

# *Topic Management at Question Time: Contextual Constraints*

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies the language produced at Question Time in the House of Commons. Following Hasan (Halliday & Hasan 1985/1989), it will be argued that contextual factors influence in a very special way the choices MPs make at the level of discourse organization, and in particular the strategies they use in topic management. Meta-linguistic expressions and topic marking devices, rather infrequent and marked in informal conversation, are present in the genre of oral questions in the House of Commons. At the same time, every intervention in the House has to follow the rules of the Erskine May code, which means, in a genre as aggressive as Question Time, using a high number of politeness strategies. In this context, MPs use politeness strategies for a double function: to mitigate the threatening activity on the one hand, and to organize the discourse and the development of the topic on the other.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article <sup>1</sup> will attempt to study the influence of the institutional context of Parliament on textual organization and more specifically on topic management in the spoken genre of Question Time in the House of Commons <sup>2</sup>.

## 2. CONTEXT

### 2.1. *Theoretical background*

Leckie-Tarry (1993:40) identifies two major groups of studies which in the Hallidayan tradition relate a text with its context: those which focus on the study of register, and those which focus on the study of genre:

The term 'register' tends to be the more neutral, generalized and embracing term, having a wider currency in the language teaching area, and a stronger historical basis. It tends to suggest a focus on the linguistic side of the text-context paradigm, on patterns of lexis and syntax rather than on discourse structure or textual organization, and on sections of discourse smaller than the whole text. 'Genre', in contrast, has the force of suggesting the priority of the context as a 'conventionalized occasion' over linguistic forms and patterns, the text as a complete event, with formalized organizational schemata.

This article falls within the scope of genre studies. The research line postulated by Hasan (Halliday & Hasan 1985/1989) allows the analyst to study the relationship between the context and the overall organization of texts.

Hasan (*ibid.*) works with Halliday's concept of Context of Situation and the variables of Field, Tenor and Mode:

The FIELD OF DISCOURSE refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place (...)

The TENOR OF DISCOURSE refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles (...)

The MODE OF DISCOURSE refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation (...)(Halliday & Hasan 1985/1989:12)

In relation with these parameters, Hasan introduces the concept of Contextual Configuration (CC) (*op. cit.* 55):

A CC is a specific set of values that realises field, tenor, and mode.(...) We need the notion of CC for talking about the structure of the text because it is the specific features of a CC –the values of the variable– that permit statements about the text's structure. ... a CC can predict the OBLIGATORY (1) and the OPTIONAL (2) elements of a text's structure as well as their SEQUENCE (3 and 4) vis-à-vis each other and the possibility of their ITERATION (5).

The characteristics of the CC of a text directly influence the text structure, in both its obligatory and its optional elements, as well as the order in which they appear. This influence is so evident that a direct relationship can

be established between a text's CC and its genre (*op. cit.* 63). Thus, it becomes possible to talk about the structure potential of a given genre, or its Generic Structure Potential.

Martin's approach to context (1992) is similar to Hasan's (*ibid.*), in «the correlation proposed between schematic structure and field, mode and tenor options; for both Martin and Hasan, staging redounds with social context» (1992:505). However, Martin's approach differs from Hasan's in that (*ibid.*) «there is a network of relationships underlying register which relates text types to each other in ways they cannot be inter-related considered from the perspective of any one register variable». Martin argues that Hasan's view associates text structure and genre mainly with the field variable: «obligatory elements of structure appear to derive from field, with variations in generic structure controlled by tenor and mode. This means that there is a very strong association between field, text structure and genre.» (*op. cit.* 504).

However, this is not totally the case, because Hasan (*op. cit.* 56) insists that in order to define a Contextual Configuration «we need to see the total set of features –all the selected values of the three variables– as one configuration, rather than attempting to relate aspects of the text's structure to individual 'headings'». Nevertheless, Martin's views about genre as «a pattern of register patterns» can be illuminating (*op. cit.* 507).

## 2.2. Contextual Configuration of Question Time

This article aims at establishing the influence of the parliamentary context of Question Time on text structure and topical management. Thus, it seems priority to define the genre of Question Time in terms of its Contextual Configuration. First of all, Question Time is to be distinguished from various other parliamentary genres. Question Time refers to the space of time in the House of Commons from Monday to Thursday, from two thirty to three thirty, in which Members of Parliament from both sides of the House, Government and Opposition, can put questions to Members of the Government benches. (For the sake of simplicity, no distinction will be made here between Prime Minister Question Time and ordinary questions, and written questions will not be considered at all. This study refers to oral questions exclusively).

