

# Humbug and outrage: A study of performance, gender and affective atmosphere in the mediation of a critical parliamentary moment

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## Abstract

In a Parliament called back following its unlawful prorogation in September 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson touched a raw nerve by stating that the ‘best way to honour Jo Cox’s memory is to get Brexit done’. Johnson had earlier dismissed concerns about threats to Members of Parliament which echoed his inflammatory language as ‘humbug’. We examine this critical parliamentary moment in the context of broader discussions about emotionality, toxic discourse and polarisation in the United Kingdom. The study combines performance analysis of the Hansard transcripts and UK Parliament YouTube coverage of the debate, with discourse analysis of national and local newspaper coverage from 25 September to 1 October 2019. We contend that in-depth examination of this moment, alongside the subsequent journalistic commentary, contributes an original case study which works to illuminate the intersections of political performance, affective atmospheres and gender in contemporary mediated political culture.

## Keywords

Boris Johnson, Brexit, emotionality, gender, Jo Cox, performance, political culture, prorogation, toxic discourse

## Introduction

In late summer 2019, newly appointed Prime Minister Boris Johnson found himself in a fix. Attempts to pass the necessary Brexit legislation through the House of Commons had stalled, and the government’s controversial strategy of proroguing Parliament for 5 weeks in early September was declared unlawful by the Supreme Court on 24 September. The very next day, the United Kingdom Parliament re-convened. Prime Minister Boris Johnson returned early from the United States to give his statement to the House of Commons. Rather than directly addressing the Court’s decision, other than to state ‘the

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court was *wrong* to pronounce on what is essentially a political question', Johnson lambasted Parliament for its dithering and delay, claiming all he wanted was a Queen's Speech to set out the government's programme for life after Brexit.<sup>1</sup>

The Opposition had perceived the decision to prorogue Parliament for a 5-week period as an attempt to prevent proper parliamentary scrutiny of government business. Johnson and his supporters referred to the second European Union (EU) withdrawal act as the 'Surrender Act', claiming it tied their hands in negotiations. The scenes which followed Johnson's statement on the Supreme Court decision were described as some of the angriest ever witnessed, at least since sessions were televised. The PM faced multiple calls to moderate his language. In a moment much commented upon in the news media, he dismissed observations by female Labour members of parliament (MPs) that they had received threats echoing his rhetoric on Brexit, as 'humbug'. Possibly aware of the potential provocation, he touched a raw nerve by going on to state that the 'best way to honour Jo Cox's memory is to get Brexit done'.

This article takes this extraordinary parliamentary moment as exemplifying a corrosive strand in British political culture. Our study is based on analysis combining a political performance approach and discourse analysis of the Hansard transcripts of the debate, the accompanying parliamentary YouTube video, along with national and local newspaper coverage from 25 September to 1 October 2019. Within this discursive space, the figure of Jo Cox stands as the epitome of a caring and conciliatory politician. For Johnson to invoke her memory in a callous, or possibly in a deliberately provocative manner, sparked an array of commentary and meta-analysis, which only served to reinforce the continuing emotional resonance of Cox's murder in UK party-political discourse. We contend that in-depth examination of this moment contributes an original case study through which to better understand the intersections of political performance, affective atmospheres and gender in studies of mediated political culture.

We identify the following three intertwined themes in our analysis: the *gendered* nature of the parliamentary exchanges; the *emotional* registers in their performance; and finally, the memory of Jo Cox as a shared 'political resource' deployed to proclaim moral and social authority (Gluhovic et al., 2021). As Candida Yates (2019) has argued, the emotional turn in political culture is a gendered phenomenon, with notions of emotionalisation of the public sphere tied to fears about irrational femininity. We argue that the 'affective atmosphere' of parliament is a crucial element in understanding our broader political culture, and that the incongruous division between expressive registers (the Labour female MPs' outrage vs Johnson's offhand disregard) speaks to the importance of *vulnerability* as an emerging form of 'emotional self-disclosure' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 68) in political performance. Vulnerability is not usually associated with political leadership, but like political authenticity (Rai, 2015), a political judgement made in relation to vulnerability can reveal deeper assumptions about what makes a good politician. Our study therefore offers insights into the 'emotional regimes' (Reddy, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) of mediated politics.

To read back over the key events in Parliament during this period is both revealing and mindboggling. It is revealing in the way the Johnson government sets the tone for its later handling of political controversies and crises. It is mindboggling in the sense of recalling the political paralysis and turmoil caused by Brexit: the politicians who left their parties or were thrown out due to their Brexit positions, the weekly or even daily twists in the narrative as bills and amendments are debated and voted on, the possibility of yet another election hanging in the air. And among all this, British politics was said to have hit 'rock

bottom' (Mitchell, 2019), due to the stark divisions and the threatening abuse that had become part of everyday life for politicians.

While threatening language was evident across the Brexit divide, it was especially women, and even more so, MPs from Black, ethnic minority and Asian backgrounds who received the majority of abuse through social media, including death and rape threats (Dhrodia, 2017). Following the parliamentary debate that is the subject of this article, the *Financial Times* found that abuse towards certain MPs soared following Johnson's 'humbug' comment, with Paula Sherriff 'receiving toxic tweets at a rate of more than 100 an hour. She had received a total of just 31 over the preceding week' (Blood et al., 2019).

The *FT* study mentioned above would appear to support the very points being made by those female MPs; that the tone of language used by Johnson has real consequences for his opponents, lending legitimacy to a martial discourse of 'cowardice' and punishment for those deemed weak. If you 'capitulate', you get what you deserve.

