Parliamentary Affairs (2024) XX, 1–25
Advance Access Publication 19 June 2024
https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsae013

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Parliamentary questions to the House of Commons Commission: Accountability and parliamentary administration

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Parliamentary administration is integral to supporting the work of elected politicians. How is it held to account? This article focuses on parliamentary questions—one means of scrutinizing parliamentary administration. The article uses a qualitative analysis of written and oral questions MPs have asked the House of Commons Commission (the body responsible for parliamentary administration). It asks three sub-questions: (1) Who asks the questions?; (2) What questions are asked?; and (3) How are these questions answered? Interrogating these questions also provides a window into the internal governance challenges of the House of Commons.

Keywords: accountability; democracy; governance; House of Commons Commission; parliamentary administration; parliamentary questions.

> It is important that we…explore whether parliamentary services are delivering in a way that helps MPs to be effective…Effective MPs are not just a good thing in their own right; effective MPs help to build trust in the House of Commons; they help to build trust in Parliament and so they help to build trust in democracy.
> Dame Maria Miller MP (2023)

Significant executive failings have recently dominated headlines and academic research on accountability in British politics (e.g. Judge 2021, 2022; Rose 2021; Ward and Ward 2021; Hayton 2022). These events have diverted attention from

Received 31 July 2023; revised 13 May 2024; accepted 27 May 2024

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other branches of government that suffer from equally critical but largely overlooked problems of accountability. This is particularly true of the shadowy area of parliamentary administration—the permanent House of Commons administrative staff that provide Members of Parliament (MPs) with vital services that facilitate their day-to-day work, and support the institution's governance. Very little has been written about the basic functions of these internal parliamentary structures (e.g. Yong 2018; Bennister 2021)—still less about how and to whom they are accountable.

Yet as Dame Maria Miller highlights, there is a direct link between the standard of parliamentary administration and the standard of democracy. Appropriate and efficient administrative services are important for democratic quality as they impact upon MPs' effectiveness. Poor services can hamper MPs' everyday work for the public they represent, and in turn, damage trust in Parliament itself. However, the provision of good services such as accommodation and procedural support requires MPs to take an active interest in how the House of Commons is governed. The quality of parliamentary administration thus also depends on a basic principle of democratic accountability—the ability of elected representatives to scrutinize Parliament's internal governance arrangements and make improvements.

As Miller identified, however, parliamentarians are persistently reluctant to 'think about the governance of the institution, and the way it creates the right framework for the running of this important place' (Miller 2023). Thus, internal governance is 'opaque, lacks accountability and is complex to understand' (Miller 2023). A recent review of House of Commons financial management drew similar conclusions (Morse 2022). As Miller—herself a member of the Administration Committee, which scrutinizes the Commons' House Service—scathingly summed up, '[t]hose are not the attributes of an organisation that I would like to work for' (Miller 2023): the threads of democratic quality and accountability are intimately linked.

In this article, we build on Miller's critique of the governance and accountability arrangements of parliamentary administration. Much public accountability scholarship is encumbered by repetitive conceptual debates that have generated competing accountability typologies with little empirical grounding (Jarvis 2014). Our article rejects further theoretical deliberation in favour of providing the first deep empirical analysis of the most visible formal mechanism by which parliamentarians can hold the administration accountable—parliamentary questions (PQs) to the House of Commons Commission. A primarily qualitative analysis of these questions and interviews with eighteen parliamentarians and officials offers a window into the broader governance themes raised by Miller and enables us to reflect further on the relationship between the internal governance of parliaments and democratic accountability.

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The article proceeds in five sections. In the first section, we introduce the key issues and actors in parliamentary administration and provide an overview of the core governance and accountability problems. In the second section, we discuss the accountability functions of PQs before turning in the third section to methodology. In the fourth section, we analyse how parliamentarians use PQs to hold the Commons Commission accountable. Here, we review how engaged parliamentarians are with House administration and what questions they ask. We assess the quality of both MPs' questions and the Commission's answers. In the fifth section, we employ interviews to show how Commission PQs, despite having some uses, fail to meet basic accountability standards because of disinterested parliamentarians and poorly organized and communicated governance structures.

1. The problems of House of Commons governance

Parliaments usually have an administration (Christiansen, Griglio and Lupo 2021, 2023)—an organization with several corporate functions (e.g. IT, human resources, and estate maintenance) which supports Members in their work (e.g. providing procedural support and research). In the House of Commons, the administration has two levels: a political level and an official level (the House of Lords has its own administration). At the political level, there is the House of Commons Commission ('the Commission'), a statutory body responsible for the employment of staff, the House budget and setting the House services' strategic priorities and objectives, i.e. how the Commons' resources are distributed—on building projects, committees, engagement, and so on. The enormously complex and expensive Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster ('R&R') also falls within the Commission's remit, after previously being hived off to an independent body.

The Commission consists primarily of seven MPs: the Speaker (as chair), the Leader of the House, the Shadow Leader of the House, and four backbenchers (chosen through the 'usual channels', i.e. the Whips, rather than elected as with select committees); two non-executive members and two officials (the most senior House official, the Clerk of the House and another senior official, the Director General). Only MPs can vote. At the official level, there is the Executive Board ('the Board'), chaired by the Clerk and heads of the House departments, which supports the Commission and implements its decisions. The Commission is also supported in its work by a small number of 'domestic' committees (looking inward, rather than outwards towards government), which advise the Commission. Of these, the most important are the Finance Committee, which scrutinizes the Commons administration's finances; and the Administration Committee, which scrutinizes House services and support. Both committees consist entirely of MPs—again, all

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chosen through the 'usual channels', with the numbers determined by party proportion in the Commons.

