6 Conclusion

6.1 Findings of the study

In this study, I have attempted to provide an empirically adequate account of accusations of inconsistency advanced by the Prime Minister in response to criticism from the Opposition in Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. I have characterised the accusations as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring (Chapter 2) and I have suggested a set of soundness conditions for judging the (actual) (un)reasonableness of the accusations at issue (Chapter 5). In order for the analysis and the evaluation of the accusations to be faithful to the institutional particularities of the argumentative practice concerned, I have characterised the parliamentary session of Question Time as an argumentative activity type and identified the preconditions that the rules and conventions of Question Time create for argumentative confrontations in the parliamentary session (Chapter 3). While the characterisation of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue as a particular way of strategic manoeuvring, in Chapter 2, sheds light on the argumentative function of the accusations, significant insights into the institutional function of the accusations are gained by taking the preconditions identified in Chapter 3 into account. These institutional insights are instrumental for a more refined analysis of the accusations at issue (Chapter 4) as well as for an evaluation that does not overlook the institutional concerns of the arguers in the parliamentary session of Prime Minister's Question Time (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 2, the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism are characterised as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in which the Prime Minister attempts to steer his argumentative confrontations with MPs from the Opposition towards a favourable outcome within the boundaries of reasonableness. In this way of manoeuvring, the Prime Minister casts doubt on a standpoint of the Opposition that expresses criticism of policies, actions or plans of the Government, by means of accusations
of inconsistency. The Prime Minister challenges his adversary’s commitment to
the criticism expressed by accusing him of being inconsistent with regard to the
subject matter of the criticism: while the adversary’s critical standpoint commits
him to A, another position with which he can be associated commits him to –A.
By pointing out the (alleged) inconsistency, the Prime Minister, who does not
accept the criticism expressed, attempts to lead his adversary to retract this
criticism. The retraction of the critical standpoint eliminates the initial
disagreement that has given rise to the argumentative confrontation and closes the
argumentative confrontation with a definition of the difference of opinion as no
dispute.

In principle, the definition of the difference of opinion as no dispute is
within the boundaries of reasonableness. The definition can be affected by a
discussant who retracts a standpoint in order to avoid holding two mutually
inconsistent positions simultaneously. The definition is also favourable to the
Prime Minister. Once the MP from the Opposition retracts his standpoint the
Prime Minister is no longer under the obligation to refute the criticism that he
does not accept. The Prime Minister attempts to steer his argumentative
confrontations with MPs from the Opposition towards this favourable outcome by
making choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices that lead the MP
towards the retraction of the critical standpoint, rather than the retraction of the
other position inconsistent with it, as the means to repair the alleged
inconsistency.

In Chapter 3, the institutionally conventionalised argumentative practice
of Prime Minister's Question Time is characterised as a multi-layered
argumentative activity type that is governed by parliamentary rules and
conventions as well as by political considerations. In this activity type, the Prime
Minister engages in argumentative exchanges about policies, plans and actions of
the Government with his fellow MPs, in a well-regulated question-answer format.
In these exchanges, interrelated differences of opinion are discussed, as the MPs
and the Prime Minister pursue a number of interrelated institutional aims.

Of the several institutional aims pursued by argumentation in Question
Time, holding the Government to account can be considered the institutional goal
of the argumentative activity type. Holding the Government to account is the goal
for which Question Time was established as a parliamentary session and to which the discussants can be collectively held committed by virtue of their participation in the session. By discussing the government plans, policies or actions, and subjecting the performance of the Government to argumentative scrutiny, MPs and the Prime Minister pursue this goal. The argumentative exchanges between MPs and the Prime Minister can be viewed as an attempt to resolve a main difference of opinion about a standpoint like the performance of the Government is up to standard by means of arguments that relate to policies, plans or actions of the Government. In the course of discussing this main difference of opinion, sub-differences arise when the Prime Minister does not accept arguments advanced by the Opposition in which criticism is expressed concerning certain policies, plans or actions of his Government.

