (ii), the political nature of assignment of roles and attribution of commitments is also significant. In determining whether or not the Prime Minister is justified in holding his adversary to be committed to a certain proposition on the basis of the position he refers to, such a political nature is crucial. In principle, it is necessary, in order to hold political parties to account, to consider that the commitments that can be attributed to a certain MP are not restricted to those deriving from his own positions. It should be possible, to different degrees of justifiability, to attribute to MPs from a certain political party commitments deriving from positions that have been assumed by the leaders of their parties, election manifestos, or other public expressions of opinion made in the name of the Party. Only by considering all these together as sources of commitments, can the examination of political argumentative discourse give due consideration to the dynamics that shape such discourse. After all, the political scene in democracies is created and managed
through the action and interaction of political parties rather than individuals.

While it is crucial to give due attention to the group dynamics of political organisation in deriving commitments for argumentative discussions, it is still debatable to which extent commitments of MPs can be justifiably attributed to their fellow Party members. Are the commitments assumed by party member equally transferrable? This would be difficult to establish. Take, for example, the case of the London police. Is the Leader of the Opposition accountable for what a fellow Party member, Boris Johnson, expresses? On the one hand, the often extreme views of Mr. Johnson undermine the legitimacy of transferring his commitments to fellow Tories. Yet, on the other hand, Mr. Johnson’s position was assumed in his capacity as the Conservative Party’s candidate for the Mayor of London. The latter makes it actually imperative to consider his positions as representative of the policies of the party he represents.

In considering whether or not the Prime Minister is justified in attributing the two mutually inconsistent commitments to the accused simultaneously, i.e. in establishing whether soundness condition (iii) is fulfilled, political characteristics of the discourse are again crucial. Where do we draw the boundaries of one and the same discussion? Van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s general conditions for what counts as one and the same discussion need to be tailored to the particularities of the political context. Argumentative parties need to be seen in terms of political parties rather than as individuals and the discussion of the performance of the Government needs to be viewed in relation to the alternative the Opposition would provide. But here again, in pursuing maximum political accountability one risks distorting politicians’ individual responsibility as well as overlooking the necessity to consider political actions in perspective. For example, one might wonder if the commitment derived from the Conservatives’ opposition to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992, can be attributed to Mr. Bottomley, sixteen years later. On the one hand, the position was not only one of the Conservative Party, of which Mr. Bottomley is a member; Mr. Bottomley himself was one of those who walked through the no lobby opposing the referendum. And yet, on the other hand, in the sixteen years that separate the two discussions, so many starting points have changed that the question becomes legitimate whether Mr. Bottomley’s commitment to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty should
not be held is simultaneously held with his commitment to a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty should be held.

It would contribute to holding the Conservative Party to account for its political program to extend the scope of what can be considered as one and the same discussion and include in one discussion the two discussions about referenda: the one on the Maastricht Treaty as well as the one on the Lisbon Treaty. Especially given the change of position of the Tories from Government to Opposition, it is a way of holding them accountable to seek for justification for what seems like a change of policy. However, one should be careful that the pursuit of a greater accountability of the Opposition is not achieved on the expense of the accountability of the Government. Separating the two discussions, at a certain level, and discussing the performance of the Government independently, is sometimes necessary for holding the present Government to account. In the case of the exchange with Mr. Bottomley, for example, in order to hold the Government to account, one needs to consider the argumentative discussion about the performance of the Government as a primary discussion, and consider that the previous position of Mr. Bottomley occurs in a different discussion. That would not be unreasonable, especially given the different time and political context in which that position was assumed.

In determining whether or not a certain choice of topic, audience frame, or stylistic device of the accusation of inconsistency restricts the accused freedom to choose the way to react to the accusation, i.e. whether or not soundness condition (v) is fulfilled, due attention needs to be given to the political implications of the choices made. Whether or not a certain choice precludes the possibility for the accused to express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to \( \neg A \) in case the accusation is accepted is highly dependent on the political implications of the reaction opted for. For example, crucial in detecting the violation of Mr. Cameron’s right to maintain his commitment to borrowing should not have been allowed and be accountable for it is the fact that to be regarded as insensitive to people’s needs in times of crisis is particularly undesirable for a party that aspires to take over Government. The particular choice of presenting the commitment to borrowing should not have been allowed in terms of a (quite blown up) political implication is more problematic in this
(political) context than it could have been in other (personal) ones. Had the same presentation been used in an ordinary interpersonal conversation, in which the political implications play a less important role, the accused would have had more freedom to maintain his standpoint. After all, sensitivity to people’s problems matters considerably less when no responsibility is assumed towards these people.

As the discussion above shows, political institutional considerations play a crucial role in determining the reasonableness of argumentative moves. Only if such considerations are taken into account when applying the general soundness conditions, can the evaluation of the Prime Minister’s response at issue be institutionally relevant.