The **FIELD** of the genre, following the indications from Erskine May's *Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament* (1989:287), is asking for (and giving) information about the government of the country, and pressing for action. However, in reality, as Silk<sup>3</sup> notes (1989:185), the main activity of Question Time is challenging the Ministers or MPs of the other party, and congratulating the MPs (or Ministers) of one's own.

The procedure of the questions is extremely formal. Questions for oral answer are delivered to the clerks at the Table in writing, a fortnight before they are actually answered. This means that the person to whom the question is directed can prepare the answer carefully. Initial questions are never formulated orally. The Speaker calls the question number, and then the answer to that question is delivered orally. Immediately after this initial exchange, the Speaker calls upon the MP who put the first question to make a supplementary, and then other members of both sides of the House to ask further supplementary questions. Once these are resolved, the Speaker moves on to another question, and the procedure is repeated.

From the point of view of the content, initial questions are usually bland, in the sense that they do not surprise anyone, and are somewhat out of date. However, supplementary questions are usually aggressive. As Silk (*op. cit.* 185) explains,

The minister is briefed by civil servants about the potential supplementaries but has to think quickly to respond to awkward points, and it is here that backbenchers hope to shine on the occasions when they catch a minister unawares or are able to expose an area of policy which is embarrassing to the government.

Another important issue with respect to topic is that a supplementary question must only refer to the answer out of which it immediately arises. The main topic of the initial question must be maintained, or else the Speaker will interrupt the MP making the supplementary.

The **TENOR** of the genre is constituted by the relationships between MPs and members of the Government. The main issue to consider is **Power differential**. In Question Time, almost every speaker (or potential speaker) has the same power. It is true that MPs have the right to ask questions which can be a source of trouble for Ministers, but Ministers can answer aggressively as well. Moreover, they have the possibility of not answering a given question, if they do not wish to do so.

The **Social Distance** between all Members of Parliament is great, institutionalized, and regulated through Erskine May's Procedure. The reason is explained by Boulton, former Clerk of the House, (1992:8) when he notes that «The whole character of proceedings in the Chamber is adversarial», and therefore «some rules of order or self-restraint are required». MPs and Ministers have to talk to each other not as private individuals, but as official representatives: «no Member should refer to another by name. Each Member must be distinguished by the office he holds, by the place he represents or by other designations (...)» (May 1989:380). Similarly, as a means to achieve indirectness, all questions and answers are not directed to the real interlocutor, but to Madam Speaker. By so doing «Personalities are kept at arm's length» (Boul-

ton *ibid.*). Silk's (1989:92) commentary to this rule is that «This form of circumlocution does give a breathing space for the MP speaking, and perhaps does something to avoid personal abuse».

A third important element to consider within the Tenor is the party to which MPs and Ministers belong. MPs of the same party are, in principle, political *friends*, and when they interact their main aim is to support the hearer's Face, and so to create solidarity. This type of interaction abounds with what Brown and Levinson (1978, 1989) have termed «positive politeness strategies». On the other hand, MPs of different parties are, a priori, political *enemies*, and the main aim of their political interaction is to attack the other's political Face. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a high density of what Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) have called «Face-Threatening Acts»<sup>4</sup>.

I shall consider now the **MODE**. In Question Time the language role is constitutive. The medium presents some difficulties in its definition, because it has a mixed nature. Interaction is predominantly oral, with the exception of the initial adjacency pair: the first question is written, and the first answer is probably prepared in writing to be delivered orally. The oral debate that emerges from the initial question is not necessarily natural and spontaneous.

Supplementary questions can be prepared in advance, and it is a fact that Ministers try to foresee every possible supplementary, and sometimes even rehearse them. Nevertheless, it is *impossible to foresee the course* of the debate, and the degree of spontaneity probably increases as MPs are called on to make supplementaries. Therefore, the result is half-way between spontaneous and prepared language.

Language in Question Time is subject to Erskine May's rules of form. The questions must not be too long, and must not contain offensive expressions (May 1989:287). The questions and answers have to be formulated in what May has called «parliamentary language» (*op. cit.* 380): «Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Parliamentary language is never more desirable than when a Member is canvassing the opinions and conduct of his opponents in debate». This norm, together with the rules designed to maintain the distance between the speakers, result in the occurrence of a type of language which is highly institutionalized, rich in conventionalized terms of address, politeness strategies and formulas.

