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PRIME MINISTERS AND THE COMMONS: PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR, 1868 TO 1987

PATRICK DUNLEAVY, G. W. JONES AND BRENDAN O'LEARY

Since 1868 nineteen Prime Ministers have answered parliamentary questions, made statements, given major speeches, and intervened in debates in the House of Commons. This article presents a comparative and quantitative analysis of PMs' behaviour patterns on these four dimensions. Key findings include: the importance of 1940 as the critical break between a traditional and a modern form of parliamentary activity, in which Prime Ministers make fewer contributions to Commons proceedings altogether, fewer speeches and far fewer interventions in debates than in the pre-1940 period, but more statements; the emergence of question time as the absolutely dominant form of prime ministerial activity in the Commons, especially from the mid-1970s onwards; and the distinctiveness of Thatcher's minimalist Commons activity, when set against other post-1940 PMs.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

The 1867 Representation of the People Act established the House of Commons in a recognizably modern form, as a body of elected representatives directly accountable to a mass electorate – although one still embracing only a minority of adult males (because of property qualifications), and only a small minority of citizens (because of the exclusion of women from the electorate). Since that time there have been nineteen Prime Ministers drawn from and answerable to the House of Commons, excluding three peers at the end of the nineteenth century. The importance of activity in the Commons as an influence upon Prime Ministers has been continuously and extensively discussed in the interim period – by political practitioners, journalists and academics. This paper contributes to this debate by generating some broad but important indices of PMs' behaviour in the Commons.

Conventional wisdom stresses the significance of Parliament, not just as a socialization experience and testing ground for potential political leaders but as an active, continuous and vital part of the ministerial role. In particular, success in becoming party leader, in making a mark as Leader of the Opposition, and in performing as Prime Minister when in office, are all seen as contingent upon

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performance in the Commons. In discussions of the core executive the role of Parliament is emphasized in a general way but not analysed in detail. For example, Hennessy's (1986, p. 3) book on the Cabinet distinguishes three political tasks for British parties in government: mobilizing Whitehall; 'retaining the support of the House of Commons without which government cannot be sustained'; and 'mobilizing consent among the electorate'. Two of these three tasks either directly involve parliamentary activity or entail at least using Parliament as a key linking device to the mass media, interest groups and public opinion. Yet Hennessy's subsequent discussion of cabinet government makes almost no reference to Parliament.

More generally, the discussion of how and why governments behave as they do in the Commons is impressionistic, rather than grounded upon much systematic research. Griffiths's (1973) quantitative study of how legislation is processed gave a thorough account of just how few amendments to their legislation government ministers in majority governments accept. Almost all other systematic legislative studies have focused on aspects of parliamentary behaviour rather remote from the core executive, such as backbench dissent and use of early day motions (Finer *et al.* 1961; Norton 1975).

This paper employs a different approach by developing a long-run quantitative analysis of prime ministerial activity in the Commons. The research method involved scanning all volumes of *Hansard* from 1868 to 1987 and coding any activity by PMs on each day under four headings:

- answering questions;
 - making a ministerial statement;
 - delivering a speech in the course of a Parliamentary debate. Prime Ministers' speeches almost always involve either launching a government motion or debate on legislation, or summing up for the government in response to a critical opposition motion; and
 - a miscellaneous category of minor interventions by the PM in parliamentary debates – for example, interrupting other speakers, points of order and information, and impromptu debating responses to points initiated by other speakers.
- To curtail the workload involved in assembling these data, multiple interventions of the same kind by PMs on a single day were not recorded individually. Thus our database shows the days when Prime Ministers undertook one or more of the four kinds of parliamentary activity set out above.

Any research method of this type confronts some difficulties in achieving consistent classification of behaviour from written sources. First, the actual coding of items was undertaken by several research assistants over an extended period of time. Though briefed uniformly with respect to classification rules, their decisions on marginal cases may nonetheless contain a degree of variability. Second, the codes for statements and speeches have a potentially fuzzy boundary, especially in the pre-1940 period. Since 1945 the tightening up of cabinet rules of ministerial procedure has tended to make the distinction sharper. A smaller problem concerns the boundary between speeches and minor interventions in debate. In both cases a small proportion of cases will have been resolved by judgement, rather than directly by clear-cut criteria.

Several factors minimize these methodological difficulties. The data are presented here in aggregate form, comparing one PM with another. Since most Prime Ministers were in office for fairly substantial periods, either in one bloc or in several smaller amounts, considering their periods of incumbency as a whole tends to reduce the danger of wrong conclusions being drawn from the misclassification of one or two cases. Aggregation also means that erratic misclassifications, due solely to random errors, tend to cancel each other out. Hence it is unlikely that any systematic classification biases continue to distort the aggregated figures. Our findings are consistent with a much wider and more detailed analysis of which this paper forms a small part, and with a variety of other historical sources of evidence. We are confident that the data reported here are reliable.

PRIME MINISTERS' BASIC ACTIVITY RATES

The Appendix to the paper gives the total number of parliamentary session days during the term of each Prime Minister, and the number of these days when that person answered questions, made a statement, gave a speech or intervened in debates in a minor way. Also included is a count of the number of days on which each PM did any one of these things. One obvious problem is that there has been a major change across the period in the number of days when Parliament is in session, which tends to weight the data as presented towards PMs in the earlier part of the period. The information in the Appendix is arranged in the date order that individuals first became Prime Minister (the pattern followed in all the diagrams later in the paper). Looking at raw data it is apparent that variations in the length of PMs' terms of office creates a jumpy picture without clear patterns. On the other hand, rearranging the information in search of such a pattern forfeits any impression of changes over time.

