**“He is just the Nowhere Man of British Politics”:**

**Personal Attacks in Prime Minister’s Questions**

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**Journal of Language and Social Psychology (in press)**

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Aimee Barlow for her research assistance. The first author gratefully acknowledges financial support in the form of a teaching studentship from the Department of Psychology, University of York, UK.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The first author was supported by a PhD teaching studentship from the Department of Psychology, University of York, UK.

*Prime Minister’s Questions* (PMQs) is a weekly event in the UK House of Commons where the Prime Minister (PM) faces questions from other Members of Parliament (MPs). It has been described as “the shop window of the House of Commons” (Bercow, 2010) but, based on a recent survey, the majority of public opinion indicates discontent with the high levels of political point-scoring (Allen et al., 2014). In 2005, in his first speech as Conservative party leader, David Cameron expressed his dissatisfaction with what he called “Punch and Judy politics” – an obvious reference to PMQs – and pledged changes from the “name-calling, backbiting, point-scoring, finger-pointing” behaviour (Cameron, 2005). In the interim, much has been said and written about how Cameron’s proposed changes failed to materialise. Arguably, the character-bashing, synonymous with the actions of the aggressive puppets, has intensified. Indeed, after becoming PM in 2010, Cameron himself attracted much of the coverage for name-calling and rudeness. Despite his earlier criticism, it was claimed he went on to “[embrace] the yah-boo style”, and that PMQs often “descends into furious mud-slinging”, especially when Cameron clashed with Labour Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband (Chorley, 2013).

The overall adversarial nature of the weekly debates is increasing in its resemblance to “an unpleasant football match”, according to an article in *The Guardian* newspaper; with “secret grudge matches, settlement of scores, and covert fouls committed when the players hope the [referee] is not looking” (Hoggart, 2011). In 2014, respected TV news presenter and journalist Tom Bradby wrote on Twitter “PMQs has become completely, utterly pointless. But for what it’s worth, I think [David Cameron] needs to watch the rudeness” (Bradby, 2014). Furthermore, the Speaker (the parliamentary official charged with keeping order during debates in the House of Commons - currently John Bercow) claims the public have a strong aversion to the rowdiness on display (Hardman, 2015). Indeed, Bercow’s disquiet for the potential damage to Parliament’s reputation is apparent by his persistent criticism of PMQs (Reid, 2014). Of course, name-calling in parliamentary debates is not restricted to Cameron. A question during PMQs in 2014 directed at Cameron from Leader of the Opposition (LO) Miliband included “It is not so much ‘The Wolf of Wall Street’ but the dunce of Downing Street” (Hansard, HC Deb, 2 Apr 2014, col. 876). In his response, Cameron referred to the sale of the nation’s gold when Labour was in government and branded Miliband, and Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls who was sat alongside him, as “the two muppets”.

So, is this apparent press and public dissatisfaction indicative of any real change in parliamentary behaviour? Confrontation and hostility was a reported feature of LO/PM clashes in PMQs when Harold Wilson (Labour PM 1964-1970 & 1974-1976) and Edward Heath (Conservative PM 1970-1974) were leaders of their respective parties around half a century ago (Jones, 1973). Are the political leaders of today exhibiting higher levels of antagonism and rudeness than their recent predecessors? It is apparent that the development of a reliable measure to address this issue from a quantitative perspective would help to answer these questions and more.

***Previous research and theory***

Of course, the behaviour of politicians in parliamentary debates, including PMQs, has not escaped the attention of researchers and has been covered from different perspectives in a large number of research papers. One article focussing on the then PM John Major (Burnham, Jones, & Elgie, 1995) claimed he became less forthcoming in his responses and more impolite than he had been earlier in his premiership. Impoliteness was also the focus of research by S. Harris (2001), who assessed PMQs from the concept of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). According to their highly influential theory, the purpose of politeness is to avoid threatening another’s face – face being a person’s “positive social value” (Goffman, 1955/[1967, p. 5]) – which can be maintained, enhanced, damaged or lost during the course of social interaction. S. Harris (2001) indicated that impoliteness is a systematic feature of PMQs – and not only an accepted mode of interaction, but one which is approved, and even rewarded.

Bull and Wells (2012) performed a systematic analysis of the language used in 18 PMQs sessions from 2007. They identified six different ways that the LO can threaten the face of the PM in their question, and five counter measures that the PM uses to defend face in his/her responses. They supported S. Harris’s notion of the expectation of face-threatening behaviour in PMQs, claiming MPs enhance their reputations via aggressive communication. Murphy (2014), from a sample of six PMQs sessions (three from Cameron’s premiership and three from that of Labour PM Gordon Brown) identified seven different face-threatening acts in questions to the PM, and five in the PMs’ responses. Furthermore, and perhaps more relevant to the focus herein, he highlighted five “impolite linguistic strategies” (p. 91). Defined as face threats which are deemed to be highly impolite and confrontational, they were: *Unanswerable questions*, *Personalised negative characterisations*, *Unrelenting pointed criticisms*, *Accusations of hypocrisy*, and *Patronising or condescending remarks*.

Unlike the relatively small samples and narrow time frame of Bull and Wells (2012) and Murphy (2014), a more extensive study examined PMQs across a 31-year period (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014). Comparing the opening sessions of the five most recent PMs at that time, they reported findings supporting their claim that PMQs was becoming more rowdy, including increases in the number of interruptions. Findings also indicated an escalation in the average number of interventions by the Speaker to call the House to order. They also reported a greater likelihood for MPs to ask *unanswerable* questions[[3]](#endnote-1) the longer their tenure, as well as an increasing domination of the proceedings by party leaders.

Though the process of questioning leading government figures is an opportunity for any MP to shine (Giddings & Irwin, 2005), PMQs has come to be dominated by two main players: the LO and the PM (Bates et al., 2014) – their weekly clashes resembling a gladiatorial contest (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). PMQs has been described as a performance by a select group of famous actors “displaying a standard repertoire of rhetorical skills”, played out in front of a packed gallery (Lovenduski, 2012, p. 320) – and, since 1989, to the TV viewing public.

Ilie (2004) explored the differences between the UK and Swedish parliaments in the styles of insulting language on display in those two institutions. Though no quantitative evidence was provided, she suggested that whilst the insults by Swedish politicians tended to focus on ideological issues, British MPs had a greater tendency to target their insults on personality characteristics of addressees.