In theory, the Commission is the governing body of the Commons administration. It 'represents' all 650 members; and is responsible for a budget of close to £800 million and approximately 3,000 staff (see Lee and Yong 2022). In practice, however, matters are a little different. The history of House administration is that the Commission has been weak in its governance role (Yong 2018). This is for three reasons. First, its cross-party composition, meant to insulate it from government influence, has meant that decision-making is slow because a consensus is needed. Second, with the exception of the Speaker, members of the Commission tend to have short tenures, and have many other responsibilities (for instance, the Leader of the House is also responsible for the Government's legislative programme). Third, Commission posts are also unsalaried. So Commission members' interest in administration is typically low. All this means that serious consideration of administration suffers; the day-to-day business of House administration is often left by default to the Speaker and senior officials (Yong 2018).

How, then, is the House's administration—and in particular the Commission—held to account? There are some difficulties here. First, the Commission publishes very little: an annual report and accounts; as well as meeting agendas and minutes—although the latter two in particular tend to be of limited use, noting the subject of discussion, but not what was discussed. This makes it difficult to know what the Commission has been doing.

Second, there are limited accountability mechanisms available. The House could hold debates on the work of the Commission, including its budget, but this rarely happens because time is precious, and most Members prefer to spend it debating or scrutinizing government action. Domestic committees in many ways are similar to select committees: they scrutinize another body and hold it to account. While select committees typically scrutinize government activity, domestic committees examine parliamentary administration, with the Commission as the ultimate accountor of the administration. But there are problems with this view. The Finance and Administration Committees *advise* the Commission—they support rather than scrutinize it. The Chairs of these committees are also Commission members themselves. Moreover, the domestic committees very rarely publish reports; agendas and minutes are also tight-lipped. We do not know the extent of their work or influence.

There is, however, one formal accountability mechanism we *can* clearly document and evaluate: parliamentary questions. Written questions to the Commission can be tabled at any time. And there is a set time put aside for oral questions to the Commission—around every 5 weeks on a Thursday morning (when the House is sitting), along with questions to other bodies, including the Church Commissioners and the Electoral Commission. Questions are answered by a

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Commission spokesperson—often a member of one of the smaller parties represented on the Commission, such as the Liberal Democrats or the Scottish National Party (SNP).

In this article, we use Commission PQs as a window into the challenges of Commons administration and governance. PQs allow us to explore the 'operating mechanisms and ultimate performances of parliament' (Martin 2011: 260). They offer an insight into what interests parliamentarians, and how engaged they are with such issues. They also illuminate the inner lives of parliaments—the ways that governance arrangements work in practice. We have supplemented our analysis of Commission PQs with 18 interviews with parliamentarians and officials, because this allows for a more complete picture of MPs' motivations, how PQs are understood, and how PQs fit within the broader accountability and governance arrangements of parliamentary administration.

2. Parliamentary questions and accountability

The practice of tabling PQs that the Commission must answer speaks directly to accountability's core meaning as 'answerability' for one's actions (Romzek and Dubnick 1987: 228). However, accountability is more than a vague commitment to answerability. One key definition specifies that accountability happens when 'there is a relationship between an actor and a forum in which the actor is obliged to explain and justify his [sic] conduct; the forum can pose questions; pass judgement; and the actor may face consequences' (Bovens 2007: 452). PQs are thus a formal accountability forum that supposedly empowers parliamentarians to not only scrutinize the Commission's work but also potentially encourage administrative change.

Studies of PQs have almost exclusively focused on their role in holding the *executive* to account (see Martin 2011). In theory, PQs are a key way for parliamentary 'principals' (MPs) to exert democratic control over executive 'agents', to whom they have delegated governing authority (Martin 2011: 265). In the UK, Prime Minister's questions (PMQs) have dominated this analysis (e.g. Bates et al. 2014; Shephard and Braby 2020). Commission PQs, however, have never been studied, reflecting a broader dearth of empirical research into parliamentary administration in the UK, despite growing scholarly interest in the subject elsewhere (see Christiansen *et al.*, 2023).

A similar principal–agent relationship underpins Commission PQs. MPs are the principals; and the Commission and the House officials which the Commission employs are the agents (Peters 2021). But as Olsen has noted, the assumptions underlying principal–agent literature must be treated with some caution. In particular, there is an expectation that accountability is about disciplining unruly

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agents, when in practice 'Shortcomings in accountability regimes sometimes originate in principals' (Olsen 2013: 454).

The broader literature on PQs supports Olsen's claim, finding that parliamentarians are largely disinterested in asking effective questions (Wiberg 1994; Cole 1999). Others have noted that the capacity of PQs to induce consequences like sanctions or organizational learning—a key factor that distinguishes accountability from related concepts like transparency—is limited (see Martin 2011: 261; Rozenberg and Martin 2011: 394). Though PQs may have reputational ramifications for the individuals and institutions under scrutiny, the adversarial nature of some formats—particularly PMQs—hampers their true effectiveness (Bates et al. 2014).

These findings should make us question rational actor approaches which presume that 'appropriate' accountability systems can be straightforwardly created or reformed in historically complex and contingent political environments (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). The use of PQs as a means of accountability has been largely accidental. The House of Lords' Earl Cowper is thought to have posed the first PQ in 1721, asking the government to address rumours about the South Sea Company's reportedly fugitive Chief Cashier (House of Commons Information Office 2010: 2). PQs have since become 'a highly institutionalized part of parliamentary life' (Norton 2001: 22)—a ritual (Olsen 2013: 456) that sometimes verges on pantomime (Shephard and Braby 2020). Moreover, Parliament itself has 'developed through historically evolving processes rather than deliberate design' (Olsen 2013: 458).

As well as being critical of the 'accountability value' of PQs (Cole 1999), existing literature also suggests some important issues to consider when assessing Commission PQs. Studies point to important differences between oral and written question formats (see Cole 1999; Rozenberg and Martin 2011). Oral question sessions like PMQs, held publicly in the House of Commons Chamber, are time-limited and typically characterized by political grandstanding and partisan point-scoring. Written questions, meanwhile, are free from time constraints, typically housed in unfrequented quarters of the UK Parliament website, and often used as a tool for more detailed information mining. PQs can also be a 'two-way information channel', allowing questioners to access information and draw attention to issues (Martin 2011: 261). There are possibilities for agenda-setting here (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010), though this requires questioners to be sufficiently invested in the issues they are asking about.