This problem is solved by computing a new index, showing the spacing of PMs' Commons activity, that is, the average number of parliamentary days which elapse between one day of activity and the next. We first apply this spacing index to measure when PMs made any kind of contribution in the Commons. Here we divide the total number of parliamentary session days for each PM by the number of days that they carried out any of the four kinds of parliamentary activity (Figure 1a). Two features are immediately apparent. First Lloyd George obviously stands out as the PM who was least active in the Commons, in terms of days attending and speaking, etc. Both the median and mean for the data set show that PMs on average carry out some kind of activity every two parliamentary days, whereas for Lloyd George the figure is effectively double, once every four days. Second, rather less visible in a simple histogram, there is a reasonably clear tendency for the intervals between Prime Ministers' Commons activity to be longer in the post-1940 period than before that date.

Splitting Prime Ministers into two groups at the point when Churchill assumed leadership of the wartime coalition government has the advantage of dividing the data almost equally in half. The exploratory and confirmatory summary statistics for both sub-groups show clearly their very different features (Table 1). (For further information on the statistics used see Erickson and Nozanchuk 1977; Marsh 1988).

FIGURE 1(a) Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Any Interventions

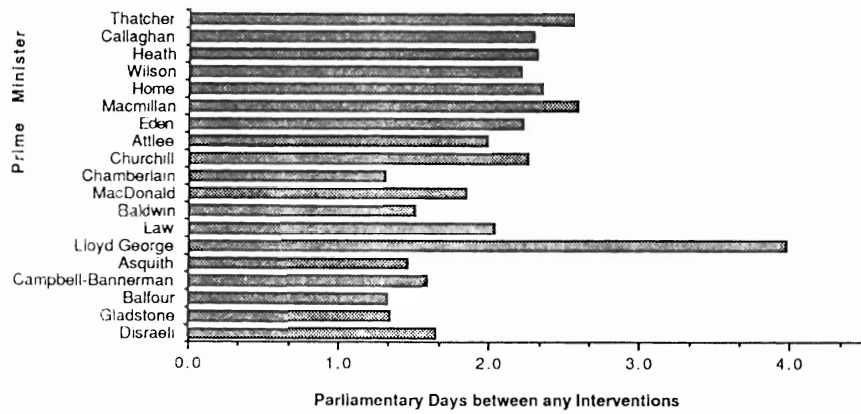


TABLE 1 Parliamentary days between any form of prime ministerial activity, 1868–1940 and 1940–87

Whole period		Pre-1940	Post-1940
2.29	Upper quartile	1.84	2.35
2.03	Median	1.55	2.29
1.59	Lower quartile	1.34	2.69
0.70	Midspread	0.50	0.13
2.67	Range	2.67	0.61
—	Upper far outliers	Lloyd George	—
2.04	Mean	1.80	2.31
0.62	Standard deviation	0.76	0.17

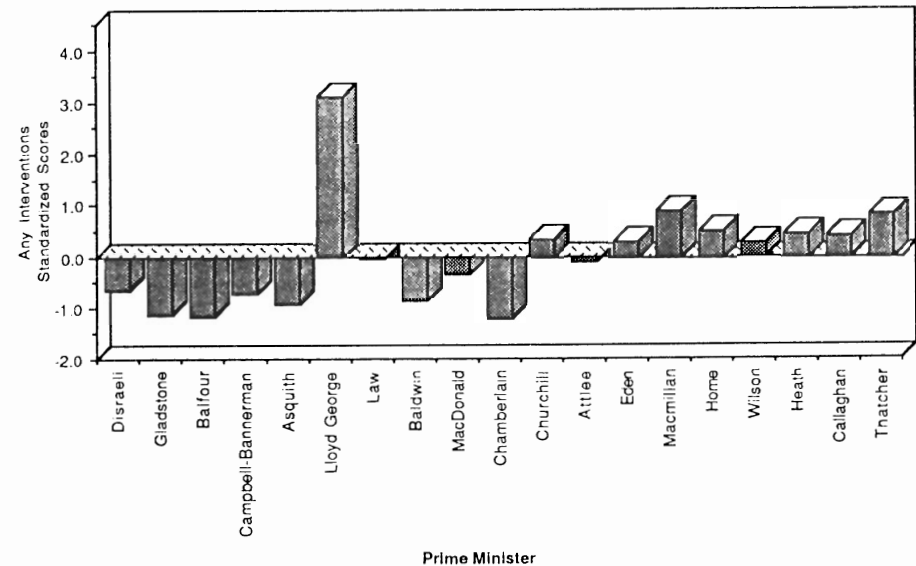
The pre-1940 group has a median spacing of slightly over one and a half days between PMS' Commons interventions, and a variation of half a day in the midgroup of the data. The post-war group's average is higher at 2.3 days, but the midgroup is more tightly clustered around this level. Lloyd George is a far outlier in the pre-1940s group – that is, his spacing of interventions is more than three times the midsread above the upper quartile, making it a very unusual observation (see Tukey 1977, pp. 43–4).

Another way of displaying this pattern graphically is to control for the average difference in level and spread present in the data set as a whole, and to focus on how individual PMS' scores diverge from this overall pattern. We can best carry out this exercise by standardizing the data, which involves the following calculation for each of the 19 data points:

$$\text{Standard score} = \frac{\text{Observation} - \text{Level}}{\text{Spread}}$$

The level indicator used in the mean for the whole data set, and the spread indicator its standard deviation (both given in Table 1 above). Thus the standardized scores show for each PM the positive or negative residual once the mean for the whole data set (in this case 2.04) is subtracted from their spacing figure, divided by the standard deviation (in this case 0.62). Standardization produces a distribution of scores with a mean score of zero (because positive and negative scores exactly cancel each other out), and a standard deviation of 1. Summarized graphically in Figure 1b, the standardized scores for all but one PM before 1940 are negative,

FIGURE 1b Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Any Interventions: Standardized Scores



while those for all but one post-war PM are positive. The pre-1940 exception is of course Lloyd George, whose standardized score is again clearly exceptional, whereas the post-war exception is Attlee, whose score is only very marginally negative. The most active Prime Ministers in the pre-1940 period are clearly Gladstone, Balfour and Chamberlain, with Bonar Law and to a lesser degree MacDonald below the norm. In the post-1940 period Churchill, Eden and Home have similar rather active scores, while on this index both Thatcher and Macmillan appear as the least active post-war PMs.

