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A framework for the systematic analysis of evasion in parliamentary discourse

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Abstract

Evasion (equivocation) has been identified as a matter of concern in political interviews, but no systematic study has been undertaken in the context of parliamentary discourse, notably Question Time, anywhere in the world. This study applies and adapts various approaches on how politicians 'resist' answering questions, all of which are based on political news interviews, to the study of evasion in parliamentary discourse. A comprehensive, unified framework for the analysis of evasion is described, a decision flow-chart for the framework is provided, and an illustrative example of the applied framework is given based on Australia's Question Time. It involved the classification of responses as 'answers', 'intermediate responses', and 'evasions' based on specific criteria. Responses which were considered evasions were further analysed to determine the levels of evasion, whether they were covert or overt in nature and the types of 'agenda shifts' that occurred, if any. The corpus investigated consists of Australia's House of Representatives' Question Time transcripts, for the months of February and March 2003, on the specific issue of Iraq. The study provides empirical evidence that evasion does occur during parliamentary Question Time.

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1. Introduction

This article presents and describes a framework for the analysis of evasion in parliamentary Question Time, an area which has not been systematically studied anywhere in the world. The framework combines and modifies various approaches in the study of evasion or equivocation in political broadcast interviews, for which there have only been limited studies conducted so far, and applies this to another form of political communication, Question Time. While political interviews and Question Time are arguably different generic types of discourse, there is considerable overlap, particularly in terms of the politicians' motives and strategies of evasion. Wilson (1990), Harris (1991), Bull and Mayer (1993), Bull (1994) and Clayman (2001) provide useful procedures for the analysis of evasion but none offer a complete analytical framework. For instance, Wilson, Harris and Bull provide criteria for the identification of answers, intermediate answers and evasions, but do not offer procedures for the in-depth analysis of evasive responses. On the other hand, Clayman discusses various means by which evasive responses may be analysed but does not discuss criteria for identifying responses. This article provides a more comprehensive model that identifies evasive responses, the different levels at which evasion occurs, whether overt or covert practices are involved, and the types of agenda shifts in evasive responses.

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2. Background

2.1. Parliamentary discourse

Parliamentary discourse is a sub-genre of political discourse in general. The institution of Parliament, according to Bayley (2004), is dedicated to talk, with the primary activities of parliamentarians being debating, questioning and answering. Rodan (1983) regards Australia's House of Representatives as essentially a 'talk shop'. Parliamentary talk occurs in a number of contexts which, in turn, influence the nature of parliamentary discourse. Bayley (2004) explains that a parliamentarian might talk in a cooperative and informal manner in a committee, take on an adversarial stance in a full sitting in the chamber (of which Question Time is an example), or resort to threats or promises in the corridors of Parliament.

Based on the literature available, there appears to be a number of broad viewpoints on what constitutes parliamentary discourse. Van Dijk (2004) looks at parliamentary discourse in terms of its contextual properties, Bayley (2004) views parliamentary talk as a discourse model due to its distinctive characteristics whilst Harris (2001:453) argues that the House of Commons should be regarded as a community of practice, whereby new members undergo a gradual process of 'situated learning' before gaining full membership as experienced parliamentarians. Their views are part of the rapidly growing literature on parliamentary discourse, including recent studies on Iraq war discourses such as those carried out by Chouliaraki (2005) and Van Dijk (2005) which show the ongoing relevance of the present study which focuses on the Iraq issue. However, most of these studies focus on parliamentary debates and speeches. Very little analysis has been found of parliamentary Question Time discourse. Most of what is available is mainly or partly based on Britain's Prime Minister's Question Time (Wilson, 1990; Harris, 2001; Ilie, 2004; Chilton, 2004), with both Harris' and Ilie's studies focusing on the adversarial or confrontational nature of that discourse.

2.2. Australia's Question Time

In Australia, parliamentary Question Time is the most visible means of holding the Executive Government accountable for its actions. Questions without notice (asked during Question Time), in Australia's House of Representatives, are asked by Members of Parliament (MPs) and usually directed at Ministers regarding their portfolios. All Ministers are expected to be present to answer these questions. The forum is well attended by parliamentarians (Sinclair, 1982) since it "attracts a consistently high degree of media attention" (Kelly and Harris, 2001:2) and is the "most publicly-recognised event" in Australia's Parliament (Uhr, 1982:62). Australia's Question Time is part of a political system based on Britain's Westminster's system. The practice of asking questions without notice evolved 'ad hoc' in Australia and its House of Representatives formally adopted Standing Orders permitting such questions in 1950 (ed. Barlin, 1997). However, some significant differences have evolved in Australia.

In Australia's House of Representatives, Question Time occurs almost always at 2 p.m. on each sitting day, i.e. when Parliament is in session. It begins with the Speaker, who is in charge of proceedings, announcing 'Questions without Notice' and then asking whether there are any questions (House of Representatives infosheet, 2002). This is followed by members on either side (Government and Opposition MPs) standing up and seeking to attract the Speaker's attention. The first question is almost always asked by the Leader of the main Opposition party or his/her deputy, and the Speaker then calls for questions from both sides of the House (Government and Opposition) alternately (Sinclair, 1982; Solomon, 1986). Question Time ends when the Prime Minister, or a senior Minister in the Prime Minister's absence, requests that further questions be placed on the Notice Paper. These questions then become questions on notice. However, in Britain, prior notice is given to a Minister of questions that will be asked during Question Time, the exception being a special procedure (for questioning Ministers regarding urgent matters) known as the 'Private Notice Question' (House of Commons Information Office, 2003). Otherwise all other questions, whether oral or written, are on notice. Similar practices of placing all oral questions 'on notice' have also been adopted in India and New Zealand (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedures, 1986; Jaensch, 1992).

Some rules and regulations also differ between Australia's and UK's parliamentary systems. Relevant to this study is that the only rule governing answers in Australia's Question Time is that the answers should be relevant to the questions

asked (Parliament of Australia, 2006). The rules regarding answers in the British, Indian and New Zealand Parliaments are more detailed (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedures, 1986). However, there are similarities. Although parliamentary rules govern turn-taking procedures during Question Time, 'illegal interventions' such as ''jeering, cheering, calling out'' and laughter (Harris, 2001:462) seem to be tolerated in both the British and Australian systems. Party solidarity is expressed with each side cheering ''its own'' while jeering the ''other''. Conflicts sometimes arise during Question Time, the main reason being the adversarial nature of parliamentary discourse (Ilie, 2003; Bayley, 2004; Chilton, 2004). Commonly known as 'point-scoring' in Australia, both sides of the House, i.e. both the Government and the Opposition, have been accused of 'attacking' each other (Henderson, 1981; Jaensch, 1984, 1986, 1992; Solomon, 1986; Snell and Upcher, 2002; Uhr, 2002; Rasiah, 2006). One form of attack is the use of questions. Questions are ''part of a political battle in which party points are scored and personal or party glory pursued'' (Borthwick, 1993:103). Most questions asked by Opposition MPs are likely to contain a built-in hostility which often leads to evasion.