To examine the issues outlined earlier, we pose the following questions:

- In this dramatic parliamentary moment, what role do emotions, bodily gesture and the affective atmosphere play in the social meanings of the political performance?
- In what ways are the above factors gendered?
- How does invoking Jo Cox's memory play a role in the mediated evaluations of vulnerability, authenticity, and care?
- How does the journalistic interpretation of the parliamentary event work to reinforce or challenge the polarising discourse of Brexit?

Our study is grounded in research on gender and politics, in addition to work on emotions and drama in politics and journalism, and a related interest in 'affective atmospheres' which cuts across studies of political theory and geography, anthropology and sociology (Åhäll, 2018; Anderson and Ash, 2015; Merrill et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). While emotions are arguably a more recent focus of attention in political communication, we note a longer history of interest in affect and emotion from feminist research (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Kay, 2020). More broadly, our article is situated in scholarship that highlights political performance as a lens through which to understand how publics make sense of politics (Alexander, 2006; Coleman, 2013; Gluhovic et al., 2021). The next section outlines the literature which informs our study.

## Literature review

### *Political performance and storytelling*

This was a moment of high drama – a government dragged back to Parliament to defend itself after the Supreme Court judged its actions unlawful. An exit from the EU looming without a withdrawal deal in place, and parliament paralysed by division and polarising discourse. We follow others in approaching politics as competing narratives, shaped in a specific performance style and with mediated repetitions accentuating certain actions, which in turn works to clarify their significance and moral value. Crucially, the 'communicative success – or felicity – of a political performance will depend upon the use of appropriate modes of mediation and predictive accuracy regarding its receptive decoding by intended addressees' (Coleman, 2013: 330).

Cultural sociology and performance approaches frequently reference Victor Turner's (1974: 78) notion of 'social drama', a 'device' for analysing events that manifest social conflict. Our event is one controversial moment within the transitional period of Brexit; a period characterised by the reaffirmation of social and political cleavages, and with it a sense of crisis for political and legal institutions, augmented by the partisan print media. We do not include public or citizen responses directly in order to gauge felicity or success, but we do trace how the political performances were decoded by the print media as a 'mediating agent' (Gluhovic et al., 2021). The ways in which news media describe and evaluate the 'scenes' from parliament are part of the constraining or containing contextualisation through which political communicative acts are deemed effective, or inauthentic. Such journalistic interpretations and judgements on performative authenticity and efficacy are contingent on expectations around parliamentary language and embodied actions.

A focus on performance allows for analysis beyond the linguistic content of political speech, with attention to style, form, gesture and use of physical space (Alexander, 2006), specified as integral to the communicative instance. By paying attention to the performative function of language and speech acts (Austin, 1975), the emphasis is on the way political actors anchor their performance in existing culturally shared contexts but at the same time enact new possibilities of meaning: 'at the core of political performance is the function of giving form – and thereby material presence – to that which is absent and in that process constituting it' (Sorensen, 2020: 11).

In this cultural pragmatic approach to political meaning, competing accounts of reality are offered in the choices of narratives and claims made by politicians, whose perceived qualities appeal to some and not to others. The ways in which proffered narratives resonate and gain momentum and authority is dependent on the qualities of the speaker and evaluations of their political performance, co-constituted in mediated coverage. Political performance and storytelling involve having a voice or an opportunity for public speech, and this is where inequality of voice and gendering of speech cannot be ignored.

### *Gender, voice and the political realm*

Jilly Boyce Kay's (2020) recent book on *Gender, Media and Voice: Communicative Injustice and Public Speech* opens by tracing the histories of women's public speech in western culture, recounting the often brutal ways in which women's voices are silenced or shamed. From Ancient Rome to the 19th century, there are examples of when a woman speaking in public was deemed transgressive or unbecoming, with many words for vocal women in the English language holding negative connotations (pp.1–2). Times have changed, of course, but modern-day women politicians would recognise the 'communicative injustice' (Kay, 2020: 8) of having to navigate the contradictions of speaking out in public; many academic studies echo findings of sexist language used towards female leaders, such as Hilary Clinton or Julia Gillard (Harmer et al., 2017; Holland and Wright, 2017; Southern and Harmer, 2019).

For Kay (2020), 'communicative injustice' describes:

the impossible situation that women are in when it comes to public speech: to have a public voice and to participate in debate in the public sphere is fundamental to any conceptualisation of citizenship and full personhood – and yet that self-same public sphere is profoundly shaped by its own history of gendered exclusions. (p. 9)

Kay's conceptualisation of communicative injustice extends the oft-cited 'double bind' (Hall Jamieson, 1995) faced by women in public life – qualities associated with femininity are constructed as incompatible with strong leadership, binding women through attacks on their looks, competence or emotionality (Yates, 2019).

Digital culture and especially social media platforms provide new pseudo-anonymous spaces to denigrate women in public life, with a number of politicians recounting their need for additional security and even having to abandon their homes at short notice due to death threats. The killing of Jo Cox MP during the Brexit campaign in June 2016 was a shocking instance of when the symbolic violence of threatening language became a murderous reality.

It is Cox's violent death that is evoked in our case study as a shared background story with mythic power. We detail below the parliamentary exchange which provoked further media commentary, but the final related area of study which informs our analysis is that of political emotions and affective atmospheres.

