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# Interruption and filibuster: tools of parliamentary scrutiny and representation

*Interruption et obstruction : des outils de contrôle et de représentation parlementaires*

15 July 2025.

**Stéphane Revillet**

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=5290>

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PREO

# Interruption and filibuster: tools of parliamentary scrutiny and representation

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## **Introduction**

1 In the British representative political system, the British Parliament acts on behalf of the represented, making citizens' voices, opinions

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and perspectives “present” in public policy making processes (Pitkin 1967). The Parliament enacts new legislation through public, private and hybrid bills by debating proposals, scrutinising bills in committees and amending texts. In addition to the law-making process, political representation is inextricably linked to the notion of government scrutiny and accountability<sup>2</sup>. In order to check the work of government, MPs have at their disposal various methods of scrutiny, including debates, questions (oral or in writing) and committees. The various constituent elements of political representation mentioned above (debating, making or amending laws and holding the government to account) are not equally valued in terms of effectiveness and utility (Bennister / Kelso 2015). Two parliamentary activities in particular are the target of criticism in this respect. More often than not PMQs and PMBs, which are the focus analysis of this study, have been criticised for mainly serving a symbolic function (Reid 2014: 46). The theatricality, the noise and disorderly behaviour of MPs during PMQs (on Wednesdays at 12:00 am) slow down debates or intimidate some MPs (especially women MPs) who no longer dare to ask questions, thereby reducing the number of questions posed to the Prime Minister. As far as PMBs are concerned, they are an illusion of legislative power granted to the members of the House. Only 20 MPs whose names are drawn may introduce a bill of their choice. However, very few proposals become law<sup>3</sup>, and when they do they are almost certainly proposals from members of the party in power<sup>4</sup>. Although these sessions are one of the rare occasions when MPs gather in the same place at the same time to hold the government to account or to allow MPs to propose their own piece of legislation. PMBs and PMQs are blamed respectively for “enormously damaging the reputation of the House and the legislative process” (The Commons’ Procedure Committee 2016), and for undermining democratic principles (Judge 1992: 541). The focal point of the criticisms lies in the constant interruptions which cause disorder in the House of Commons during PMQs and in the practice of filibustering on second reading debates on PMBs. Despite being subject to the same parliamentary rules as any other debate, PMQs and PMBs have developed their own “informal rules”, i.e. “tactics and manœuvre which may or may not be conducted within the limits set by the rules of the prescriptive framework” of the debates (Bailey 1971; Gretchen Helmke / Steven Levitsky 2004), thereby providing MPs with strategic tools for pur-

poses other than those related to the primary function of the two procedures.

- 2 The aim of this article is to study the role of interruptions during PMQs and of filibusters (continuous interruptions) during PMB sessions. More specifically, these two parliamentary events will be examined in order to highlight how they contribute to the legislative process, to the control of government's action and to MPs' duty of representation. This final point will serve to illustrate the polysemy of the term "representation" while simultaneously elucidating the various roles that Members of Parliament may assume within the context of parliamentary proceedings.

## Theoretical framework

- 3 PMQs and PMBs have not been researched in equal measure. Studies of PMQs largely outnumber those of PMBs which too often focus on their procedural aspects highlighting their limited impact and shortcomings in general (Bromhead 1956 ; Brazier / Fox 2011). Unlike its US counterpart, the British filibuster has received even less attention; however, two notable pieces of scholarship have directly or indirectly contributed to a better understanding of the filibuster during PMBs: *Tories in the Killing Fields? The Fate of Private Members Bills in the 1997 Parliament* by David Marsh and *Private Members' Bills in the UK Parliament: Is there an Electoral Connection?* by Shaun Bowler. David Marsh studied the content of PMBs between the 1950s and the 1960s with an analysis on how two Conservative MPs, Eric Forth and David Maclean, significantly affected Private Members' legislation through their use of the filibuster. Shaun Bowler showed how PMBs increase MPs' visibility and thereby enhance their electability. In a similar vein, Michael Kellerman's study of electoral vulnerability shows how the use of Private Members' bills and parliamentary questions develop reputations with constituents while increasing their visibility<sup>5</sup>.
- 4 The literature on PMQs and accountability predominantly suggests that PMQs in their current form fail to increase government accountability (Dunleavy et al. 1993; Shepard 1999, Bates and al. 2014). Less time is dedicated to questions due to longer answers by the Prime Minister, partisanship, the increasing number of verbal attacks over time (Waddle / Bull 2018) and most importantly interruptions (Cum-

berbatch et al. 1992; Shepard 1999; Bates et al. 2014, Armitage 2013). Without calling into question the results of academics on the detrimental effects of interruptions on accountability, this paper contends that the interruptions, as disorderly behaviour, can be construed as an alternative way of holding the government to account. Drawing on Cornelia Ilie's extensive writing on unparliamentary language during PMQs, this study will partly rely on discourse analysis to demonstrate the functions of interruptions (both during PMQs and PMBs). In her comparative study of "interruption patterns in British parliamentary debates and drama dialogue", C. Ilie has elaborated a detailed typology of MPs interruptions in the House of Commons which provides a useful insight into the metadiscursive statements made during debates. In line with Kellermann's comparative approach, this paper uses discursive and quantitative tools to compare the effects of continuous interruptions during PMBs in the form of filibusters and spontaneous collective or individual interruptions during PMQs on political representation.

