

Written submission from Dr Mark Shepherd and Sebastian Ludwicki-Ziegler

Explanation of Scope and Limitations of our Research

Our research analysed the exchanges between Nicola Sturgeon and Jackson Carlaw during First Minister's Questions (FMQs) compared with exchanges between Boris Johnson and Ian Blackford during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). The focus of our investigation has been the occurrence of personal attacks and positive self-references between those politicians in the months before the pandemic broke out (January and February 2020), when it became a recognised issue (March 2020), and after the UK wide lockdown (End of March to June/July 2020).

The research we have conducted addresses a range of issues being considered by the Committee, some of them directly and some indirectly. Before explicitly addressing these points, we would like to emphasise that our results are qualitative by nature and cover a relatively short period in which the pandemic has dominated. This has two consequences: The research results, which are the foundations of our response, are of very limited generalisability and have been characterised by crisis communication which is different to how communication occurs during "normal" times. However, the high inter-coder reliability tests (Cohen's Kappa ~0.8) suggests that our results have a high degree of reliability.

Methodological Considerations

The following need to be put into context of our sampling approach. We excluded any PMQ or FMQ session in which any of the leaders (Johnson, Blackford, Sturgeon, Carlaw) were absent (e.g., PMQ on 22nd April 2020). We also excluded the "Leaders' Virtual Question Time" of the Scottish Parliament on 9th April and 16th April 2020 since they were substantially different to the live/hybrid FMQ/PMQ format. However, any other FMQ and PMQ session taking place between 8th January and 22nd July 2020 has been considered. Those session can designated in three categories:

- sessions which did not have any virtual participants
- sessions where one of the two leaders (either Johnson/Blackford or Sturgeon/Carlaw) participated virtually
- sessions where some members of the parliament attended virtually but both leaders (either Johnson/Blackford or Sturgeon/Carlaw) were in the chamber

The last two types of PMQ/FMQ sessions took place in a hybrid parliamentary setting. The main difference between hybrid sessions and live sessions are, that social distancing measures have been enforced and virtual participation of MPs/MSPs been allowed. The social distancing measures reduced the space available in both chambers significantly and limited the number of

people who could attend in person. Therefore, a large number of parliamentarians who wanted to attend, needed to do so remotely.

Relevant Key Findings

- The observed exchanges in the Scottish Parliament have been consistently less hostile than exchanges in the House of Commons in the observed time frame.
- Hostilities almost ceased during the first month of COVID (March) and remained at lower levels in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament (compared to pre-COVID levels).
- After the March, the levels of hostility in the exchanges have started to recover, but the recovery has been noticeably slower in the Scottish Parliament.
- Positive self-references rose in the Scottish Parliament during the first month of COVID but decreased after that and remained lower than pre-COVID levels. In the House of Commons, positive self-references fell during the first month but started recovering to pre-COVID levels from mid-June.
- Overall, the attendance rate of MPs and MSPs for in-parliament attendance looks higher in the Scottish Parliament from April onwards (based on an estimation having checked using video evidence).

Consequences

In the scholarly debate on personal attacks during parliamentary questions, the assumption has been that high levels of personal attacks between speakers are likely to be less informative ("Punch and Judy"-politics) and potentially more polarising or indicative of higher degrees of polarisation. Exchange are less likely to be constructive. In that sense, lower levels of hostility – and self-congratulatory references – could be better suited for an informative exchange that is likely to support the parliament in its function to scrutinise the government.

With this logic in mind, our results suggest that there is little indication that a hybrid approach in the parliament has an overall negative impact on exchanges in the parliament, given the relatively low levels of personal attacks. However, it must be kept in mind that the absence of personal attacks is likely due to the crisis of Covid. Still, even considering this, there is little in our data that indicates that hybrid exchanges or face-to-face exchanges in a hybrid parliament would significantly impact personal hostility or positive self-reference levels.

In this context, the comparison between exchanges in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament is also interesting with regard to the in-person attendance of parliamentarians. There here been a suggestion in the public debate that a higher attendance rate might create an atmosphere which is more supportive of hostile exchanges. Looking at the higher in-person attendance rates in the Scottish Parliament compared to the House of

Commons but the higher levels of hostility in exchanges in the former compared to the latter, there is little evidence for that assertion in our data. That said, we must bear in mind that the number of MPs far exceeds the number of MSPs and MPs have less space than MSPs in the chamber. Additionally, in cases where exchanges have been hybrid (one person present in the parliament, the other participating online), there has been little evidence that levels of hostility or positive self-reference were substantially different to in-person exchanges.

Consequences for Questions on Inclusion

We didn't find any indication that levels of hostility or positive self-references have been affected by allowing speakers to participate remotely. While our evidence might be limited, it suggests that there are potentially very minimal costs for the scrutiny function of the parliament and rather limited risks for increased hostility caused by miscommunication (e.g. through the absence of visible body language) for keeping the hybrid character of the parliament. Assuming that allowing parliamentarians to participate remotely increases overall the inclusivity of the parliament, and possibly also attendance, the limited cost and risks of maintaining hybrid arrangements point towards added benefits rather than additional problems by allowing online participation. That said, our findings are limited to one key procedure and do not address wider issues of physical presence and the role of formal and informal spaces in and around institutions for the exercise of a broader range of legislative functions such as: legitimation; constituency & interest group & party representation; socialisation; training; and recruitment.