Each format can potentially contribute towards holding the House administration accountable (Rozenberg and Martin 2011: 397). Notwithstanding the lack of attention granted to the relatively obscure practice of Commission PQs (compared to PMQs), oral questions may still publicly embarrass the Commission into action. The ability to ask surprise supplementary oral questions may also

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encourage a more sustained examination of important issues and may push the Commission to reveal more than intended. On the other hand, the dry but more specific nature of written questions may prompt the Commission to engage in deeper reflection and learning.

Consulting existing PQs research also helps us to operationalize Bovens' (2007) definition of accountability by posing further questions that address *how* and *for what* House administration is accountable (Jarvis 2014). We thus consider: (1) Who asks questions of the Commission?; (2) What questions are asked?; and (3) How are these questions answered? (cf. Cole 1999; Bates et al. 2014). Examining these questions sheds light on the deep-rooted accountability and governance challenges facing parliamentary administration.

3. Methodology

Our primary dataset comprises written and oral questions that MPs asked the House of Commons Commission between July 2014 (when dedicated records began) and November 2022 (when this study began). To enable a fuller assessment of the accountability value of these interventions, the dataset also includes the answers that the Commission provided. Looking at both written and oral Q&As allows us to comment on how useful each format is for holding the Commission to account.

We collected from Hansard all written and oral Commission Q&As in our timeframe. This yielded a dataset of 658 written Q&As (where one entry includes one written question plus its answer) and 230 oral Q&As (where one entry includes *either* a primary *or* a supplementary question plus its answer). We also treated duplicate oral questions as separate entries with corresponding (identical) answers.

As the study is relatively large-n we used NVivo to code our data. To provide a measure of parliamentarians' engagement with House administration, our coding protocol first breaks down Commission Q&As by questioner (the MP asking the question). Questioners are further defined by two attributes: political party (Conservative, Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrat, or Other) and gender (for simplicity, conceived as a male/female binary), which allow us to assess how participation in Commission PQs corresponds with broader House of Commons structures.

To aid our assessment of the accountability value of Commission PQs, we also drew on typologies of Q&A quality (Bates et al. 2014; Bull 1994). Categorizing questions by how much they help the Commission to state its position on key issues also allows us to comment on the motivations of questioners. Unlike in PMQs where 'helpful' questions that are planted by the government can be readily identified (Bates et al. 2014: 263), Commission PQs pose unique challenges for conducting a similar analysis. In Westminster parliamentary administration, no

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single political party governs, meaning there is no *official* mechanism for orchestrating questions that would help the Commission to express its views. There are some informal channels—officials or Commission members may ask amenable MPs to submit questions that raise the profile of favourable topics—but these are difficult to uncover. Commission PQs are thus characterized by either 'standard' or 'unanswerable' questions (see Table 1; Bates et al. 2014: 263). Commission answers are more varied. Between the extreme poles of a full answer and a non-reply sit 'intermediate' answers which may be 'partial' (generally incomplete) or which specifically direct the questioner to another authority ('referred' answers) or a later time ('deferred' answers) (see Table 2; Bates et al. 2014: 260–262).

Our coding protocol also allows us to code our data thematically via a close, qualitative reading of Q&A issue content. While Q&As could be coded at multiple thematic points, we decided to code them at one top-level theme and one sub-code which we felt best reflected the issue at each Q&A's heart (Cole 1999). The top-level themes we identified were 'governance', 'modernization', and 'working conditions'. Sub-themes included administrative issues of varying scales—from the specifics of the Commission's recycling policy to the major challenges of how to manage the decaying parliamentary estate (see Table 4).

To ensure inter-coder reliability, we followed a process similar to that used by Bates et al. (2014: 262). Both authors initially coded the same sample of oral PQs before meeting to agree on the contents and dividing lines between different thematic categories and measures of Q&A quality. The lead author then coded the entire written and oral Q&A dataset according to these classifications before the second author reviewed the coding for validity and consistency. The coding was finalized following a further discussion between the authors.

While PQs provide a useful window into how parliamentarians engage with administration, they only tell part of the internal governance story of the House of

Table 1: Types of question

Category	Definition	Example
Standard	A question that is straightforward to answer.	(Robert Halfon, Conservative): What steps the Commission is taking to increase the number of apprentices in the House of Commons? (Halfon 2019).
Unanswerable	A question that either appears to be designed deliberately to provoke discomfort and/or evasion, or contains and/or is premised on incorrect information, and/or is irrelevant to the Commission's remit.	(Dave Doogan, SNP): What recent assessment the Commission has made of the potential merits of introducing electronic voting? (Doogan 2020).

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Table 2: Types of answer

Category	Definition	Example
Full reply	An answer in which requested information is provided, and/or the Commission's views are made clear on the issue in hand.	Q (Robert Halfon, Conservative): What steps the Commission is taking to increase the number of apprentices in the House of Commons? A (Tom Brake, Commission Spokesperson): To increase the number of apprentices, the House service has taken a number of steps. That includes expanding the range of apprenticeship programmes on offer from 2 to 14 since September 2018 and upskilling existing employees by enrolling them on apprenticeship programmes. The expansion of apprenticeship programmes will continue. Ongoing engagement and planning for apprenticeship roles across all House teams will ensure more quality apprenticeships are created (see Halfon 2019).
Intermediate—deferred	An answer in which it is claimed that a full reply in terms of information, views and/or decisions can only be given in future correspondence, meetings, debates, or other inquiries.	Q (Alison Thewliss, SNP): What rates are House of Commons apprentices paid? The Government's minimum rate is £3.70 per hour for under-19s and those over 19 in their first year. I would be interested to know how much apprentices in the House, who do a very important job, are paid. Would it not set an example to give them a much higher rate so that the rest of the country could do so as well? A (Tom Brake, Commission Spokesperson): I am afraid that my briefing on the subject has no information on that, so I will write to the hon. Lady to confirm the rate. Hopefully, she will be satisfied with the rate House apprentices receive (see Halfon 2019).
Intermediate—partial	An answer in which the requested information is incomplete, and/or the Commission responds on its own terms, and/or the Commission responds to a closely related issue, and/or the Commission's views on the topic in hand are ambivalent.	Q (Barry Sheerman, Labour/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve the working conditions of staff on the parliamentary estate? A (Tom Brake, Commission Spokesperson): The Commission seeks to provide good working conditions for all its staff. Terms and conditions of staff are kept broadly in line with those in the home civil service. No staff are paid below the London living wage. A range of facilities, including welfare support and learning opportunities are provided. The 2015 staff survey showed increasing job satisfaction, with 86% of staff willing to recommend the House of Commons as a good place to work (see Sheerman 2015).