## Methodology

- 5 Identifying a filibuster (which needs to be distinguished from an "object procedure"<sup>6</sup>) can prove challenging. According to the Commons' Procedure Committee (2016), filibustering is defined as "speaking at inordinate length on the bill to ensure that the debate cannot conclude before the set time limit". As parliamentary rules are intended to sanction statements that are "irrelevant to the bill, tedious or too long"<sup>7</sup>, it is not clear whether MPs' contributions to the debate are delaying tactics. A few indicators can be relied upon in order to identify an MP who is trying to talk out a bill. These include the Speaker calling a member to order if the member persists in repeating an argument already made, an MP accusing another MP of deliberately wasting time<sup>8</sup>, MPs calling for a closure motion, and finally media coverage of such events the day after the debates.
- 6 The time frame for the study of PMBs spans over the successive Conservative terms in office from 2010 to 2024. The number of filibusters during this period of time was unusually high and mainly carried out by like-minded Conservative MPs, allowing a pattern to emerge. The total number of filibusters examined in this paper is 15<sup>9</sup>.

- 7 The study of interruptions during PMQs is part of a larger research project based on 429 sessions during Conservative premierships between 1991 and 2019. The challenge in identifying interruptions, i.e., “verbal interruptions basically identifiable as voiced intrusions in the current speaker’s contribution (Ilie 2005: 316)”, lied in the fact that Hansard transcripts do not record the majority of the interruptions making watching the recordings of all the sessions a requirement for a reliable count and categorisation of all the interruptions occurring during PMQs.

## 1. Prime Minister’s Questions

- 8 Some MPs like Peter Bone<sup>10</sup> argue that noise and disorder during PMQs are essential in holding the government to account. This view was most explicitly articulated during the implementation of social distancing measures in the House of Commons from 18 March 2020. Subsequently, on 22 April, a hybrid system with a video connection enabled the debate to be held both in person and remotely. Attendance in the House during these measures dropped considerably, with the Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, noting that “attendance today is significantly below the normal numbers” (Hansard 2020), which inevitably made the debates “much quieter, with deafening shouts being replaced by an unusual silence”, the press noted<sup>11</sup>. Some welcomed this change<sup>12</sup>, explaining that democratic and less theatrical debates could finally take place during PMQs. However, other commentators<sup>13</sup>, as well as members of the House, deplored this state of affairs, denouncing the House’s inability to hold the government to account for its decisions and actions.

Peter Bone: The technology is fine for casework, constituency work. But scrutinising government is just hopeless [...] you can’t intervene, you can’t question a minister during a debate, the government is getting a free ride when it comes to scrutiny (Bone 2020).

- 9 On a similar note, journalist John Craig criticised PMQs held in semi-presence (hybrid format) for being a “poor substitute” and concluded that the Commons needs “to return to its usual boisterous, raucous and spontaneous normality if government ministers are to be held truly accountable” (Craig 2020). This remark therefore raises ques-

tions about the link between disorder and the notion of government accountability. One might ask to what extent noise and interruptions are effective and “true” means of holding the Prime Minister to account.

- 10 There is no set list of unparliamentary behaviour and words<sup>14</sup>. The Speaker alone has the power to determine whether the House is in order. In doing so, s-he applies Erskine May’s advice that “good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language” and that “all members should maintain silence or should converse only in undertones. Whenever the conversation is so loud as to make it difficult to hear the debate, the occupant of the Chair calls the House to order” (Erskine May 2019). Basically, anything that disrupts a speaker’s speech or the order of the House is considered disorderly conduct. Interruptions such as shouting, insults, noise, clapping, are subject to disciplinary action<sup>15</sup>.