Despite the undoubted valuable contributions of the aforementioned studies to the understanding of communication and behavioural styles of parliamentarians, both as a group and as individuals, they are no barometer of rudeness and personal disrespect. Waddle and Bull (2016), in describing personalisation as having a specific purpose in the context of political discourse, proposed a typology of personalisation to evaluate the discursive practices of politicians. They identified seven distinct types of personalisation, often used as a control measure in the face of a challenging question. However, the basis of their model and its intended application was the political interview. Whilst there are obvious similarities – in both interviews and PMQs, a politician is subjected to a potentially troublesome questioning process – there are obvious differences. In a political interview, there is an expectation on the interviewer, typically a broadcast journalist, to be seen to remain impartial; there is no such obligation on the person asking questions in PMQs (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). Interviews tend to be conducted on a one-to-one basis, without interruption; PMQs is played out in the presence of several hundred MPs, often to a cacophony of interruptive shouts, barracking or laughter. Interviews, typically subject to broadcasters’ regulations, and with an agenda set by the interviewer (Greatbatch, 1986), tend to at least resemble a free-flowing conversation; in PMQs, the speaking turns of individual participants are prompted by the Speaker, and they are expected to conform to parliamentary regulations. Despite these differences, personalisation tactics may be similarly employed in the parliamentary setting, both to protect one’s face and to attack the face of opposition members.

***PMQs in the UK Parliament***

Before introducing the current research, it is necessary to provide some background information and details of PMQs itself. Questioning of the Prime Minister in Parliament first became a regular and frequent event during the premiership of Harold Macmillan (Conservative PM 1957-1963) in 1961 (House of Commons Information Office, 2010b). Until 1997, PMQs took place twice weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Parliament was sitting, typically lasting 15 minutes. This became a single weekly event for around 30 minutes each sitting Wednesday from the outset of Tony Blair’s premiership in 1997. Each session begins with the same tabled routine question from an MP – who is chosen via a random selection process known as the *shuffle* (Coe & Kelly, 2009) – asking the PM to list his official engagements, which in turn receives a stock answer. Following this parliamentary ritual, the MP can then ask a *supplementary* question on a topic of their choice. The PM need not have any prior knowledge of a supplementary question, thereby allowing the potential for unpredictability and surprise. The PM then faces further supplementary questions from both opposition and government MPs. On the whole, members can ask only one question, giving them no opportunity to follow up on the PM’s reply. The LO, however, is permitted six questions, therefore has adequate opportunity for follow-ups to the PM’s reply should they wish. Control of the proceedings is the responsibility of the Speaker, who, among other things, has a duty to admonish members who use language deemed to be unacceptable, including accusations of lying or drunkenness. Historical examples of *unparliamentary* language which the Speaker has objected to include blackguard, rat, hooligan, guttersnipe, git, stoolpigeon, swine, coward and traitor (House of Commons Information Office, 2010c).

***Research focus***

The focus of the current research was an evaluation of the level of personalisation – categorised as personal attacks – by the two main players in PMQs: the PM and the LO. To conduct such an analysis, it was necessary to design a model of personalisation appropriate to this specific mode of political communication. The model is based primarily on language characterised as disrespectful. This is described in detail in the subsequent section. The period of analysis partially follows that of Bates et al. (2014), namely, the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. Besides providing a new model to characterise personalisation, our analysis extends beyond the scope of their research insofar as we analyse both the early and latter periods of each of the five PMs. This feature specifically enables an evaluation of the focus of the research aims herein: to assess changes in this form of personalisation over a period spanning five decades, and within the tenure of each PM.

More specifically, this research tests two hypotheses. Firstly, as the findings of Bates et al. (2014) indicated an increase in rowdiness across that period, it is not unreasonable to propose that, in part, that may be due to an increase in the use of personal disrespect by the main players. Consequently, it was predicted that the current research would reveal an apparent increase in such antagonistic language across this time frame. Secondly, Bates et al. also indicated an increased likelihood for MPs to become more troublesome in their questioning the longer their tenure, and Burnham et al (1995) suggested that John Major’s impoliteness grew throughout his premiership. Therefore, it was further predicted that the individual PMs in this study would be shown to resort to more personal attacks in the latter periods of their time in office.

**Method**

***Participants***

The Prime Ministers included in this research were Margaret Thatcher (Conservative PM 1979-1990), John Major (Conservative PM 1990-1997), Tony Blair (Labour PM 1997-2007), Gordon Brown (Labour PM 2007-2010) and David Cameron (Conservative PM 2010-2016). The Leaders of the Opposition were James Callaghan (Labour LO 1979-1980), Neil Kinnock (Labour LO 1983-1992), Tony Blair (Labour LO 1994-1997), John Major (Conservative LO 1997), William Hague (Conservative LO 1997-2001), David Cameron (Conservative LO 2005-2010), Ed Miliband (Labour LO 2010-2015) and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour LO 2015-present).

***Apparatus***

The following websites were used to access transcripts and/or video recordings of PMQs: https://www.parliament.uk/ (for transcripts and videos), http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/ (for transcripts) and http://www.c-span.org/ (for videos). Hansard is the official record of proceedings in the UK Parliament. Though not fully verbatim – transcripts undergo some editing to remove obvious errors and repetition – they form a substantial, near comprehensive account of the spoken words of members in parliamentary debates (House of Commons Information Office, 2010a).

***Procedure***

Analysis was conducted of PMQs sessions from the early and latter periods of each of the aforementioned five PMs. Only question/response (Q/R) exchanges from the permanent LO and the PM were included in the analysis. Therefore, sessions where questions were taken by the Deputy PM, or another stand-in for the PM, were excluded. Similarly, and in the interests of homogeneous sampling, sessions where, for example, the main LO questions were asked by an Acting LO were also omitted.

The number of questions from the LO, whilst apparently fixed at six per session today, was often fewer and irregular in number in the past. It was initially decided to analyse the first 10 and the last 10 sessions for each PM. Based on the current format, that equates to 60 Q/R exchanges. However, due to past irregularity, and in the interests of consistency, the first and last 60 Q/R exchanges were used for all PMs.