### *Political emotions and affective atmospheres*

The 'affective turn', or turn to emotions, across social sciences signals the more sustained scholarly interest in the role of emotions in social and political life. Accompanying this shift is a questioning of rationality and emotionality as working in binary opposition, most relevantly for our purposes, in relation to democratic engagement and the health of the polity (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Normative assumptions about rational decision-making as good, and emotionally driven political actions as bad, have also been interrogated in this work (Papacharissi, 2014; van Zoonen, 2005). Studies of emotions such as resentment, anger and offence have sought to understand the complexities of the political contexts and power relations behind grievances (Graefer, 2019; Hochschild, 2016), while the politics of love, fandom, compassion, solidarity, care and conviviality have also attracted scholarly attention (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Parry, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). As Emma Hutchison (2019: 287) writes, the time when Politics and International Relations scholars needed to fight to assert a case for studying emotions 'have certainly long passed', and studies of world politics are also now engaging with 'the social meanings and collective, political significance and resonance of emotions'.

While recognising this is an area of some debate, we do not want to get too side-tracked by the differences between affect and emotion and we refer to them interchangeably here. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) writes, emotion is often understood as a more conscious and nameable process, with affect as a bodily sensation, at times unconscious and not easily interpreted. We are interested in the relational and performative role of emotions in mediated political culture and the way in which intensities of emotion, authenticity of feeling and dynamic affective energies are articulated as part of political performance. Following Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), we consider '*which* emotions do gain purchases in the public sphere, *why*, and *with what consequences*' (p. 8, emphasis in original). Sara Ahmed (2004: 25) also stresses the relational and collective quality of feelings and emotions, arguing that they are not a 'private matter' because they 'define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects', and so bridge the private and public. Our case study emerges from 'extraordinary' scenes in the House of Commons, and we believe the institutional space of the exchanges is also important to consider. It is the 'affective atmosphere' generated in these parliamentary scenes that takes us beyond individual personalities and their performance of emotions.

In developing a feminist methodological approach to analyse the politics of emotion in IR, Linda Åhäll (2018) cites Theresa Brennan's notion of 'affective atmosphere':

as that feeling that you get when you walk into a room and sense a particular mood in the air [. . .] even our most intimate feelings do not really belong to us but are an effect of the body's encounters with others. (p. 5)

Cultural geographers have approached the 'strange reality' of affective atmospheres, by looking for 'thresholds and tipping points' as a method for understanding atmospheric change and the possible new affective relations produced (Anderson and Ash, 2015). Merrill et al. (2020: 547) have recently drawn upon the work of Sara Ahmed and others to propose the concept of 'public atmospheres', to observe how commemorative events are mutually constituted in the spaces of the city and those of digital technology and media, emphasising 'how these events help assemble public atmospheres of togetherness that engender shared modes and moods of belonging'. According to the authors, public atmospheres are those experienced by large numbers of people in public events, but the (digitally) mediated elements extend the 'publicness' beyond those co-present in a shared location and time. As the institutional space in which the representatives of the UK population legislate and scrutinise government, the affective atmosphere of the House of Commons offers a microcosm of a nation, where 'moods of belonging' clash with feelings of division, anger and indignation.

## **Method**

Our study is based on a combined political performance and discourse analysis of the Hansard transcripts of the debate, UK Parliament YouTube footage, along with national and local newspaper coverage from 25 September to 1 October 2019. Our approach to the parliamentary performance is inspired by work on cultural pragmatics and political performance (Alexander, 2006; Coleman, 2013; Sorensen, 2020). Discourse analysis helps us to understand the interactional and constantly shifting nature of identities, through notions such as positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990), especially in institutional settings where power is negotiated. But a performance approach enriches such analysis by focusing our attention on the staging, symbolic and emotional dimensions of social performance (Alexander et al., 2006). We used the Hansard transcripts of the debate on 25 September as our primary source material (Hansard, 2019), starting from Boris Johnson's address at 6.30 p.m. until the end of the debate (just over 3 hours in total). The UK Parliament (2019) YouTube channel also allowed us to watch the relevant sections to capture the gestures, use of space and affective atmosphere as mediated by the Commons cameras.

Journalists provide an 'interpretive community' (Alexander, 2006) for such performances, offering divergent judgements or providing clarity on the meaning and success for the political actors involved. For the newspaper analysis, we used the Nexis database, searching for 'Tracy Brabin' and 'Paula Sherriff', as we recognised that most of the articles featuring the two MPs would refer to this event, as opposed to using 'Boris Johnson' or 'humbug' for example. We removed articles about other constituency work or incidental mentions. We retained articles about abuse of female MPs or the calls for new standards in public life and language as these were thematically related to our primary research interests.



In total, in the week following the event, our news sample comprised 97 articles from mostly national news outlets (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Express*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Metro*, *Sun*, *Telegraph*, *Times*; plus any Sunday sister papers). We also included newspapers local to their constituencies (*Yorkshire Post*, *Huddersfield Examiner*, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*), to observe if there were regional-specific differences in coverage. It was not our intention to conduct a comparative analysis of the newspapers, more to examine the discourse and intertextual references across the print news coverage. We coded the articles using an open approach to emergent and recurrent themes, but with the broader ‘sensitising concepts’ (van den Hoonaard, 2008) of gendered language, emotional registers, affective atmosphere and vulnerability as a guide. Appendix 1 includes all the articles directly cited, but due to space constraints we have also aggregated notable descriptors that recur across articles, without necessarily citing them directly.

We first present observations on the parliamentary debate itself, before turning to the journalistic interpretation of events.

## Findings

### *Parliamentary performance – Who said what and how?*

It is important to relay what was said by our key players during the debate in Parliament on 25 September 2019, sparked by Boris Johnson’s statement on the legal ruling on prorogation. Hansard is the official transcript for UK Parliament and the full debate can be accessed online (Hansard, 2019). We concentrate here on the exchanges with Paula Sherriff and Tracy Brabin in addition to the mentions of Jo Cox MP.