TYPES OF PRIME MINISTERS' INTERVENTIONS

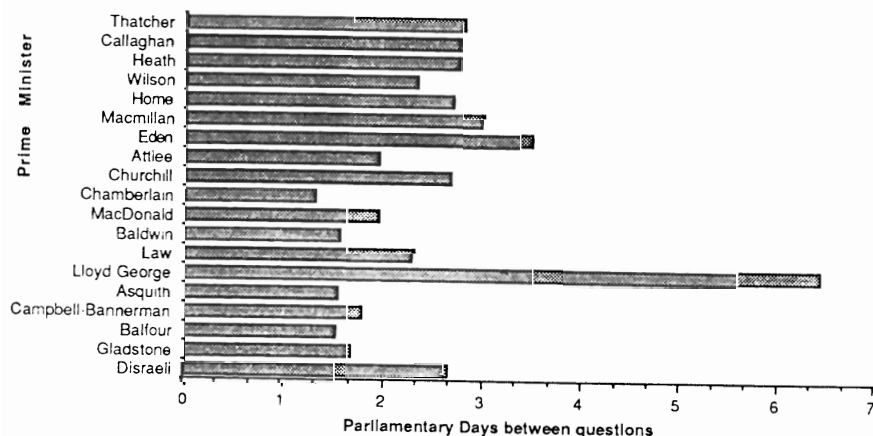
In this section we consider separately each of the four types of parliamentary activity, demonstrating that there are significantly different patterns of change in the ways in which PMs have answered questions, made statements, given speeches, and made minor interventions in debates across the whole period.

Questions. In 1868 questions to the Prime Minister were treated in the same way as those for any other minister. The Clerks of the House of Commons simply entered questions onto the daily Order Paper in the sequence that they were received, so that a PM could have to sit through the whole ministers' question time in order to respond to his own questions. From the 1880s onward Prime Minister's questions were bunched together and placed last on the order paper, so that the PM's commitment of time was lessened. By 1904, however, the number of questions had increased a great deal and the time for questions was being limited to the first hour of the parliamentary day. As a result Prime Minister's questions were rarely reached, and to counteract this tendency they were placed at a fixed point on the order paper, at number 45 (after a short period at number 51). This practice continued (with one exception mentioned below) until 1953 when as a concession to the ailing Churchill his questions were concentrated onto two days only, Tuesdays and Thursdays. This pattern was followed by Eden and Macmillan, but as questions and answers became longer the PM's questions listed at number 45 were still often not reached. In 1961 the Commons adopted a select committee proposal that Prime Minister's questions be taken at 3.15pm for a fixed time of 15 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays only, except for rare private notice questions. This pattern persists to the present day. (For further details see Jones 1973; Chester 1977; Chester and Bowring 1962).

A further important change in Prime Ministers' question-answering activity followed from Churchill's decision in 1940 to break with the previous practice of PMs being the Leader of the House of Commons, with responsibility for managing Commons business. Previous PMs fielded questions about quite routine business matters, with the exception of Lloyd George who was never Leader of the House during the coalition governments which he headed from 1916 to 1922.

Figure 2a shows the parliamentary days between one PM's question session and another. The figure for Lloyd George is clearly exceptional at 6.4 days between his question-answering sessions and merits some detailed explanation.

FIGURE 2a Prime Ministerial Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Questions



In 1916 Lloyd George allocated the Leader of the House role to the Conservative leader Bonar Law, who was also Chancellor of the Exchequer. According to J. C. C. Davidson's draft memoirs: '[Lloyd George] was interested only in the effective control of the War. It would have suited him had Bonar Law carried on the routine duties – and especially the Parliamentary duties – of the Prime Minister' (Rhodes James 1969, p. 47). Consequently from 1916 through the 1918 election which he won as leader of a Coalition Liberal/Tory government to the end of the 1919 parliamentary session, Lloyd George answered Commons questions only 19 times in 462 parliamentary days, an average spacing of 24.3 days between these occasions.

However, Lloyd George's behaviour changed in the 1920 and 1921 sessions when he answered many questions on Ireland, foreign affairs and industrial relations issues. At this time too he complained about his questions rarely being reached, and for two years PM's questions were listed at number 25 on the order paper. Despite being absent at international conferences again in 1922, in the period from 1920 until his government was wrecked by the withdrawal of Tory MPs' support in 1922, Lloyd George reverted to a much more conventional pattern, answering questions 119 times in 420 parliamentary days, a spacing of just 3.5 days.

