

The saint in the bear pit: reviewing Jeremy Corbyn's first PMQs

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The [prime minister's questions](#) of September 16 2015 was surely the most eagerly awaited of recent political history.

The buzz was palpable, both in the House of Commons and on social media. Would we see the much anticipated [new style](#) of PMQs? Or would we see more blood on the carpet – specifically the blood of a mild-mannered 66-year-old from north London?

In the event, Jeremy Corbyn, the newly elected leader of the opposition, put in a respectable performance, albeit without really forcing the prime minister out of his comfort zone.

It has been said that questions in this famously rowdy parliamentary session [fall into three categories](#) – standard questions that can be answered in a straightforward way, unanswerable questions designed deliberately to provoke discomfort or evasion, and helpful questions usually asked from the government backbenches to open an opportunity for the PM to launch an attack.

Corbyn's six questions all fell into the first category. And as he announced at the start of the session, they had all been crowd-sourced from citizens – Maria, Stephen, Paul, Claire, Gail and Angela, to be precise.

This strategy had been mooted within hours of Corbyn's election, his team briefing that his approach to PMQs would try to avoid what they called the "overly theatrical" style that turns so many voters off politics. Team Corbyn would be more collegiate, with questions to the prime minister shared around the front-bench team according to the policy area.

In the end, Corbyn kept the questions for himself, delivering them in measured and polite tones to an initially cautious prime minister.

The use of questions from the public helped Corbyn, since Cameron could not mock him without, by implication, mocking Maria or Paul as well. However, this newly deliberative style also sapped the exchange of energy – and the need to cycle through several publicly submitted questions meant Corbyn had little time to follow up Cameron's often evasive answers.

As PMQs progressed, one could see the prime minister relaxing. He soon realised he had little to fear from this style of questioning as long as he kept his own so-called "[Flashman](#)" instincts (the tendency to [sneer](#)) in check.

For their part, the Labour backbenches were more vocal in support than some had expected, and many of their members probably felt that the first PMQs of the Corbyn leadership went better than they had hoped. The question is whether this will be enough, week in and week out. Is this how to win the argument against a confident Tory front bench?

Fresh start or back to the future?

Like many great British establishment rituals, PMQs is not as old as it looks. In its modern form it dates back only to 1961, and it's undergone a number of changes since then. It's nonetheless become central to the British parliamentary tradition, and also enjoys something of a cult status abroad, where the sight of grown men and women [goading, braying, and heckling one another](#) is greeted with a mixture of puzzlement and wonder.

At its most volatile, PMQs is a bear pit. As the Guardian journalist Michael White [pointed out](#) in the 1990s, "little more enlightenment emerges from PMQs than from the average pub fight".

Because Jeremy Corbyn is more of a saint-like figure than a pub brawler, many observers were intrigued as to how he would approach one of the most high profile and arguably stressful aspects of his new role as Leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition.

It is clear that Corbyn and his team have identified PMQs as both a potential hazard and also an opportunity to further define his leadership of the Labour Party as a break from the "bad old" Westminster politics.

The trouble is, Corbyn is most definitively not a stranger to the Bear Pit of PMQs. He has been attending for more than 30 years, albeit perched high above the Commons floor on the very back benches. His outsider, political ingénue image is a confection.

And in any case, a more deliberative and civilised style of PMQs is not a break with the past. It would be a return to a more [civilised parliamentary era](#).

But Corbyn's team will argue that PMQs was never going to be the principal means by which his Labour party would hold the government to account. For them, real opposition to austerity will be built across the country as a whole, using the same social movement model that won Corbyn the Labour leadership. If Corbyn stays the course, we have four and half years to find out if this approach works.

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