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Table 2. Continued

Category	Definition	Example
Intermediate—referred	An answer which is referred, in full or in part, to the relevant minister, official or other government/ parliamentary body. Referred replies also include answers where the Commission simply states that an issue is outside of its remit and/or those that refer to previous Commission answers.	Q (Philip Hollobone, Conservative): If gender equality is core to the way in which the House of Commons works, why are only two members of the 12-member House of Commons Commission women? A (Tom Brake, Commission Spokesperson): That is a good point, and in terms of the party appointees, it is for the political parties to respond to it. I am pleased, however, that the two lay people on the Commission are women, as the hon. Gentleman indicated (see Hollobone 2016).
Non-reply	An answer in which the specific question is evaded, and/or a completely different question is answered, and/ or the requested information is not provided, and/or the Commission's views on the topic in hand are withheld. Non-replies can also arise in answer to rhetorical questions or when the questioner fails to ask anything specific.	Q (Philip Hollobone, Conservative): As the House of Commons Commission is encouraging British-produced food and drink on the parliamentary estate, may I commend to the right hon. Gentleman Weetabix breakfast cereal made in Burton Latimer and Warner Edwards gin made in Harrington—both within the Kettering constituency—as appropriate for the start and end of the parliamentary day? A (Tom Brake, Liberal Democrat): The hon. Gentleman's love of Weetabix is now on the record (see Hollobone 2018).

Commons. To fully assess the accountability value of PQs, we need to ask broader and deeper questions about the experiences of those familiar with them. We therefore conducted 18 semi-structured elite interviews with those with experience in parliamentary administration—e.g. former Commission members, members of the domestic committees, and repeat questioners. We interviewed ten present and former House of Commons politicians (e.g. MP1), including five Conservative, three Liberal Democrat, one SNP and one Labour Member, and eight officials (e.g. HoC1). The responses of all interview participants have been anonymized.

4. Analysis of Commission PQs

4.1 Who asks the questions?—MPs' engagement with Commission PQs

To explore how engaged parliamentarians are with the House of Commons administration, we first need to consider who asks Commission PQs. Table 3 shows the top ten individual questioners asking written and oral Commission PQs. Only

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Table 3: Leading Commission questioners (July 2014–November 2022)

Questioner	Gender	Party	No. of PQs asked	% of total PQs asked
Oral questions				
Patrick Grady	M	SNP	18	7.8
Barry Sheerman	M	Labour	12	5.2
Philip Hollobone	M	Conservative	12	5.2
Chi Onwurah	F	Labour	11	4.8
Christian Matheson	M	Labour	10	4.3
Justin Madders	M	Labour	7	3.0
Robert Halfon	M	Conservative	7	3.0
Carol Monaghan	F	SNP	6	2.6
David Linden	M	SNP	6	2.6
Chris Bryant	M	Labour	5	2.2
Total			**94**	**40.9**
Written questions				
Robert Halfon	M	Conservative	29	4.4
Michael Fabricant	M	Conservative	28	4.3
Chris Stephens	M	SNP	26	4.0
Chi Onwurah	F	Labour	25	3.8
Dr David Drew	M	Labour	25	3.8
Justin Madders	M	Labour	24	3.6
Simon Burns	M	Conservative	22	3.3
Alan Brown	M	SNP	17	2.6
Frank Field	M	Labour/ Independent	16	2.4
Thomas Docherty	M	Labour	14	2.1
Total			**226**	**34.3**

two women are represented here. Our full dataset shows that the total number of women asking Commission PQs broadly mirrors the number of women MPs in the House of Commons. For example, women account for about a third of MPs in Parliament and around 30% of Commission questioners across both written and oral formats. However, women's under-representation among repeat questioners in Table 3 suggests that gender disproportionately configures who is willing and/ or able to spend their limited time regularly addressing House governance.

These findings highlight the persistently gendered nature of how Parliament operates. While women's overall representation has improved, our findings suggest that there are still significant barriers preventing women MPs from *participating* fully in Parliament. As Professor Sarah Childs observed in her landmark 'Good Parliament' report, this is a significant problem because: 'An inclusive, effective and representative Parliament is about more than simply increasing the diversity of Members…it also requires their equal and effective participation therein' (2016: 6). The report encouraged the Speaker's Office to conduct an investigation into different levels of participation in activities like Chamber debates, and advised the

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Table 4: PQ themes and sub-themes (July 2014–November 2022)

Theme	Sub-theme	Oral questions		Written questions	
		No. of PQs	% of PQs	No. of total PQs	% of total PQs
Working conditions	Complaints, grievance, and harassment	17	7.4	25	3.8
	Diversity and representation	23	10.0	54	8.2
	Health and COVID	21	9.1	87	13.2
	Pay and hours	14	6.1	32	4.9
	Training	6	2.6	5	0.8
	Transport	0	0.0	6	0.9
	Total	**81**	**35.2**	**209**	**31.8**
Modernization	IT services	9	3.9	34	5.2
	Voting	45	19.6	6	0.9
	Waste and environment	9	3.9	33	5.0
	Total	**63**	**27.4**	**73**	**11.1**
Governance	Codes of conduct and reporting	4	1.7	19	2.9
	Collections, exhibitions, and commemoration	7	3.0	27	4.1
	Commission decision-making and strategy	8	3.5	28	4.3
	Costs, budgets, and other finance	16	7.0	104	15.8
	Estates	24	10.4	44	6.7
	Outreach and engagement	5	2.2	18	2.7
	Procurement policies and contracts	18	7.8	47	7.1
	Recruitment and HR	3	1.3	58	8.8
	Security	1	0.4	31	4.7
	Total	**86**	**37.4**	**376**	**57.1**
Overall total		**230**	**100**	**658**	**100**

Commission to 'restate its responsibility' to provide training for Members seeking to develop 'the skills necessary for effective parliamentary participation' (Childs 2016: 12, 25). However, our findings suggest that there is still much work to be done when it comes to promoting equal and effective participation in parliamentary governance. This is particularly important because the House administration's provision of services like childcare can also facilitate women's greater participation in Parliament's core legislative and scrutiny activities.