When this research began, David Cameron was the current UK Prime Minister. Therefore, at that time there was no actual period immediately preceding the end of his tenure as PM, unlike his four predecessors. On that basis, the then most recent PMQs sessions (January to March 2015) – the last 10 before the 2015 General Election – were selected to represent his latter period. This situation changed when, following the referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU) on 23rd June 2016, Cameron announced his decision to resign as PM. Cameron’s premiership ended on 13th July 2016 when he was replaced as PM by Theresa May. Rather than discard the data for Cameron from 2015, this was retained and forms part of the analysis in our *Original Study*. Additional data was then collected from the period immediately prior to Cameron’s departure from office, and this was analysed in our *Follow-up Study*. Table 1 shows this in greater detail.

**Table 1.** The ten blocks of PMQs sessions analysed in each study

**PM** **Period (Code)** **Dates of PMQs sessions**

Margaret Thatcher Early (MT1) 22 May 1979 – 7 Feb 1980

Margaret Thatcher Late (MT2) 8 May 1990 – 27 Nov 1990

John Major Early (JM1) 29 Nov 1990 – 23 Apr 1991

John Major Late (JM2) 3 Dec 1996 – 20 Mar 1997

Tony Blair Early (TB1) 21 May 1997 – 19 Nov 1997

Tony Blair Late (TB2) 21 Mar 2007 – 27 Jun 2007

Gordon Brown Early (GB1) 4 Jul 2007 – 5 Dec 2007

Gordon Brown Late (GB2) 6 Jan 2010 – 7 Apr 2010

David Cameron Early (DC1) 13 Oct 2010 – 19 Jan 2011

David Cameron (*Original study* only) Late (DC2) 14 Jan 2015 – 25 Mar 2015

David Cameron (*Follow-up* only) Late (DC2) 13 Apr 2016 – 13 Jul 2016

For the sessions at the beginning of Thatcher’s premiership, transcripts were accessed from http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/. Thatcher first became PM on 4 May 1979. The website was checked from that date onwards for occurrences of PMQs. These were identified via the headings ‘Commons Sitting of [date]’ / ‘ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS’ / ‘PRIME MINISTER’. Only Q/R exchanges from Callaghan and Thatcher were selected. This process was continued through to the 60th Q/R exchange on 7 February 1980.

Transcripts from the subsequent blocks of PMQs (Thatcher’s last through to Cameron’s last) were accessible from https://www.parliament.uk/ via the following links: *Parliamentary business > Publications & records > Commons Hansard archives > By date*. Every Tuesday and Thursday, up to the end of Major’s premiership (2 May 1997), was then checked for occurrences of PMQs. From that date onwards – the outset of Blair’s premiership – the same method was used, though now PMQs had shifted to Wednesdays only. A more straightforward method for locating the occurrence and transcripts of PMQs in more recent years was available, also via the Parliament website: *Parliamentary business > News > Parliament, government and politics > Parliament > Prime Minister’s Questions* – though this was applicable only to sessions from 26 November 2008 onwards.

Transcripts were analysed for instances of personalisation. In the context of PMQs, personalisations were defined as follows. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that by virtue of the combative nature of parliamentary debate, particularly in an adversarial political system as that in the UK, much of the discourse will be critical, and occasionally of a personal focus. Indeed, the accepted role of opposition politicians is to challenge the actions of the government (S. Harris, 2001), including ministers and the PM. On that basis, it is necessary to distinguish between exchanges which qualify as personalisation and those that contain personal references which do not.

From the perspective of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), expressing disagreement can be seen as a threat to a person’s face. Expressions of disagreement based on personal performance may be couched in language which mollifies the effect, making it more polite and showing an element of respect, thereby indicating the disagreement is not personal. Politicians express disagreement, often in relation to personal performance or behaviour, but the choice of language and delivery dictates whether it is classed as disrespect. Only questions or responses within the LO/PM exchanges adjudged to be personally disrespectful were identified as personalisation, in effect, a personal attack. For example, consider the accusation of broken promises. Prior to elections, politicians state what they will do if they win. Afterwards, for a variety of reasons, they may fail to adhere to their pre-election pledges. Indeed, it has been suggested that politicians who are frank about what they are likely to be able to achieve in office, even for reasons outside their control, are unlikely to win an election (Flinders, 2012; Flinders, Weinberg, & Geddes, 2016). These broken promises can lead to accusations of dishonesty. However, unless the comment implies an enduring negative personality trait, or is couched in language which is deemed to be personally disrespectful (e.g., “She ratted on that promise, of course…” LO Kinnock to PM Thatcher [HC Deb, 22 May 1990, col. 167]), it would not be identified as personalisation here.

Another example is a claim that the member opposite is mistaken about a particular issue. Should the comment resemble “The Leader of the Opposition is wrong”, this would not qualify; but, a statement like “As usual, the Leader of the Opposition is wrong” implies an enduring negative character trait, therefore would qualify. Furthermore, comments by the LO that the PM failed to answer the question are common in PMQs, but again, only those which imply this is typical of the PM, or contain an element of disrespect (e.g., “She dodged the question then, and she is trying to dodge it now” LO Kinnock to PM Thatcher [HC Deb, 28 June 1990, col. 483]) are classed as a personal attack. Further details of comments which qualify as a personal attack are shown in Table 2.

An additional consideration was the use of quotations. Politicians often cite the words of others in their questions or responses in PMQs. In terms of personalisation, such rhetoric can be as equally disrespectful and face-threatening, therefore quotations also qualify providing they fit with the criteria as described above. Furthermore, it is important to stress that, in accordance with this model, comments which qualify must have a personal focus, not a group focus. For example, during a session in 2015, Cameron’s response to a Miliband question concluded with “What a useless shower” (HC Deb, 28 Jan 2015, col. 852). Though highly disrespectful, and indeed with possible personal implications, this had a clear group focus without any individual personal direction so was not identified as personalisation. Finally, attacks focussing on anyone other than the LO or the PM did not qualify for inclusion.