## 1.1. Interrupting scripted speeches

- 11 Interruptions, whether they seek to corner the speaker by making him recognise something or forcing him to say something, or whether they are simple negative remarks on what is being said, or whether they are designed to silence the opponent with a wall of noise, these interruptions have one objective, that of interrupting the speaker’s ready-made question or duly prepared answer and thus getting him to react spontaneously. As way of illustration of such interruptions, verbal attacks from the opposition is a telling example when they shout: “withdraw, resign!, answer!” (Hansard 2006a).
- 12 As PMQs are the most attended and most watched parliamentary event of the week (Alderman 1992), reacting to these disruptions can be quite challenging for the Prime Minister at the dispatch box or the leader of the Opposition or even to any MP speaking during PMQs. The speaker is left with a very limited range of options (in terms of political strategy). S-he can decide to ignore these interruptions and sit back in their seat which could be interpreted as arrogance, a lack of courage or even as acceptance of the criticism directed at them. Moreover, the final word has been left to the opposition which is contrary to the communication pattern of PMQs, thereby putting the PM in a weaker position. During such instances of media exposure,

the best option is therefore to retort even if that means providing an off-the cuff answer. The reply is off-script, and sometimes off-message forming a sort of parallel discourse. It is precisely these off-script, impromptu remarks that provide a way of testing the government's accountability. The Prime Minister will be judged more on these impromptu comments than on their well-scripted speeches prepared in advance of the meetings.

- 13 It is an established fact that debates at PMQs are intensively and meticulously prepared in advance (Hazarika Ayesha / Tom Hamilton 2018), nothing is left to chance, the PM must never let him or herself be taken by surprise. That is why spontaneous answers are closely scrutinised by the opposition and the media for slips of the tongue, contradictions, revelations, or something authentic, something true. In fact, as mentioned above, these answers lead to the emergence of a parallel discourse that appears more transparent, akin to an alternative truth to the well-prepared discourse. This 'para-discourse' (literally, the discourse alongside the main discourse) provides the context for interpreting the expression "true accountability". Consequently, the Government's accountability is assessed through a different channel which ultimately tests how credible and effective the Prime Minister is at the dispatch box. In this case, the notion of accountability is inextricably linked to those of credibility and effectiveness. These two concepts can neutralise the intended effects of the interruption. The Prime Minister is accustomed to this exercise and can anticipate such incursions into their speech. S-he may possess highly developed skills in the art of responding spontaneously without revealing any flaws in their initial speech which will reflect positively on the Government, making it appear competent and reliable. The performance rather than the substance of debate takes precedence (Alderman 1992). In other words, the government's competence is indexed to the PM's rhetorical and communication skills<sup>16</sup>. Interruption is therefore a double-edged sword in this effort to make the Government accountable.

## 1.2. Interruptions as a signal

- 14 Interruptions therefore provide a means of judging a speaker (the PM or the Leader of the Opposition or an MP) more on their improvised

comments than on their duly prepared answers. More importantly, interruptions have another role, which is to draw the attention of parliamentarians and, by extension, the public to a specific aspect of what an MP or the PM is saying. This can take the form of collective shouting known as a “wall of noise” or more precisely “dismissive collective backchanneling” (Ilie 2005), or a remark shouted by an MP to the speaker. It is very common for a response to be interrupted when the Prime Minister or a Member of Parliament's speech is deemed unsatisfactory by their colleagues. When, for example, the government's presentation of figures or achievements is deemed to be erroneous or exaggerated<sup>17</sup>, the answer is interrupted, as is an answer characterised by circumlocution and a lack of clarity and precision<sup>18</sup>, or when opposition MPs force the PM to provide information that they consider to be in the public interest<sup>19</sup>, the answer is interrupted. Additionally, when these interruptions are repeated in the same answer, prompting the Speaker to intervene, the warning signal sent to the PM is even stronger. This kind of interruption sends a signal to the audience to pay attention to the message being delivered. The more intense the interruption, the greater the desire to draw attention to a particular point. It is irrelevant whether the interruption denounces an inaccurate point or an outright lie, what matters is that the audience's attention is drawn to something that is deemed questionable, something that must be noticed. In this instance, it's not about the effects of the interruption prompting the speaker to respond spontaneously, but about the message contained in the interruption itself. The signifier, i.e. the noise or the interjection, refers to a more elaborate and complex signified, i.e. the warning, the potential lie, the denunciation of an act contrary to the interests of the individuals. The interruption is the message as well as a discourse being created in parallel to the official, prepared discourse, in a condensed form of communication (based on signs).