Table 3 also suggests that Labour, the major opposition party during our timeframe, fielded the most questioners at Commission PQs. This

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mirrors governing–opposition party dynamics common in other PQs sessions (e.g. Rozenberg and Martin 2011; Bates et al. 2014). The pattern is generally replicated in our broader dataset, though in oral PQs each major party fielded roughly equal numbers of questioners. Table 3 also points to most Members' limited engagement with House governance—combined, the leading ten questioners accounted for over a third of all oral and written questions asked. The presence of Chi Onwurah (Labour), Justin Madders (Labour), and Robert Halfon (Conservative) in both the oral and written PQ league tables suggests that these Members were unusually interested in questioning the Commission. This may be because each Member focused on specific areas of concern—parliamentary apprenticeships (Halfon); complaints and grievance procedures/trade union blacklisting (Madders); and IT services/ diversity (Onwurah).

Nevertheless, the majority of Commission questioners asked only one or two questions in written and oral forums across the 8-year span of our timeframe. This suggests that House governance issues are a niche interest. The volume of questions asked is also tiny when compared with questions tabled for a minister of even a small government department. In 2022, MPs addressed over 1,600 written questions and over 300 oral questions to the DCMS (Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport) Minister.[1] Put differently, in a single year MPs asked DCMS more than double the number of questions that they asked the Commission over our entire 8-year timeframe.

This evidence suggests that parliamentarians are only minimally engaged in interrogating parliamentary administration via the mechanism of PQs—that they are weak principals. Interviews provide further support for this claim. Many interviewees attested that MPs are scarcely interested in House administration (e.g. HoC1; HoC7; HoC8; MP3; MP6; MP7)—they simply 'want things to work' (MP4; MP7). Oral Commission PQs are typically poorly attended by parliamentarians (HoC7; MP3). One interviewee suggested that the scheduling of these sessions on Thursday mornings is partly to blame for the relative emptiness of the Chamber: votes do not occur on Thursdays and many MPs will travel back to their constituencies early (MP3). The fact that oral DCMS PQs, also held on Thursday mornings, are frequented significantly more also points to MPs' lack of interest in House administration. There is little evidence of MPs seeking to set an agenda here (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010).

4.2 What do MPs ask the Commission about?

Several interviewees suggested that parliamentarians will only engage with the House administration to the extent that it 'affects them' (MP3) or their 'everyday

[1]We calculated these figures by manually counting the written and oral questions put to DCMS in 2022 and recorded in Hansard.

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lives' (MP1). One retired official said that MPs tend to be interested in 'bread and butter' administration issues such as 'good services, leaking toilets, working computers, unjammed printers and all the rest of it … and inexpensive lunch' (HoC1).

Given MPs' focus on practical administrative matters that impact their day-to-day comfort, it initially seems unsurprising that questions about working conditions accounted for around a third of all written and oral Commission PQs (see Fig. 1). However, these figures were skewed by the COVID pandemic. Questions about Parliament's practical responses to COVID joined a handful of broader questions about health and safety to become the largest or second largest sub-theme in written and oral working conditions PQs.

This category's sub-themes also suggest that questioners often asked about issues that did not affect their own comfort (see Table 4). For example, over a quarter of written and oral questions in the working conditions category asked about diversity and representation. Questions in this sub-theme focused on the accessibility of Parliament, particularly to those with families or disabilities; the inclusion of apprentices among House staff; and issues of gender and/or ethnic minority representation in Parliament.

Appropriate staff pay, contracts, and trade union representation were also notable topics in both written and oral questions. Given the publication of reports by Cox (2018) and White (2019) into the bullying and harassment experienced by the House of Commons and MPs' staff, around a fifth of oral questions in the working conditions theme probed the Commission's progress on reforming the

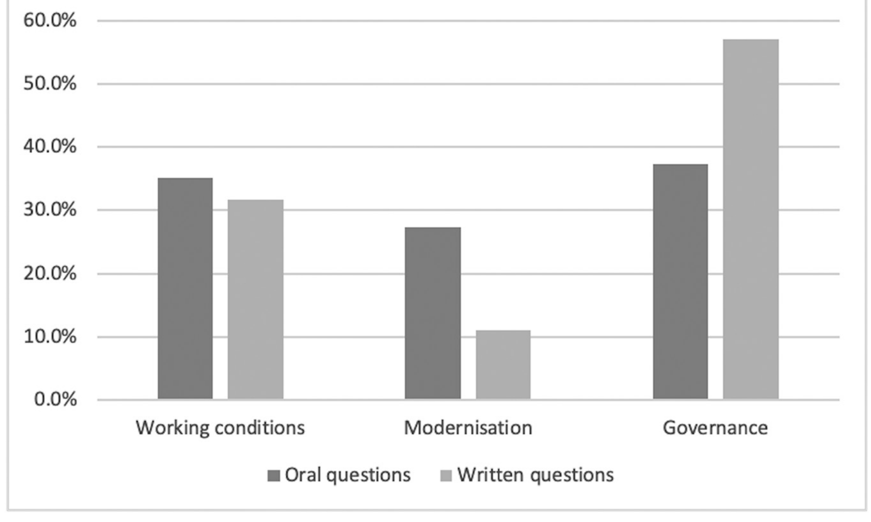

Figure 1: Proportion of questions by theme.