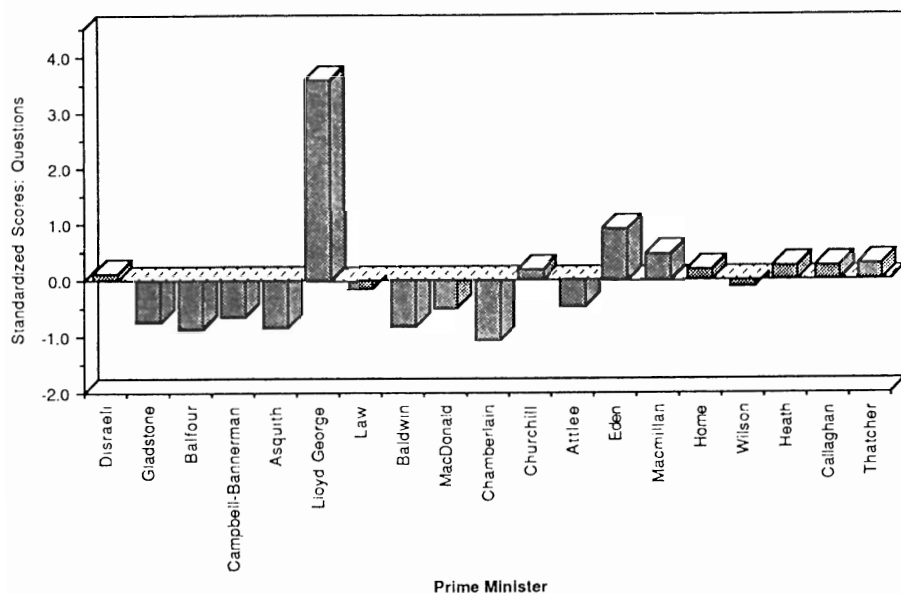
Looking at the rest of the data in Figure 2a, there is again an increase in the spacing of Prime Ministers' question sessions after 1940, compared with the previous period. Table 2 shows the summary statistics for the two sub-groups. The post-1940 set are more closely bunched than in the earlier period. Indeed so restricted is the post-1940 midspread that there are two far outliers: Eden who answered questions only once every three and a half days, and Attlee who responded more frequently than every two days. In the pre-1940 group Disraeli and Bonar Law were rather more diffident about responding to questions, in addition to Lloyd George.

TABLE 2 Parliamentary days between Prime Ministers' responses to questions, 1868–1940 and 1940–87

Whole period		Pre-1940	Post-1940
2.76	Upper quartile	2.31	2.81
2.36	Median	1.74	2.76
1.79	Lower quartile	1.58	2.69
0.97	Midspread	0.73	0.12
5.10	Range	5.10	1.51
Lloyd George	Upper far outlier	Lloyd George	Eden
—	Lower far outlier	—	Attlee
2.50	Mean	2.29	2.73
1.10	Standard deviation	1.43	0.39

Looking at the standardized score for the data set as a whole again brings out the importance of the 1940 break, although the pattern is less clear cut than with other forms of intervention. Figure 2b shows that all but two post-war PMs have positive standardized scores (the exceptions are Attlee, and Wilson who answered questions marginally more frequently than average), while only two PMs in the pre-1940 group beside Lloyd George had positive scores. Yet perhaps the most

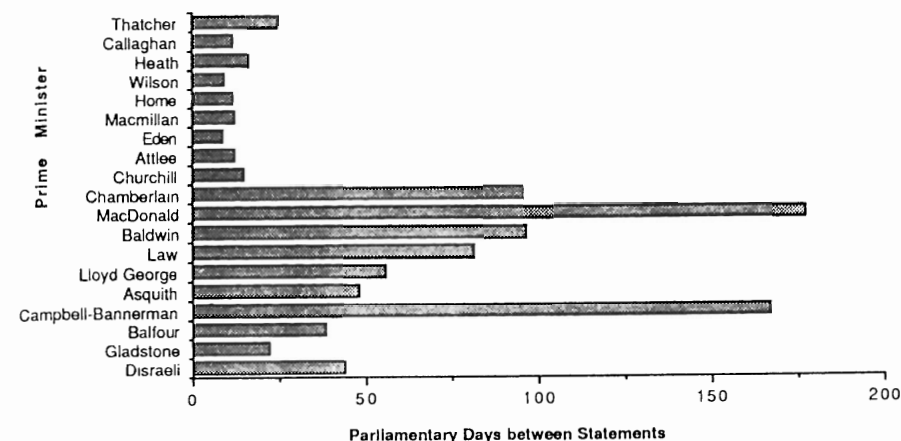
FIGURE 2b Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Questions: Standardized Scores



important message of these data is about lack of change. With the exception of Lloyd George, none of the standardized scores is very large. The increased spacing of question responses after 1940 is a matter of degree rather than a radical change. Prime Ministers must still face up to question time and other interrogation by MPs every two and three-quarter days, making this activity more than four times as common as any other mode of parliamentary intervention by PMs.

Statements. The pattern of Prime Ministers' behaviour in giving statements to Parliament shows a quite different direction of development (Figure 3a). Statements have become *more* frequent and uniform across Prime Ministers in the later period. Statements by the Prime Minister were reasonably frequent (every 30–40 days) under Gladstone, Disraeli and Balfour. Gladstone made far more statements in his 1880–86 governments (especially in 1885) than in his earlier period in office. This pattern changed radically, however, when first Campbell-Bannerman and later Bonar Law and MacDonald conspicuously avoided making statements, while other PMs in this period stretched the spacing of statements to around once every 90 days.

FIGURE 3a Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Statements



The 1940s breakpoint here operates strongly. Churchill made 39 statements during his wartime coalition government, possibly because he also held the Minister of Defence portfolio. His example seems to have triggered a clear switch, with all but one subsequent Prime Minister making statements on average between every nine and every 16 days – chiefly about overseas summits, strategic defence issues, and security and intelligence service scandals.