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| **Table 2.** Personal attacks in PMQs |  |  |
| **Comments focussed on the member opposite which contain or are couched in personal disrespect, e.g.,** |  | **Examples** |
| Negative personality statements |  | *The truth is he is weak and despicable and wants to crawl to power in Alex Salmond’s pocket.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288])  *If he had an ounce of courage, he would rule it out.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288]) |
| Implications of an enduring negative character trait |  | *Is not the truth that, just like on every other issue, we get broken promises from this Prime Minister?* (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 19 Jan 2011, col. 834])  *Every forecast the right hon. Gentleman has made about the economy has been wrong. /…/ He has made misjudgment after misjudgment on every single question.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 18 Mar 2015, col. 756]) |
| Negative names/labels |  | *He is just the nowhere man of British politics.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 24 Nov 2010, col. 261])  *The Prime Minister is a crank.* (LO Kinnock to PM Thatcher [HC Deb, 18 Oct 1990, col. 1374])  *He is a socialist – a crypto-communist.* (PM Thatcher to LO Kinnock [HC Deb, 18 Oct 1990, col. 1375]) |
| Aspersions/disparaging insinuations |  | *We can talk about the Prime Minister trebling the deficit, about wrecking the pension system, about ruining the tax system and about bringing this country to its knees.* (LO Cameron to PM Brown [HC Deb, 24 Feb 2010, col. 293])  *He is being funded to the tune of £47 million by the hedge funds. Everyone knows that is why he is refusing to act, but what is his explanation?* (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 4 Feb 2015, col. 265])  *He says the election is all about me and him, but the one thing he wants to avoid is a televised debate between me and him.* (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 4 Mar 2015, col. 939]) |
| Patronising, condescending remarks |  | *That is a much better question; I think we are making some progress.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 20 Oct 2010, col. 939]) |
| Mockery |  | *If the Prime Minister is going to have pre-prepared jokes, I think they ought to be a bit better than that one - probably not enough bananas on the menu.* (LO Cameron to PM Brown [HC Deb, 10 Feb 2010, col. 904])  *I hope that what he has said is not an indication that he is going to support another football team, rather than sticking with the two that he has already.* (LO Corbyn to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 4 May 2016, col. 161])  *Apparently, someone can go around to his office, and he stands on a soapbox to make himself look a little taller.* (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 4 Mar 2015, col. 938]) |
| Badgering |  | *The Prime Minister claims to be a numbers man, so is it 90 percent, is it 95 percent or is it 98 percent? Come on.* (LO Cameron to PM Brown [HC Deb, 25 Jul 2007, col. 836])  *I have to say to him—he talks about job insecurity and my two months to go—it might be in my party’s interests for him to sit there; it is not in the national interest. I would say: for heaven’s sake man, go!* (PM Cameron to LO Corbyn [HC Deb, 29 Jun 2016, col. 294]) |

Analysis was conducted, primarily, using the written transcripts. However, this was supported by the use of video recordings of PMQs sessions sourced from the Parliament website (back to December 2007) and http://www.c-span.org/ (back to October 1989). These were consulted for clarification purposes in the case of examples of personalisation identified as ambiguous from the transcript alone. Video recordings were not available for Thatcher’s early period (1979-1980).

All selected transcripts were analysed by the main author. Each turn, both the LO’s and the PM’s, was coded as either 0 (containing no personal attack) or 1 (containing at least one personal attack). As a measure of reliability, 20% (12 Q/R exchanges) were selected randomly from each of the 10 blocks in the original study to be analysed by a second researcher. Prior to the actual analysis of these sessions, the second researcher underwent a training period in identifying personalisation according to this model. An interrater reliability test using Cohen’s (1960) kappa was performed on the two sets of findings from the 120 Q/R exchanges analysed by both researchers. The resultant figure (*k* = 0.88, *p* < .001) indicated *almost perfect agreement* (Landis & Koch, 1977) in our comparative analysis, supporting the reliability of the main author’s identification of personalisation.

**Results**

***Original Study***

This study was based on the early and late periods of each PM; however, Cameron’s latter period was represented by the 10 sessions immediately prior to the 2015 General election, when he was opposed by LO Miliband. Statistical analysis was conducted via a generalised linear model (GLM). This was chosen due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable – the level of personalisation by either the PM or the LO. For each turn, 0 represented no personal attack, 1 represented the identification of at least one personal attack within the turn. Within each GLM there were two factors: politician (e.g., individual PMs in the first analysis) and time period (early and late), and subsequently an interaction effect to assess the difference between periods for each politician. The first analysis was conducted to assess the personalisation by the five PMs in their responses to questions from the LO. Figure 1 shows overall personalisation (both early and late periods) by each PM. It is apparent that, except for Blair, there has been a general trend for PMs to be more personally disrespectful in their responses than their predecessors. Cameron was found to respond with significantly more personal attacks than each of the other four PMs (*p* < .001 in all cases) – a total of 72 from his overall 120 (60 earliest and 60 latest) assessed responses, equating to 60%. Total overall personal attacks by Thatcher, Major, Blair and Brown were found to be 29 (24.2%), 36 (30%), 29 (24.2%) and 45 (37.5%), respectively. Table 3 shows the quantities for each politician by period.

**Figure 1.** Personal attacks by PMs.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

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| **Table 3.** Number of turns containing a personal attack (pers.) within each | | | | |
| period. | | | |  |
| **PM** | **Period** | **LO** | **LO pers.** | **PM pers.** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Thatcher | Early | Callaghan | 8 (13.3) | 5 (8.3) |
| Thatcher | Late | Kinnock | 23 (38.3) | 24 (40) |
| Major | Early | Kinnock | 9 (15) | 7 (11.7) |
| Major | Late | Blair | 19 (31.7) | 29 (48.3) |
| Blair | Early | Major/Hague | 21 (35) | 11 (18.3) |
| Blair | Late | Cameron | 17 (28.3) | 18 (30) |
| Brown | Early | Cameron | 28 (46.7) | 15 (25) |
| Brown | Late | Cameron | 37 (61.7) | 30 (50) |
| Cameron | Early | Miliband | 24 (40) | 35 (58.3) |
| Cameron | Late [Original study – 2015] | Miliband | 28 (46.7) | 37 (61.7) |
| Cameron | Late [Follow-up – 2016] | Corbyn | 5 (8.3) | 12 (20) |

*Note.* There are 60 turns per politician per period. Values in parentheses are

the percentages of those 60 turns which contained a personal attack. In Blair’s

early period, Major was LO for only 3 sessions and asked 13 questions, Hague

followed as LO and asked the remaining 47 questions.

