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TITLE: Press response to women politicians: a comparative study of suffragettes and contemporary Scottish Parliament leaders.

YEAR: 2018

Publisher citation: PEDERSEN, S. 2018. Press response to women politicians: a comparative study of suffragettes and contemporary Scottish Parliament leaders. Journalism studies [online], 19(5), pages 709-725. Available from: https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1200953

OpenAIR citation: PEDERSEN, S. 2018. Press response to women politicians: a comparative study of suffragettes and contemporary Scottish Parliament leaders. Journalism studies, 19(5), pages 709-725. Held on OpenAIR [online]. Available from: https://openair.rgu.ac.uk

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journalism studies on 29/6/2016, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1200953.

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Press response to women politicians: a comparative study of suffragettes and contemporary Scottish Parliament leaders

Abstract

Celebrity culture and the personalisation of both politics and the media in the last few decades has exacerbated the media's focus on the appearance of women politicians. However, this article argues that we can see a similar approach to women politicians when they first appeared in newspapers over a hundred years ago. Using evidence from Scottish newspapers' coverage of the suffragettes in the early 20th century and comparing it to coverage of contemporary Scottish women politicians, this article demonstrates that the reporting of these early women politicians had the same focus on body and appearance, the same concerns about clothing choices and the same discussion of their domestic lives. However, it is also suggested that, to a certain extent, the construction of the woman politician as different or other and the focus on appearance, bodies and even their maternal role was part of a discourse promoted by the suffragettes themselves in their campaign for the vote. Women needed to be presented as different from men, as supplying a necessary feminine touch to politics, and this needed to be clearly exemplified in their physical appearance. However, this has left an unwanted legacy for contemporary women politicians.

Keywords: Suffragettes; women politicians; feminine; media; newspapers; Scottish

It is argued that the celebrification of politics and the media poses a particular problem for women politicians (van Zoonen 2006).There has been a clear shift in print journalism in the last few decades towards “infotainment” and celebrity news, with a rapid merging of news and entertainment (Day 2004; Deuze 2005; Weiskel 2005). For example, Langer (2007) points out that in the last two decades *The Times’* coverage of senior politicians has clearly moved towards the portrayal of the “human” side of leaders, with a steep increase in references to their personal lives. For some male politicians, such as Tony Blair or David Cameron, this personalisation allows them to present their ‘ordinary’ side to the electorate, forging connections by emphasising their role as a family man or rock-music fan (Langer 2010). However, for women, celebrity culture focuses on bodies and appearance, as a quick glance at celebrity magazines or the *Daily Mail’s* infamous “sidebar of shame” demonstrates, which leads to a continual appraisal and criticism of women politicians’ appearance and bodies. In addition, van Zoonen (2005, p. 95) suggests that viewing female politicians through such a celebrity lens of hyperfeminism reinforces a gendered morality that underlines women politicians’ “odd position in politics”. The constant need to know about the private lives of politicians rather than their public role leads to prurient curiosity about family and home, highlighting women politicians’ “odd choices” as mothers or potential mothers and suggesting that they are both different from other women and different from other politicians (van Zoonen 2005). In their analysis of the coverage of women politicians in the European press, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) argue that the British press, in particular, focuses on how women politicians dress and makes references to their sexuality. In a similar analysis of coverage of the 2010 General Election, Ross *et al* (2013) found that women politicians were much more likely to be mentioned or quoted in feature articles in the press focused explicitly on gender issues, and were thus made interesting because of their sex and couture rather than their political abilities and experience. In this way the celebritised media continues the implicit assumption that politics is a man’s game and that women who become politicians are novelties whose appearance and private lives matter more than their policies.