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House's complaints and grievance procedures. The public forum of oral questions leant itself to this emotive topic, allowing some questioners to air their exasperation about the Commission's inertia (e.g. Madders 2019).

While working conditions were an important theme, governance—covering the rules and regulations of House administration—made up the majority of both PQs formats. Nearly 60% of written PQs asked about governance, perhaps because these queries were best addressed via this traditionally more detailed Q&A format. For example, over 40% of these questions asked for precise information about project costs or procurement contracts. Oral questions were used less often to discuss governance, and only slightly more than they were used to ask about working conditions (see Fig. 1). Over a quarter of oral governance questions asked about issues with the parliamentary estate. Three-quarters of these asked specifically about the highly politicized topic of R&R and other major projects dealing with the crumbling Palace of Westminster. Given the scale of R&R, the cost and potentially far-reaching changes to Members' working environment, and the ongoing lack of decisive action (see Meakin 2022), interventions in this sub-theme expressed frustration at the debate's interminable nature (e.g. Bryant 2017).

Governance questions were also sometimes used to ask about the Commission's decision-making processes. Several identical written questions submitted by Conservative backbenchers associated with the anti-lockdown COVID Recovery Group—Julian Knight, William Wragg, and Gary Sambrook—asked about the Commission's transparency and voting processes in light of new COVID guidance it issued to MPs in November 2021 (e.g. Knight 2021a, 2021b; Sambrook 2021; Wragg 2021). Though the Q&As did not give specific details about this memo's content, the general thrust of the questions suggested that the Commission had reached its decisions in an opaque and undemocratic way—a theme we return to below.

Commission PQs about governance very occasionally touched on broader matters, such as the strategic direction of House of Commons administration. Strategy is a tricky issue: it requires Members to take a long-term view of House governance that may conflict with their short-term priorities and tenure in Parliament. However, strategy is a vital area demanding greater scrutiny from parliamentarians to ensure that the administration focuses on facilitating Parliament's core legislative and scrutiny functions (MP10). As Dame Maria Miller MP argued in an oral Commission PQ, this focus has sometimes been lost:

> This is a serious place of business…not a hospitality or a tourism venue. Will the Commission take this opportunity of a pause in business as usual [due to Covid] completely to rethink the focus of its strategy…? (Miller 2020).

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PQs generally provide Members with a way to avoid being 'fobbed off' by the Commission and House administrators (MP2). However, Miller's intervention is unorthodox as it was made while she was a member of the Administration Committee: she could have addressed her disquiet through internal governance channels. Though the Administration Committee has a formal role in advising the Commission on strategy development, Miller's PQ may indicate frustration that the working relationship between the two bodies felt more distant in practice (HoC8).

Miller's focus on strategy distinguished her from the vast majority of her colleagues, who rarely asked about major, long-term governance challenges. Though some did ask oral questions about 'modernizing' the Commons, they mostly focused on relatively minor and discrete issues such as Parliament's recycling policy and the provision of up-to-date IT services, rather than the House's overarching administrative agenda. However, around 60% of oral questions about modernization were hijacked by the SNP who, as we explore further below, used them politically to argue that the Scottish Parliament is procedurally superior to Westminster.

4.3 Question and answer quality in Commission PQs

Our analysis broadly supports existing PQs research, which suggests that the dry and (relatively) unrestricted nature of written Q&As leads to more relevant and less overtly partisan questions and fuller, detailed answers (Cole 1999; Rozenberg and Martin 2011). More than 90% of written questions were standard enquiries and around two-thirds of the Commission's written answers were full replies. Intermediate responses instead characterized the Commission's answers to more than half of all oral questions (see Fig. 2), reflecting its reticence about potentially politically thorny issues of diversity, parliamentarians' conduct, and R&R, which were typically referred to another authority or deferred to a later time.

However, PQs are not an unproblematic reflection of the issues that genuinely concern MPs (Rozenberg and Martin 2011: 398). Oral Commission PQs frequently serve performative functions, providing a forum for MPs to express partisan interests and score political points. For example, Labour Members asked almost half of all oral questions about working conditions and nearly 90% of oral questions relating to pay and other employment contract terms. Given Labour's links with trade unions, this is unsurprising. Interviewees also suggested that external organizations sometimes supply MPs with Commission PQs (MP1), with one respondent specifically noting that 'Labour members will tend to be…lobbied by trade unions' to ask questions (HoC1).

Nearly 30% of oral questions were unanswerable and were most frequently asked by SNP Members, who repeatedly enquired about the possibility of introducing electronic voting in the House of Commons. We deemed these questions

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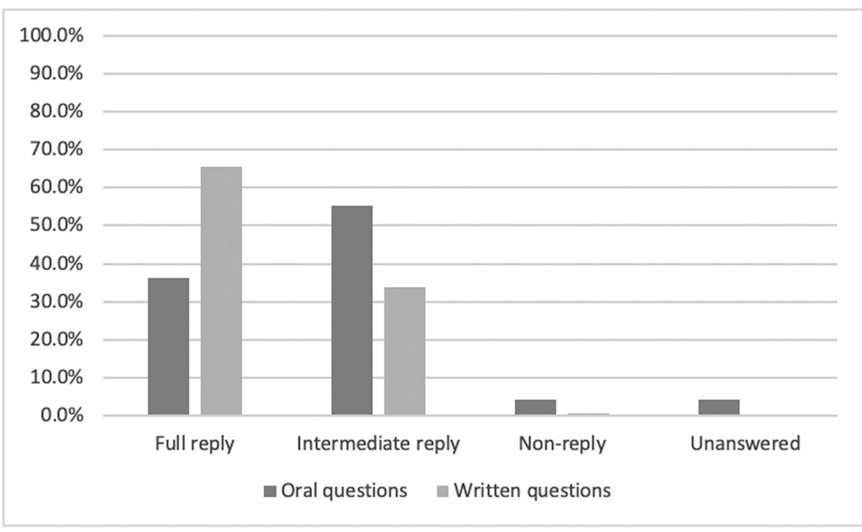

Figure 2: Answer quality.

unanswerable because the voting procedure is beyond the Commission's remit, except in the limited sense that it would oversee the financing and staffing arrangements of any new voting system (Wishart 2020). Commission answers usually referred the questioner to the relevant body responsible for overseeing voting practices, such as the Procedure Committee or the House of Commons more generally. The SNP largely neglected similar written questions, perhaps because they are seldom publicized.