### 1.3. Agenda setting

- 15 Questions during PMQs are powerful tools to determine which issues attract political attention and have strong effects on the content of the political agenda. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the content of the opposition parliamentary questions drives the government's agenda, that is to say, they are used to determine what issues

are discussed politically (Bevan / John 2016: 10). Some scholars argue that the battle over what issues are on the political agenda is more important than how parties position themselves towards those issues (Petrocik 1996; Green-Pedersen / Mortensen 2010). Issue competition has become one fundamental feature of public debate (Otjes / Louwse 2018) especially during PMQs (Bevan / John 2015). Nevertheless, the capacity to draw attention to a particular issue is constrained by the limited number of questions that Members of Parliament are permitted to ask. The issues that are the most likely to have a significant impact (or travel beyond the boundaries of parliament and reach the public or the media) are those which will be the most noticeable. The use of rhetorical devices can enhance the visibility of these issues, thereby amplifying their impact. For example, it is not uncommon for a PM to use humour or pathos to draw attention to a particular issue or question. Interruptions fulfil this function precisely. The concept of agenda-setting follows the definition provided by George Tsebelis (2002): “the institutional power of political actors to issue a proposal to which other actors must react”. PMQs represent an institutional instrument through which Members of Parliament may prompt reactions from other political actors, whether within or beyond the parliamentary sphere, with respect to a proposed subject. MPs who are selected to put a question to the government have the opportunity to raise the subject they wish while forcing the Prime Minister to address the same subject in their answer. In most cases, these questions go unnoticed by the public except when the question is remarkable and notable, that is to say, when its form or originality arouses a certain interest. In this way, the interruption can be seen as an institutional means available to MPs who wish to highlight a specific issue. As mentioned earlier, the strength of the interruption is proportional to the importance of the signal sent, and in this case to the importance of the subject covered. Drawing attention to a specific point is a way of forcing the government to take an interest in it, or even to take action. Beyond its accountability function, interruption, in its function of agenda-setting, can in some instances be influential on the legislative aspect of an issue (Bevan / John 2015).

- 16 In October 2017, at a Prime Minister's Questions session in Parliament (Hansard 2017b), Ian Blackford, the Member of Parliament and leader

of the Scottish National Party (SNP) parliamentary group, posed a lengthy question regarding the adverse effects of Brexit on the economy, family budgets, and the potential impoverishment of Scotland and the North of England. Then he made a slip of the tongue (intentionally or not). He said 'breakfast' instead of 'Brexit', which caused a deafening uproar in the chamber, and necessitated the speaker's intervention. Ian Blackford used this incident to highlight the casual attitude of MPs to the possibility of a no-deal exit. Upon resuming his question, another SNP MP (Angus Brendan) interrupted the session by shouting at the opposition. The Speaker intervened again and called this MP to order, but also Ian Blackford for having broken a parliamentary rule, that of not formulating a short and precise question. Ian Blackford was finally allowed to ask his question, which he did in a single sentence. In this instance, the objective was to stage an interruption for dramatic effects in order to draw as much attention as possible to the subject he was raising. Furthermore, the subject highlighted by the MP will be given greater attention when the interruption is provoked by the Speaker through a call to order or the imposition of a penalty following a breach of parliamentary rules.

- 17 David Cameron did the same thing during a PMQ session in June 2006 on the subject of security, forcing the Prime Minister (Tony Blair) to raise the subject of prison sentences (Hansard 2006b). D. Cameron was interrupted three times, including once by the Speaker, and did it again the following week (21/06/2006) on a very similar subject and was interrupted three times, including twice by the Speaker. In this case, there was a very clear desire to force the government to commit itself to a specific issue by forcing it onto the agenda and increasing its visibility (and therefore its importance) through interruptions.

## 2. PMBs

- 18 Like PMQs, Private Members Bills have been the subject of much criticism, with their efficacy and relevance frequently called into question (Hansard 2016). PMBs are acknowledged more for their symbolic function ( Otjes / Lowerese 2018: 500) than for their strictly legislative function. The selection of Private Members' Bills is typically conducted through a lottery system, akin to that employed in bingo

games. The 20 names of MPs drawn from a bowl are allowed to present their bills for first reading before formally presenting them to the House of Commons over the thirteen Fridays devoted to this activity (however, in practice, only the first seven Fridays count, as the remaining seven are often devoted to reprogramming bills that did not result in a vote when they initially presented and therefore have almost no chance of succeeding). Despite the considerable number of PMBs that can be submitted, only a small proportion ultimately become law. Furthermore, these proposals are not normally intended to create a tax or public expenditure. They are mainly consensual and are seldom the subject of controversy. If these proposals fail to meet with the government's approval, they have virtually no chance of passing the second reading stage. This is because the majority of MPs only have to vote against the second reading, which effectively renders the proposal null and void. In the event that a proposal is tabled without prior debate, it can be rejected by a single Member of Parliament, who is required to simply indicate that they are rejecting it ("object" procedure). This is why the vast majority of PMBs that become law originate from the party in power. The opposition can, however, use a procedural mechanism to block the progress of a proposed law: the filibuster. The aim is to take the floor as long as possible to reach the end of the time allotted for debates in order to prevent a vote on this proposal. In order to end a filibuster, a motion for closure must be passed by at least 100 MPs present at the debate. Given the typically sparse attendance on Fridays (Brazier / Fox 2011), it can prove challenging to secure the necessary votes in favour of closure. Even if the opposition has the 100 MPs present to put an end to a filibuster preventing a vote on the second reading of a bill by an MP from the party in power, the government will be able to pass this legislation through alternative channels (by means of a government bill), often by making certain amendments proposed during the second reading of the rejected PMB. The symbolic nature of PMBs makes the legislative stakes rather low and one might ask why MPs sometimes go to so much trouble to bring a filibuster to a successful conclusion. In fact, the stakes are of a different nature. Exactly like PMQs, MPs use the procedural and institutional rules in force to direct attention to selected elements while simultaneously creating a discourse that is parallel to that which is officially presented in the House. The mechanisms are the same as those used for interruptions