2.3. Evasions (evasive responses)

Dillon (1990:154) views evasion as a ''routine strategy for responding to a question without answering it''. Many others have also commented on the widely-held view that politicians equivocate or evade answering questions (Wilson, 1990; Harris, 1991; Bull and Mayer, 1993; Bull, 1994, 2003). A study on British political interviews conducted by Harris (1991) concludes that there is empirical evidence to justify this view.

2.4. Questions

Questions play an important role in the political process (Wilson, 1990; Harris, 1991; Bull, 1994); specifically in Parliament, news conferences and news interviews. Both Question Time and political interviews involve a basic question/answer framework where questions are asked and answers are expected (Harris, 1991). However, according to Harris (2001) and Chilton (2004), the question/answer framework, specified by the House of Commons' Circular, is not clearly obvious in practice due to the informal and interactive nature of Question Time. There are a number of factors that can influence the questions and therefore the types and nature of responses given. Hostile Opposition questions are more likely to be evaded since they are usually closed yes/no questions containing negative presuppositions. Wilson (1990:151) states that some yes/no questions have propositional contents that make them difficult to be answered directly with 'yes' or 'no', since such answers would ''indicate acceptance of many of the propositions attached to the question''. According to Chilton (2004:64), it requires ''effort to retrieve, formulate and challenge a presupposition''. Such questions contravene parliamentary rules, though they continue to be asked.

There are a number of different approaches to the study of questions. Relevant to this study is the common-sense approach, as propounded by Wilson (1990), which is basically similar to the structural approach used by Lyons (1977). Wilson identifies two main types of questions. The first type uses interrogative forms such as who, what, where, when and how (the 'Wh-questions') and the second has forms using particular ''grammatical movement rules'' that change ''subject auxiliary positions'' (Wilson, 1990:145), thus producing questions such as ''Is Mary X'' or ''Are they Y'' (the 'yes/no questions'). Included in the second type are those using modals such as can, could, should, will, etc. Bull (1994, 2003) also uses the structural approach for classifying questions mainly drawing on the works of Quirk et al. (1985). Another category of questions are the 'disjunctive' questions which require a choice between two or more alternatives (Quirk et al., 1985).

2.5. Responses

Generally, a question requires an answer but the choice of answers to yes/no questions is not always the simple 'yes' or 'no'. To overcome this problem Stubbs (1983) suggested a choice from a slot in a continuum, whereby 'yes' or 'no' answers are selected from a continuum which ranges between 'yes' and 'no' and 'positive certainty' and 'negative certainty'. For example, an answer such as ''I don't think so'' lies closer to the 'no' than to the 'yes' end of the continuum (Stubbs, 1983:106). Thus, any response to a yes/no question that provides information to the questioner, which helps him/her locate the answer within a slot in the yes/no continuum, is considered an answer. As for

Wh-questions, Wilson (1990:146) describes an appropriate answer in this context as presupposing ''an unknown variable which requires a value . . . selected from any one of a number of complex sets''. A 'where' question ''must normally be followed by a place'' and a 'when' question ''by a time adverbial'' (Stubbs, 1983:107).

However responses could also contain implicatures, or that which is inferred. Harris (1991) made a distinction between direct and indirect answers. Responses considered indirect answers, according to Harris (1991), contain the same information as for direct answers except that they are provided implicitly and not directly. Besides direct and indirect answers, there are responses, which occupy a position in between replies (answers) and non-replies (evasion), known as 'intermediate replies' (Bull, 1994, 2003).

3. Data

The data consists of question–answer pairs in Question Time transcripts as they appear in Hansard for the House of Representatives in the Australian Parliament in February and March 2003 dealing with the topic of 'Iraq'. It includes only Questions without Notice. These transcripts are freely available online. Additional answers for questions without notice were not included in the analysis because they do not have the spontaneity of the regular question–answer format. There were 48 Opposition questions and 39 Government questions. A number of these questions consisted of two or more sub-questions. Only this data was analysed because the main aim of this paper was to test the viability of the framework developed.

4. Procedure

Each question/sub-question was first categorized as either a 'Wh-question', a 'yes/no question' or a 'disjunctive' question. The response to each of these questions/sub-questions was then categorised as either an 'answer', an 'intermediate response' or an 'evasion'. Evasive responses were further sub-categorized according to the 'level of evasion', whether 'overt or covert practices' were involved, and the 'agenda shifts' that occurred in each. The framework for the systematic analysis of evasion in the form of a flowchart (Fig. 1) is provided together with an in-depth analysis of an evasive response drawn from Australia's federal House of Representatives' Question Time.
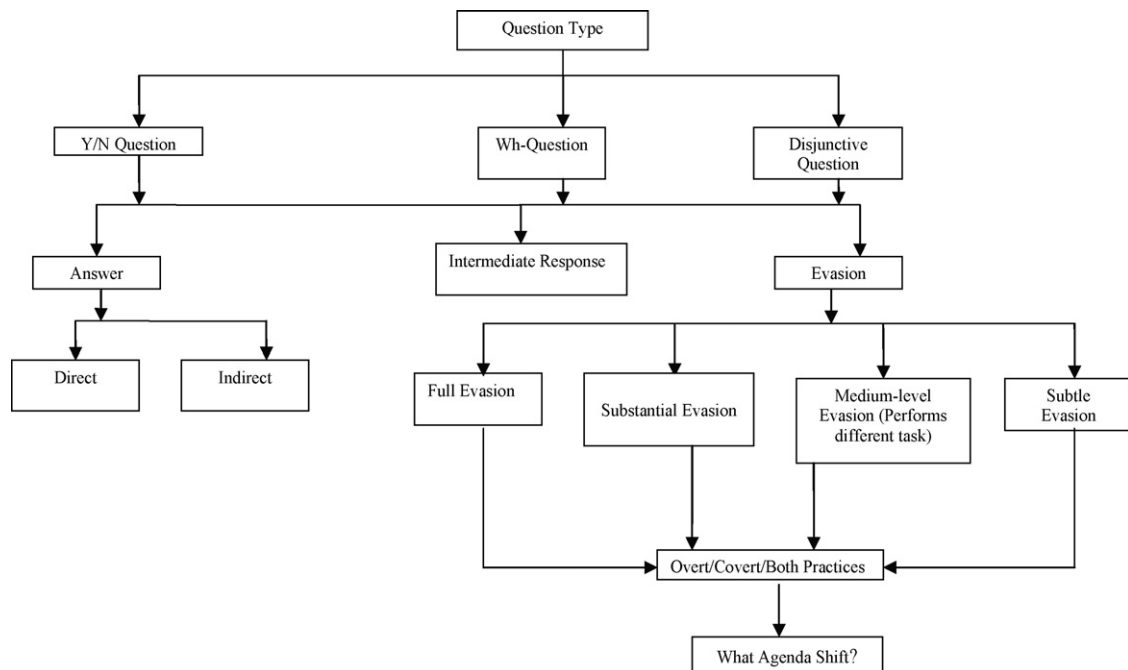