In addition to the institutional goal of holding the Government to account, a number of other institution-related aims can be associated with the argumentative practice of the parliamentary session. The most important of these aims is the promotion of party political interests. The questions of MPs convey political statements that promote their party’s policies or attack those of their adversaries. Similarly, the answers of the Prime Minister often convey pride in the achievements reached by his party’s policies, or express criticism of the policies of the Opposition. In their pursuit of promoting their party interests, MPs and the Prime Minister engage in the discussion of differences of opinion concerning the competence of political parties in leading the country. Accordingly, the argumentative exchanges between the Prime Minister and MPs can also be viewed as an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion about a standpoint like unlike the other party, we can provide good leadership.

The rules of Question Time stipulate that the questions of MPs and the answers of the Prime Minister address only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Government. Consequently, MPs and the Prime Minister need to address the differences of opinion concerning the competence of political parties only through addressing their difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government. An MP from the Opposition needs to defend the standpoint that unlike the ruling party, we can provide good leadership by means of his negative evaluation of the performance of the Government. Likewise, the
Prime Minister or MPs from his party need to defend the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, we can provide good leadership* by means of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government.

The characterisation of the argumentative practice of Question Time as an argumentative activity type identifies several significant institutional preconditions for argumentative confrontations. For example, the main initial difference of opinion, i.e. the difference concerning the performance of the Government, is expected to be mixed. The Prime Minister and MPs from his party are in favour of the positive standpoint, i.e. *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, and MPs from the Opposition are in favour of the negative standpoint. The sub-disagreements about arguments from the Opposition are also expected to be mixed. The Prime Minister has the institutional obligation to defend his Government and must therefore advance and defend a sub-standpoint that is opposite to the standpoint advanced by the Opposition in which criticism of his Government is expressed.

In Chapter 4, the Prime Minister’s responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency are re-examined in light of the insights gained from the characterisation of the argumentative practice of Question Time as an argumentative activity type, carried out in Chapter 3. This re-examination sheds significant light on the strategic institutional function of the responses at issue as attempts of the Prime Minister to manage his institutional obligation to defend his Government when refuting the criticism advanced by the Opposition is not easy. As the characterisation of the argumentative activity type of Question Time shows, MPs from the Opposition express criticisms of government policies, plans or actions as arguments in support of their negative standpoint concerning the performance of the Government. Consequently, the Prime Minister’s responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency are instances of strategic manoeuvring that come in response to such arguments.

On the basis of a detailed examination of the exchange between Tony Blair and Ian Duncan Smith about the National Health Service (NHS), three main characteristics that are central to the Prime Minister’s strategic manoeuvring are identified. First, the accusation of inconsistency challenges the commitment of the MP from the Opposition to the justificatory power of the latter’s critical
argument, often after attempts to refute the arguments’ propositional contents have failed. Second, the accusation of inconsistency can save Mr. Blair from what is an institutionally undesirable outcome in the particular activity type of Prime Minister's Question Time. If it leads Mr. Duncan Smith to retract (the justificatory power of) his argument, the accusation saves Mr. Blair from having a mixed dispute about it. In such a dispute Mr. Blair would have to assume the politically undesirable position of defending the premise 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. Third, the accusation of inconsistency is not only an argumentatively opportune choice in the discussion about the performance of the Government, but it is also an institutionally opportune choice in the discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country. The alleged inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the standpoint that unlike the Opposition, the ruling party can provide good leadership.

In Chapter 5, the reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency is discussed and soundness conditions are formulated for this particular way of manoeuvring. Guided by the view that a case of confrontational strategic manoeuvring is dialectically sound as long as the pursuit of a particular definition of the disagreement does not hinder the critical testing procedure, five conditions were formulated that need to be fulfilled in order for accusations of inconsistency employed by the Prime Minister to exclude from the discussion a point of view of the Opposition to be reasonable.

First, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the Prime Minister’s accusation risks distorting the standpoint it responds to thereby giving rise to cases of the straw man fallacy. Second, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to –A on the basis of the other position the accused assumes. Third, the accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused the two mutually inconsistent commitments to A and to –A simultaneously. Unless the last two conditions are fulfilled, the accusation risks falsely considering as mutually accepted starting points propositions that cannot be considered as such. The unreasonable cases resulting
from failing to meet the three conditions above are in fact cases in which the accusation fails to be a responsive expression of doubt concerning the standpoint it challenges.