during PMQs. A filibuster consists of the repeated and continuous interruption of the speech of the MP presenting his or her bill. This form of parliamentary filibustering, which involves delaying legislation, serves a number of additional functions beyond the immediate prevention of a proposal ('killing' a bill), namely to hold the government publicly accountable for its activities and to assess the legislative coherence of proposals presented at second reading.

## 2.1. PMBs: holding the government to account

- 19 Completing a filibuster is regarded as a considerable achievement. Indeed, the MP who embarks upon such an obstruction procedure must be able to talk for as long as possible about the proposed text for debate. The parliamentary rules governing debates in Parliament apply to this type of interruption. Standing Order 42 allows the Speaker to direct an MP to discontinue his or her speech if s-he "persists in irrelevance, or tedious repetition either of his own arguments or of the arguments used by other Members in debate" (Standing Orders 2018). In addition, the filibustering MP must not stop speaking for more than a few seconds before the floor is given to someone else. In order to keep up, other MPs intervene by asking the filibustering MP a 'follow-up question'. The longest filibuster to date was by Andrew Dismore (3 hours 17 minutes). During the session on 2 December 2005 (Hansard 2005), Andrew Dismore, then Labour MP for the constituency of Hendon, wanted to denounce publicly a bill proposed by Anne McIntosh, a Conservative Member of Parliament, which aimed to toughen the law against burglars. The bill in question, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Protection of Property Bill, would essentially have allowed homeowners and shopkeepers to use more force to defend themselves against burglars. Labour MP Andrew Dismore delivered a 3 hour and 17 minute filibuster to denounce an enacted law as a form of vigilante justice. It was not so much the content of Dismore's speech that attracted attention, but rather his performance as a filibusterer. The media immediately picked up on the feat, while echoing the MP's arguments against PMBs. For the MP, it was not just a question of using up the time allocated to the debate on the PMBs and seeing it disappear, but also and above all of ensur-

ing that the proposal received bad publicity in order to dissuade the government from presenting it to Parliament in another form. In this instance, the filibuster is the chosen method for drawing attention to a proposal that is perceived as questionable or even unjust, or in this instance, to have disproportionate consequences. In this case, when the filibuster is carried out by a member of the Opposition to block a government bill, the aim is to control the government's activity by sending out a parallel message. The objective is to achieve a high level of visibility and a sense of theatricality. The importance of the message does not really lie in the content of the speech but in the signified of the filibuster, i.e. the need to reject the bill whose legislative process is interrupted by a quasi-continuous speech (continuous interruption).

- 20 Another example will highlight the para-discourse created by the filibuster. The example also highlights the role of PMBs as a check on government accountability. On 10 December 2021, Jeff Smith, then a Labour MP, introduced his PMB, the Medical Cannabis (Access) Bill, at second reading (Hansard 2021a). The bill, which had been in preparation for four years, was a response to a Conservative piece of legislation passed in November 2018. The Conservative government changed the law to allow the prescribing of unlicensed cannabis-based medicinal products in certain circumstances. However, the substance was rarely prescribed, as only certain specialists were authorised to do so, giving the law a very limited scope. MP J. Smith therefore introduced this proposed law (PMB) to facilitate access to medical cannabis by authorising more doctors, such as GPs, to prescribe therapeutic cannabis. He criticised the government for having allowed patients to suffer for four years without giving them access to a substance that would have alleviated their suffering. The introduction of this PMB was a clear message that the government had only gone half way by passing an imperfect, even ineffective law. The introduction of the proposed law can be seen as a potential device for correcting existing legislation. In this case, the bill failed, but it did succeed in publicising the failings of the existing law; it is a real mechanism for scrutinising government activity. In response to the introduction of Jeff Smith's Bill, a number of Conservative MPs, including Katherine Fletcher, Sally-Ann Hart, and Dr Mullan took it in turns to prevent the vote on the second reading of the bill. These

MPs could have tried to gather enough Conservative colleagues to vote against the proposal by turning up at the time of the vote, but they used the filibuster to nip the proposal in the bud. The filibuster is a response to the implicit question posed by Jeff Smith's proposal, namely, why not amend the 2008 law to allow wider access to the substance? The message is unambiguous: there is no question of allowing illicit substances to be consumed more widely. As is developed in the next section, the filibuster is also indicative of MPs' ideological principles. A reading of the filibusterers' discourse reveals a conservative stance on the subject: they certainly feared widespread abuse of cannabis and fear that reimbursements for this substance would skyrocket. Once again, instead of simply setting out the arguments for rejecting the bill and sanctioning it with a simple vote, the MPs were choosing to make the message visible in a parallel dialogical relationship between two irreconcilable positions.