Fig. 1. Analytical framework for the study of evasion.

It is acknowledged that, in a given analysis, some of the categories described in this framework may not always present clear boundaries and can occasionally appear to overlap, thus creating difficulties for the analyst. Several strategies employed to minimise the problem, in this study, are explained below.

The following paragraphs describe the procedures involved based on the analytical framework in Fig. 1.

4.1. Questions and sub-questions

Each MP's turn in the questioning process consisted of either a single question, or one or more sub-questions. Frequently, Opposition MPs' turns consisted of two or more sub-questions and the study analysed each of these sub-questions separately. Analysis of an Opposition question consisting of a number of sub-questions was not a straightforward task, especially if these sub-questions were embedded with multiple presuppositions. Responses to such questions, usually lengthy, warranted careful analysis to clarify which parts satisfied the required criteria for what could be considered an answer, an intermediate response or an evasion to each sub-question. Occasionally, responses to questions with fuzzy category boundaries, specifically those with hostile presuppositions, were categorized as 'intermediate responses' partly to give the benefit of doubt to the respondents and partly because of other factors, as explained below (refer to section 4.3.2).

4.2. Question types

The first analytical step was to identify the type of question or sub-question asked – whether it was a Wh-question, a yes/no question, or a disjunctive question. Only these three categories of question-types were found in the data. The overwhelming majority of Government questions were single Wh-questions beginning with the yes/no question structure: ''Would the [Prime Minister/Acting Prime Minister/Minister inform/report to] the House [. . .]?'' A typical example is the following:

(1)

Would the Prime Minister report to the House on the latest evidence of Iraq's noncompliance with United Nations resolutions as outlined overnight by United States Secretary of State Colin Powell?

(House Hansard, 06 February 2003:11127)

The example shows the difficulty of categorising questions using the framework. Although it appears strictly as a yes/no question, it was categorized as a 'Wh-question' ('What is the latest evidence . . .?'). It was, like almost all of the Government MPs questions, a Wh-question, overtly presented as a polite request. The respondent, Prime Minister Howard, provided a lengthy reply giving the required evidence. Questions using such structures show deference to the respondent. It should be noted that none of the Opposition questions used the same structure.

4.3. Responses

After each question was categorized by type, each response was analysed and categorized either as an answer, an intermediate response or an evasion.

4.3.1. Answers (direct and indirect)

For yes/no questions, direct answers are responses that explicitly contain words such as "yes", "no" or can be located within a slot on the yes/no continuum; for Wh-questions, an answer is a response which supplies a value for the missing variable, and for disjunctive questions, a direct answer involves the selection of one disjunct. Most instances of direct answers given in the study were responses to questions from Government MPs. Howard's response to (1) was classified a direct answer.

Sometimes, answers were given indirectly or implicitly. In the following exchange, when asked by an Opposition MP whether he recalled making some specific statements earlier, Australia's Foreign Minister Downer's reply was an implicit 'yes'.

(2)

| Rudd: | . . . do you recall saying . . .? |
| Downer: | I appreciate the honourable member quoting what I said in my answer last week [. . .] |

(House Hansard, 24 March 2003:13297)

4.3.2. Intermediate responses

This study included as intermediate responses, those that were directed towards the question's presupposition(s), for example, responses that corrected an inaccurate presupposition or those that challenged a question's illocutionary force. It would have been unfair to expect a politician to respond to a question with a straightforward, direct answer if the presupposition(s) of the question itself was/were incorrect. Intermediate responses in this study also included refusals to answer on grounds of inability or because of confidentiality issues. The following are some of the different types of intermediate response the data revealed.

i. Presupposition(s) in the question

In response to Opposition MP Rudd's question on whether the Government had been informed of detailed plans for a ''US military administration of Iraq'', Howard replied that the full details were ''yet to be settled'' (House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13803). Howard's intermediate response, that details had not been finalised' cancelled Rudd's presupposition that the US had detailed plans.

ii. Hypothetical question

In one instance, Opposition Leader Crean asked a lengthy question regarding the ''threat assessment to Australians in South-East Asia'' due to Australia's involvement in military action in Iraq without a UN mandate. Anderson responded that the question was hypothetical since the war had not begun (House Hansard, 13 February 2003:11831). It was classified an intermediate response.

iii. Lack of required information

When Crean asked Howard a closed, specific question requesting the 'precise date' when the Government ordered the refit of a particular ship, Howard gave a short, intermediate response that he did not know the date (in bold). The whole of the exchange is as follows:

(3)

    Crean: My question is to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, on what precise date did the government order the refit of the HMAS Kanimbla in preparation for its forward deployment to a possible war against Iraq?

    Howard: **I do not know that date**. I will find out and let the House know.

<div align="right">(House Hansard, 5 February 2003:10947)</div>

iv. Security reasons

In response to a question by Crean about the welfare and activities of Australian troops in the Gulf, Howard stated that he could not provide the information required for security reasons (House Hansard, 20 March 2003:13144). It was classified an intermediate response.

All of the above are examples of the different types of intermediate responses revealed by the data. Responses considered neither answers (direct or indirect) nor intermediate responses were classified as evasions or evasive responses.

5. Evasion (evasive responses)

Analysis of evasive responses involved the identification of the different levels of evasion, whether overt or covert practices were involved and the different types of agenda shifts that occurred.