Whilst it must be agreed that celebrity culture and the personalisation of both politics and the media in the last few decades has exacerbated the media’s focus on the appearance of women politicians, this article argues that, in fact, we can see a similar approach to women politicians when they first appeared in newspapers over a hundred years ago. Using evidence from Scottish newspapers’ coverage of the suffragettes in the early 20th century and comparing it to coverage of contemporary Scottish women politicians, this article demonstrates that the reporting of these early women politicians had the same focus on body and appearance, the same concerns about clothing choices and the same use of their bodies for purposes of humour. However, it is also suggested that, to a certain extent, the construction of the woman politician as different or other and the focus on appearance, bodies and even their maternal role was part of a discourse promoted by the suffragettes themselves in their campaign for the vote. The presentation of these early women politicians as feminine, interested in fashionable dress, maternal and generally domesticated was assumed to be necessary in the campaign for the enfranchisement of women. Women needed to be presented as different from men, as supplying a necessary feminine touch to politics, and this needed to be clearly exemplified in their physical appearance. In an effort to balance cartoons and newspaper reports depicting them as the “shrieking sisterhood”, interested only in sensation, the suffragettes set out to portray themselves as dignified but feminine. This emphasis on the ‘otherness’ of women was an important plank in the suffragettes’ claim for the vote. However, it may have left an unwanted legacy for modern women politicians.

The contemporary situation

A variety of academic studies over the last few decades suggest that all women politicians are forced to endure this obsession with appearance, and with the connections made between outward appearance and their ability to do the job (for example see van Acker 2003; Adcock 2010; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012; Heldman, Carroll and Olson 2005; Higgins and McKay 2015; Kenny 2015; Ross *et al* 2013; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996; Sreberny and van Zoonen 2000). This scrutiny of appearance comes as part of a discourse on the *difference* of women politicians. Just the very use of the term "women politicians" shows they are seen as different, not the norm, other (Ross *et al* 2013). Of course, one of the reasons they are not the norm is because there are so few of them. In the UK, the description of women Labour MPs as "Blair's babes" in 1997 constructed these women as an indistinct group of young, innocent and inexperienced politicians needing to be led by a man, while at the same time suggesting that they represented a real turning-point in the numbers of women in Parliament. In fact, as Adcock (2010) points out, 80% of all candidates under the age of 30 in that election were men, and the Commons remains a stronghold of white, middle-class, middle-aged men. After the General Election of 2015, women now make up 20 of the 59 Scottish MPs, again celebrated as another remarkable achievement. However, it should be remembered that the number of male MPs elected in 2015 alone outnumbers the total number of female MPs *ever* elected to the House of Commons (Kenny 2015).

The election of 2015 was certainly remarkable for media coverage of the performance of the female leaders of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Green parties in the televised leaders debates (Pedersen *et al* 2015), but overall coverage of women candidates was very poor, with most newspapers giving more coverage to leaders' wives (and what they wore) than to women politicians (Kenny 2015). Gidengil and Everitt (2000, 2003a and b) suggest that media coverage of female political leaders in televised debates uses more highly charged language to report the speech of female politicians, using more negative and aggressive terms, and is more likely to attempt to interpret what the female politicians have said. Thus, they argue, the media focuses disproportionately on aggressive behaviour and tone, when women behave in combative ways that could be seen as traditionally non-feminine. They argue that media coverage of debates implies that politics is still a man's world and that women politicians, and particularly women party leaders, are a novelty. The leaders' television debates in 2015 also led to newspapers publishing cartoons of the three women leaders, many of which sexualised them, such as Ed Milliband appearing between Nicola Sturgeon's breasts (*Daily Mail* 17 March 2015) or her face imposed over Miley Cyrus' body on a wrecking ball in a tartan bikini (*The Sun* 10 March 2015) or on Kim Kardashian's body (*The Independent* 23 April 2015 and BBC programme *Newsnight*), or dressed up as a *femme fatale* begging for the affections of Milliband with the leaders of Plaid Cymru and the Green party Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett.