## 2.2. The filibuster as a vehicle for ideology

- 21 This study has been conducted within a specific time frame within which conservative filibusterers were very active (more precisely between 2010 and 2021). As a matter of fact, it can be said that it was the period when Philip Davies revived the practice of talking out bills, soon followed by other like-minded MPs such as Christopher Chope, Jacob Rees-Mogg, David Nuttall, Peter Bone, Andrew Rosindell... A brief genealogy of the Conservative filibuster will shed light on the profile and motive of these Conservative filibusterers. Philip Davies claimed in a PMB debate that “when [he] was first elected to Parliament 10 years ago, [his] mentor was the late, great Eric Forth, and one of the things he taught [him] was the importance of Private Members Bills<sup>20</sup>”, and later adding that “after he died, he vowed he would do the same kind of work<sup>21</sup>”. When the New Labour introduced the Northern Ireland Bill in 1998, sixteen Tory MPs voted against it, defying the frontbench's order to abstain. Alongside these rebel groups, a smaller group was formed, the “Awkward Squad” led by Eric Forth and David Maclean who engaged in a parliamentary “form of guerrilla warfare” against the government (Cowley / Suart 2003: 71). Their collective aim was to cause what one of them called “buggera-

tion” and “to make life for the government as miserable as possible” (Cowley / Stuart 2003: 72). They began to block PMBs because they accused the government of exploiting private members’ time by having backbench MPs introduce ‘handout’ bills<sup>22</sup>, which were essentially government bills in disguise. By blocking Private Members’ Bills, Forth and Maclean sought to delay their reintroduction, thereby wasting the government’s time. Additionally, they opposed private members’ legislation on principle (Marsh / Marsh 2010), arguing that such bills were poorly scrutinised, often driven by single-issue groups, and typically resulted in increased regulations and costs.

- 22 Philip Davies echoes Eric Forth's voice in the House of Commons when he quotes his mentor explaining that “many of them (PMBs) had a worthy sentiment behind them, but that we should not just pass legislation on the whim of a worthy sentiment<sup>23</sup>”. Davies also concurs with E. Forth in claiming that “the system is designed in a way that encourages the presentation of loosely-drafted bills which necessitates close scrutiny” (HC 2016). On this point, P. Davies explains that if there were another mechanism for blocking a flawed bill, without being able to allow MPs to set out their arguments in full, “nobody would hear another point of view. You would only hear one side” (Hansard 2016). From this point of view, the purpose of the filibuster, apart from “killing” a bill, is to scrutinise the weaknesses of the proposals, all of which need to be improved, and only procedural activism allows real legislative control. By self-proclaiming the heir of the “past master of talking out bills on a Friday<sup>24</sup>”, Philip Davies creates a genealogical shortcut to present himself as a rebel using the same rebellious methods as his late colleague. Not only did Forth and Davies turn the filibuster into a trademark of rebellious conservative groups (compared to the almost non-existent Labour filibusters) but also into a vehicle for right-wing mode of expression. The metaphor of a filibustering lineage is reinforced by the ideological similarities shared by Eric Forth who saw himself as a libertarian, hard-right MP and the Conservative filibusterers mentioned earlier, who were identified as conservative right-wing libertarians who made “talking out” their speciality. The ideological affinities and the equal frequency and intensity of their filibustering efforts give Philip Davies, Christopher Chope (nicknamed the “Chopper” for his extensive use of the filibuster), Peter Bone, Jacob Rees-Mogg and David Nuttall among oth-

ers the characteristics of the “Awkward Squad”. Like Eric Forth who belonged to two neo-liberal Thatcherite Eurosceptic groups (No Turning Back and Conservative Way Forward), the Conservative filibusterers mentioned in this study almost all belong or used to belong to anti-EU, social conservative or libertarian groups (Common Sense Group, ERG, Cornerstone Group).