The first MP to mention Jo Cox is Allison McGovern (Labour, Wirral South):

. . . I want to raise with the Prime Minister a more serious point about our political culture. Those of us who constantly remember our friend Jo Cox need our political culture to change now. It is getting toxic. The Prime Minister’s language is violent and his Government are dysfunctional. Will he promise to change? . . .

Later on, Paula Sherriff (Labour, Dewsbury) reiterates this point:

I genuinely do not seek to stifle robust debate, but this evening the Prime Minister has continually used pejorative language to describe an Act of Parliament that was passed by this House. I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker, that we should not resort to the use of offensive, dangerous or inflammatory language about legislation that we do not like.

We stand here, Mr Speaker, under the shield of our departed friend. Many of us in this place are subject to death threats and abuse every single day. Let me tell the Prime Minister that they often quote his words – surrender Act, betrayal, traitor – and I, for one, am sick of it. We must moderate our language, and that has to come from the Prime Minister first, so I should be interested in hearing his opinion. He should be absolutely ashamed of himself. [Applause.]

Prime Minister Boris Johnson:

I have to say, Mr Speaker, I have to say that I have never heard such humbug in all my life. [Hon. Members: ‘Shame!’] The reality is that this is a Bill—[Interruption.] This is a Bill—[Interruption.]

[Speaker of the House calls order as Opposition MPs angrily react]

[Later in the debate] Tracy Brabin (Labour/Co-op, Batley and Spen)

We are hearing from the Prime Minister words such as the ‘humiliation’ Act, the ‘surrender’ Act, and the ‘capitulation’ Act. All of these words suggest that we, because we disagree with him, are traitors, that we are not patriots, but nothing could be further from the truth. Now this may be a strategy to set the people against the establishment, but I would like to gently suggest that he is the establishment and we are still people. As the woman who has taken over the seat that was left by our dear friend, Jo Cox, may I ask him, in all honesty, as a human being that, going forward, will he please, please moderate his language so that we will all feel secure when we are going about our jobs? [Applause.]

Prime Minister Boris Johnson:

The surest fire way – [Interruption.] Well, no. Of course there will be an attempt to try to obfuscate the effect of this Act – the capitulation Act, the surrender Act or whatever you want to call it. It does – [Interruption.] I am sorry, but it greatly enfeebles this Government’s ability to negotiate. What I will say is that the best way to honour the memory of Jo Cox, and indeed to bring this country together, would be, I think, to get Brexit done. I absolutely do . . .

Although they do not garner the same level of news coverage, other MPs also evoke Jo Cox’s memory in the debate: Rosie Duffield (Lab), Jo Swinson (Lib Dem), Lucy Powell (Lab), as well as the Speaker, John Bercow. Others speak of their sadness about the tone of language used by the prime minister.

As can be observed, many of these voices are female, and mostly Labour Party MPs, but similar concerns were expressed by newly independent MPs and those from other parties (not all women). Reading the Hansard transcript or watching the video, there is a sense of the power of collective voice. Each of the voices are different, some emotional in their delivery, others restrained. But the scenes recall what Jilly Kay (2020) writes of as a subversive form of ‘communal social power’ (p. 4), drawing upon the work of Silvia Federici (2018). It is not the individual oratory of one voice here, but the polyphonic repetition of the calls, the *collective* voice or ‘teaming’ that, as Kay (2020) writes in radical theories of women’s voices, potentially represents a genuine threat and ‘has the most capacity for subversion’ (p. 5). Their voices here are supportive of each other, repeatedly calling for a change in the political language and culture that has become violent and vicious.

Most of the speakers position themselves as Cox’s friend, and so ground their statements in the personal and epideictic style of rhetoric, casting her virtues against the vices of Johnson. Rosie Duffield uses the words: ‘our beloved colleague and *sister* Jo Cox’ (our emphasis). This is a very different use to the formal parliamentary convention of referring to ‘my right honourable friend’. Here, ‘*our* friend’ signals their shared bond in emotional terms, not party-political affiliations. As Alexander (2006: 94) writes, ‘performative actions have both a manifest and latent symbolic reference’ where ‘explicit messages take shape against background structures of immanent meaning’. The ‘scripts’ of the MPs, which Alexander (2006: 95) explains can be ‘emergent’ rather than necessarily planned in advance, are designed to appeal to the public imagination through a certain moral positioning, in this case through the combination of a personalised emotional connection and sacralising plea in Jo Cox’s name.



*Paula Sherriff.* Paula Sherriff starts her contribution criticising the pejorative language used by Johnson about the Benn Act, and then makes the connection to the death threats and abuse received by MPs, which echo his language. In making this shift, she says, ‘We stand here, Mr Speaker, under the shield of our departed friend’, not naming Cox directly but signifying the importance of her statement by pointing and making this reference to someone whose life is commemorated within the House of Commons. When Sherriff says, ‘we stand here’ she conjures the opening words of a memorial service, signalling a portentous tone. But clearly angry, she points at the Prime Minister as she recounts the words ‘betrayal, traitor’, while behind her, in the televised version of the debate, we can see other women saying ‘they do, they do’ as voices on the opposite bench heckle Sherriff. As she finishes with ‘He should be absolutely ashamed of himself’, gesturing with her notes in her hand, Labour MPs stand and applaud her, breaking parliamentary rules (UK Parliament, n.d.).