5.1. Levels of evasion

Each evasive response was first analysed to determine its level of evasion, i.e. whether it was a full evasion, a substantial evasion, a medium-level evasion or a subtle evasion. These levels of evasion are based on Clayman (2001:413–414)'s categorization of 'positive dimensions of resistance' (whereby respondents move away from the parameter of the question by ''saying and doing things that were not specifically called for'') and 'negative dimension of resistance' (whereby respondents refuse to respond to a question). These levels of evasion are discussed below.

5.1.1. Full evasion

Full evasion occurs when a question is neither answered nor acknowledged. For instance, when referring to the UN ''food for oil program'', Crean asked Howard the following sub-question: ''Can the Prime Minister also confirm that this program was suspended last week?'' (House Hansard, 25 March 2003:13403). Howard did not answer the question, and this non-response was therefore considered a 'full evasion'.

5.1.2. Substantial evasion

A substantial evasion involves a significant change in topic whereby the respondent moves away from the topic of the question to an entirely different topic or area of discussion. There were no clear cases of substantial evasions observed in the study. Perhaps attempts at such shifts would have been apparent (as evasion) to listeners, including the Speaker, fellow parliamentarians, and the overhearing audience.

5.1.3. Medium level of evasion

A 'medium level of evasion' is a response that is within the parameters of the topic but performs a task entirely different from that required by the question. This was the most frequent means by which respondents deviated from question agendas in the study. The following is one such example:

(4)
> Crean: When Prime Minister Howard meets President Bush later today in Washington, will he be telling the President that there will be no Australian military participation in any action against Iraq without a second UN resolution?
> Anderson: The Prime Minister will be taking this opportunity to express Australia's strong preference for a new Security Council resolution [...]

<div align="right">(House Hansard, 10 February 2003:11242)</div>

In responding, the Acting Prime Minister Anderson shifted from the question's task (requiring him to state whether the Prime Minister would be telling President Bush there would be no Australian military participation without a second UN resolution) to expressing what Australia strongly preferred. Since Anderson performed a task different from that required by the question, it was classified as a 'medium-level evasion'.

5.1.4. Subtle evasion

A subtle shift changes the terms of the question so slightly that it appears the respondent is answering the question. In one example, Crean's question asked for reassurance that ''all necessary steps'' were ''being taken to protect civilians'', to which Howard replied that ''in this particular conflict unprecedented steps have been taken by the coalition to avoid civilian casualties'' (House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13799). Howard had thus subtly shifted from using the question's phrase ''all necessary steps'' to ''unprecedented steps'', a subtle form of evasion.

After each evasive response was classified according to its level of evasion, a determination was made as to whether overt and/or covert practices were involved in the evasion. The determination is based largely on Clayman (2001)'s overt and covert practices of resisting a question.

5.2. Overt and covert practices

Respondents sometimes overtly made shifts while responding but at other times were covert in their attempts, as discussed below.

5.2.1. Overt practices

Overt practices, whereby politicians are open and explicit about resisting the question, were used to minimize any possible damages caused by the evasive attempts. Clayman (2001) identified three main categories of overt practices ('token requests for permission', 'minimising the divergence' and 'justifying shifts'), all of which were noted in the present study.

i. Token request for permission

    This occurs when the respondent appears to be asking for permission to shift the topic but does not wait for the permission to be granted before proceeding with his/her response. One instance of its use was in response to a question by Crean for confirmation regarding the decision to involve ''senior military officers'' in planning military action in Iraq with the United States. Anderson shifted the agenda by making a token request for permission, ''Let me remind you again [. . .]'' and then speaking about the objective of ridding Saddam of his ''weapons of mass destruction'' (House Hansard, 12 February 2003:11628).

ii. Minimizing the divergence

    This is a form of damage control whereby the respondent downplays or gives the perception of minimizing the departure from the question agenda (Clayman, 2001). For instance, in response to an Opposition question regarding reports that Basra had been classified as a target by the British military and what that meant ''for the civilian population of that city'' (House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13561), Downer shifted the agenda to attacking Saddam. His response included the following overt, temporal minimiser: ''[. . .] and I take a moment to say this [. . .]''. He went on to emphasize efforts by the coalition forces (Australian, American and British) to ''avoid civilian casualties'' and their ''humanitarian approach'', unlike Saddam's regime, ''the world's most brutal regime'', which ''deliberately'' put Iraqi civilians' lives at risk in order to ''maximise civilian casualties''. It was the only instance in the data of a temporal minimiser having been used. Downer downplayed his shift as being merely a minor digression/departure from the question's agenda.

iii. Justifying the shift

Sometimes the respondent overtly justifies or explains his/her shift away from the question's agenda. For instance, in response to a question by Crean on human casualties in the Iraqi war and the UN Secretary-General's observation that ''the belligerents are responsible for the welfare of the civilian population'', Howard justified his shift (in bold) to imply that Iraq carried the blame:

(5)

    [. . .] I think **it is important to remind ourselves** every day, as we respond in an episodic fashion to individual incidents, that the reason why the action has been taken is that Iraq failed to comply with multiple resolutions of the Security Council of the United Nations [. . .]

                                                            (House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13799)

Howard's recurring agenda shift seems to have been to shift all responsibility to Iraq ('blame' Iraq). This suggests that he may have had a personal preference as to how these shifts could be made.

5.2.2. Covert practices

    Politicians sometimes used 'covert practices' to conceal the fact that they are shifting away from the questions' agenda, thereby avoiding any open acknowledgement of the move and perhaps 'getting away' with it. Clayman (2001) identified 'subversive word repeats and anaphoric pronouns' as one means of covert practice, with another being 'operating on the question'. Findings on these practices are discussed below.

i. Subversive word repeats and anaphoric references

    Respondents sometimes gave the impression that they were answering questions through their use of 'lexical repetitions' and anaphoric pronouns. Key word(s) in a question are repeated (lexical repetition) in a response although the question remains unanswered. For example, when Crean asked Howard how long an ''interim US protectorate'' in Iraq would last, Howard repeated the word ''interim'' used in the question but evaded answering the question. Part of Howard's response was:

(6)

    As I made clear to the House yesterday, it is a matter of practical reality that there will be an interim period immediately following the conflict in which the US will play a leadership role in the administration of Iraq—and that is proper and natural.