Fourth, in order for the accusation to be reasonable, the accusation needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him a commitment to A and a commitment to –A and requires him to retract one of the commitments in order to repair the inconsistency. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the argumentative confrontation cannot be expected to proceed to any clear definition of the disagreement at stake. Fifth, the choice of topic, audience frame and stylistic devices of the accusation must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the commitment to –A in case the accusation is accepted. Unless this condition is fulfilled, the accused’s freedom of expressing points of view will be violated, giving rise to instances of the *ad hominem* fallacy.

In applying the five soundness conditions above, institutional characteristics of the argumentative practice need to be taken into account. Particular attention should be given to the fact that in political argumentative discourse political affiliation is commonly accepted as a legitimate source of deriving commitments. An MP is not only committed to positions that he has assumed himself but is also committed by affiliation to the positions of his political party, usually expressed by fellow party members. Moreover, account should be taken not only of the main discussion about the performance of Government, but also of the discussion about the political competence of political parties to lead the country. In the particular context of Question Time, the fact that the performance of the Government is not assessed independently from the alternative offered by the Opposition is crucial to the judgment of reasonableness of the accusations at issue. Unless these two points are taken into account when applying the soundness conditions above, the evaluation of the responses at issue cannot be sensitive to the political institutional point of the argumentative exchange.
6.2 Discussion of the findings

This study provides a fairly detailed account of the Prime Minister’s responses to criticism with accusations of inconsistency. Even though it may seem like an empirical study of Prime Minister’s Question Time, the study is rather a theoretical study of strategic manoeuvring in (a particular argumentative move typical of) this kind of parliamentary session. For the purpose of analysing and evaluating the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, pragma-dialectical tools and concepts are discussed and further developed. In particular, the relationship is explored between van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s concepts of strategic manoeuvring (1999, 2007) and argumentative activity types (2005), and between these two concepts and the earlier pragma-dialectical concept of a critical discussion as an ideal of reasonable argumentative discourse (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 2004). New insights are gained into the possible application of these concepts to account for the Prime Minister’s responses subject of examination. In spite of the marginality of these responses, as attempts to avoid rather than to engage in an argumentative discussion the account is significant for argumentation theory. The attempt to avoid a discussion is not always unreasonable, and yet, when it is fallacious, its consequences on argumentative discourse are dire. The examination carried out in this study is useful for understanding the Prime Minister’s attempts, so that they can be properly assessed and the reasonable among them can be distinguished from the fallacious.

The present examination of the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring (Chapter 2) connects the pragmatic characteristics of the moves to their dialectical function. Dialectically, the responses are identified as instances of strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint. They are expressions of critical doubt that attempt to lead the proponents of the standpoints doubted to retract them in order to define the difference of opinion concerning these standpoints as no dispute. Pragmatically, the responses are identified as instances of doubt that is expressed indirectly by means of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency. The accusations attempt to bring about the retraction of the standpoint doubted as one particular perlocutionary effect of the speech act, namely repairing the alleged inconsistency by retracting one of the mutually inconsistent
commitments.

In the present examination of the Prime Minister’s responses with accusations of inconsistency to criticism as instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring, the Prime Minister is assumed to be trying to eliminate an initial disagreement about the criticism advanced by the Opposition. Several considerations, applicable to the cases analysed in this study, lend support to this assumption. In the cases analysed, the Prime Minister employs accusations of inconsistency in response to some criticism that he does not accept, or is at least expected not to accept. That justifies the understanding of the accusations as indirect expressions of doubt concerning the criticism. Thus understood, the accusation can be viewed as either an attempt to get the criticism maintained, in the next turn, and start an argumentative discussion about it, or an attempt to get it retracted and eliminate the initial disagreement about it. In view of political considerations pertinent to the exchanges examined, it seems advantageous for the Prime Minister, to avoid rather than to engage into the discussion of the criticism. The Prime Minister’s choices of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices support the assumption: these choices direct the MPs from the Opposition towards retracting rather than maintaining the criticism advanced.