Sherriff’s delivery is markedly emotional – her speech is fast, passionate in tone and at times, broken and uneven. Sherriff’s tenor rises as her speech continues, and on occasion, is audibly close to breaking. Her breathing patterns are not measured, and in noting ‘we must moderate our language, and it has to come from the Prime Minister . . . first’, we hear a distinct gap. While in script, this gap may appear planned – a dramatic pause – its delivery as spoken sounds unpolished, unpracticed – a faltering that can be interpreted as both authentic and as signifying vulnerability. What can be understood as an error in delivery is furthered when Sherriff notes that the Prime Minister should be ‘shame – ashamed’. Again, this hesitation works to evidence both her labelling of Johnson and perhaps her own feelings, signalling the unrehearsed and unrestrained nature of her feeling in that moment.

In contrast to Sherriff, Johnson offers a competing account of reality and his ‘humbug’ response is a performance on two levels – of his indifference to the stories being told, and his refusal to capitulate to ‘care’. Johnson’s relative stasis in delivery – an open-armed grin on standing, then the placement of one arm behind his back, as well as a consistency of tone in his nomination of ‘humbug’, undermine and rebuff Sherriff’s emotional account. Through a measured response, Johnson attempts to depress and simultaneously agitate this politicised space.

Where Sherriff’s speech sought to make visible the low moral standards of the Prime Minister, and in so doing created an intense, reflective and memorialised mood (albeit through a high intensity speech), Johnson’s low intensity performance usefully shifts the atmosphere, creating a playfully superior, high pressure environment. Here, Johnson’s dismissive response serves to draw on and draw out gendered differences, positioning Sherriff as an emotional, unruly, woman in contrast to his own deliberate, calculated and calm masculine approach. Johnson’s performance seeks to undo the power of personal, emotive storytelling, situating it as inauthentic, subjective and feminised.

*Tracy Brabin and the memory of Jo Cox.* Tracy Brabin later also pleads for Johnson to moderate his language, ‘as the woman who has taken over the seat that was left by our dear friend, Jo Cox’. Brabin not only draws upon the emotive connection of being Cox’s ‘dear friend’ in appealing to Johnson’s humanity, but further self-authorises her representative claim as the MP who now serves Cox’s former constituency. Johnson responds by upping the emotional ante (see full transcript above): ‘What I will say is that the best way to honour the memory of Jo Cox, and indeed to bring this country together, would be, I think, to get Brexit done’.

Johnson's attempts to dismiss their calls, while repeating the very language they are worried encourages further abuse of MPs, shows him digging in against their pleas. Not only that, he opportunistically co-opts the memory of Jo Cox into his Brexit plan; a rhetorical move that also aligns getting Brexit done with bringing the country together. By adding 'bring the country together', Johnson attempts to propose a linkage that no one could argue against. But his sleight-of-hand only further aggravates those who knew Cox personally as a campaigner against Brexit. A mistake, or a deliberate provocation? The Labour MPs' affective proximity and knowledge of Jo Cox, as their friend, is cast against Johnson's presumed knowledge of how to honour her memory. But his attempt to speak on behalf of Cox is opportunistic. His evocation of what political action could honour Cox is strategic and cynical; he enfolds her imagined wishes into his argument, something which cannot be fully resolved or repudiated by Cox herself.

Johnson's language of surrender, capitulation and humbug recalls what Smith et al. (2020) have recently dubbed 'strategic populist ventriloquism', when established political actors 'commandeer the populist baton' and adopt a language of insurgency, often at times of crisis. As with Smith et al.'s article, Brexit is once more the driving force for this adoption of a populist style, but in this instance, the judiciary and parliament are cast (once again) as the enemies of the people in an attempt to mischaracterise their constitutional roles. Johnson disregards the norms and conventions of the state institutions while claiming that parliament and the judiciary are the ones acting beyond their constitutional remit.

In working to provoke a physical shock through speaking *for* Cox, Johnson shifts the terrain, moving the debate away from his failure (a failure that points to his own vulnerability), and towards the vulnerability of others. He achieves this through a performance of indifference, to which others are forced to react and he gets to show his emergent resilience. In many ways, this is a sensible performance in that it functions to divide and demonstrate incompatibility – of parliament and of publics. In downplaying the issue of language as a cause of violence, and his own role in facilitating and speaking it, he functions to change the atmospheric mood. Johnson distracts from the failure of his prorogation strategy by curating a buoyant public mood through his intentionally cavalier performance (getting Brexit done). In his denial of vulnerability, he secures division and simultaneously, maintains a sense and feeling of hope for himself.

### *Journalistic interpretations: 'Something has curdled'*

It is worth restating that intemperate language is the subject of the parliamentary debate in a dual manner; the MPs are themselves talking about the dangers of divisive language, while taking part in emotionally intense scenes. The press characterisation and analysis of the exchanges amplifies the drama, and below we discuss the discursive constructions of the parliamentary setting, prominent metaphors, the main actors and proffered judgments on its broader implications, which, we note, are often aligned with the partisanship of the newspapers' editorial positions.

*Parliament's affective atmosphere and organic metaphors.* The extraordinariness of this moment is highlighted across the newspaper coverage. To an extent, this is due to the unprecedented context; the first day back in Parliament following the unlawful prorogation. But it is also due to the manner in which parliamentary repertoires are transgressed.

In the reporting, Parliament itself features almost as a protagonist in the plot, given descriptors such as bad-tempered, dramatic, furious, angry scenes, spectacle, uproar, with ‘intense and noisy heckling’ or ‘explosive’ scenes. One observation much repeated in the coverage referred to the ‘gasps’ provoked by Johnson’s comments. A gasp indicates an affective bodily response denoting astonishment; a catching of the breath which is audible but without language. The word draws attention to the embodied and collective construction of emotions within the chamber. Earlier in the day, Attorney General Geoffrey Cox had referred to it as a ‘dead parliament’, ‘too cowardly’ to call an election, while Johnson had referred to a ‘zombie parliament’. This notion of parliament itself as a suffering body is taken up in the news coverage, for example, in the headline: ‘Parliament is sick. Only an election will cure it; Lady Hale and co’s ill-judged meddling is no remedy for a traumatised House’ (Dominic Lawson’s column, *Sunday Times*, 29 September).