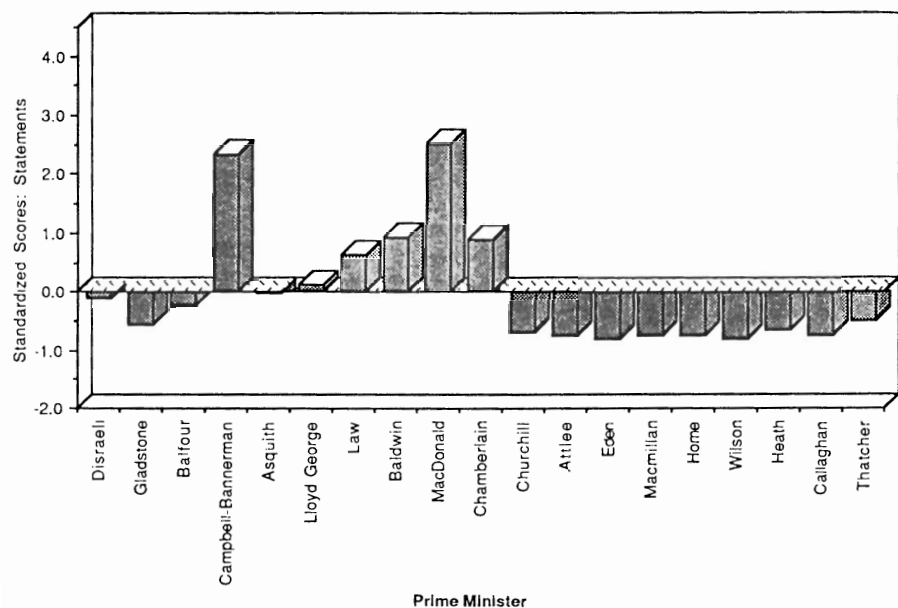
Comparing the summary statistics for the two groups of PMs shows these differences clearly (Table 3). The median spacing of statements for the later group is every 12 parliamentary days, compared with 68 days for the pre-1940 PMs: the later group is also much more tightly bunched. The only far outlier in the table is Thatcher, who stands out in the post-war group as making very few statements, with her spacing index being over twice the post-war median. Yet in the data set as a whole Thatcher is the median observation.

TABLE 3 Parliamentary days between Prime Ministers' statements to the Commons, 1868–1940 and 1940–87

Whole period		Pre-1940	Post-1940
55.6	Upper quartile	96.4	14.6
24.4	Median	68.3	12.0
12.4	Lower quartile	43.8	11.8
43.2	Midspread	52.6	2.8
168.5	Range	155.4	15.7
—	Upper far outlier	—	Thatcher
49.8	Mean	82.4	13.5
50.4	Standard deviation	50.5	4.4

Looking at the standardized scores for the spacing of statement-giving clearly shows the sharpness of the 1940 break, and the relative uniformity of post-war PMs' behaviour (Figure 3b).

FIGURE 3b Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Statements: Standardized Scores



The exceptionally low level of statements from Campbell-Bannerman and MacDonalld, and the suggestion of greater use of statements before 1906 are also apparent. However, it is also in this early period that unambiguous classification of statements and speeches is somewhat more difficult.

Speeches. The basic data on the spacing of PMs' speeches are presented in Figure 4a. A general trend for Prime Ministers to make speeches less often apparently operates across the period, although with some notable wobbles. Campbell-Bannerman made few speeches compared with other pre-1940 PMs. In the more recent period both Chamberlain and Eden made noticeably more speeches than their contemporaries, and both were heavily involved in foreign affairs. From February 1938 Chamberlain additionally had to speak in the Commons for his Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. Both in the data set as a whole, and amongst post-war PMs, Thatcher stands out as making few speeches, around once every 45 parliamentary days.

Table 4 gives summary statistics for the data set as a whole and for the two groups of PMs. The post-1940 group shows a tighter concentration around the median. There are two far outliers in the post-war group, Thatcher who stands out as making few speeches, and Eden who made more than average. Post-war

FIGURE 4a Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Speeches

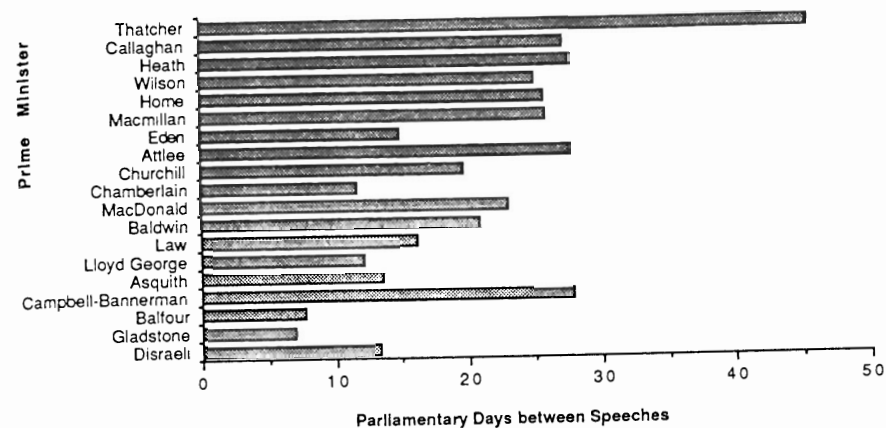


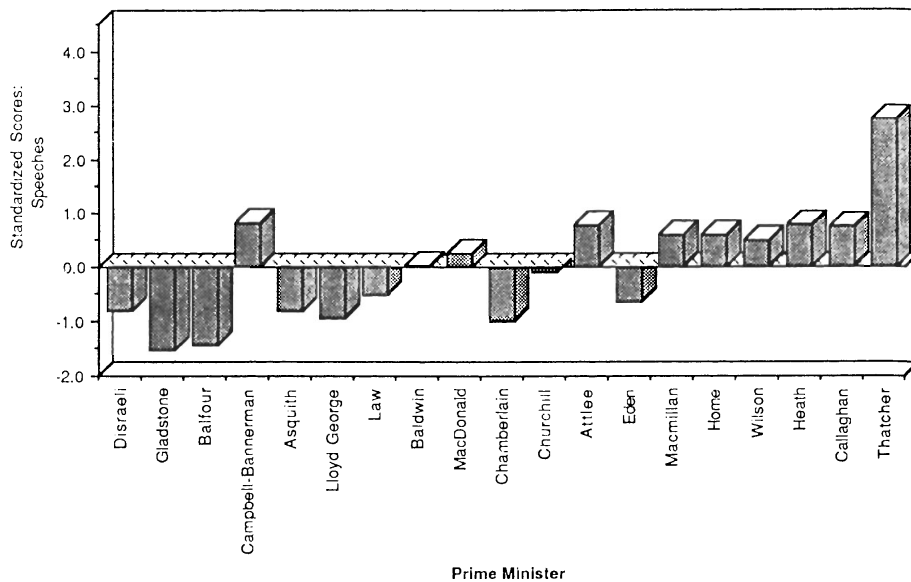
TABLE 4 Parliamentary days between speeches by PMs, 1868-1940 and 1940-87