Since August 2015, Scotland has had three women leaders of political parties at the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood: Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP, who is also First Minister of Scotland, Kezia Dugdale of the Scottish Labour Party and Ruth Davidson of the Scottish Conservatives. In addition, Maggie Chapman is one of the two co-convenors of the Scottish Green Party. The voices at First Minister's Questions, therefore, have been overwhelmingly female for the first time as the Holyrood Parliament debates issues such as terrorism, the crisis in the oil and gas industry, and Scotland's relationship with the rest of Britain and the EU. However, this demonstration of strong female leadership has not meant a disappearance of discussion of the women's appearance and dress in the press. Indeed, Higgins and McKay (2015) argue that Nicola Sturgeon's media image has been softened and domesticated in accordance with the obligations of this more intimate politics and as she is rehabilitated from "nippy Nicola".

An overview of recent press coverage of Sturgeon, Davidson and Dugdale clearly demonstrates that there continues to be a undercurrent of discussion about their appearance in their press coverage. Thus we learn that Nicola Sturgeon has a self-confessed shoe obsession and is one of "life's natural shoppers" (*Daily Record*, 29 September 2009). The *Daily Record* also describes Sturgeon as having a "petite frame". However, as the *Daily Mail* (19 April 2015) notes, Nicola, as they like to call her, has not always been "petite". She has a "slimmed down physique" which has enabled her to ditch those "boxy jackets" and "elephantine trouser suits" for a "sophisticated new look". The *Mail's* Liz Jones is particularly complimentary about Nicola's new hairstyle, so much better than her old "death row hair" (16 October 2014). In fact, Jones argues that Nicola is living proof that women become sexier with age, income and office, but would like to see her morph into even more of a "fox". When the SNP manifesto was launched last year, *The Times* responded with an extended analysis of Sturgeon's hair, makeup, fashion and weight loss (22 April 2015, quoted in Kenny 2015) while *The Express* suggested she has been taking clothing tips from Kate Middleton (20 April 2015). However, not everyone has been complimentary – Amy Childs, from reality television show *The Only Way is Essex*, informed *The Sun* that Nicola needed a complete make-over (24 November 2015). The celebrification of politics continued with an article in *The Telegraph* (5 May 2015) where writer Verity Lambert visited Sturgeon's favourite Edinburgh shop, Totty Rocks, for a "Nicola Sturgeon makeover" in an article very reminiscent of "Steal her Style" pages in celebrity magazines such as *heat* or *Closer*. Sturgeon's clothes are even seen as making political statements. According to *The Observer* she chose to wear red a lot in the autumn of 2015 as she took on the Labour party (17 October 2015).

In contrast, Scottish Labour's leader Kezia Dugdale is reported to prefer to wear black, despite the *Daily Mail* warning her that it is drab and does not photograph well (22 August 2015). When she was interviewed for the *Mail*, however, they noted that she wore a new grey trouser suit from Jaeger (60% off in the Frasers sale), a silky red top and patent nude heels. Normally, of course, complained the *Mail on Sunday*, Kezia wears "sensible black shoes" (1 November 2015) and, to be frank, her hair needs a decent stylist (18 January 2015). Dugdale, however, told the press that she has no plans to start wearing high heels á la Nicola (*Edinburgh Evening News* 16 February 2015).

Neither is the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, a fan of heels. The "pocket Dawn French of Scottish politics", as the *Mail on Sunday* calls her (24 October 2015), told *The Times* she preferred jeans and fleeces, although she knew her mother would prefer her to wear a skirt (8 November 2015). *The Guardian* described her proportions as "exceedingly compact" but suggested that her "gamine crop" and "elfin features" might give some the impression of a "schoolgirl debater" (15 August 2015). The *Sunday Times* also linked Davidson with schooldays, seeing her style as head-of-sixth-form (28 September 2014), although confusingly the BBC preferred to label her as a "tough old bird" (13 January 2016). However, Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail* described Davidson is a "bouncing" girl, "one of nature's thigh slappers" on whose "chipmunk cheeks" you could balance a teaspoon (20 April 2015).

Whilst some male politicians, such as Jeremy Corbyn, *have* had to suffer scrutiny of their appearance by the press, this is more the exception than the rule (Ross and Sreberny 2000). In addition, David Cameron's criticism of Corbyn's dress-sense in spring 2016 provoked horrified comments on social media and the suggestion that dressing badly made Corbyn more "genuine" (*The Independent* 1 August 2015). Meanwhile, the use of first names and comments about schoolgirl appearances serve to belittle and patronise women politicians (Adcock 2010).