Within the column, Lawson writes:

In fact this parliament should be prorogued for medical reasons. It is ‘suffering from a form of post-traumatic Brexit stress disorder’, as one of its former Labour members told me last week: ‘The atmosphere is so unhealthy and poisonous, it can no longer do its job. There needs to be an election for that reason alone. Even if the result were another hung parliament, at least it would be a new one’.

We will return to the political divergences in journalist interpretations later, but here we note the medical metaphor applied to the parliament itself, suffering from ‘post-traumatic Brexit stress disorder’, a gibe quoted from a former Labour MP who is supportive of an election. In this interpretation, the ‘poisonous’ atmosphere is the fault of both sides, and for Lawson, this moment further highlights the hypocrisy on the Labour benches. The notion of an ailing parliament suits those who agree with the prorogation; the Supreme Court might have revived it temporarily, but its impairments are exposed.

In his political sketch, Michael Deacon (*Daily Telegraph*, 27 September) characterised the parliamentary atmosphere thus:

It’s spreading across politics like a mould. A mould that lurks at the back of the fridge. Something has curdled, festered, soured – and now it’s turning dark, and thick, and rancid.

It’s been happening slowly. But all the time, its spores have been dispersing, silent and unseen, to contaminate all they touch. It’s breeding. Devouring. The rot is setting in. And there’s no ignoring it now.

Not after what happened in the Commons, late on Wednesday night. That was when the atmosphere decisively changed – from angry to outright ugly.

This was one of the less partisan columns, with the metaphor of mould infecting politics both within and beyond the Commons. Deacon sees this as a ‘decisive’ moment, using imagery of revulsion and contamination in a striking manner. Whether or not one agrees that Parliament was malfunctioning, there are deeper conflicts at play here: in questioning the role of Parliament to scrutinise Government legislation, and the Supreme Court to judge the prorogation unlawful, Johnson’s Government and the supportive media stoke a public crisis through which they intend to consolidate power.

*How the main actors are described and judged.* As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 108) argues, mediated anger is ‘variegated and complex’, so that its rationality and legitimacy can be

‘discursively constructed’ across a spectrum. In the newspaper coverage of this event, the anger expressed by the Labour MPs is legitimated by those writing in left-leaning papers, with a more mixed tone of reporting in the right-wing press, where we observe that initial political news reporting was varied and even sympathetic. However, the right-leaning commentators and editorials later rallied for Johnson over the course of the week.

In the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Mirror*, as well as the Yorkshire-based newspapers, the female MPs’ strong emotions were highlighted, and reported without distancing language: ‘Ms Sherriff shook with rage’ (Nicola Bartlett, *Mirror*, 25 September), ‘a heartfelt speech’ (Rowena Mason, *Guardian*, 25 September), ‘her voice breaking with emotion’ (Ben McVay, *Huddersfield Examiner*, 27 September). But for Sarah Baxter in *The Times* (28 September), this was a ‘highly emotional tirade’ where Cox’s name had been used first ‘in an inflammatory way’ and ‘cynically’ by the female MPs: ‘An intensely political battle over Brexit has been turned into a gendered fight over the safety of female MPs. Speaking as a feminist, this is not a matter for pride’. Baxter’s brand of proclaimed feminism is then extended into an argument against Labour’s proposed ‘menopause leave’: ‘I certainly won’t be announcing my transition from hot chick to old crone by labelling a perfectly normal part of the ageing process a long-term illness’. Such columns are of course designed to be provocative. For Baxter, ‘Hounding Johnson has become a blood sport’ for Labour MPs, but she also appears to welcome the brawly side of political debate.

In Baxter’s column, Boris Johnson’s comment about honouring Jo Cox by getting Brexit done was ‘a horrible, tin-eared mis-step’, but for others the characterisations of Johnson are scathing. He is unrepentant, failing to show humility, shameful, defiant; has unimaginable temerity, calamitous, dismissive, cavalier, and rampaging. For Pippa Crerar in the *Daily Mirror*, Johnson is a ‘confidence trickster’ who ‘goaded them with disgraceful accusations of “betrayal” and “surrender”’ (26 September). Tom Peck (*Independent*, 25 September) and John Crace (*Guardian*, 25 September) go further and directly accuse him of ‘lying’, while Kevin Maguire deems him a ‘serial liar’ (*Mirror*, 30 September). John Crace provided one of the most scathing assessments in his political sketch, calling him ‘the Incredible Sulk’:

A normal person would have ‘fessed up and resigned. But this was the speech of a serial offender – the narcissistic sociopath – who couldn’t believe he’d been caught red-handed yet again . . . Lie followed lie. Lying is one of the only things Boris can be trusted to do. (*Guardian*, 25 September)

As noted earlier, not all commentators in the right-wing press were supportive of Johnson. Alexandra Shulman for the *Mail on Sunday* writes of the prime minister’s problem with women, suggesting the Opposition needs a female leader: ‘All his knee-jerk “Big Girls’ Blouses” and “girly swot” putdowns will be impossible to lob at a woman while his usual bluster will sound even more out of touch when he’s got a female grilling him effectively at PMQs’ (28 September).