Whole period		Pre-1940	Post-1940
25.9	Upper quartile	21.0	27.7
21.0	Median	13.4	25.9
13.6	Lower quartile	11.7	25.1
12.3	Midspread	9.3	2.6
38.3	Range	20.7	30.5
—	Upper far outliers	—	Thatcher
—	Lower far outliers	—	Eden
20.7	Mean	15.4	26.6
9.0	Standard deviation	6.4	7.8

PMs made speeches on average around half as often as PMs before 1940. The early group has a much larger midsread but a smaller range than modern PMs, with no far outliers – although both Gladstone and Balfour made noticeably more speeches than anyone else in the data set. Gladstone was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1880-83 as well as Prime Minister. Balfour in 1902 was the first PM in the Commons since Gladstone in 1894, and taking over from Lord Salisbury he may have wanted to demonstrate command of the House. Balfour was also heavily involved in promoting a controversial Education bill.

Looking at the standardized scores confirms the impression of a more scattered pattern, but the importance of the 1940 break remains (Figure 4b). Only one of the post-war PMs (Eden) has a clear-cut negative score, although the spacing of Churchill's speech-making is also slightly below average. Only two pre-1940 PMs have positive scores, Campbell-Bannerman and Macdonalld, with Baldwin on the margin. The range of fluctuations in the scores is wider at the beginning

FIGURE 4b Prime Ministerial Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Speeches: Standardized Scores

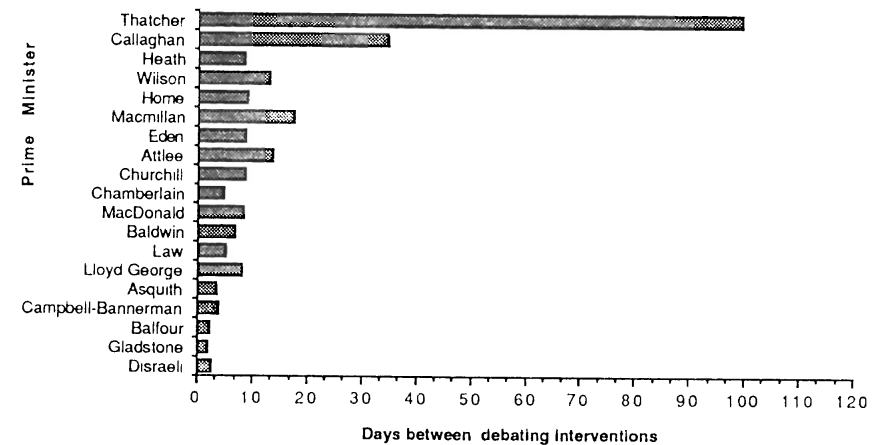


of the period (because of Gladstone's and Balfour's activism) and at the very end (because of Thatcher's very infrequent speeches).

Interventions in debates. In the data set as a whole, intervening in debates is the second most common type of activity by PMs. Prime Ministers respond to questions once every 2.4 days, and intervene in debates every 8.3 days – while they make statements or speeches only every 21 to 24 days. The basic data for the development of this kind of activity over time is dominated by the extraordinary reluctance of Thatcher, and to a lesser degree Callaghan, to make impromptu or unscripted debating interventions (Figure 5a). Thatcher intervenes in this way only once in a hundred days on average over her term. In the three most recent parliamentary sessions covering 1985–6, 1986–7 and 1987–8 (totalling 508 days), no debating interventions by Thatcher were recorded at all. Thatcher's behaviour departs radically from previous patterns of behaviour, especially for post-war Conservative leaders. Churchill, Eden, Home and Heath all intervened almost as frequently as the least active pre-1940 PMs. Infrequent debating interventions are more characteristic of non-Tory Prime Ministers. Lloyd George, MacDonald, Attlee, Wilson and Callaghan all made them less frequently than their contemporaries. Only Macmillan amongst Tory PMs pre-figures Thatcher's reclusive style.

A number of explanations of Thatcher's behaviour suggest themselves. The first is that like Lloyd George and Churchill (at times) she has a strong preference for running the core executive itself, rather than presiding in Parliament. A second possibility is that she was socialized into party leadership under Callaghan, whose

FIGURE 5a Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Debating Interventions



debating interventions were more than twice as infrequent as those of any previous PM. She could then have copied and further developed this minimalist style. Third, Thatcher could have adopted a non-reactive parliamentary approach because of her well-attested general preference for presenting herself in public only in scripted and carefully controlled events. The fact that she is a post-war far outlier in terms of making statements or speeches as well as the effort she reputedly puts into preparing for question time, the one unavoidable parliamentary chore, support this interpretation. This concern with being prepared and shielded from potentially discomfiting experiences is also evident in Thatcher's infrequent electioneering, and her unwillingness to speak before non-Tory audiences or undertake walkabouts (in the UK, although not abroad).

Fourth, however, Thatcher's reclusiveness in the Commons may reflect the fact that she is the first woman at 10 Downing Street, operating in an overwhelmingly male parliamentary context. Many of her statements seem to express a perception of the Commons as a distinctively hostile environment, rather than the friendly male debating club which some previous premiers enjoyed dominating:

One tends, particularly with the kind of atmosphere in the House of Commons at Question Time, when you are always attacked, to defend yourself. Most women defend themselves. It is the female of the species. It is the tigress and lioness in you which tends to defend when attacked (Thatcher, quoted *Daily Mail* 4 May 1989, p. 22–3).

Other features of her personality, such as her lack of a strong sense of humour would increase this inclination. The implications of her reclusiveness for opposition leaders Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock have been unfavourable. She is a hard target to learn how to attack successfully, since she is so seldom in operation in the Commons except under the very limiting conditions of Prime Minister's question time.