This suggests oral PQs are more 'political' than their written counterparts: they offer a theatrical forum that can be hijacked by MPs to air specific grievances (Rozenberg and Martin 2011: 396). Interviews confirmed this. Oral Commission PQs are characterized by venting and 'the spontaneous eruption of emotion' (HoC1), or strategically leveraged to make issues a matter of public record, to be further publicized in partisan press releases (MP2; MP5). As one MP suggested, in Parliament 'you ask a question because you know the answer, but you want them to tell you' (MP4). The repetitive nature of the SNP's questions also implies that the party was using a 'syndication' strategy to advance its Scottish independence agenda by coordinating the questions that its members asked (see Bates et al. 2014: 256). Though the Commission consistently told SNP MPs that electronic voting procedure was not its responsibility (MP1; MP4), they continued to use their limited time politically. Harnessing the positive, forward-looking connotations of technological progress (Melhuish 2022), the SNP argued that the Scottish Parliament, which already uses electronic voting, is more 'modern' than

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the 'archaic' Westminster legislature (MP4). As one former official observed, this was 'the third party…busy doing what it should be doing…they know full well that it's not going to happen…It is part of the game' (HoC7).

Despite such political game-playing, evaluation criteria used in other PQ studies suggest that the 'accountability value' of Commission PQs is relatively high (Cole 1999; Rozenberg and Martin 2011). For example, one scale developed to assess the quality of questions scrutinizing the work of executive administrative agencies sees those probing for basic facts about key areas including finance and staffing as high value (Cole 1999). If we accept similar parameters for measuring the quality of Commission PQs, then the high volume of straightforward information-seeking questions met with full Commission responses points to the process' benefits for holding House administration to account. This is particularly true of detailed written Q&As. However, as we discuss below, if we put interview responses alongside broader understandings of accountability, a mixed picture of the value of Commission PQs emerges.

5. The deep-rooted challenges of holding Parliament's administration accountable

Having examined who asks Commission PQs, what they ask about and the quality of both questions and Commission answers, we now ask: to what extent are PQs effective as a means to hold the Commons Commission accountable? And what does this tell us about the internal governance of parliamentary administration?

Some interviewees presented PQs as one of the only ways to 'get stuff done' when informal channels had failed, adding that 'The moment you put a PQ down, suddenly all the toilets were fixed' (MP2). Others felt that Commission PQs were useful for highlighting Members' administrative interests (HoC5; HoC8; and MP5), with the requirement for the Commission to provide a detailed, public answer 'concentrat[ing] minds [of those charged with House administration] on these issues' (HoC1). However, some interviewees suggested that PQs are only a small part of the administrative accountability system (HoC5). Members do have many informal routes of complaint—to the Speaker, Leader of the House, committee chairs, party whips/the usual channels, and administrative officials (HoC4; HoC5; MP4; MP5; and MP7). PQs are thus only infrequently used by Members (MP8). As one former official observed: 'The real way that you do change is behind the scenes, rather than on the floor of the House' (HoC7). However, the hidden nature of such practices conflicts with a definition of accountability which emphasizes the role of *public* forums in illuminating and addressing issues (see Bovens 2007).

Others suggested that some Commission answers to formal PQs were quite limited, given that they seldom led to further action beyond information provision (HoC2; HoC7). One former Commission member struggled to point to *any*

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instance when a PQ had prompted a subsequent Commission discussion (MP1). These responses suggest that while Commission PQs may be useful for addressing specific House administration issues, they sometimes fail to meet the standard of accountability, which is more than basic scrutiny, and requires that some form of remedial action be taken where necessary (Bovens 2007: 452). Although interviews suggest that PQs can provide an effective route for fixing immediate problems, there is little evidence that they encourage the Commission to engage in deeper learning.

In part, this is a function of the kinds of questions asked (MP1). While our findings suggest that Commission PQs could be used to publicly push a progressive parliamentary agenda, in practice this potential is largely wasted. Some interviewees echoed Miller's criticisms that there is still insufficient Member interest in the broad strategic direction of House services (HoC2; MP8). Interviewees reported that this is not only apparent from Commission PQs but also from poor Member participation in direct Commission or Administration Committee consultations about their long-term needs (HoC2; MP2). Politicians typically do not look past the next election (HoC2). As one retired official advised, 'The real problem of accountability is politicians who are ever-changing and driven by winds of change…it's the intersection between the permanent and the temporary that's the real problem, the short-term and the long-term' (HoC1).

Some interviewees were sympathetic towards parliamentarians' short-term focus and disengagement from House administration (HoC3), saying that taking the longer view necessary to address fundamental challenges like R&R would require a 'switch to a different part of your brain' (HoC4). One official also reflected that MPs had been 'burned by the expenses scandal' and remained mindful of the optics of lobbying for enhanced House services funded by taxpayer money (HoC4). Another remarked that it would not be a 'good look' for parliamentarians to spend their time asking questions about 'their position as customers' of House services rather than about public policy issues affecting their constituents (HoC5).

Interview evidence also suggests that parliamentarians' low engagement with House administration may also arise because of a lack of knowledge about governance structures, which are often unclear (MP3; MP6). As one interviewee reflected, among questioners it was 'probably fifty-fifty in terms of an understanding or little understanding' about the Commission's role (MP1), further limiting the agenda-setting potential of Commission PQs. Time is also a factor. Interviewees characterized MPs as 'a group of permanently exhausted time-poor people' (HoC4)—what Administration Committee Chair Sir Charles Walker has dubbed the phenomenon of the '100-hours-a-week MP' (see Miller 2023). While in need of greater in-house service provision (HoC4), MPs lack the time to address these issues themselves (HoC1, HoC4, and MP6). This also suggests that

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the problem of Commission accountability may be more with the principal than with the agent.