Finally, text structure and topic management are conditioned by time constraints. Members of Parliament are aware of the fact that when they hold the floor, they only have seconds to speak. This chronological difficulty leads to the production of a type of speech remarkably structured and compact.

### 3. TOPIC

#### 3.1. *Theoretical Background*

In order to identify the organization of the genre of Question Time with respect to Topic, it is necessary to agree on some brief theoretical considerations about the concept of Topic itself.

The main concern of this study is the concept of Discourse Topic, and the means or strategies used by MPs to mark Topic change or Topic development. The notion adopted in this article is van Dijk's Topic of discourse or Topic of conversation (1977), which works with the concept of «aboutness»: «ABOUTNESS (...) should be established in (con-) textual terms, perhaps in such a way that a discourse or a passage of the discourse is about something if this something is referred to by most phrases with topic function» (1977:119).

Van Dijk explains (*op. cit.*133-4) that «a concept or a conceptual structure (a proposition) may become a discourse topic if it HIERARCHICALLY ORGANIZES the conceptual (propositional) structure of the sequence». There is a Discourse Topic, which is global, covering a whole passage, and within it there can be more Local Topics, or Sub-topics, which are related to the Discourse Topic, usually as a part of it.

In the case of the genre of Question Time, the problem of deciding what is the discourse topic of the question is solved by the Hansard editors. At the beginning of each question, the editors write what they consider the question is about. This will be accepted as the Topic of the whole text. The different topics related to this Discourse Topic introduced in the supplementary questions will be called Local Topics or Sub-topics.

With respect to **topic change**, many authors have investigated the differences between the genre of informal conversation and other types of more formal genres. It has often been noted that in informal conversation the use of meta-language in textual and topic organization is considered infrequent, and is a marked option. Van Dijk (*op. cit.*140), for example, says that

Changes of topic are subject to certain constraints within the same discourse or conversation. Whereas in casual everyday conversations topics may follow each other without much of a systematic connection (often a common argument or predicate is sufficient as a condition of change: ...), topic sequencing in discourses following stricter conventional rules must satisfy a number of conditions similar to those determining the linear connection and coherence of sentences.

Levinson (1983:313) quoting Sacks (1971, April 5), comments that «the relative frequency of marked topic shifts (...) is a measure of a 'lousy' conversation».

On the other hand, in genres such as business conversations, the most frequent method of textual organization is metalanguage (Stalpers 1992). In daily spoken discourse, the use of metalanguage to introduce a new topic can be seen as aggressive, and even manipulating. However, in business conversations metalanguage is seen, rather, as a bald-on-record strategy, in a context in which time is money. Efficiency and organization are valued over subtlety.

### 3.2. *Topic management in Question Time. An example*

The main aim of this paper is to study how the CC of Question Time influences the choices at topic. For this purpose, one question has been selected among the hundreds of questions that occur yearly at Question Time<sup>5</sup>. It is Question 4 of 27 January 1993, directed to the Secretary of State for the Environment. The Discourse Topic of the whole exchange is Local Government Corruption. For the purposes of analysis, this question was preferred to others because of its length. Some oral questions are four turns long, which is not enough to show clearly the type of topic organization used in the genre. This question, however, consists of 11 speakers and 29 turns, which allow for complex organizational relations. (For the sake of brevity I will concentrate on the first ten turns, which are reproduced in the Appendix).

Question 4 of 27 January was opened by two initial questions in writing, the reason being that both questions (4 and 7) refer to the same topic. This fact, together with the nature of the discourse topic itself, corruption, announces the potential aggressiveness of the exchange.

Mr. Riddick and Mr. Batiste, both Conservative MPs, ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Mr. Howard, about the possibility of taking action to cut corruption in local governments. Mr. Howard gives a typical answer without too much content, which opens the turn of supplementaries. Mr. Riddick and Mr. Batiste are the first ones to be called. Both speakers denounce corruption in local Labour governments, thus producing indirect attacks against the Labour party. Mr. Howard agrees with them. Immediately afterwards, the Speaker calls on two Labour MPs, Mr. Fraser and Mr. Keith Hill, who defend the Labour position, always within the same general topic. Mr. Howard answers their questions rejecting their defence. (The debate between both sides of the House continues, but for the purposes of this article these ten turns are enough).