Because Thatcher's debating interventions are so infrequent, the horizontal scale used in Figure 5a tends to wash out the gentler but important trend for debating interventions to become less common over time, especially in the post-war period. Table 5 shows the summary statistics for the pre-1940 and post-1940 groups of PMs.

TABLE 5 Parliamentary days between PMs' interventions in debates, 1868-1940 and 1940-87

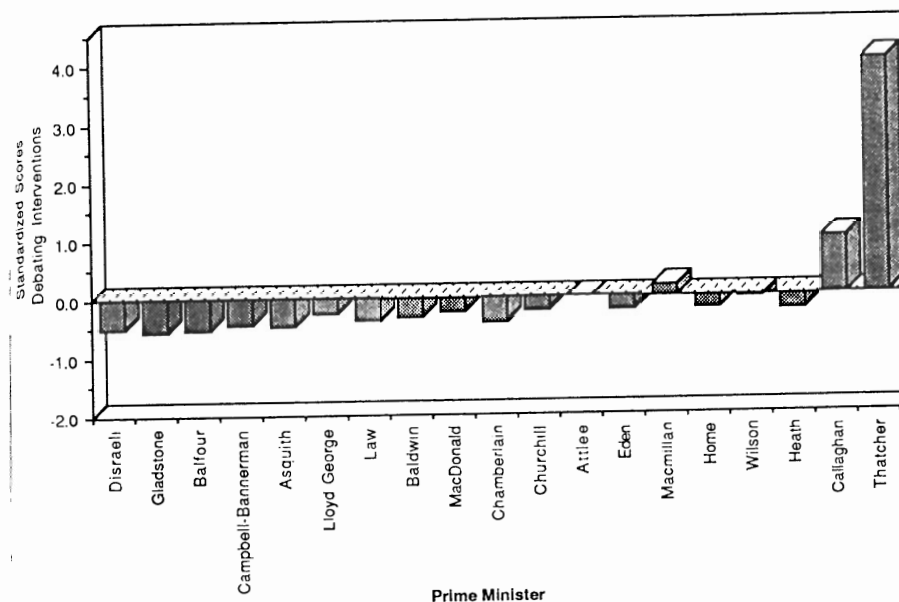
Whole period		Pre-1940	Post-1940
9.1	Upper quartile	6.8	17.6
8.3	Median	4.4	12.9
4.8	Lower quartile	2.7	8.9
4.3	Midspread	4.2	9.3
97.5	Range	6.8	91.0
That., Call.	Upper far outliers	—	Thatcher
13.7	Mean	4.8	23.6
21.4	Standard deviation	2.2	27.9

The mean and standard deviation are badly affected by the unusually high spacing score for Thatcher: given the distribution shown in Figure 5a these indices of level and spread are best set on one side in favour of their more robust exploratory alternatives, the median and midspread. The median for the post-1940 group of PMs is almost three times higher than in the earlier group, and the midspread is twice as great. Thus, in contrast to the other three types of parliamentary activity, post-war PMs behave in highly variable ways about intervening in debates, while PMs in the earlier period were strikingly uniform in regularly intervening.

Finally, turning to the standardized scores for intervening in debates (Figure 5b), it is possible to distinguish clearly the three features discussed above. Almost all the positive scores are mopped up by the exceptionalism of Thatcher (and to a lesser degree Callaghan) in not intervening, the only other premier with a modest positive score being Macmillan. The steady over-time trend for debating interventions by PMs to decline is shown in the tapering off of negative scores along the horizontal axis. The variability of post-1940 PMs' performances is apparent with four negative scorers (Churchill, Eden, Home and Heath) interspersed with zero or positive scores.

Cumulating activity indices. The standardized scores for the four main types of prime ministerial interventions in the Commons have another advantage worth noting. It is possible to cumulate them meaningfully to arrive at an overall score for each PM's parliamentary activism. The data on overall intervention rates discussed on pp. 125-7 shows only how often PMs carried out at least one activity on any given parliamentary day. But the disaggregated information reviewed here suggests that before 1940 Prime Ministers were often multi-faceted parliamentary performers who would, for example, both make a speech in a debate and then

FIGURE 5b Prime Ministerial Parliamentary Activity: Parliamentary Days Between Debating Interventions: Standardized Scores