                                                            (House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13802)

In responding, Howard performed a task different from that required by the question, which was the expected duration of the interim period. Anaphoric reference or 'back referencing' has an effect similar to word repetition. One instance in this study was the use of the anaphoric reference 'those' in response to a lengthy Opposition question, as follows:

(7)

Plibersek:	My question is to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister inform the House of the UNHCR's current preparations for receiving refugees in the border regions of Syria, Jordan and Iran as a result of the conflict in Iraq? Can the Prime Minister confirm that the UNHCR has made contingency plans for receiving up to 600,000 refugees from Iraq in these areas? Can the Prime Minister advise the House of what communication his government has had with both the coalition military command and the UNHCR to provide safe passage for Iraqi civilians to border refugee camps?
Ruddock:	The fact is that we have been in close consultation with the UNHCR on its efforts in relation to **those matters** and are very aware of the contingency planning that has occurred. It is very wise for organisations like the UNHCR to be involved in contingency planning. We have been apprised of it and are very much aware of it. As required, we will contribute to assist in relation to **those matters**.

<div align="right">(House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13565)</div>

Senior Minister Ruddock, who was responding on behalf of the Prime Minister, covertly evaded answering the question by giving a vague response, neither confirming nor disputing any of the presuppositions contained in the questioner's three sub-questions, by using the anaphoric reference 'those' as in ''those matters'' (in bold).

ii. Operating on the question

Another covert means of evading answering the question is to operate on or reformulate the question before responding to it (Clayman, 2001). Here the respondent 'operates' on or modifies the question before answering it by either referring to, characterizing, or paraphrasing the question. This reformulation of the question aids and conceals the respondent's attempt to shift the agenda. The respondent makes adjustments to the surface form of the questions in order to fit it with the response that he/she actually wants to give. The following is an example:

(8)

Crean:	Prime Minister, what credibility can your explanation have when the official record of conversation cleared by the minister's office shows that the discussion that he was having was specifically about the issue of UN support for, and I quote, 'action in Iraq'? Prime Minister, if your foreign minister was talking about war, then weren't his comments about the impossibility of withdrawing our ships and other presence expressly made in the context of war?
Howard:	[. . .] the heart of the issue raised by the Leader of the Opposition – that is, whether a final decision has been taken by this government to involve itself in military action against Iraq. The answer to that question is that no such final decision has been taken.

<div align="right">(House Hansard, 05 February 2003:10943)</div>

In this example, Howard reformulated Crean's question broadening its agenda to fit the answer he wanted to give, ''that no final decision had been taken'' although this did not answer Crean's question.

iii. Other covert means

Besides Clayman's (2001) categories of covert practices (word repetition, anaphoric pronouns and operating on the question), other covert means of evasion were also observed in this study. They included the use of 'similar words' and the use of vague and non-specific terms.

• *Use of similar words*

As occurs with word repetitions, words similar to those in the question give the impression that the question is being answered. The sample analysis provides evidence of Howard covertly using words similar to those in the question (refer to section 6 – sample analysis). When asked for the date on which the Government ''ordered'' the refit of the Kanimbla, Howard used words similar to or belonging to the same lexical set as the word 'order', such as ''I

announced'', ''I mentioned'', ''I again said that'', ''I repeated that'', and ''I indicated''. This was a covert attempt to appear as if he was answering the question.

- *Use of vague or non-specific terms*

Another covert practice identified was the use of vague, non-specific terms. For instance, Howard used the non-specific term 'generously' in response to a question by Crean on Australia's contribution to the new UN appeal for humanitarian assistance to Iraq. Howard covertly evaded giving the exact amount of assistance, instead offering a vague response with a positive connotation (in bold) by stating: ''I would expect Australia to respond **generously** [. . .]'' and ''Australia will be very **generous**'' (House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13563). This was an ambiguous response.

The study, thus, extends Clayman's (2001) work by adding the above two categories ('Similar words' and 'Vague or non-specific terms') to his categories of covert practices. Clayman's work is useful in explaining the various levels of evasion and whether there were overt or covert practices involved when politicians shifted the agenda from the questions' tasks. However, Clayman does not describe exactly what these agenda shifts are, i.e. what topics politicians shift to in evading answering questions. These are discussed below.

5.3. Agenda shifts

Politicians who evaded answering questions made agenda shifts, and thus indirectly used Question Time as a forum to further their own agendas. It is of interest to note what these agendas are. Agenda shifts in this study are based broadly on Bull and Mayer's (1993) typology of non-replies. The present study's categorisation of categories and sub-categories of agenda shifts, as revealed by the data, is:

i.   Attacks the questioner
ii.   Makes political points
        a. External attack–attacks opposition or other rival groups
        b. Talks up one's own side
        c. Presents policy
iii.   States or implies that the question has already been answered
        (modified from Bull and Mayer's typology of non-replies 1993:656–661)

5.3.1. Attacks the questioner
A prominent agenda shift was to attack the questioner. An example of a response with multiple agenda shifts attacking the questioner is Howard's response to a question by Crean. Crean questioned Howard's credibility because of his earlier response which contradicted what was officially recorded (House Hansard, 5 February 2003:10942). In his response, Howard's agenda shifts included five attacks directed at Crean. They are as follows:

(9)   I know that it suits the political purposes of the Leader of the Opposition to try and represent things otherwise [. . .]
(10)   [. . .] as the opposition leader falsely alleges; and he knows the allegations are false [. . .]
(11)   The Leader of the Opposition can spend the rest of Question Time today, he can spend all of Question Time tomorrow and he can spend all of his waking hours making those allegations. They are false and they will remain false.
(12)   [. . .] a deployment supported by the then Leader of the Opposition, the member for Brand. They were the circumstances in which that deployment was made. The member for Brand knows that you can deploy in advance of making a final decision without being falsely accused of making a final decision and of keeping that from the Australian public, because that in reality was what we did with his support in 1998.
(13)   [. . .] the claim made so vigorously by the Leader of the Opposition is, as usual, quite wrong.

(House Hansard, 5 February 2003:10942)

On the other hand, Howard's agenda shifts could also be interpreted as constituting a counter-attack aimed at the Opposition's accusation, i.e. questioning his credibility. The Prime Minister was counter-attacking the negative 'tone' of the question (''what credibility can your explanation [. . .]?'') which implied that Howard had lied since what he said contradicted what had been officially recorded as having been said.