However, it might be necessary to consider whether the accusations cannot in fact be attempts to get the Opposition to retract the previous position rather than the current criticism. Given the political nature of the argumentative exchanges of Question Time, the accusations can sometimes be understood as an expression of critical doubt concerning the position of the Opposition that is inconsistent with the current one. For example, Mr. Brown’s accusation to the Tories of being inconsistent in their attitude towards the NHS can maybe be understood as an attempt to get the Tories to change their mind about their policy of cutting investment in Health. Empirical research into the outcomes actually pursued by the Prime Minister’s responses at issue seems necessary in order to further support the assumption that underlies the analysis and the evaluation in this study. Further research must also be conducted in order to develop a set of criteria that can be used to determine what the favourable outcomes pursued by accusations of inconsistency, advanced in response to criticism from the Opposition, are.
In order to identify the dialectical function of the Prime Minister’s responses at issue, a dialectical profile of the confrontation stage was designed (section 2.3). The profile represents in a dialogue-like tree and at a certain level of abstraction, all the different ways a confrontation can develop within the boundaries of reasonableness. The profile is instrumental for the analysis of the Prime Minister’s responses as it represents the dialectical interaction involved in them.

Taking types of strategic manoeuvring to represent, as this study suggests, instances of strategic manoeuvring, at a certain level of abstraction, i.e. in terms of slots for dialectically relevant moves, the profile can, in principle, also be the basis for designing a typology of confrontational strategic manoeuvring. The profile presents a finite number of slots for analytically relevant moves available to arguers, a finite number of dialectical routes that can be followed and a finite number of outcomes that can be pursued in an argumentative confrontation. In principle, it should be possible, by taking these three factors as parameters, to derive a finite number of types of confrontational strategic manoeuvring that are distinguished according to the dialectical functions underlying them. Because the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage represents all the moves that play a role in the critical testing procedure, such a typology would in principle represent all the instances of confrontational strategic manoeuvring. Further research should be conducted in order to check the actual feasibility of such an endeavour.

Also worth investigating in further research is whether or not dialectical profiles can be of use in analysing instances of strategic manoeuvring that relate to other stages of the critical testing procedure. The dialectical profiles of (parts of) other dialectical stages, already suggested by van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007a), can be used for that. However, it might be the case that for typologies of other categories of strategic manoeuvring, e.g. a typology of opening-stage related strategic manoeuvring, complete dialectical profiles are needed in which all the moves in the stages concerned are represented. In this case, it becomes relevant to investigate the possibility of designing complete dialectical profiles for the opening, argumentation and concluding stages. The confrontation stage, for which a profile has been designed in this study, is the simplest dialectical stage and the options of moves that need to be accommodated
in its profile are far fewer that the options that need to be accommodated in profiles for other stages.

The characterisation of Prime Minister’s Question Time as an argumentative activity type (Chapter 3) sheds light on how aims intrinsic to argumentation, i.e. dialectical and rhetorical aims, are influenced by extrinsic aims pursued by means of argumentation, which are institutional aims in the case studied. The characterisation incorporates several different institutional aims that are pursued by means of argumentation, but prominence is given to the aim of holding the Government to account, as the institutional goal of the argumentative practice of the parliamentary session. As a result, in this study, the analysis and evaluation of the argumentative practice is carried out from the perspective of a particular institutional concern in the accountability of the Government. The strategic function of argumentative moves is analysed in terms of their contribution to this aim, and such a contribution is also taken into account when assessing the reasonableness of the moves.

In giving prominence to one institutional aim in the characterisation of the argumentative practice as an activity type, I followed Levinson (1992) and van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), who suggest that the practice of an activity type is “rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question” (Levinson, 1992: p. 71). However, because in Question Time a number of different institutional aims are significant to the argumentative practice, the activity type was characterised as multi-layered: one of the institutional aims was made prominent without ignoring the other aims. It is yet worth investigating whether or not such prominence is at all necessary, from the perspective of argumentation theory. Can the institutional aims not be considered all at an equal level, without giving prominence for one over the others? The merits of giving prominence can be investigated by looking into the possibility of characterising an activity type, Question Time for example, in terms of all the institutional aims pursued in it and the argumentative means available to realise these aims given the institutional rules and conventions of the practice concerned.