Figure 2 shows comparisons in PM personalisation between the early and latter periods. Firstly, for the PMs combined, significantly more personal attacks took place towards the end of their premierships (*p* < .001). Individually, all five PMs were seen to increase in their use of personal attacks. To test for significance here, Bonferroni correction was applied due to multiple tests (five early/late period comparisons), which adjusted the significance threshold from .050 to .010. So, whilst each PM’s personalisation total was higher in their last 60 responses than in their first 60, the only significant increases were Thatcher’s (*p* < .001), Major’s (*p* < .001), and Brown’s (*p* = .005). The increases in personal attacks by Blair and Cameron were found to be non-significant (*p* = .139, *p* = .709, respectively).

**Figure 2.** PM personal attacks by period.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

The next analysis was focussed on personal attacks directed at the PM in the LO questions. Figure 3 shows how each of the five PMs fared overall (both early and late periods) in the proportion of questions they faced which contained a personal attack. Brown, who across his entire premiership was opposed by Cameron as LO, received the most personal attacks. Personalisation directed at Brown was significantly higher than that directed at Thatcher, Major and Blair (*p* < .001 in all cases), but not significantly higher than that directed at Cameron (*p* = .091). Cameron as PM, who faced LO Miliband in both early and late periods, also received significantly more personal attacks than Thatcher (*p* = .004) and Major (*p* = .001) but not Blair (*p* = .061).

**Figure 3.** LO personal attacks directed at each PM.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 4 shows a comparison of time period for LO personalisation. Firstly, on a combined basis, significantly more personal attacks were found in the latter periods (*p* = .003). Individually, all PMs except Blair received more personal attacks in the latter periods of their premierships, though the only significant difference (following Bonferroni correction) was for Thatcher (*p* = .003).

**Figure 4.** LO personal attacks directed at PMs by period.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

In terms of personalisation by individual LOs, again it was Cameron who was the most personally offensive. Figure 5 shows the individual LO performances. Focussing on single periods, Cameron in opposition at the end of Brown’s premiership used the highest number of personal attacks against any PM. Indeed, there were significantly more LO personalisations in that period than any other (ranging from *p* = .019 to *p* < .001), except for Cameron at the start of PM Brown’s tenure (*p* = .101) and Miliband in PM Cameron’s latter period (*p* = .101). Conversely, Cameron in opposition at the end of Blair’s premiership was one of the least personally offensive LOs: significantly greater than only Callaghan opposing Thatcher (p = .047).

**Figure 5.** Personal attacks by LOs (PM/period code in parentheses).

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.

Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 6 shows how each PM compared to their respective LOs (both early and late periods) in the use of personal attacks. The most noticeable difference was at the start of Brown’s premiership, when he received more from LO Cameron than he delivered (*p* = .015). However, following Bonferroni correction due to multiple comparisons, none of the differences were statistically significant. We then computed the phi coefficient (*φ*) to assess the association between question and response. This gave us some indication of how the level of personalisation in the LO’s question might prompt something similar in the PM’s response. Interpretations of effect sizes were based on Cohen (1969). Results indicated that, overall, there was a small effect (*φ* = 0.27, *p* < .001). Across each premiership and the early or latter period for each PM, we found mostly only a small effect or no effect. The exceptions were three medium effects: PM Cameron’s early period when he was opposed by LO Miliband (*φ* = 0.41, *p* = .001), Thatcher’s premiership (*φ* = 0.33, *p* < .001), and Brown’s premiership (*φ* = 0.33, *p* < .001). Other phi results for each period were: MT1 *φ* = .24, *p* = .067; MT2 *φ* = .27, *p* = .039; JM1 *φ* = -.15, *p* = .237; JM2 *φ* = .27, *p* = .034; TB1 *φ* = .10, *p* = .421; TB2 *φ* = .15, *p* = .235; GB1 *φ* = .31, *p* = .017; GB2 *φ* = .31, *p* = .017; DC2 *φ* = .05, *p* = .696.

**Figure 6.** Personal attacks by PMs and their respective LOs.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.

Error bars represent standard error.

***Follow-up Study***

In this study, Cameron’s latter period is now represented by his final 10 sessions prior to resignation in July 2016. Throughout those sessions he faced questions from LO Corbyn. Table 3 above shows the personalisation data from that period, indicating that PM Cameron’s overall personalised responses were now down to 39.2%. The following tables include some duplicated representations from the original study. These have been retained to aid evaluative comparisons. Figure 7 shows that in the follow-up study Cameron was again found to be highest in personalisation use overall compared to the four preceding PMs; however, now he was significantly higher than only Blair and Thatcher (*p* = .012).

**Figure 7.** Personal attacks by PMs.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 8 shows comparisons between early and latter periods. Whilst the differences between early and latter periods for the PMs combined is now reduced, it still indicates a highly significant increase in the latter periods (*p* < .001). In the case of Cameron alone, analysis now shows that he is the only PM to score lower on personalisation in his last 10 sessions than his first 10, making significantly fewer attacks (Bonferroni correction applied) in his latter period (*p* < .001).

**Figure 8.** PM personal attacks by period.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 9 shows the levels of LO personalisation received by each PM. Cameron was now found to receive one of the lowest levels of personal attacks of any of the five PMs, and significantly lower than Brown (*p* < .001). Figure 10 shows that there is no longer a significant difference in combined LO personalisation between early and latter periods (*p* = .320). Individually, Cameron was now found to receive significantly fewer personal attacks (Bonferroni correction applied) at the end of his premiership than at the start (*p* < .001).

**Figure 9.** LO personal attacks directed at each PM.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

**Figure 10.** LO personal attacks directed at PMs by period.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

When personalisation by individual LOs was examined (see Figure 11), Corbyn was found to subject PM Cameron to fewer personal attacks than any of the opposition leaders to their respective PMs. His level of personalisation was significantly lower than other LOs (ranging from *p* < .001 to *p* = .007) except for Kinnock when opposing Major (*p* = .261) and Callaghan opposing Thatcher (*p* = .382). Figure 12 shows the personalisation comparison between the LO and the PM in Cameron’s latter period. Though PM Cameron was more personally offensive than LO Corbyn in this period, the difference was not significant (*p* = .075).