None of Sturgeon, Dugdale or Davidson have children. Sturgeon is married, while Davidson and Dugdale have female partners. Van Zoonen (2006) points out that fatherhood can only add to a male politician’s image, particularly if he is virile enough to father a baby whilst actually in Number 10. Public fatherhood enhances a male politician’s authority, whilst also showing him as nurturing and more like the ‘man next-door’ (Ross *et al* 2013). However, for women politicians, the question of children is more fraught. If they do not have them they may be seen as unnatural, denying their maternal side for the sake of power. If they do have them, it is assumed that they will be distracted and inefficient, unable to give their all to public affairs. In an interview on the radio show *Desert Island Discs,* Sturgeon spoke about “hurtful” questions relating to her lack of children, saying that it was untrue that she made a “cold” decision to put politics ahead of having a family (*The Telegraph*, 15 November 2015). Several newspaper cartoons of Nicola Sturgeon over the last couple of years have made allusion to her childbearing ability or childlessness. For example, she has given birth to Ed Miliband (*The Times* 5 May 2015) and stood sadly around an empty cot with other childless female leaders (*The New Statesman* 16 July 2015).

This quick overview of press coverage of the three women’s appearance and home lives clearly demonstrates how modern women politicians – even when successful leaders of their parties or even their nation – have to endure the constant critiquing of their appearance, weight and domestic arrangements. The infantilising use of first names, links between appearance and ability to do the job, and comments about their domestic and family arrangements ensure that these comments are not merely irrelevant but are also judgmental. As discussed above, Van Zoonen (2006) suggests that celebrity culture is to blame and that the celebrification of politics has led to an emphasis on the superficial, with women politicians in particular losers within a culture that emphasises women’s appearance and bodies above any other achievements.

However, the personalisation of news and a focus on “human interest” stories in the press is not a new phenomenon. It was also to be seen at the start of the 20th century, when a new type of newspaper aimed at the mass market and exemplified in Scotland by Alfred Harmsworth’s *Daily Record* established in 1895, started to appear. An examination of the coverage of women politicians, in the personae of the suffragettes, in the Scottish press at the start of the 20th century demonstrates that the same discussion of appearance, domestic responsibilities and dress also formed part of the press coverage of these women politicians.

The suffragettes and the Scottish press

Matheson (2000) argues that the period around the turn of the 20th century saw the birth of a new type of news discourse, as the news moved from a pre-modern text, which was merely a straight-forward reporting of events, with no attempt at interpretation, to a journalistic discourse where “information from external texts was now severely edited, summarized and contextualised by the newspaper, and was thus translated into a single news style” (p. 565). Reporters and editors now reworked news events into stories, and offered interpretation and description, using interview material, photographs, introductory paragraphs and decked headlines to weave together a range of voices into one. These new mass-market dailies were also aware of a growing number of women readers, leading to the appearance of the “woman’s page” in many newspapers. Stories on these pages were often written by pseudonymous “female correspondents” and were surrounded by advertisements from the newly established department stores and other retailers of fashion and beauty items.

As several studies of the women’s suffrage movement in the UK have pointed out (for example Chapman 2013; Kelly 2004; Mercer 2004; Nessheim 1992; Tickner 1988), these new mass-market dailies and the suffragettes were made for each other, and newspapers in fact offer a very important resource in the study of the women’s suffrage movement in the UK. The first act of suffragette militancy occurred in October 1905, when Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney disrupted a Liberal meeting in Manchester by heckling the speakers and were arrested after Christabel spat at a policeman. Sentenced to pay a fine or undergo a short prison sentence, both opted to be imprisoned. The resulting coverage in the press was an educational experience for the leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which adopted these new "tactics" of interrupting meetings and refusing to pay fines in order to gain maximum publicity for the cause. Arguing that the suffrage question had been ignored by the press until that moment, Christabel later stated: "Where peaceful means had failed, one act of militancy succeeded and never again was the cause ignored by … any …newspaper" (Pankhurst 1987, in Kelly (2004, p. 327). The move of WSPU headquarters from Manchester to London also facilitated national press coverage of the "suffragettes" – a term coined by the *Daily Mail*.

