

PMQs

The cognoscenti around Westminster and Whitehall call Prime Minister's Questions PMQs. Every Wednesday afternoon, for half an hour, Mr Blair faces interrogation in the House of Commons. It used to be every Tuesday and Thursday, for a quarter of an hour on each day. That did not suit Mr Blair's convenience so he altered it, without prior consultation with the Opposition, the Speaker or anyone else. We may judge how this weekly parliamentary institution works by considering the PMQs on Wednesday February 9.

The highlight of PMQs is the setpiece challenge by the Leader of the Opposition, armed cap-à-pie in self-righteousness. I will leave that till the end. A mini-highlight is the challenge by the leader of the LibDems Mr Charles Kennedy, armed in fustian Scottish righteousness. He chose the plight of old age pensioners, of whom I happen to be one. He was not so crass as to use the term "old age pensioners"; he deferentially called us "pensioners". This is in line with the modern practice of referring to "older" people, rather than old people (which is what we are). This year, believe it or not, is the International Year of Older Persons. Older than what? A child of three is older than a child of two.

Mr Kennedy had two points. Why were we pensioners getting the measly rise of only 75p a week for the year 2000? What will happen to rural post offices if the pension is increasingly paid to bank accounts? Mr Blair retorted that we were getting a lot more than 75p. What about the £100 fuel allowance? What about the minimum income guarantee? Moreover, "pensioners over the age of 75 will get free television licences from autumn 2000. There are also, of course, free eye tests, the national concessionary bus fares scheme and the many other things that we have done for pensioners in this country". So that's all right.

On the post offices Mr Blair played the modernisation card. It would, he said, be wrong to stop the switch-over from paying benefits in cash to paying them into a bank account. "It would be absolutely absurd to have the technology to do that, to have invested in it and then to waste that technology. In respect of the rural post offices, I also put forward a number of things that will help them to deal with the new situation. If the Liberal Democrats are really saying that, even if we have the technology to pay money direct into people's bank accounts, we should not do so, I disagree with them."

A feature of PMQs since the general election in May 1997 has been the number of Labour back-benchers who spoon feed Mr Blair with questions he will relish answering. Here is one clever example from February 9.

Mr Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the working families tax credit benefits 1.5 million families by an average of £24 a week? Does he agree that, when the Tories have mastered that simple arithmetic, he can tell Archie to tell Michael to tell William, and that we shall see another U-turn?

Thus fed, Mr Blair launched a spirited attack on the Conservatives. It took up a few precious minutes of his half hour on the rack.

Modernisation let Mr Blair down when it came to his duel with the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Hague. In far-off Cardiff a confidence motion was about to be debated in Mr Blair's baby the Welsh Assembly. The man he parachuted in as Labour leader, Alun Michael, expected to lose it so he resigned before that could happen. New Labour's electronic pagers did not

inform Mr Blair of this dramatic event in time to stop him saying “I believe that the Welsh First Secretary is doing an excellent job and so does the Labour party”. Tory pagers were working more efficiently. Primed by one, Mr Hague leapt up.

Mr William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Will the Prime Minister comment on the fact that within moments of his expressing full confidence in the First Secretary in Wales . . . news came through to the House that the First Secretary had resigned, before the vote of confidence had taken place? [*Interruption.*] Will the Prime Minister confirm that that has happened, and if it has, will he confirm also that the next big test of devolution will be the choice of a new First Secretary without any interference whatever from the Prime Minister?

Mr Blair of course confirmed neither, limiting himself to an ill-humoured reference to “fun and games down at the Assembly”. Next day it was announced that the Labour Party in Wales had elected as their new leader Mr Rhodri Morgan, the man they wanted all along.

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