**Figure 11.** Personal attacks by LOs (PM/period code in parentheses).

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.

Error bars represent standard error.

Again the phi coefficient was computed to assess the level of association in terms of personalisation between question and response. This revealed a medium effect of question on response for PM Cameron’s premiership overall (*φ* = 0.42, *p* < .001), but no effect of LO Corbyn’s questions on Cameron’s responses (*φ* = 0.15, *p* = .243).

**Figure 12.** Personal attacks in Cameron’s latter period (2016).

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means

from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

**Discussion**

The findings from this model of personalisation in PMQs indicate that there has been a general trend across our research period (from Thatcher’s premiership beginning in 1979 to Cameron’s ending in 2016) for PMs to be more personally offensive than their predecessors. When comparing a combination of their early and latter periods, all PMs except Blair were found to be more personal in their questioning style than the PM they succeeded. Cameron was shown to use more personal attacks than any of the previous PMs. This was particularly true when considering the findings of our *original study* – facing LO Miliband both when he became PM in 2010 and in the latter period in 2015 – where he was found to use significantly more personal attacks than the other PMs. Taking our *follow-up study* into account, Cameron again came out highest in personalisation use overall, though now that his latter sessions were substituted with those against Corbyn in 2016, he was significantly higher than only Thatcher and Blair. Despite the reduced statistical significance from the follow-up, in terms of overall personalisation by each PM, findings from both studies support the hypothesis of an increase in personal disrespect across the research period. This apparent increase in antagonistic language by the PM has parallels with the findings of Bates et al. (2014) indicating increased rowdiness across a similar period.

Both studies here indicated a significant increase in personal attacks across premierships when the five PMs were assessed in combination. In terms of personalisation by each PM across their individual periods of office, the original study showed a general trend for the premiers to increase in their use of attacks on their respective LOs. All scored higher in their latter sessions, though only Thatcher, Major and Brown showed a significant increase. These findings support the second hypothesis that PMs would increase in their use of personal attacks. Findings also support Burnham et al. (1995), who, in their assessment of John Major, reported an increase in impoliteness across his tenure as PM. However, the results of the follow-up in relation to Cameron do not support the second hypothesis. Facing questions from Corbyn in his latter period, Cameron was the only PM in this study to make fewer personal attacks at the end of his premiership, in this case a significant reduction on his early period. This anomalous finding is discussed in greater detail below.

Turning now to personalisation aimed at the PMs, Gordon Brown, who was opposed by LO Cameron across his entire premiership, was shown to receive the greatest number of personal attacks of all PMs. Findings from the original study showed the attacks directed at Brown were significantly higher than the three previous PMs: Thatcher, Major and Blair. These significant differences were still evident in the findings of the follow-up, though now his position as the PM targeted with the highest level of personalisation was more pronounced, as he also received significantly more than his successor, David Cameron. When comparing early and latter periods, the original study revealed PMs received higher levels of personalisation at the end of their premierships in all cases except Blair, though the only significant increase was for Thatcher. In contrast, the follow-up revealed Cameron was actually subjected to a significant decrease in personalisation at the end of his tenure, receiving the lowest number of personal attacks of any PM in any period.

The personal attacks directed at PMs were looked at more closely in terms of personalisation by individual LOs by period. Cameron was again seen to be the most offensive. His highest level of personalisation directed at the PM was in Brown’s latter period, significantly higher than any other LO in any period except his own opposition in Brown’s early period or that which he himself faced from Miliband in 2015. Cameron’s high levels of antagonistic opposition was not always the case. His earlier lower level of personalisation in his questioning of PM Blair appeared far more polite. Despite the apparent increased personalisation in PMQs since 1979, our follow-up revealed a new low in LO personal attacks in 2016: Corbyn, who during his bid for the Labour leadership in 2015 called for a ‘new kind of politics’ (ITV, 2015), by this measure appears to have delivered on his promise.

***Increases in personalisation***

So what are the reasons for the pre-2016 growth in personal attacks evident from this research? The British political system and its particular style of majoritarian democracy – an electoral system that tends, artificially, to create parliamentary majorities rather than power-sharing – lends itself to an antagonistic, confrontational political culture (Lijphart, 2012). Furthermore, this culture is reflected in the layout of the chamber in which parliamentary debates, including PMQs, are held: opposing benches, where the party of government face the party of opposition (Flinders et al., 2016). The chamber is more befitting confrontation than consensus (Gimson, 2012). But the system and layout have remained relatively unchanged for much longer than the period covered in this research. However, one noticeable change within this period is the advent of television coverage of parliamentary proceedings, and almost certainly as a consequence, the heightened media attention. Bates et al. (2014) propose an increase in adversarial behaviour may be due to the presence of television cameras – broadcasting live to the nation, and across the world in the case of PMQs – and a rise in ‘personality politics’ dominated by party leaders, often at the expense of other members. The heavy focus on the main players is a view supported by Reid (2014), who suggests PMQs is now considered an LO/PM contest. Reid further suggests that the leaders’ performances are commented on and scrutinised, not just in print and broadcast media, but also on social media. Reports often take the form of a sports report. Contributors to the various forms of media discuss the performance of the PM and LO in terms of “goals scored” (Lovenduski, 2012. p. 320). The contest has been compared to “a form of verbal pugilism” (Bull & Wells, 2012, p. 46), and in the vein of sports reporting, each week a winner is declared (Reid, 2014).

It is under these adversarial circumstances, the media spotlight, and the subsequent mass media post-contest analysis that PMQs is played out each week. Political leaders have claimed their behaviour in PMQs is affected by the circumstances of the event. Following accusations of patronising comments directed at female MPs, Cameron, in a BBC interview, said “[PMQs] is very aggressive, confrontational […] I don’t think you can change it actually […] I apologise for that. That’s not what I’m like” (The Andrew Marr Show, BBC, 2 October 2011). Former Acting Leader and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party Harriet Harman claimed her reported adversarial performance when facing LO William Hague was due to following the conventions of PMQs, and knowing that it was expected of her by her party (Lovenduski, 2012). Rising to the challenge in PMQs, with the scrutiny and publicity it generates, is viewed by parties across the political divide as a very public assessment of leadership (Reid, 2014).