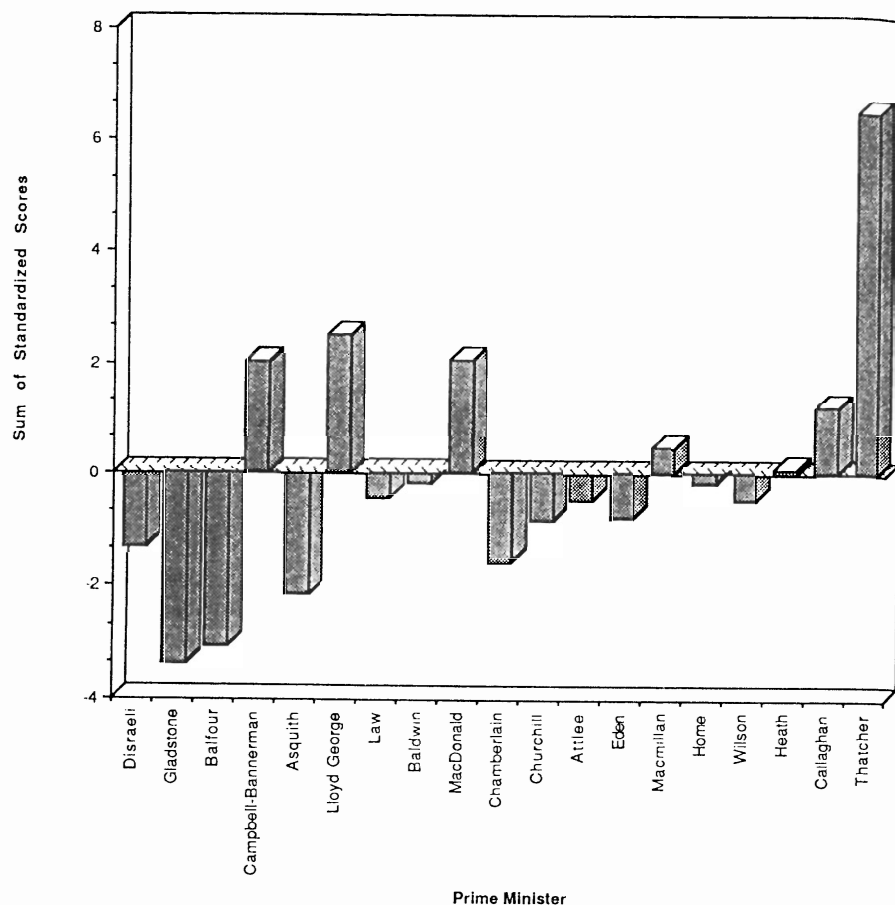


intervene subsequently. But in the modern period PMs have tended to attend the Commons only for a set and specific purpose, especially the effectively mandatory Prime Minister's question time. To confirm or refute this hypothesis we need only add up each PM's standardized score across all four types of activity. Using standardized indices is important because it allows us to aggregate several variables which otherwise have widely different numerical levels and spreads.

The resulting picture is shown in Figure 6 and some important differences compared with Figure 1b are immediately apparent. Using the cumulated standard scores of parliamentary activism strongly identifies Thatcher as far and away the least active Prime Minister in the Commons for the last hundred and twenty years. Her abandonment of debating interventions, and her very infrequent speeches, set her strongly apart, and even on statements she is a sporadic performer by post-war standards. A long way behind Thatcher comes Lloyd George, almost solely because of his infrequent answering of questions, and then Campbell-Bannerman and MacDonald because of their few statements and speeches. Callaghan also has a positive score because of his reluctance to intervene in debates, and Macmillan because of restrained activity rates on everything except making statements.

The other side of the coin are the activist Prime Ministers, whose negative scores indicate that the spacing of their contributions was well below the average for the data set as a whole. Gladstone and Balfour were the most active, with negative scores on all four aspects of Commons activity, but especially answering questions and making major speeches. Asquith rather unexpectedly stands out from the other pre-1940 PMs because of significant negative scores on answering questions, making

FIGURE 6 *Sum of Standardized Scores: Parliamentary Days Between Questions, Statements, Speeches and Debating Interventions*



speeches and intervening in debates. Chamberlain also surprisingly beats Disraeli to the fourth largest negative score, chiefly on the frequency of his speeches and diligence in answering questions. Disraeli was scarcely more active than the norm for other PMs on answering questions.

Finally, Figure 6 differs from the previous figures in this section in showing only one clear trend. With the highly important exception of Thatcher, post-1940 PMs are clearly much more similar in their cumulated scores than the earlier group of Prime Ministers. Although modern PMs' scores still bob up and down around the middle line, the fluctuations are much less than in the pre-1940 group. In the post-war period before Thatcher, there is reason to believe that the parliamentary component of the Prime Minister's job was becoming more standardized and less susceptible to variation with individuals' personalities. This trend has clearly been brought to a halt by Thatcher's distinctively minimalist parliamentary activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The data reviewed here capture only fragments of political scientists' and historians' concerns with the core executive's relations with Parliament. Yet this analysis is both distinctive and helpful because it provides precise quantitative evidence on important questions previously handled only in a vague, qualitative and judgemental fashion. Comparing performance across Prime Ministers is only feasible if we have some systematic and reasonable quantitative measures, especially measures with a ready intuitive meaning of the kind described here. We believe that quantitative comparisons are also helpful in providing a better foundation for considering how the relations between the core executive and the legislature in Britain differ from the patterns found in other parliamentary democracies.

Our findings leave many questions open. We hope to address them in future analyses. Of particular interest are the relative importance of long-term institutional arrangements and short-term political influences in shaping Prime Ministers' activity in the Commons. Some major changes, such as the formalization of Prime Minister's questions, have apparently made relatively little difference. Attention to the data for individual parliamentary sessions shows large variations within each Prime Minister's term of office. For example, activity rates frequently seem to rise when PMs first gain power and later when they are coming up to re-election. We have demonstrated, however, that the scope for useful quantification in the area of core executive-legislature relations is considerable.

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APPENDIX: Basic data on Prime Ministers' activity in the House of Commons, 1868-1987

Prime Minister	Parliamentary days in office	Days when PM				
		Intervened at all	Answered questions	Made a statement	Made a speech	Intervened in debates
Disraeli	438	267	165	10	33	163
Gladstone	1655	1234	981	76	234	911
Balfour	420	319	270	11	54	179
Campbell-Bannerman	334	210	187	2	12	83
Asquith	1292	883	819	27	95	358
Lloyd George	889	224	138	16	73	111
Bonar Law	81	40	35	0	5	16
Baldwin	964	641	601	10	46	142
MacDonald	1063	578	542	6	46	124
Chamberlain	478	368	358	5	41	100
Churchill	1225	545	455	84	62	138
Attlee	1025	517	517	85	37	76
Eden	269	121	77	31	18	31
Macmillan	1089	420	363	88	42	62
Home	155	66	57	13	6	17
Wilson	1306	590	554	140	52	101
Heath	611	264	221	38	22	74
Callaghan	518	226	187	44	19	15
Thatcher	1588	622	566	65	35	16

Notes: The last session of Thatcher's period in office covered is 1987-8.

In all the tables and diagrams used in the text, Bonar Law is treated as having made 1 statement. Since the spacing index used here is total days/statements treating Bonar Law as having made zero statements (as in fact was the case) would produce a spacing index of infinity for him.

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