- 23 By creating a filibustering lineage, right-wing filibusterers are able to demonstrate their doctrinal views, as if the mere fact of resorting to this practice were enough to convey an ideological message. However, unlike an “object procedure”, the filibuster requires the skills of an orator, even of a stage performer. The very nature of the filibuster is spectacular. It is not uncommon for filibustering MPs to use humour and dramatisation to take up as much time as possible to make their speeches stand out in order to enhance the reception of their message.
- 24 During the debate on Jeff Smith's Medical Cannabis (Access) Bill, Mark Fletcher expressed support for Katherine Fletcher's filibuster in a manner that was both supportive and somewhat obsequious. This led to a notable humorous remark from Katherine Fletcher, who thanked her colleague while “reassuring the House that it's not just a family name they have in common” (Hansard 2021b). Then, during the same session, the (perhaps deliberate) use of unparliamentary language by Sally-Ann Hart prompted the Chair to remind her of the basic parliamentary rules, turning the situation into a running gag. As a Member of Parliament, Sally-Ann Hart was expected to be cognizant of the fundamental parliamentary rule concerning the avoidance of direct address with the personal pronoun ‘you’ (Erskine May 2019). She used it several times in one of her comments, and the Chair duly reminded her of the rule and painstakingly explained it to her. The Member of Parliament resumed her speech, apologising profusely, and then used the offending pronoun again, which prompted an interruption and some laughter. The Chair again set about explaining the rule at length. The MP, Sally-Ann Hart, took the floor again and commented on the rule, acknowledging its validity. Then the MP Jane Hunt, in support of Mrs Hart, took the floor and used the pronoun ‘you’, which again triggered an interruption and laughter that gave way to another series of formal apologies. The comedy and theatricality of the scene is undeniable, with the form of the message clearly

taking precedence over the substance. The purpose of dramatising the sequence is to put the spotlight on both the MPs and their action (the filibuster). Sometimes the theatricality of the scene is taken to the extreme. The media commented extensively on a scene involving Jacob Rees-Mogg, who began his filibuster by reciting a poem on a mug from his childhood (Hansard 2010). The more theatrical the filibuster, the more likely it is to be picked up by the media and thus reflect in one way or another on the filibusterer.

- 25 Undeniably, a correlation exists between the spectacular nature of a filibuster and the strength of the (ideological) message being conveyed. However, for Davies, the visibility offered by the theatricality of the filibuster must not be utilised as an act of self-promotion. Philip Davies deplores that “They [MPs] have to be seen to be doing something. I detest the fact that politicians always have to look as if they are doing something” (Hansard 2015a). In his view, MPs introduce bills in order to show that they are active in their role as representatives of their constituents' interests, and use the legislative process simply to send a signal to their electorate without actually seeking to “pass legislation to bring something into the law of the land” (Hansard, 2015c). We can only note the contradiction in Davies' arguments. When he says that his colleagues “bring forward a private Members' Bill or support a private Members' Bill [it is] on the basis that it would send a signal” (Hansard 2015c), he says nothing about the message or messages that he himself sends by using the filibuster and the self-serving use that he can make of a debate on a PMB.
- 26 The filibusterers identified above follow a pattern in the use of the filibuster. When the theatricality or even the aggressive form of their filibuster is taken to extremes, they are seeking to send out a clear ideological signal. Two themes are often present in their filibuster: the rejection of state intervention (“it is for people to sort out themselves. It is not for the government to do something about it” (Hansard 2015b) and anti-socialism (“so many socialist, nanny-state proposals” (Hansard 2018)). To illustrate this point, Conservative supporters of the filibuster prevented a vote on bills to make hospital parking free for carers (Hospital Parking Charges (Exemption for carers) Bill, 2015), or to strengthen tenants' rights against their landlords (The Tenancies (Reform) Bill, 2014), to ban upskirting (Voyeurism (Offences) Bill, 2018) and a bill to limit NHS privatisation while en-

sure government accountability for the NHS (National Health Service (Amended Duties and Powers) Bill 2015). Moreover, Christopher Chope's opposition to this proposal (punishing upskirting) was immediately condemned by his own party, which hastened to pass the law through the usual legislative process. This action demonstrated the ideological nature of Chope's actions, as he acted alone against the advice of his own government; thereby demonstrating that his convictions take precedence and that he cast himself as rebel. This is also the case when filibusterers denounce PMBs that call for ever more state intervention and advocate local action and reliance on the voluntary sector (Hansard 2015f) rather than putting up with “central government diktat” (Hansard 2015e) or succumbing to “bursts of socialism” (Hansard 2015d), deploring that “it is always necessary for the state to come in a heavy-handed way and get rid of all the good work” (Hansard 2015g).

- 27 In essence, filibustering is a way “to be seen to be doing something”, not necessarily working in the interest of one's constituents but to increase one's visibility and to promote one's ideological principles. With this type of action on the part of MPs, i.e. interrupting the speaker or filibustering, the objectives and effects sought by the MP are varied. They may seek to denounce a proposal deemed unfair or contrary to the interests of the majority, to draw attention to debatable points, to control government action, or to send a signal to their party or constituents. It is through these mechanisms of interruption and filibustering that we can better understand the different roles of MPs and the notion of political representation.