In the third turn, Mr. Riddick uses his supplementary to enumerate a series of accusations against the local Labour governments. He articulates his turn in two moves. (I will use the term *Move*, after my own modified version of Tsui (1994), in the sense of each of the parts in which a speaker divides his/her intervention (see Pérez de Ayala 1996). In each move, the discourse takes a new direction and the speaker develops a new function). The first move is the enumeration of cases of corruption:

**Turn 3.— Mr. Riddick: (Move 1)** Nepotism in Monklands, a £10 million fraud in Lambeth, mismanagement in Sheffield, a £40 million fraud in Hackney and yet more probably to come out –yet the same councils forever demand more money from the Government. Is that not a disgrace? (...)

The topic is «Corruption in local governments is a disgrace». However, Mr. Riddick elaborates on his turn, presenting in a second move the topic of the consequences of corruption: «Corruption is betraying the poorest people in society». This second move carries a topic shift, always within the same discourse topic. Interestingly, this topic shift is introduced by means of an interrogative that contains two politeness strategies, Positive Politeness 4 «Use in-group identity markers», and Positive Politeness 5 «Seek agreement»:

**Turn 3.— Mr. Riddick: (...)** (Move 2) Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that grossly incompetent management by Labour authorities is not only ripping off local poll tax payers, but hitting and betraying the poorest people in all society who so depend on the services provided by those local authorities?

Turn 4 corresponds to Mr. Howard's answer, an agreement with Mr. Riddick's accusation. Turn 5 conveys the next supplementary question, by Mr. Batiste, also accusing the Labour party. Both turns, 4 and 5, only have one move, with no topic development.

Turn 6 contains Mr. Howard's answer to Mr. Batiste's question, with two moves and a topic change. Mr. Howard begins his turn agreeing with Mr. Batiste's accusation to the Labour party:

**Turn 6.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** My hon. Friend makes a typically shrewd and important point – [*Interruption*] What he says is entirely accurate. (...)

However, there is a sudden change of style, which coincides with a change of the topic, due to the interruption. The Hansard transcription does not indicate who interrupts, but we can guess that it is probably the comments of the Labour party. Unhesitatingly, Mr. Howard stops talking about corruption, and censures Labour MPs' attitude severely:

**Turn 6.— Mr. Howard: (...)** (Move 2) I should have thought that on this one question today we might see some signs of humility in the Labour party instead of the reaction of the past few minutes.

Influenced by the situation, Mr. Howard produces a very sudden topic change. Once more, in the topic change –which is simultaneously a change of move– there occurs a politeness strategy, this time Off record 14 «Displace the Hearer».

The following adjacency pair introduces a question by a Labour MP, Mr.



Fraser, who attempts to defend Labour authorities from corruption. Mr. Fraser's turn is an example of good structuring in three moves. The first introduces the topic of the defence, with the conjunctive adjunct «First»:

**Turn 7.— Mr. Fraser: (Move 1)** The Secretary of State will be aware that our interests are those of voters, of tenants and of consumers. First, will he confirm that the allegations in the chief executive's report on Lambeth are not principally against councillors? (...)

The second move comprises a topic shift, an attack to the government audit service. The move is marked with an explicit signal, the adjunct «Secondly», and strategy number 1 of negative politeness, «Be conventionally indirect»:

**Turn 7.— Mr. Fraser: (...)** (Move 2) Secondly, what on earth has the audit service been doing for the past 10 years? It was quick enough to surcharge councillors over political acts. Why on earth has not the audit service, with a growing budget, been able to deal with the matters contained in the chief executive's report? (Move 3) Will the Secretary of State look at the way in which the audit service has considered these matters as well as at the principal issues involved?

The third move, in which Mr. Fraser asks for action with respect to the functioning of the audit service, presents no topic shift. Summarizing, turn 7 is carefully structured in three moves, with a topic shift after the first one, introduced by a combination of metalanguage and politeness strategies.

Mr. Howard responds in two moves —first, to the request for action concerning the audit service, promising to do something; and then criticising Mr. Fraser for his actions as an MP— which form a very brief turn with a topic change in the middle. This topic change is introduced by strategy number 5 of negative politeness, «Give deference»:

**Turn 8.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** I shall look at all relevant aspects of the matter. (Move 2) The hon. Gentleman might have done better to ask what he, as a Member of Parliament for Lambeth, was doing for the past 10 years.