The impact of Commission PQs is also constrained by institutional procedures that do not make them a useful mechanism for delivering substantive accountability (Cole 1999) or setting an agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The scheduling of oral Commission PQs in a low-profile and inconvenient 15-min time slot in the debating Chamber (MP3) indicates the low importance that parliamentarians place on House administration. It is also a function of the degree of control that government retains over parliamentary business. Governments have a status quo bias and have little incentive to allow sufficient time for potentially disruptive administrative questions and debates (MP10), which our findings suggest are most frequently used by the opposition. Practically, this means that it is only possible for the Commission spokesperson to address a paltry three or four questions per session.

Given these factors, it is unsurprising that oral Commission PQ sessions are poorly attended by Members (HoC1; HoC7; and MP3). Nevertheless, while it is tempting to conclude that improving the accessibility of oral Commission PQs would lead to greater engagement, some interviewees suggested that MPs will continue to complain that they have been overlooked, when in fact they have simply failed to avail themselves of the appropriate consultation routes (MP2).

The problem of Commission accountability does not lie entirely with the large body of MPs it is supposed to represent. Accountability is also complicated by the nature of the Commission itself. It is often unclear who politicians wish to hold to account via PQs, given that the Commission predominantly comprises their fellow parliamentarians, rather than officials. The Commission occupies an ambiguous position, sitting between the House administration and MPs, increasing the potential for divided loyalties: is the Commission in practice a principal, or an agent? It is not clear that Commission members themselves know. One former MP and Commissioner summed up the Commission's identity crisis:

> What is the Commission? Is it an executive body? Well, no, I suppose the [Executive Board] is. It's supposed to be holding the [Executive Board] to account. I don't think it's ever got its head around whether it is the ultimate managing authority, with the [Executive Board] beneath it, or whether it's the select committee accountability for the [Executive Board]. (MP8)

Many interviewees—both officials and MPs—felt that the Commission is itself unaccountable (HoC1; HoC2; HoC5; MP2; MP3; MP7; and MP9), and in the case of its failure to progress R&R and deal with other issues of estate maintenance, had 'screwed up' (MP3). As some put it, the Commission is 'not accountable to anyone

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except in some very broad concept of the public, who don't care. It's not accountable to Members…' (HoC1), let alone by the formal mechanism of PQs (HoC2). The Commission typically only meets once a month, save during exceptional circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, and operates at too high a level 'to be able to apply any detailed attention to the delivery of particular services, to the development of particular strategies and so on' (HoC1).

The Speaker's power also limits the Commission's accountability to parliamentarians. The Speaker's position within the House and as Commission Chair can also make it politically risky for other members to question its direction and decision-making (MP2; MP8). Thanks to the status of his office, the Speaker has agenda-setting power within the Commission (MP1). Other Commission members acknowledge that he could make life difficult for them and so tend to defer to him (HoC7; MP7). As one former Commissioner recounted, 'There were occasions when I felt we should be challenging something the Speaker pushed for and suddenly you felt people were melting away' (MP8). Other former Commissioners agreed that 'if the Speaker wanted to do something…you had to spend quite a lot of capital in order to block [it]' (MP7) and if he 'got the backing of the Commission it would be very hard for it not to happen' (MP5). Officials also observed that the Commission's work is typically driven by a powerful Speaker (HoC7), with recent officeholders taking a particular interest in administrative matters (HoC5; HoC8). As one MP explained, the Speaker cannot hold the Commission to account because he is usually looking to 'control' it (MP2). This is compounded by the lack of clarity in House governance arrangements (MP1; Yong 2018). As a former Commissioner concluded 'I don't think it was ever quite clear where the boundary lay between…what was within the authority of the Commission to do and what was within the authority of the Speaker, acting in his own right' (MP7).

6. Conclusion

Dame Maria Miller argues that if we want effective parliamentarians, then we need an effective parliamentary administration. That requires that parliamentarians are willing and able to scrutinize and hold those responsible for House of Commons administration and governance to account. Parliamentary questions would seem to be a useful and public means of doing this, but what we see in practice is something different. PQs routinely fail to get to the heart of fundamental governance and accountability issues concerning the Commission.

This is due to at least three structural problems. The first is that of the weak principal: MPs are either too busy and/or not very interested in administrative matters. They are often unclear about what the Commission does, and what they want from the Commission or officials. The second is that of the weak agent. The Commission is riven by various faultlines, which means it does not operate as

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an effective 'executive' body, making clear strategic decisions. Officials, to some extent, may step into the breach, but doing so risks being accused of interfering in Parliament's democratic processes.

The third is the limited nature of the PQs mechanism itself. Commission PQs suffer from many of the weaknesses identified in the literature about PQs to the government: they can have multiple purposes beyond their accountability function. Members are thus just as likely to use PQs to make political points as they are to scrutinize and seek important information. But Commission PQs also suffer from weak institutional support in that they are scheduled at a poor time that impedes their regular use and effectiveness.

How, then, can matters be improved? For all the reasons we have noted, PQs are unlikely by themselves to secure accountability and good governance. The domestic committees may be able to provide better scrutiny. But this would require their status to be elevated from advisory to authoritative and would involve the further commitment of time and energy needed for members to develop deeper expertise and pass judgment on the Commission and House administration. This, at least, would be preferable to the ad hoc, mostly uncoordinated responses of individual MPs that we currently see.

More generally, this analysis suggests that if we want to understand accountability and governance of parliamentary administration—and perhaps not just the UK Parliament—then it may be wise to focus not just on formal mechanisms but also examine more closely informal mechanisms of accountability and governance—such as the everyday interactions between members, the commission and officials in the 'informal spaces' of Parliament (Norton 2019). It is not public (as Bovens 2007 would require), but it may be in these everyday interactions that the accountability of the administration is more substantively achieved.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Peter Kerr, Alexandra Meakin, and Louise Thompson for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this work.

Funding

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [grant number RPG-2022-068: 'How Parliamentarians hold Parliamentary Administration to Account'].

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