## 3. Representation

### 3.1. Legislative roles

- 28 The use of interruptions and filibusters can be seen as indicative of the role that MPs have elected to perform as parliamentarians. It is of significant consequence for them to multiply interruptions or filibusters. This is why it is relevant to discuss MPs' roles that “can be viewed as regular patterns of behaviour by institutional framework in which parliamentarians operate” (Strøm 1997: 157). The use of interruptions and filibusters demonstrates a typical behaviour, a deliber-

ate action, an effort that mobilises resources and strategies on the part of MPs. This kind of action requires some degree of expertise, talent, know-how and time in order to achieve the desired effects which are measurable in relation to the position held by the MPs, as well as their reputation and media capital. There is no denying that this use of resources serves specific objectives and outcomes that provide some indication of a particular role as a parliamentarian. These characteristics of the role of MPs align with Strøm's concept of "games plans that help MPs align their employment of resources with their objectives" (Strøm 1997: 158). As previously illustrated, those who employ interruptions and filibustering tactics exploit the established rules and practices of the House to circumvent or even subvert them in order to achieve a desired outcome and effect (Toby 2012). These roles and behavioural strategies can be classified into different categories and serve a variety of purposes. These roles are complex and more difficult to identify than those of leaders or ministers (position roles<sup>25</sup>). The role of the MP is less constrained by his or her status (Searing 1994), is more fluid (preference role<sup>26</sup>) and can even evolve according to the situation during the term of office (Wahlke et al. 1962: 17-18) or according to institutional rules and culture (Searing 1995 : 419), but also according to the personality of the MP (Mutz 2009). It is the ambivalent position of the MP that can influence his or her choice of role. Indeed, the position of MPs within Parliament is complex. Their political existence depends both on the party which decides on the selection of the candidate for MP and, above all, on the votes of the voters in the MP's constituency (Norton 2001: 28). It can thus be argued that the role of MPs in their duty of representation in the House of Commons is multifaceted and, at times, conflicting. They may then choose to represent the interests, policies and even ideology of the party as a priority. Alternatively, they may decide to represent the interests of their constituency first, sometimes at the cost of being at odds with the party line. Additionally, they may also seek to be (re)selected and elected by giving priority to self-representation (Crew 2015: 98).

29 In accordance with Donald Searing's typology of legislative roles<sup>27</sup> (Searing 1994), it is possible to categorise the roles of filibusterers and interrupters according to the type of representation they have chosen. MPs who use interruptions and filibusters are clearly identi-

fied as 'Policy Advocates', who are primarily concerned with exerting influence over the policies that the government is going to pursue (Searing 1994). In this category, many MPs are 'Generalists' who seek to control government action by seeking as much visibility as possible (for example, to have their name in the press). They act "as a gadfly to keep stinging the executive to do the things that you consider necessary to keep the executive under constant supervision" (Searing 1994: 53). 'Generalists' use publicity to highlight issues while trying to influence public opinion through parliamentary channels. It is also through this way of controlling government action that they can influence the prioritisation of certain subjects (agenda setting) or the cancellation of a bill. Still in the same category of 'Policy Advocates', filibusterers include (mainly) 'Ideologues' who try to promote abstract and often radical political ideas (Searing 1994 : 55). In both cases, the aim is to enhance one's visibility, which is likely to increase the electability of MPs (Franklin / Norton 1993: 109; Bowler 2010) or contribute to their appointment to ministerial posts. This can be defined as self-representation. It is evident that the role of MPs can be, in certain circumstances, multiple, changing and complex, combining two roles aimed at satisfying two different objectives. Interruptions and delaying tactics (filibuster) are used in sessions dedicated to the expression of backbenchers. PMQs and PMBs are forums dedicated to promoting the interests of constituencies. What links the various roles examined above is precisely local representation, even for the Ideologues (mentioned above), who to some extent advocate local intervention and responsibilities to the detriment of increased state intervention. During these sessions, MPs refer directly to their own constituencies or, as is often the case, to specific individuals in their constituency. Again according to Searing's typology, the vast majority of MPs behave during these sessions as Constituency Members, i.e. "as agents to protect and advance the interests of ordinary citizens from their constituencies, redressing grievances" (Searing 1994: 57). These Constituency Members use PMQs and PMBs to defend the interests of their constituents or at least show that they are active and engaged legislators working for their constituents<sup>28</sup>. It is not uncommon during PMQs or PMBs for an MP's role as a Constituency Member to be emphasised by other MPs<sup>29</sup>.

## **3.2. MPs: the voice of the people**