*Interpretations of the political implications of the ‘humbug’ moment.* One way in which the newspaper commentaries introduced wider responses and political implications was through references to social media posts. Many articles detailed the kind of abuse and threats that MPs receive, and more specifically, noted the increase in threats for Paula Sherriff and Tracy Brabin in the days following the debate (Mark Townsend, *Observer*,

28 September). The *Daily Star* reported on Lord Alan Sugar's tweet, noting that he had been 'slammed' for it, but re-printing it nevertheless, including spelling errors:

He wrote: 'I am not getting the reason for demanding Boris to apologise. It was the ranting women who first brought Joe Cox name up in the chamber. The woman in particuluar (sic) ranted like an insane person. If anyone should apologise it should be her. She was addressing the PM of the UK'. (Jack Andrews, *Daily Star*, 28 September)

'Ranting women' and Paula Sherriff labelled as 'insane' recall Jilly Boyce Kay's (2020: 9) concept of 'communicative injustice' cited earlier, and the difficulties encountered by women speaking publicly and using anger politically. Lizzie Dearden in the *Independent* reported on the celebrations of Boris' comments by far-right extremists such as Tommy Robinson and the Democratic Football Lads Alliance: 'A Facebook post attacked Labour MPs for bringing up Ms Cox's death, adding: "We aren't disgusted by the word 'humbug'. We are disgusted by you, you utter c\*\*s. Not by [Mr Johnson]"' (26 September).

Dominic Midgley saw the debate as a turning point which could lead to regulation of social media platforms: 'the now notorious "toxic" debate in the House of Commons on Wednesday rightly attracted waves of disapproval but it may well go down in history as a watershed in our attitudes to the Wild West of social media' (*Express*, 28 September).

The newspaper commentaries ultimately replay and re-constitute the divisions performed in the Commons. Following initial reporting of events in a similar manner, the divergence in the re-telling becomes stark, generally following editorial positions. An editorial in the *Observer* (29 September) accused the Prime Minister of 'toxic behaviour' designed to distract from his failings but also warning of his autocratic tendencies: 'this reassertion of parliamentary sovereignty over an imperious executive is what has driven Johnson to his populist attacks on our democratic institutions'. In the same edition, Andrew Rawnsley acknowledges some hypocrisy, in this case employing the metaphor of poison: 'All the parties bear some guilt for the poison flowing through Britain's body politic'.

Where the left-leaning press were generally in agreement that the language used by the Prime Minister, of 'surrender' and 'betrayal', fueled division and even contributed to the rise in MPs being threatened, the fight-back in the Conservative-supporting press took the approach of bringing up past instances where Labour MPs had used inflammatory language, promoting an equivalence in behaviour as a means to delegitimize them. One such article quoted Maria Miller MP that this was all part of the 'cut and thrust' of politics, noting her role as 'chairman (sic) of the women and equalities committee' (Mikhailova and Jones, *Telegraph*, 27 September). A focus on cynical strategic effectiveness also emerged during the week, with reports that the Prime Minister's senior aide, Dominic Cummings, was gleeful at polling that showed the reiteration of 'surrender' played well for the Conservatives (e.g. Tim Shipman, *Sunday Times*, 29 September).

These are just some of the more striking features of the newspaper coverage, but even this small sample of articles could be productively examined for further damning commentary, which worked to fix the notoriety of the event in both personalised and constitutional terms.<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

Moments where institutional and democratic norms appear to be transgressed, and become matters of public debate, provide the fissures which can be fruitfully mined by

researchers of mediated political culture and political performance. The years between the Brexit referendum and the United Kingdom actually leaving the EU represents a transitory period and a moment of ‘social drama’ (Turner, 1974), where deep political cleavages are played out in Parliament, party affiliations transform, cultural and historical myths are drawn upon, and toxic discourse further entrenches divisions. The ‘social drama’ played out in parliament and mediated through journalistic accounts creates ‘emotional and moral effects’ (Alexander, 2006: 95; Turner, 1974), and the conflicting co-constituted interpretations work to reify the polarisation of politics in the emotionalised public sphere of post-Brexit UK.

The political significance of this moment is not captured through the ‘script’ alone, but in the affective atmosphere generated through the interactions, and the pressure that builds due to the dissonance between the women MPs’ concerns and Johnson’s response. Jilly Boyce Kay’s (2020) book cited earlier in this article asks, ‘how we might rethink and re-value voice as collective, interdependent, vulnerable, faltering, misfiring, awkward and messy’ (p. 16). We would argue there is still a long way to go for voice to be re-valued in this way, certainly in the official political realm. Regionality and class also play a part here in the dissonance between the women MPs’ and Johnson’s parliamentary performance, and while the speakers featured in this instance were white, we would note that future analysis of political communicative norms would benefit from an intersectional approach which pays attention to the contours of ethnicity, class and ableism in evaluations of political performance.

The ‘story’ of Jo Cox’s death provides the symbolic reference point through which we might judge the performances of the politicians. The women invoke their departed friend with reference to vulnerability but also to care. The notion of care as a political category is receiving renewed attention from writers such as Judith Butler (2020) and ‘The Care Collective’ (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), foregrounding interdependencies over difference, and the social and political organisation required to preserve lives, and nurture people and the planet. In the analysis, we were struck by the emotional vulnerability conveyed, and we are interested to explore further how this manifests as part of the repertoire of political emotions; and how this connects to voice, care and gender.

As the Johnson Government has dealt with the crisis of the pandemic in 2020–2021, one of the recurring evaluations is that the Government not only lack moral responsibility, but they also seem indifferent to the accusation. They do not appear to care that we think they do not care. When met with a blithe indifference (as Sherriff is in this instance), the MPs’ further exasperation clashes with Johnson’s insouciant, erroneous deflections. This might seem an inconsequential moment of parliamentary performance, but one could argue it characterises the governmental strategy of the past year or two. Cries of ‘shame’ in the Commons alongside Sherriff telling Johnson he should be ‘ashamed of himself’ are vocal manifestations of a concern for what others have characterised as ‘post-shame’ politics, often linked to rising populism and authoritarianism (Wodak, 2019). In this turn to shameless politics, a disregard for achieving authenticity (ringing true), or a lack of concern for whether people believe what you say, starts to warp the parameters by which we evaluate a ‘successful’ political performance (Alexander, 2006).