In the following turn Mr. Keith Hill, Labour MP, produces three moves, which constitute a second attempt to defend the Labour position, certainly subtler than the previous one. The first move is an evaluation of the measures taken by the Conservatives. The topic, Mr. Hill's ideas on corruption. The second move introduces a topic shift, protection to Lambeth employees. There is still another topic shift, with the third move, which is a proposal to the Conservatives to accept part of the responsibility in the cases of corruption. Each of the moves, and hence each of the topic shifts, is introduced by a question, due to the obligation within the genre of Question Time to formulate

questions. These questions, or rather, interrogatives, become formulaic politeness strategies, (strategies number 2 of negative politeness «Question, hedge»):

**Turn 9.— Mr. Keith Hill: (Move 1)** Will the Secretary of State accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Ms. Hoey) and I recognise that the initiative that he has taken is inevitable, and that Labour Members will not tolerate fraud and maladministration, wherever and whenever it may occur? **(Move 2)** Can he ensure that, in all inquiries which may be undertaken, full protection is afforded to the many Lambeth employees who have sought to do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay in difficult circumstances? **(Move 3)** Does he recognise that the paramount concern is for firm and fast action by both the Government and the council in cooperation, because both agencies have allowed the matter to persist for far too long?

In summary, three moves which develop local topics, introduced by politeness strategies.

In T10, Mr. Howard responds to these three moves with another three, which mirror the three local topics proposed by Mr. Hill. In the first one Mr. Howard thanks Mr. Hill for his evaluation of the Conservative action. In the second he reassures Mr. Hill about employees' protection. Finally, in the third move he rejects all responsibility in the cases of corruption:

**Turn 10.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** I welcome the first part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. **(Move 2)** I am sure that the police will give careful consideration when protection is necessary and appropriate. **(Move 3)** As far as responsibility for such matters is concerned, it was the Labour council of the London borough of Lambeth which got into this mess, and it is that council which must get out of it.

From the point of view of topic management, replies in Question Time are more complex than questions. An MP putting a question –as Mr. Hill in turn 9– is under the obligation to produce interrogatives which, as has been seen, are used as one of the means to introduce topic shift. In the case of the replies to questions, however, MPs do not have the help of interrogatives, and have to resort to different strategies. In the first move of turn 10, Mr. Howard uses strategy number 15 of positive politeness, «I welcome ...» («Give gifts to H»), and also metalanguage, «the first part». In the second move, Positive politeness strategy number 15 is used again, «I am sure that...». The third move is introduced with metalanguage, «As far as responsibility for such matters is concerned».

#### 4. INFLUENCE OF THE CC OF QUESTION TIME ON TEXTUAL ORGANIZATION

The analysis has shown how politeness strategies introduce new topics and how they signal topic shifts in the genre of Question Time. At this point it becomes necessary to recapitulate the actual influence of the contextual configuration of Question Time, described above, on the choices made by MPs at the level of topic management. The influence of each of the contextual factors could be summarized in the following points (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Influence of the contextual factors on the strategies used for Topic Management in Question Time.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	↔ TOPIC MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
<p>I. (FIELD) Asking for and giving information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Adjacency pair organization</li> <li>– Questions: Topic introduction through interrogatives</li> <li>– Answers: Topic introduction through metalanguage and politeness strategies</li> </ul>
<p>II. (TENOR) Erskine May's rules of order and self-restraint</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Politeness strategies and special forms of address in the introduction of moves and topic shifts.</li> </ul>
<p>III. (MODE) Erskine May's rules of turn length and of form (parliamentary language)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Abrupt and marked topic changes</li> <li>– Use of politeness strategies to introduce topic.</li> </ul>

– The Field of Question Time (asking for and giving information about the government of the country) produces an adjacency pair organization. Topics are introduced by interrogatives in questions, while answers are organized with metalanguage and politeness strategies, reflecting each of the topic shifts introduced by the interrogatives.

– Within the Tenor, the relationship between MPs is regulated by Erskine May's rules of self-restraint. These rules result in the production of politeness strategies and special forms of address in the introduction of moves and topic shifts.

– With respect to the Mode, there are a number of norms in Erskine May that attempt to control turn length as well as the type of language produced in the Chamber. Time constraints result in short turns, and in the production of abrupt and marked topic shifts. These are often introduced by politeness strategies, in an effort to produce «parliamentary language».

## 5. CONCLUSION

MPs in Question Time are obliged to produce very short turns, but very elaborate and highly organized with respect to topic. Topic shifts are frequent, very abrupt, and are usually introduced by two types of elements: metalanguage, and Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

This type of marked topic development is clearly the result of Question Time contextual constraints: MPs have to abide by a very precise discourse topic. Whatever topic shifts or developments they introduce have to be relevant to the topic. Due to the scarcity of time, topic shifts are extremely abrupt, as in business conversations, and have to be marked by metalanguage.