5.3.2. Makes Political points

Another prominent agenda shift used by Ministers was to make 'political points' by attacking the Opposition, attacking others, and talking up one's own side.

i. External attack (attacks Opposition or other rival groups)

Attacking the Opposition was the major agenda shift observed here. In one response, Downer used the phrase 'eerie silence' four times in his attack on the Opposition, implying that the party said nothing whenever Tony Blair and the issue of Iraq were mentioned but provided ''a fusillade of abuse'' otherwise (House Hansard, 13 February 2003:11832). Agenda shifts by Question Time respondents also included attacking the UN, its Security Council, Iraq (and its leader, Saddam Hussein), and those who held a view different to that of the Government. For example, Howard attacked Iraq and Saddam while responding to a question by Crean asking for confirmation that the ''food for oil program'' had been suspended the week earlier (refer to section 5.1.1). Howard evaded answering the question and instead blamed Iraq for the suspension, as follows:

(14)

> [. . .] I might also take the opportunity, because the Leader of the Opposition mentioned the oil for food program, of reminding him and the parliament that the United Nations sanctions would never have been necessary if Iraq had agreed to the requirements of disarmament imposed way back in 1991. I might also say that the oil for food program has been immorally and shamefully rorted by Saddam Hussein, who has used the proceeds of it to acquire his weapons capacity and support it. It has to be said—and the Australian public should be reminded—that we had these economic sanctions because Iraq did not disarm. They were imposed by the United Nations because Iraq did not disarm. If Iraq had disarmed, those sanctions would never have been necessary. Worse still, having through his policies made those sanctions necessary, the Iraqi leader has compounded the sins inflicted upon his own people by rorting the very oil for food program which was designed to in some way mitigate the impact of the economic sanctions. So he is doubly guilty of betraying his obligations towards the Iraqi people.

>   (House Hansard, 25 March 2003:13403)

ii. Talks up one's own side

Question Time respondents often made agenda shifts portraying themselves and the Government positively. Of the 27 questions asked in the month of February 2003 by the Opposition Leader, 13, i.e. almost 50%, received a response that shifted the agenda to portraying the Government in a positive light. One instance of its occurrence was when Opposition MP Gillard asked Ruddock (Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) for confirmation that in the previous year's budget ''the government cut core funding to the UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, by almost 50 per cent'' and that ''the additional amount of money the Howard government is giving the UNHCR for the Iraqi crisis remains less than the amount it cut out of the UNHCR's core funding'' (House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13564). In his response, Ruddock shifted the agenda to a positive portrayal of the previous Government actions after making a token request for permission and an attack on the questioner:

(15)

Ruddock: [. . .] Let me say I think the member for Lalor needs to better inform herself in relation to these matters. We have played an honourable role in resettling Iraqis over some 10 or so years, as initiated by governments of her persuasion and followed on by governments of this persuasion. Some 18,000 people were resettled under orderly refugee resettlement and humanitarian programs over that time. If you look at the way in which we dealt with people—and I actually have the statistics and am happy to make them available to the honourable member for Lalor—and at the assessment of Iraqi asylum seekers in Australia over a period of four or five years, you will find that 97 per cent were accepted and 80 per cent or more were accepted at the time of primary decision making. If you look at it in comparison with most other Western countries and their processing of Iraqi asylum seekers, you will see that that was at the end of the range [. . .]

>   (House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13564)

Respondents also frequently portrayed those they considered to be 'allies', positively. One such shift was the praising of significant world political figures regarded as being in agreement with the Government's position, including the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair; the United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell; and the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan.

Another popular agenda shift was the portrayal of the Government in a positive light by comparing it to 'others' who were portrayed negatively. The 'others' included Saddam Hussein, his 'regime', and countries (including their leaders) that did not agree with Australia's views on Iraq. Thus, the agenda shifts observed in this study included Van Dijk's (2005) 'positive self-presentation' (the tendency of a speaker to present him/herself and his/her party in a positive light) and 'negative other-presentation' (the presenting/referring of 'others' in a negative light) occurring within a single response. For example, in response to an Opposition question on the ''latest estimate of humanitarian casualties'' (House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13799), Howard made five such agenda shifts:

(16) The concern that he [UN Sec. Gen.] has for the safety of civilians in this conflict is understood and is very much in the minds of the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Of course, it is not in the mind of the government of Iraq.

(17) I contrast the policy of the United States government, the British government and the Australian government to the behaviour of the Iraqi regime. For example, Iraq is deliberately placing air defence and other military assets in close proximity to civilian sites in Baghdad. Saddam Hussein's forces have also used a hospital at An Nasiriyah as a headquarters for the storage of arms. There are other examples where deliberate action has been taken as an instrument of war and as an instrument of political propaganda to use civilians as shields and to deliberately play upon the very legitimate and genuine humanitarian concerns of civilian populations in democracies such as Australia.

(18) Some commentators have even suggested that the targeting policies of the allies in this conflict have been such as to put at greater risk the lives of defence personnel serving on behalf of the United States and the United Kingdom.

(19) But I repeat again that unprecedented steps have been taken by the Americans, the British and by us to keep those casualties to an absolute minimum—and that is in stark contrast to the deliberate policy of the Iraqi regime to put the lives of their own civilians at risk as a political instrument and as a psychological instrument against the forces that are aligned against them.

(20) Those are some of the steps we are taking. Similar steps are being taken by the British and the Americans. Of course, no such steps are being taken by Saddam Hussein—no such steps are being taken by the Iraqis. I simply ask the Leader of the Opposition and, indeed, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, whose concern I share, to please examine the relative behaviour of the British and the Americans and the Iraqis. Any suggestion of moral equivalence between the coalition and the Iraqis on this occasion I totally reject.

(House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13799)

Howard's implication was that, unlike the Iraqi Government, the Australian Government and its allies were (16) concerned about the welfare of the civilians who were (17) deliberately used as 'shields' by the Iraqi forces. He also implied that (18) Australia and its allies' defence forces put their own lives at risk to (19) keep casualties ''to an absolute minimum'' in ''stark contrast'' to the Iraqi forces. His last sentence in (20) above is noteworthy in that nothing in the question had suggested a moral equivalence between the Coalition and the Iraqi forces.

iii. Presents policy

Apart from 'external attacks' and 'talking up one's own side', politicians also 'present policies' when making political points. The latter occurred when Howard was responding to a question by Crean asking for a 'precise date'. Howard shifted the agenda by explaining Government policy, specifically that of its 'contingency planning' [refer to section 6 (sample analysis) for full details].

5.3.3. States or implies that the question had already been answered

This is the third category of agenda shifts, besides 'attacking the questioner' and 'making political points'. Howard stated that the question had already been answered to evade Crean's question on whether there were plans to relieve the existing troops. He said:

(21)   I answered a question on this yesterday, and nothing has happened to in any way alter the answer that I gave
        yesterday. If anything did then I would inform the Australian people.