The daily newspapers not only reported the activities of the suffragettes but also provided photographs, thus increasing the visibility of suffrage campaigners throughout the country (Kelly 2004). Suffragette "spectacles" such as processions and meetings were designed to be reported in this way (Tickner 1988), and thus the suffragettes gained visibility and the press sold newspapers by providing its readers with spectacle and modernity (Kelly 2004). However, Kelly (2004) points out that, while press coverage of the suffrage question could be enthusiastic, sometimes it was more curious than positive, focusing more on the response of the crowds to the women than the cause itself. Chapman (2013) agrees, arguing that this new popular press treated suffrage stories in a sensationalist way, as a series of "human interest" stories. She also suggests that changes in editor or proprietor could lead to changes in a newspaper's attitude towards the question of the enfranchisement of women and notes that many newspapers that were initially sympathetic to the women's cause later turned against militant tactics. It should be noted that these studies have tended to focus on national, London-based newspapers with little reference to newspapers outside London apart from the *Manchester Guardian* and thus a study of the Scottish press adds to our knowledge of press coverage of the suffrage question.

Scotland was an important focus throughout the campaign for the vote because several important figures in the Liberal government held seats in the country: Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (Prime Minister 1905-08) served as the MP for Stirling Burghs; H. H. Asquith (Prime Minister 1908-16 and a formidable anti-suffragist) held the seat of East Fife; and the 1908 by-election in Dundee which returned Winston Churchill (President of the Board of Trade) as the city's MP was one of several contests that attracted the leaders of the suffrage movement north that year. In addition, the militant society that broke away from the WSPU in 1907, the Women's Freedom League, was particularly strong in Scotland and the leaders of other suffrage groups, such as Graham Moffat of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage and the Northern Men's Federation for Women's Suffrage, which was made up of Scottish councillors, bailies, magistrates, trade council members and others in public life, were based in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Thus the Scottish press allows us to hear arguments on the subject of women's suffrage from different voices based outside the London leadership of the main suffrage societies.

For a woman to attend a public political meeting was, in itself, pushing the boundaries. The public political sphere was a masculine one. Women had no place there – their place was in the private sphere at home. Women were the traditional symbols of innocence and virtue (Srebreny and van Zoonen 2000), and there was a real concern that women involved in politics would be sullied by a close association with politics, to the extent that they would lose their femininity and their privileged position in the home as the moral compass (van Acker 2003; Baker 1984; Billington 1982). Women's bodies became subversive simply by being placed in the public sphere because their legitimate sphere was the home and the domestic (Parkins 1997). By deviating from cultural norms and making their bodies, and their demands, visible, suffragettes used shock-tactics to raise the profile of their cause, drawing attention to themselves as being ‘out of place’ and ‘other’ in the public sphere and at the same time demanding admission to it. As one anti-suffragist quoted in the *Dundee Evening Post* in 1900 put it: ‘I regard women’s rights… as the worst enemies of the female sex. They withdraw her from those sacred obligations which properly belong to her sex, and fill her with ambition to usurp positions for which neither God nor Nature ever intended her.’

On the opposite side of the argument, however, those who campaigned for the vote for women argued that it was precisely *because* of woman’s special role in the home and her female abilities and values that she should have a say in the affairs of the nation. As a correspondent to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* (17 October 1901) on the subject of parish councils argued, “A great deal of the practical knowledge and shrewdness that come to a woman who has had to make the best of a small sum would be very useful there”. Women householders had by this point achieved a vote for education and parochial boards in Scotland and might even stand for election to these boards. The sphere of influence of female board-members was firmly positioned as the welfare and care of children, the ill and the old, and their skills and knowledge were seen as complementary but not as valuable as those of men. Mrs McNab, a member of a school board, explained to the *Dundee Evening Post* (2 January 1901) that “women… have supplied qualifications lacking where only men have composed the Board, proving that women can work harmoniously with men without in any way usurping authority or affecting any superiority.”