Expectation and intense public scrutiny are less powerful arguments for increased personalisation across individual premierships. One possibility is when the latter period of a PM’s tenure comprises the final sessions before a general election. At such times there will be more at stake – a situation when each leader will be more inclined to go on the attack, increasing the potential for more hostile exchanges. This may explain the higher levels of personal attacks in Major’s and Brown’s latter periods, and in Cameron’s when he faced LO Miliband in 2015 prior to the General Election. However, Thatcher’s and Blair’s latter periods did not occur immediately prior to an election, and Thatcher in particular was far more personally disrespectful than she had been in her early period, with an almost five-fold increase in her personal attacks while responding to a similar level from LO Kinnock.

***Potential functions of personalisation***

The view that offensive personalisation is a normative behaviour in PMQs was one shared by former Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe, who argued that opponent humiliation is an accepted norm (Lovenduski, 2012). Murphy (2014) made a number of observations in relation to personal exchanges, including the suggestion that negative personalisations tend to be voiced by the LO because of the frequent comparisons made between him and the PM, therefore any damage inflicted on the premier may enhance his reputation. Furthermore, rude questions tend to prompt rude responses, in part because a PM may seem weak if s/he does not respond in kind. Murphy’s observations were offered as evidence for the proposal of Culpeper (2011) that, in interaction, impoliteness is reciprocated. In cases of physical aggression, there is a common assumption that the best face-saving response to a personal attack is a counterattack (L. M. Harris, Gergen, & Lannamann, 1986). Here, we did not find any large effects of question on response in relation to personal attacks, though the lack thereof is not necessarily indicative of unreciprocated personal antagonism. Indeed, the PM may respond to a question containing personalisation without retaliation, but release a barrage of personal attacks in subsequent responses. Our results corrected for multiple comparisons revealed no significant personalisation differences between any PM and their respective LO in 11 periods of 60 Q/R sequences. Arguably, this is further empirical evidence for Culpeper’s suggestion that impolite behaviour tends to be reciprocated. However, whether in these exchanges the antagonism was prompted by the LO or the PM remains to be seen.

Waddle and Bull (2016) reported that various forms of personalised response by politicians in interviews were often used as a control measure, typically a form of equivocation. As discussed in the introduction, there are considerable differences between the two modes of political communication. However, equivocation could also be a function of a personal attack in PMQs. Schopenhauer’s (1831/1896) nineteenth century essay ‘The Art of Controversy’ listed 38 stratagems of argument. The final stratagem was “A last trick is to become personal, insulting, rude, as soon as you perceive that your opponent has the upper hand, and that you are going to come off worst” (xxxviii, para 1). A PM may indeed use a personal attack when in a position of political weakness, or as the least face-damaging response to a difficult question, although many personal slurs may stem from a position of perceived strength.

Ilie (2004) suggested that British politicians tend to make negative personal references about the intelligence and wit of their opponents because these personal attributes are encouraged, and that a sharp and ready wit is essential in British parliamentary debates. Ilie proposed a further function of this form of personalisation: the rational force of a personal attack is outweighed by its emotional force. In the highly contested environment of PMQs, emotive personal language may indeed be used to disarm or deconstruct political adversaries.

Reid (2014) highlighted examples which correspond to the notion of deconstruction. PM Blair and his Director of Communications Alistair Campbell were aware of the renowned wit and debating skills of LO William Hague and his assured performances at PMQs. With the help of his advisors, Blair’s strategy was to attack Hague on the grounds that his wit was, he claimed, at the expense of sound political judgement. Campbell (2007) claimed that the strategy of highlighting Hague’s skill as a negative characteristic was used to good effect on the LO. Blair (2010), in his memoirs, said that he mastered the art of disarming his political opponents. According to Reid (2014), David Cameron has used PMQs to characterise his opponents as weak. For example, in 2010 he said to Miliband, “The leader of the Labour Party saw a big crowd assembling in the Mall, and he just decided, ‘I am their leader, I must follow them.’ That is his idea of leadership” (HC Deb, 8 Dec 2010, col. 300). Miliband appeared to employ a strategy in response to Cameron’s attacks to characterise the PM as remote and uncaring (e.g., “Is not the truth that he is pulling away the ladder because he does not understand the lives of ordinary people up and down the country” [HC Deb, 8 Dec 2010, col. 301]).

A further consideration for the functionality of personal attacks in PMQs is one leader’s motive to highlight differences between themselves and their opposite number. In his analysis of language used in a military training facility, Culpeper (1996) suggested that, whilst one function of politeness is recognition of similarities between interlocutors, impoliteness is a denial of that. Focussing on parliamentary discourse, Ilie (2004) proposed that insults are directed at opposing politicians in order to magnify their cognitive differences. The party leaders are likely to step up their personal attacks in the latter periods as, in some cases, these would occur at the time of an approaching general election, therefore they will be motivated to highlight differences in order to gain the support of the electorate. Mindful of the extensive coverage that PMQs receives, the use of such tactics by the leaders is comparable to ‘playing to the crowd’.

***Individual differences and differences of opinion***

The variation in levels of personalisation by party leaders in this research is not consistent with Murphy’s (2014) observation that the constraints of the rules of PMQs limit individual differences in terms of personal expression. For example, the difference between Cameron and Blair was shown here to be highly significant. Whilst Cameron’s more verbally aggressive style goes against his pledge to bring an end to ‘Punch and Judy politics’, and undoubtedly led to criticism from some quarters, other opinion was far from negative. At his final session as PM, former Conservative cabinet minister Peter Lilley heaped praise on Cameron in relation to his performances at PMQs: “[…] in 33 years in this House watching five Prime Ministers and several ex-Prime Ministers, I have seen him achieve a mastery of that Dispatch Box[[4]](#endnote-2) unparalleled in my time […]” (HC Deb, 13 Jul 2016, col. 289). Such a eulogy from a long-standing senior MP supports the claims of S. Harris (2001) and Bull and Wells (2012) that face-threatening behaviour at PMQs is not only approved but is also rewarded. Blair, shown here on the other hand to be the least personally disrespectful, was also acknowledged for his expertise at the Dispatch Box, even by a political opponent who faced him at PMQs (Hague, 2002). He was also considered a “formidable and experienced performer […] who spent a dozen years seeing off all rivals” (Gimson, 2012, pp. 12-13).

