



## Austerity – a case study

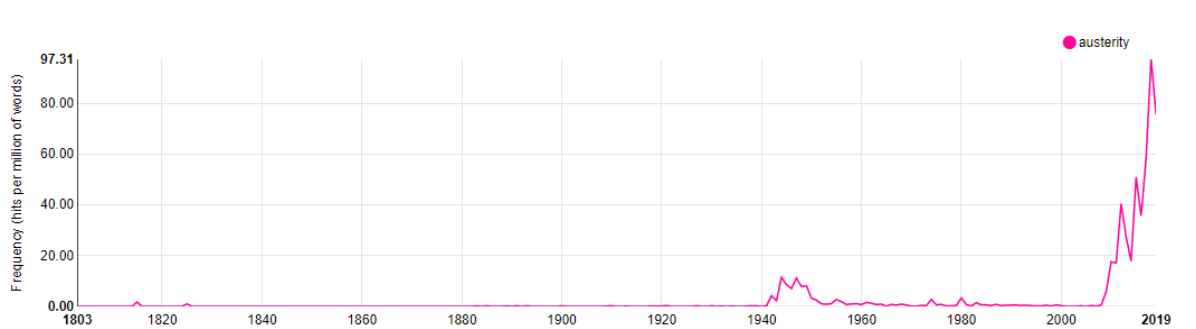
In recent times, the word ‘austerity’ has been much used, not least to distinguish the harsher policies of the incoming Conservative governments of the Cameron-Clegg coalition of 2005 and the Conservative Cameron government of 2010 from the policies of the Labour governments of Blair and Brown that preceded these. One of the triggers of this shift in policy was the global financial crisis of 2008/9.

One question that arises in connection with the case for restricting government spending is whether it is accurate to say that the appeal to a sense of the wartime solidarity between the citizens of the UK was implicit in David Cameron’s mantra ‘We’re all in it together’? In other words, does ‘austerity’ mean the same today as it did in the years of belt-tightening during the Second World War? If not, what are the differences? And are there any other socio-political keywords that are relevant to this question of whether the government should spend money on the welfare of its citizens?

The Hansard at Huddersfield website can help us to answer these questions and others by a number of means. There is no automatic answer to the question of what a word means, of course, but the site can help us find the relevant examples and format them to take a look at how they were being used across a timeframe of our choosing. Below you will find some examples of searches that lead us towards an understanding of the topic of austerity in government spending.

### Basic searching with pre-determined search terms

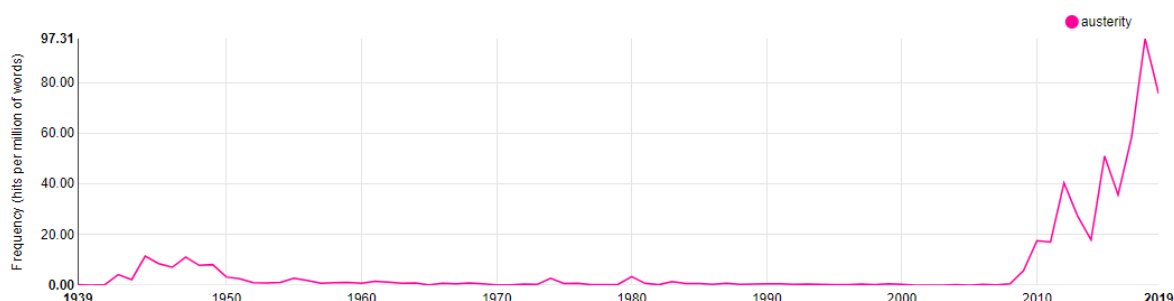
The first kind of search that can help us determine the scope of our study is the search using a specific word. If we first search for ‘austerity’ across the whole of the data, the site produces a line graph of the word’s relative frequency (per million words) per calendar year:



This result shows that the word was not in common use in the Commons until the beginning of the war, and we can confirm that earlier uses are of less interest for our purposes by double-clicking on any year and looking at the occurrences in their context. Here is the single occurrence from 1825, for example, where we see that ‘austerity’ in that period was a description of character or manner, rather than referring to an attitude to fiscal policy:

... ng his residence in Grenada, whence he went to Barbadoes, I can with great truth. testify, that I never knew a more pious or a better man. Possessed of natural cheerfulness of temper, and without any thing of **austerity** or moroseness in his manners, he discharged the duties of his profession with zeal, and as-siduity, and acquired the good-will and esteem of the whole community; and it was to the great regret... [\[0 more\]](#)

One option at this stage is to narrow the focus to the relevant years, and redo the search:



These graphs, of course, are only an indication of where the word is used most, but they provide a useful entry-point into the huge amount of data that is represented by Hansard. So, one option at this point is to look at the use of the *search term* (i.e. the word you were looking for) in significant years or time periods of more than one year. If we decide to collect all the occurrences from the first peak in 1942 to the drop off in 1950, there are 393 examples of austerity in context over that period. Here are a few of them, in the optional KWIC (i.e. Key Word in Context) format that makes it easy to see what is happening each side of the word (the *co-text*):

(Mrs. Castle), was, if I understood it aright, that under Socialism,	<b>austerity</b>	has to continue indefinitely, and that, m fact, a smokescreen
I suggest that in a situation of this kind, in which	<b>austerity</b>	and sacrifice must still be our watchword and must still
slightly immoral and that he had better have a pinch of	<b>austerity</b>	in a generous action rather than be accused of being
of the government much more than the occasional extravagances of an	<b>austerity-</b>	ridden public which is responsible for the falling off in savings.

Note that if the co-text is not enough to understand the full sense of the word in context, it is easy to click on the example and retrieve the full contribution in which it occurs. It is also possible to download the examples as a spreadsheet and then order the co-text in such a way that looking at many concordance lines rapidly becomes easier. Here is one example from the war years which shows its tendency to co-occur (*collocate*) with everyday items:

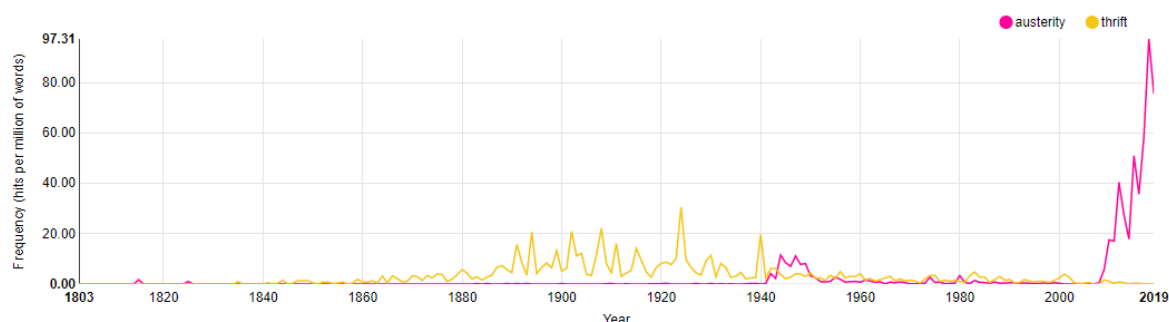
aware that these short-length socks are just as unpopular as t	austerity	suits were? Will he remove this restriction at the earliest
to point out to the House and the country that non-	austerity	suits will not be available in any great quantity for
to help the private trader to get rid of his unsaleable	austerity	suits you have to do something about the coupons. The
may be; but I feel that the idea of utilising these	austerity	suits, in utility cloth, for clothing the people of the

If we compare this right hand context with examples from a more recent set of data (1973 – 1981) where there are two peaks of usage, we can see that there are no longer any ‘austerity suits’ and instead of being a premodifier, ‘austerity’ more often stands alone as a self-explanatory concept, followed by other clause elements such as verbs or new sentences:

2015-11-18	Stewart Hosie	come, we are now on track for a full decade of	<b>austerity.</b>	It is worse than that, however. With the Government changing
2015-11-18	Jeremy Quin	the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, whose comments suggested that	<b>austerity</b>	was a political choice to sort out the deficit. It
2015-11-16	Rachael Maskell	The reality is that the Bill is about the Government's	<b>austerity</b>	measures and the fact that TfL will have to plug

In these cases, ‘austerity’ often modifies rather general nouns like ‘measures’ or ‘agenda’ rather than ‘suits’ but the reader is assumed to know what it refers to; the restriction of government spending on services and infrastructure.

There are very many ways in which the basic search can lead to some interesting results. One that might be of interest here is to ask oneself whether there are different words that may overlap in some ways with ‘austerity’, particularly in the periods before the word itself was much used in parliament. The search function allows us to search for up to four terms and display them as overlapping line graphs. In this case, it was instructive to look for ‘thrift’ (with a wildcard – so searching for ‘thrift\*’ which will find other forms such as ‘thrifty’ too) and to discover that this somewhat Victorian virtue has its heyday in the period prior to the rise of ‘austerity’:



Although the apparent correlation of these patterns cannot be seen as causal (i.e. it is not that one trend was the reason for the other), it is nevertheless interesting to see our elected representatives talking about the individual thrifty qualities (or lack of them) of citizens and to compare these with the more government-led policies of austerity. When you click on the line graph with more than one search term, the occurrences of all the terms (up to four) are retrieved:

Date	Member	Contribution
1944-11-28	Mr Thomas Brooks	... § 12. Mr. T. Brooks asked the President of the Board of Trade if he will now cancel the order which compels the manufacture of the <b>austerity</b> overcoats. ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>
1944-11-15	Professor William Gruffydd	... cation. In this Department, unlike some other Departments, there is already an Act of reconstruction on the Statute Book, but that Act cannot possibly be implemented for a generation, even with the help of the <b>austerity</b> -model teachers of the Emergency Scheme, unless something very substantial is done now under the re-allocation plan. The position is really desperate, not only as regards trained teachers but as ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>
1944-11-03	Mr Albert Alexander	... ever, we have been enabled gradually to increase the proportion of faster ships in the programme of merchant construction and, in addition, to undertake the programme of standardised cargo liners of knots, on ' <b>austerity</b> ' lines, which are giving satisfactory results. With the change in the war situation

Date	Member	Contribution
1944-12-12	Mr Arthur Jones	... on, I have been interested to read the excuses which are sometimes offered for it by those who attempt to justify it. On the other hand a distinguished Burman said the other day: The Burmese are supposed to be <b>thrifless</b> because (except during the rice boom which crashed with dire consequences to the country) they never earned enough income to save an effective amount of capital out of it. It was like 'trying ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>
1944-11-03	Sir William Beveridge	... lly going to say that this country is going to be so poor after this war that we cannot keep our old above want? Being above want does not mean relief on a means test. There is no greater discouragement to <b>thrift</b> than the prospect of being subject to a means test in old age. I urge that the Government should introduce a scheme by which all contribute for adequate pensions now. That will lower general tax ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>

These results are scalable on the website, but here are a couple of them in larger print to demonstrate the difference in their usage:

... cation. In this Department, unlike some other Departments, there is already an Act of reconstruction on the Statute Book, but that Act cannot possibly be implemented for a generation, even with the help of the **austerity**-model teachers of the Emergency Scheme, unless something very substantial is done now under the re-allocation plan. The position is really desperate, not only as regards trained teachers but as ... [\[0 more\]](#)

... lly going to say that this country is going to be so poor after this war that we cannot keep our old above want? Being above want does not mean relief on a means test. There is no greater discouragement to **thrift** than the prospect of being subject to a means test in old age. I urge that the Government should introduce a scheme by which all contribute for adequate pensions now. That will lower general t... [\[0 more\]](#)

What we notice here is a policy difference whereby ‘thrift’ is a personal virtue that the government may wish to foster by its actions whereas austerity is a top-down policy of fiscal restraint. Both may save the government money, but there is a difference of emphasis which could be of interest to policy researchers.

### Advanced searching with pre-determined search terms

The advanced search functions allow for a little more control over the precise areas of the database that you want to search. For example, if you wanted to find out whether David Cameron’s later interest in austerity as a government programme was anticipated by previous Prime Ministers, you can use the Advanced search function to limit the search to particular speakers (remembering to limit the dates to their dates in office to prevent a time-wasting search of all the data). An advanced search for Margaret Thatcher<sup>1</sup> during her years of office as MP and PM, for example, looks like this<sup>2</sup>:

Member	From:	To:
<input type="text" value="Mrs Margaret Thatcher"/>	<input type="text" value="1979"/>	<input type="text" value="1990"/>

This search brings up only one example of ‘austerity’ spoken by her in the House of Commons, but it bears a crucial similarity to its later use by David Cameron, George Osborne and others:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Date ▼	Member ▲	Contribution
<input type="checkbox"/>	1980-01-24	Mrs Margaret Thatcher	... § The Prime Minister The unparalleled <b>austerity</b> came here inbecause the previous Government refused to take the financial steps that they should have taken. We are trying to take those financial steps to reduce public expenditure to a level that the nation can genuinely afford. ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>

If the individual occurrences of your search term are of particular interest, and you want to know more about the context of their use, you can ask to see not only the date but also the debate title in which the occurrence was sited:

<sup>1</sup> Note that at the moment you have to check that you have searched on all the versions of a speaker’s name. In this case, there are two: Mrs. Margaret Thatcher and The Prime Minister Mrs. Margaret Thatcher) – including in the latter case a closing (but not opening) bracket! We (and many others) are working on the lack of consistency in Hansard’s naming practices.

<sup>2</sup> Note that although whole years show here, the precise dates need to be used in the advanced search function.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Date ▼	Member ▲	Contribution	Debate title
<input type="checkbox"/>	1980-01-24	Mrs Margaret Thatcher	... § The Prime Minister The unparalleled <b>austerity</b> came here inbecause the previous Government refused to take the financial steps that they should have taken. We are trying to take those financial steps to reduce public expenditure to a level that the nation can genuinely afford. ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>	PRIME MINLSTER (ENGAGEMENTS) (Hansard,January 1980)

There is, therefore, scope for using the Hansard at Huddersfield site to find patterns that we could not otherwise predict, but also to dig down into the database to find links and echoes that would also be hard to find in other types of search.