In any case, the prominence given in this study to the goal of holding the Government to account should by no means be taken to reflect a hierarchy of empirical importance. As explained in the characterisation of the activity type of
Question Time, arguers pursue the different institutional aims simultaneously and their order of importance varies from one exchange to the other. The prominence given should rather be understood as a matter of perspective from which an analyst approaches the practice when aiming to shed light on a particular empirical phenomenon. An analyst could also choose to give prominence to the aim of promoting party interests, and examine how the concern with such an aim influences politicians’ argumentative choices.

The observations made about the strategic function of Mr. Blair’s strategic manoeuvring in the exchange about the NHS (Chapter 4) can in principle be generalised to sketch an analytic account of the Prime Minister’s response with accusations of inconsistency to criticism. As the discussion of the exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron about the London Police and the exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Bottomley about the referendum shows, it is not unusual for the Prime Minister to employ the accusation of inconsistency to challenge the justificatory power of the critical argument. Given the rules and conventions of Question Time, it seems also typical for this kind of exchanges that the elimination of the dispute is the only outcome of the argumentative confrontation that is politically desirable for the Prime Minister. It is also quite realistic to assume that the accusation of inconsistency constitutes an argument in support of the standpoint that unlike the Opposition, the ruling party can provide good leadership. Yet, the analysis of more exchanges is certainly necessary in order to provide a better supported general account of the strategic function of the accusations at issue. Further research could for example investigate whether or not it is typical for accusations of inconsistency to challenge the justificatory power of the critical argument rather than its propositional content. Research could also be conducted to investigate the role the accusation plays in the discussion about the political competence of the Opposition to lead the country and sketch a more refined account of the strategic function of the accusations at issue.

The general soundness conditions formulated for assessing the dialectical reasonableness of the strategic manoeuvring in the responses at issue (section 5.2) bring the evaluation closer to argumentative moves as they actually occur in argumentative practice. They are derived from van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s
(2004) rules for a critical discussion (pp. 135-157) and code of conduct for reasonable discussants (pp. 190-196), but they are tuned to the particular speech act actually performed by the Prime Minister, namely the accusation of inconsistency. Similar to the code of conduct and the rules for a critical discussion, the conditions assess the reasonableness of argumentative moves based on their contribution to the critical testing procedure: a move is reasonable if it does not hinder the procedure and fallacious otherwise. However, the conditions are formulated to apply to the speech act of accusation of inconsistency rather than its reconstructed analytically relevant counterpart, namely the illocutionary negation of a commissive as an expression of doubt. Consequently, the conditions enable the analyst to trace back the dialectical (un-)reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses to aspects that relate to the accusation of inconsistency he advances. For example, condition (v) shows how a certain choice of topics, audience frames or stylistic devices that the Prime Minister employs in his accusations of inconsistency eventually obstructs the critical testing procedure, namely by restricting freedom of the accused to choose the way of responding to the accusation.

The discussion of the soundness conditions in light of institutional considerations (section 5.3) emphasizes the complex multi-layered nature of the argumentative activity type of Question Time. Moreover, the discussion reveals a difficulty in arriving at a well defined set of specific conditions that can be applied in the particular context of Prime Minister's Question Time to yield a clear cut evaluation of the responses at issue. It becomes clear that any judgment concerning the dialectical reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s responses is presumptive rather than definitive: the appropriateness of the verdict of reasonableness is dependent on the appropriateness of certain assumptions that need to be made. For each instance of the responses, the analyst needs to assume, for example, a certain position concerning whether it makes more sense to extend the set of commitments that can be attributed to the accused to include commitments incurred by his fellow party members or to limit the set and exclude such commitments. The analyst also needs to assume a certain position about whether it is, in the situation at issue, more important to hold the Government to account or to determine which of the available policies is best. In order for the
argumentative judgment of reasonableness to be in line with what is also politically rational, factors from political theory need to be taken into consideration when making such assumptions.