As we develop this work, we are interested in this dissonance in political culture, between notions of care and carelessness; shame and shamelessness. This critique of the UK government regarding the political notion of care is one that now goes far beyond left-leaning newspapers, politicians and academics. In their book, *Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain’s Battle with Coronavirus* (Calvert and Arbutnott, 2021), *Sunday*



*Times* journalists Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnott meticulously detail Johnson's dismissive approach to the COVID-19 crisis, including his failure to attend early Cobra meetings while being narcissistically fixated on his own political destiny and personal issues. Former adviser, Dominic Cummings' own dramatic appearance before the joint Science and Technology/Health and Social Care committee inquiry into lessons to be learned from COVID-19 on 26 May 2021 provided an often-horrifying glimpse into decision-making practices at the heart of government, but Cummings' failure to provide evidence subsequently to the inquiry further compounds questions surrounding his own honesty and integrity. The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice (2021) responded to his testimony on Twitter: 'The evidence from Cummings is clear, that the government's combination of grotesque chaos and uncaring flippancy is directly responsible for many of our loved ones not being with us today'. This statement captures how the grieving families, a group formed through notions of solidarity of care and mutuality in response to the crisis, perceive their loss as a consequence of the combination of incompetence and flippancy which characterises Johnson's leadership. Whether in the 'chumocracy' of awarding contracts and peerages, lobbying scandals, multiple accusations of unlawfully misleading parliament, or the cutting of foreign aid funding, such insouciance can appear as a deliberate rejection of care. As Ruth Wodak (2019) argues, the rhetorical simplification of difficult societal issues, alongside the 'normalisation' of lies and belittling of political opponents or institutions, are discursive strategies of a 'post-shame era' which paves the way to illiberalism. The 'humbug' moment might not have been a watershed moment in challenging this slide towards incivility and norm-breaking, but we hold out hope that there is a possibility this presages something more productive; the disruptive start of a fissure, a re-ordering and re-evaluation of the kind of political culture we want in the United Kingdom and beyond.

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## Notes

1. It is also worth noting that earlier that day, the attorney general, Geoffrey Cox, had also taken a rambunctious approach in his address to members of parliament (MPs): 'This parliament is a dead parliament', he said. 'It should no longer sit. It has no moral right to sit on these green benches'.
2. A year after the event, it was further immortalised as 'The Day Brexit Hit Boiling Point' in an hour-long BBC Radio 4 *Archive on Four* episode (20 September 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000my3f>.

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## Appendix I

### List of newspaper articles directly cited (all 2019)

Please note that the date refers to their upload date on the Nexis database, not the print publication date. The full list of the 97 articles in the corpus are available from the authors.

*Daily Express*. Midgley, D. *Brexit row may be watershed for curbs on social media*, 28 September.

*Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*. Shulman, A. *Alexandra Shulman’s notebook: Boris will be put back in his place – by a woman*, Femail, 28 September.

*Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror*. Bartlett, N. *Fury at Boris Johnson’s callous reply to death threats against MP Paula Sherriff*, 25 September.

Crerar, P. *Confidence trickster: PM Johnsons back in Commons but not a shred of remorse*, 26 September.

Maguire, K. *Johnson fans flames as voters’ hopes burn*, 30 September.

*Daily Star*. Andrews, J. *Sugar and Spite hits Boris row; Lord calls female MP ‘insane’*, 28 September.

*Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph*. Deacon, M. *A rancidness is infecting debate and the rot is spreading – even as far as cosy Romsey*, Sketch, 27 September.

Mikhailova, A; Jones, A. *MPs must not be bullied into curtailing their language, says PM*, 27 September.

*Guardian/Observer*. Mason, R. *PM branded a disgrace after he says best way to honour Jo Cox is to deliver Brexit; Boris Johnson’s reference to memory of murdered MP prompts gasps in Commons*, 25 September.

Crace, J. *Incredible Sulk’s anger is compounded by ranting of Geoffrey Cox*, September 25.

Townsend, M. *In Westminster, MPs felt Brexit fury. At home they see hate rising*, September 28.

Rawnsley, A. *Boris Johnson seeks to divide and conquer with his incendiary rhetoric*, September 29.

*Huddersfield Examiner.* McVay, B. *PM Jo Cox comments outrage; Boris accused over his use of 'dangerous or inflammatory' language during Brexit debate*, 27 September.

*Independent/Independent on Sunday.* Peck, T. *Boris Johnson tells the MP for Batley and Spen: The best way to honour Jo Cox's memory is to get Brexit done*, 25 September.

Dearden, L. *Boris Johnson hailed by far-right extremists for 'brilliant' performance in parliament*, 26 September.

*The Times/Sunday Times.* Lawson, D. *Parliament is sick. Only an election will cure it; Lady Hale and co's ill-judged meddling is no remedy for a traumatised House*, 28 September.

Baxter, S. *This is talk, not war, and women need no coddling; Invoking the safety of female MPs to censor debate does my sex no favours*, 28 September.

Shipman, T. *Politics turns; Boris Johnson concedes his use of the word 'humbug' to dismiss a plea by a Labour MP was a mistake, but his key adviser is delighted with the row, seeing it as a crucial part of his election strategy*, 29 September.