<div align="right">(House Hansard, 27 March 2003:13805)</div>

It was evasive because Howard had avoided giving an answer to the previous day's related sub-question regarding
the rotation of troops. He had instead performed a different task by stating that "we all hope that the duration of the
conflict will be such that" the rotation of troops "will not be needed" (House Hansard, 26 March 2003:13556).

6. Sample analysis: analysis of Howard's evasive reply

The following is a sample analysis of an evasive response (refer to Appendix A for the full transcript of the
exchange). Though not exactly a 'question without notice', since the respondent "had 24 hours to check on the
information required" (House Hansard, 06 March 2003:11129); the exchange best illustrates the application of
the framework discussed above.

In the exchange, Crean asked Howard for the 'precise' date when the Government ordered the refit of HMAS
Kanimbla "in preparation for its forward deployment to a possible war in Iraq" (House Hansard, 06 March
2003:11129). Howard's response was classified (an) 'evasion' since he did not give the required date. It was further
sub-categorized a 'medium level of evasion' since Howard performed a task different to that required by the question.
The question task required a precise date when the Kanimbla was ordered to be refitted for deployment to Iraq but
Howard stated a sequence of events related to the Kanimbla. The agenda shifts were both overt and covert in nature.

Howard's shift began overtly with a token request for permission when he stated "Let me take him through the
sequence of events" (line 4) and thus from the outset, he had stated what his response would contain. However, in his
lengthy response of dates and sequences of events, none of the information answered the question asked. Howard made
another token request for permission when he said "Let me inform the House that HMAS *Kanimbla* conducts joint
amphibious training with the Army on a routine basis" (lines 48–49). Those were the only two instances of overt
practices in Howard's response. Most of his agenda shifts were covert in nature.

One of Howard's covert practices was the use of 'word repetitions' thereby giving the impression that he was
answering the question. Howard used this technique a number of times. First, he used the term 'HMAS Kanimbla'
(which appeared in the question) 16 times in his response. Secondly, he repeated the word 'deployment' (as used in the
question), at times making subtle changes, when he said 'forward deployed' (line 6), 'previously deployed' (line 35),
'planned deployment of HMAS Kanimbla' (line 57), 'prepared to deploy' (line 39) and 'HMAS Kanimbla's
deployment' (line 44). The same technique was used with the word 'preparation' as used in the question. While
responding, Howard used the terms: 'in preparation' (line 7), 'be prepared' (line 33), 'specific preparations' (line 38)
and 'to be prepared' (line 39).

Furthermore (though not strictly a 'word repeat') Howard gave the appearance of answering question which
required a 'date' ("precise date when the Kanimbla was ordered to be refitted") by mentioning the following dates: '10
January' (line 5), '19 August 2002' (line 12), '5 September' (line 14), '24 September' (line 15), '4 October' (line 15),
'20 November 2002' (line 18), 'since the middle of 2001' (line 29), '17 October 2001' (line 29), '2 September 2002'
(line 32), 'from December 2001 to March 2002' (line 36), 'mid-2002' (line 37), 'between 14 and 31 October 2002'
(lines 38–39), 'March 2003' (line 39), '3 and 9 November 2002' (lines 40–41), '23 January 2003' (line 42), '10
January 2003 (line 42), '13 January' (line 43), '20 January 2003' (line 44), 'March 2003 to January 2003' (line 45), '23
January 2003' (line 47) and '16 to 27 September 2002' (lines 49–50). However, none of them was the required date
(i.e. when the Kanimbla was ordered to be refitted).

Another covert practice observed was the use of words similar to those in the question. Howard used this technique to
covertly give the impression that he had answered the question (which asked for the date when the Government 'ordered'
the refit of the Kanimbla). In his response, Howard used words similar to the word 'order' (as mentioned in 5.2.2) when he
stated, "I announced' (lines 5 and 29), 'I mentioned in parliament' (line 12), 'I again said that' (line 15), 'I repeated that'
(line 19), 'I indicated' (line 20) and 'Following my 10 January 2003 announcement' (line 42); all of which gave the
impression that he was answering the question.

Howard also covertly reformulated a phrase used in the question and in the process shifted its negative
presupposition to a positive one. The question's "possible war in Iraq" was reformulated by Howard in the following
ways:

i.   ''in preparation for any military action'' (line 7)
ii.   ''possible military action against Iraq'' (line 10)
iii.   ''war against terrorism'' (line 14)
iv.   ''possibility of an involvement in military operations'' (line 22)
v.   ''war against terrorism'' (line 32)

The above illustrated Howard's use of overt and covert practices to shift the agenda away from the question's agenda. Howard made a number of agenda shifts. He made 'political points' by attacking the Opposition, 'talked up his own side' and 'explained Government policy'. The following were Howard's attacks on the Opposition:

(22)   It does puzzle me, and I think it will puzzle members on this side of the House, that the opposition thinks there is something wrong with the idea of getting our military ready in case they are asked to undertake duties. (lines 23–25)
(23)   HMAS *Kanimbla*, as the Leader of the Opposition will know because he was there, departed Fleet Base East on 23 January 2003. (lines 45–47)

Besides attacking the Opposition, Howard 'talked up his own side' by suggesting that he was forthright and had nothing to hide when he stated:

(24)   I had made it clear . . . (line 8)
(25)   I have been saying this for quite a number of weeks; indeed, months. (lines 10–11)
(26)   I make no bones about that and I have never sought to disguise it. (lines 25–26)

Howard also shifted the agenda to 'explaining Government policy' when he discussed 'contingency planning'. The following are some of his statements in relation to ''contingency planning'':

(27)   . . . some forces would be forward deployed to the Gulf in preparation for any military action that the government might decide to commit Australian forces to (lines 6–8)
(28)   . . . the Australian Defence Force military planners were aware of and had engaged in prudent contingency planning with their US counterparts for possible military action against Iraq (lines 8–10)
(29)   . . . contingency discussions had taken place between Australian and US military planners (lines 16–17)
(30)   . . . Australian military personnel had engaged in contingency discussions with the United States (lines 19–20)
(31)   . . . the Australian Defence Force, as the public would expect, had undertaken contingency arrangements against the possibility of an involvement in military operations (lines 21–22)
(32)   . . . getting our military ready in case they are asked to undertake duties (lines 24–25)

The above agenda shifts were observed in a single evasive response from Howard. He used various overt and covert practices while making a number of agenda shifts but did not answer the question.

7. Results

Analysis of the data (Table 1) based on the framework described revealed that, of the 87 question turns on the topic of Iraq in February and March 2003's Question Time, all 39 of the Government MPs' question turns were answered

Table 1
Questions answered, given intermediate responses or evaded.