The appearance of politeness formulas and strategies is due to the requirements of May's procedure, that the language must be parliamentary, that is, moderate. In this genre MPs use politeness strategies for a double function: on the one hand, to follow May's rules, and make the interaction smoother; on the other, to manage the topic.

## APPENDIX

Question 4, 27 January 1993.

**Turn 1.— Mr. Riddick: (Move 1)** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will launch an initiative to cut corruption in local government.

**Turn 1.— Mr. Batiste: (Move 1)** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what representations he has received about local government corruption; and if he will make a statement.

**Turn 2.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** I am extremely concerned about recent reports of corruption in local government. I have every confidence that they will be investigated thoroughly by the Audit Commission and by the police. My officials have today written to Lambeth council in respect of breaches of competition legislation. I shall consider what action to take in the light of its reply.

**Turn 3.— Mr. Riddick: (Move 1)** Nepotism in Monklands, a £10 million fraud in Lambeth, mismanagement in Sheffield, a £40 million fraud in Hackney and yet more probably to come out – yet the same councils forever demand more money from the Government. Is that not a disgrace? **(Move 2)** Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that grossly incompetent management by Labour authorities is not only ripping

off local poll tax payers, but hitting and betraying the poorest people in society who so depend on the services provided by those local authorities?

**Turn 4.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** My hon. Friend is, as usual, absolutely right. At the very time those practices were rife, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) was telling the Labour party conference:

«In Labour Local Government we are the voice and the face of the Labour Party in practice.»

**Turn 5.— Mr. Batiste: (Move 1)** Is not the root cause of the catalogue of scandals described by my hon. Friend the Member for Coine Valley (Mr. Riddick) the fact that in too many Labour councils full-time officers are being undermined by councillors trying to take over the day-to-day running of their departments, thereby undermining the officials and destroying good working practices? Is not meddling incompetence the reality of the face of the Labour party in power?

**Turn 6.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** My hon. Friend makes a typically shrewd and important point [Interruption] What he says is entirely accurate. **(Move 2)** I should have thought that on this one question today we might see some signs of humility in the Labour party instead of the reaction of the past few minutes.

**Turn 7.— Mr. Fraser: (Move 1)** The Secretary of State will be aware that our interests are those of voters, of tenants and of consumers. First, will he confirm that the allegations in the chief executive's report on Lambeth are not principally against councillors? **(Move 2)** Secondly, what on earth has the audit service been doing for the past 10 years? It was quick enough to surcharge councillors over political acts. Why on earth has not the audit service, with a growing budget, been able to deal with the matters contained in the chief executive's report? **(Move 3)** Will the Secretary of State look at the way in which the audit service has considered these matters as well as at the principal issues involved?

**Turn 8.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** I shall look at all relevant aspects of the matter. **(Move 2)** The hon. Gentleman might have done better to ask what he, as a Member of Parliament for Lambeth, was doing for the past ten years.

**Turn 9.— Mr. Keith Hill: (Move 1)** Will the Secretary of State accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Ms. Hoey) and I recognise that the initiative that he has taken is inevitable, and that Labour Members will not tolerate fraud and maladministration, wherever and whenever it may occur? **(Move 2)** Can he ensure that, in all inquiries which may be undertaken, full protection is afforded to the many Lambeth employees who have sought to do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay in difficult circumstances? **(Move 3)** Does he recognise that the paramount concern is for firm and fast action by both the Government and the council in co-operation, because both agencies have allowed the matter to persist for far too long?

**Turn 10.— Mr. Howard: (Move 1)** I welcome the first part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. **(Move 2)** I am sure that the police will give careful consideration when protection is necessary and appropriate. **(Move 3)** As far as responsibility for such matters is concerned, it was the Labour council of the London borough of Lambeth which got into this mess, and it is that council which must get out of it.

(...)

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> This article was written within the framework of the project «Articulación del tópico en inglés y en español», directed by Professor Angela Downing, in Madrid, and financed by the Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia. (DGICYT - PB94-0256). In the project the main concern was with informal, uncontrolled conversation, but for the sake of comparison more controlled types of discourse were considered.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Silk holds an administrative post in the House of Commons.

<sup>4</sup> Goatly (1994:150) also draws a relationship between politeness and the Tenor.

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