There are also opposing views on the general conduct of members in PMQs. In addition to the criticisms by some concerned for how the public may be turned off by the rudeness on display, including the disquiet of the Speaker himself (Reid, 2014), others are approving. For example, an article parodying Punch and Judy in its title – ‘PMQs: That’s the way to do it!’ (Gimson, 2012) – refers to the event not only as a “test of courage” but also as “one of the few genuinely popular bits of British politics” (p. 11).

***Cameron vs Corbyn***

Our evaluation of the most recent period – Cameron facing questions from LO Corbyn – revealed some of the lowest levels of personalisation across the 37-year period of analysis. Corbyn’s personal attacks were the lowest of any LO, and Cameron’s were curtailed to below one third of that from the previous year when responding to Miliband. This sudden decrease in antagonism raises some interesting questions. In the case of Corbyn, he appears to have followed up on his pledge for politics of a different kind, but why the change in Cameron’s approach? This may fit with Culpeper’s (2011) proposal of reciprocated impoliteness; or, more specifically, reciprocated *politeness* towards an LO less inclined to personalise. Another possibility for Cameron’s restrained language when facing Corbyn could be his consideration to avoid damaging his own face. Verbal aggression directed at Corbyn – at seventeen years older, and with his new, more polite approach to questioning the PM – could be construed by some to be something of an own goal for Cameron. Furthermore, with recent opinion poll ratings for Labour lower than for any other period of opposition since the advent of modern polling in the 1950s (Hughes, 2016), Cameron and his advisors may have taken the view that attempting to damage Corbyn in their exchanges at PMQs was not in the interests of the Conservative party. Indeed, Cameron himself referred to this viewpoint during his final PMQs when he quoted from correspondence (seemingly, from a supporter) urging him to respond with “Sensible, sober, polite answers to Mr Corbyn…let him create his own party disunity” (HC Deb, 13 Jul 2016, col. 288).

One noticeable aspect of Corbyn’s new approach was to include questions to the PM which were sourced from, and referencing by forename, members of the public, typically sent to the LO by email. In Corbyn’s first PMQs session as LO, all six of his questions were of this type. Although these questions were often greeted with derision from Conservative MPs, arguably Cameron might have inhibited his personal attacks when addressing a question from a member of the public. However, Corbyn’s use of these questions has gradually decreased, within a few weeks dropping to just one per session (Bull, Fetzer, & Waddle, 2016), and by the time of our analysis period (Cameron’s last 10 sessions), they were used only once in occasional sessions. Another possible reason for Cameron’s newfound restraint in personalisation relates to the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU. Within our analysis period, campaigning was underway for the upcoming referendum. Both Cameron and Corbyn were campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU. This unusual situation of the leaders of the two main political parties being on the same side in a major issue to be put to the electorate may have factored in the reduced antagonism. Indeed, in the two sessions immediately prior to the referendum in June 2016, no personal attacks were made by either leader. Between 11 May and 29 June 2016, 18 consecutive LO/PM Q/R exchanges passed without a personal attack. This is a sequence unparalleled in these analyses, stretching back to 1979.

***Conclusions***

This research was conducted to devise a reliable model to measure personalisation in parliamentary debates and to fill what was seen as a gap in the literature. From the results, it is apparent that David Cameron’s pledge in 2005 to bring an end to Punch and Judy politics was not followed by a sustained decrease in the name-calling behaviour he referred to in his speech at that time. From a relatively low start when in opposition to PM Tony Blair, perhaps indicative of a continued intention to adhere to his pledge, his personalisation grew across his time as LO to a high point in opposition to Gordon Brown in 2010, then remained high across his premiership up until the General Election of 2015. The name-calling behaviour, measured by the level of personal disrespect by PMs in PMQs, bemoaned by many, has increased across our research period (from the premiership of Margaret Thatcher to that of David Cameron). All PMs except Blair were more disrespectful than their predecessors. Up until the General Election of 2015, all PMs scored higher in their level of personal attacks on their respective LOs in the latter periods of their time in office than at the beginning. Across the same time frame, other than for Blair’s premiership, there was a similar trend for LO personal attacks to be higher in the PMs’ latter periods of office. Significant differences were apparent when we analysed Cameron’s final period prior to his departure in 2016. His exchanges with Jeremy Corbyn, whilst not devoid of personal attacks, were far more polite, with a threefold reduction in attacks by Cameron compared to those directed at LO Ed Miliband, and the lowest level of any LO by Corbyn.

As to the reasons why personalisation increased dramatically between 1979 and 2015, the most convincing argument is the effects of intensified scrutiny and commentary reminiscent of a gladiatorial contest, which has grown since televising PMQs began in 1989. Broadcasting and reporting on leaders’ performances has escalated with the growth of social media. These factors will have increased the likelihood for party leaders to indulge in ‘playing to the crowd’ behaviour, conscious that personal damage inflicted on their opponent will receive nationwide attention. Potential functions of personalisation include: highlighting cognitive differences between themselves (particularly in the run-up to a general election); attempting to disarm or deconstruct their opponent via a concentrated attack on aspects of their character; and equivocation. The notion that, following a difficult question, a PM may make an equivocal response in the form of a personal attack could be analysed in a future project – using this model of personalisation in conjunction with an evaluation of the fullness of answers.

Finally, the comparatively low levels of personalisation by both Corbyn and Cameron revealed in our follow-up study raised an interesting question prompting four alternative propositions for the significant decrease in the PM’s level of personal disrespect towards the LO. Firstly, as this was the period preceding the EU Referendum, the opposing leaders were, unusually, arguing from the same side in a momentous political issue. Secondly, attacking the older and relatively polite party leader to a high degree may have been potentially face-damaging for the PM. Thirdly, it was considered not politically expedient to inflict damage on Corbyn. Fourthly, in effect, it was merely a form of reciprocated politeness. One further question has emerged from the apparent reduction in personal attacks in 2016, if Corbyn’s participation in PMQs has brought about a new kind of politics, how long will it last?

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**Notes**

1. University of York, York, UK [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

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3. Questions deemed difficult to reply to without potential face damage, or based on inaccurate information. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. A box on the central table in the House of Commons chamber from where the PM speaks at PMQs. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)