Response type	Government	Opposition	Total
Answer	39	8	47
Intermediate response	0	21	21
Evasion	0	19	19
Total	39	48	87

compared to only eight of the 48 Opposition question turns. Most of the Opposition question turns resulted in intermediate responses (21) or evasion (19). This is not surprising, considering the adversarial nature of parliamentary discourse. 'Friendly' Government questions, most of which appear to have been prearranged, were answered while 'hostile' Opposition questions, consisting of politically and personally challenging and/or potentially embarrassing propositions, were resisted. Apart from providing empirical evidence that evasion does occur, the study shows the partisanship of both parties during parliamentary Question Time.

8. Conclusion

Illustrated by examples, the study, a synthesis and modification of different approaches from a variety of fields concerned with the analysis of evasion or equivocation in political interviews, introduces and discusses a framework for the analysis of evasion in parliamentary Question Time. It includes a discussion of the different techniques used to evade answering questions. Several levels of evasion were observed, ranging from full evasions to subtle shifts, the most prominent being the medium level of evasion (performance of a task different from that required by the question). Various overt and covert practices were observed in the evasions. The study extends Clayman's work on overt and covert practices by identifying two further covert practices, the use of 'similar words' and the use of 'vague, general terms'. Almost all of the identified evasions involved agenda shifts, the two most prominent being to attack the Opposition and 'others' (negative other-presentation), and to 'talk up one's own side' (positive self-presentation). The sample analysis provided an example of how the analytical framework can be used. The framework could potentially be applied, with modification, to the analysis of evasion in other contexts and situations.

Appendix A

The following exchange took place between Opposition Leader Crean and Prime Minister Howard:

1. Mr. Crean:	My question is to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, now that you have had 24 hours
2.	to check on the information, on what precise date did the government order the refit of
3.	the HMAS *Kanimbla* in preparation for its forward deployment to a possible war in Iraq?
4. Mr. Howard:	I thank the Leader of the Opposition. Let me take him through the sequence
5.	of events. I announced on 10 January, following a meeting of the National Security
6.	Committee of cabinet, that some forces would be forward deployed to the Gulf in
7.	preparation for any military action that the government might decide to commit
8.	Australian forces to. Prior to this announcement, I had made it clear that the Australian
9.	Defence Force military planners were aware of and had engaged in prudent contingency
10.	planning with their US counterparts for possible military action against Iraq. I have been
11.	saying this for quite a number of weeks; indeed, months.
12.	I mentioned in parliament as early as 19 August 2002 – *Hansard*, page 4802 – that
13.	Australian military liaison personnel had been placed in the US command structure since
14.	the start of the war against terrorism. At a doorstop interview on 5 September and again
15.	on 24 September and in a radio interview with Neil Mitchell on 4 October, I again said
16.	that contingency discussions had taken place between Australian and US military
17.	planners. That is as far back as October last year.
18.	On 20 November 2002, in an address to the Committee for Economic Development of
19.	Australia, I repeated that Australian military personnel had engaged in contingency
20.	discussions with the United States and in addition I indicated in that same speech that the
21.	Australian Defence Force, as the public would expect, had undertaken contingency
22.	arrangements against the possibility of an involvement in military operations.
23.	It does puzzle me, and I think it will puzzle members on this side of the House, that the
24.	opposition thinks there is something wrong with the idea of getting our military ready in
25.	case they are asked to undertake duties. That is essentially what has been occurring. I
26.	make no bones about that and I have never sought to disguise it.
27.	In relation to the *Kanimbla*, Australian ships have been operating in the Gulf as part of
28.	the maritime interdiction force on and off since it was established and continuously since

29.   the middle of 2001. On 17 October 2001 I announced that Australia would maintain a
30.   naval presence in the Multinational Interception Force as part of its overall contribution
32.   to the war against terrorism. On 2 September 2002 Defence's Maritime Headquarters
33.   directed that HMAS *Kanimbla* be prepared for a routine rotation to the MIF. The Navy
34.   has two amphibious transport ships, HMAS *Kanimbla* and HMAS *Manoora*.
35.   Both ships had previously deployed to the Gulf as part of the Navy's standard rotation.
36.   HMAS *Kanimbla* had already served in the Gulf from December 2001 to March 2002.
37.   HMAS *Manoora* returned from operations in the Gulf in mid-2002. HMAS *Kanimbla*
38.   underwent specific preparations for MIF duties at Fleet Base East, Sydney, between 14
39.   and 31 October 2002. HMAS *Kanimbla* was to be prepared to deploy in March 2003.
40.   HMAS *Kanimbla* sailed to Melbourne and conducted a port visit between 3 and 9
41.   November 2002. Following this visit she then completed some outstanding maintenance
42.   work until 23 January 2003. Following my 10 January 2003 announcement, the Chief of
43.   the Defence Force ordered on 13 January that HMAS *Kanimbla* was to be on 48 hours
44.   notice to sail from 20 January 2003. HMAS *Kanimbla*'s deployment to the MIF was
45.   subsequently brought forward from March 2003 to January 2003. HMAS *Kanimbla*, as
46.   the Leader of the Opposition will know because he was there, departed Fleet Base East
47.   on 23 January 2003.
48.   The exercises have been raised. Let me inform the House that HMAS *Kanimbla* conducts
49.   joint amphibious training with the Army on a routine basis. From 16 to 27 September
50.   2002 HMAS *Kanimbla* participated in Exercise Swift Eagle in the Shoalwater Bay
51.   training area as part of its planned amphibious training. Exercise Swift Eagle is con-duc-
52.   ted every two years. The 2002 exercise was approved by the Defence leadership in March
53.   of 2001. Personnel from Ross Island were drawn from 10 Forward Support Battalion,
54.   who embarked on HMAS *Kanimbla* with two landing craft – medium LCMHs – as part of
55.   the routine training activities. At the conclusion of the exercise the LCMH remained
56.   embarked on HMAS *Kanimbla* to undergo the inte-gra-tion and continuing training in the
57.   lead-up to the planned deployment of HMAS *Kanimbla* to the MIF.
58.   The rest of the note relates to the foreign minister, and we have dealt with that. But that is
59.   the situation regarding the HMAS *Kanimbla*.
60. Mr. Crean: I ask the Prime Minister to table the document from which he was reading.
61. The Speaker: Was the Prime Minister reading from a document?
62. Mr. Howard: Yes.
63. The Speaker: Is the document confidential?
64. Mr. Howard: Yes.

(House Hansard, 06 March 2003:11129–11130)

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