Thus early coverage of women politicians emphasised their *difference*. Those campaigning for the vote argued that women’s different skills and interests peculiarly qualified them, whilst anti-suffragists were horrified at the besmirching of women by exposure to the cut and thrust of political debate. There was thus plenty for those concerned about women’s essential femininity to be worried about in this new behaviour from the suffragettes. Fighting, spitting, being arrested, going to prison. This was not the behaviour to be expected from women. How could it be argued that they would bring a special “feminine” approach to politics if they behaved like this?

This is one of the reasons that we find an emphasis on dress and appearance amongst the suffragettes. Always well dressed herself, Mrs Pankhurst insisted on a certain standard from women representing the WSPU in public (Billington 1982). Tickner (1988) and Rolley (1990) point out that the Edwardian public expected to see a woman’s femininity exemplified in her appearance. Thus it was important that photographs of the suffragettes in the newspapers show them in fashionable clothing of the day wearing large picture hats in order to counter the stereotypes put forward by anti-suffragists that they were unwomanly or even mannish (Hammam 2002). Sellers of the WSPU newspaper were encouraged to wear their smartest clothes, while Sylvia Pankhurst suggested that many suffragettes spent more on their clothes than they could afford so that they would not harm the cause (Rolley 1990). The WSPU arranged processions of women through cities to demonstrate women’s desire for the vote, again placing women’s bodies into the public sphere, marching down high streets, disrupting the usual order. These events attracted huge numbers of both participants and watchers and, as well as the marchers, they would have seen bands, women in national costumes, banners and tableaus showing famous women from history. Marchers were instructed to wear white, carry flowers and wear the WSPU colours: purple for dignity and self-respect, white for purity in public as well as private life and green for hope and new life. Working-class marchers were encouraged to march in regional dress, for example kilts, to present a visual connection with suffragism and British nationalism (Montz 2012). As Parkins (1997, p.37) notes, with the suffragettes, “the political was not so much personalized as embodied”. Again, press coverage focused on the appearance of the women marchers. The *Arbroath Herald and Advertiser* (24 June 1910) reported on a march in Edinburgh in 1910:

> There were women of every class …. Plain-looking girls were there alongside of handsomely dressed and beautiful women, tall and short, stout and lean, old and young…. The whole made up a pageant of rare beauty. Mrs Drummond, a comely matron, led the procession sitting astride a very big handsome horse.

The suffragette Cicely Hamilton remarked in her autobiography (1935) on the importance attached to dress and appearance in the movement and its insistence on a feminine note in order to emphasise that they were asking for the vote *as women* and to reassure male viewers. Thus, WSPU meetings were stage managed to present the younger and prettier members on the first row of the platform and official dress code recommended dresses rather than the more masculine coats and skirts (Park 2010). Interviews with suffragettes or descriptions of meetings in the Scottish press emphasised their feminine appearance. On her first appearance in Edinburgh in 1906 the *Evening News* (6 August 1906) described Teresa Billington as "an attractive-looking young lady, whose pleasant appearance would suggest anything but the aggressive characteristics which many may have associated with one who had figured conspicuously in the agitation". On this occasion she was "neatly attired in tight grey dress". The following day they reported that she "wore a light-blue dress and straw hat". During the same campaign a female journalist from the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (17 August 1906) was granted an interview with Billington. The interview started with a description of the suffragette, again emphasizing the femininity of her appearance: "Miss Billington is not at all the type of platform woman beloved of the comic papers. She is young, charming, soft-voiced, and not devoid of sense of humour. Her head is crowned with braids of nut-brown hair, and she gives the impression of a very attractive personality." The *Telegraph* (19 September 1906) was equally surprised to find that Christabel Pankhurst was "the perfect little lady".

It is not surprising that readers would be eager to know what a suffragette looked like because – as the quote above shows – many cartoons of suffragettes showed them as ugly, elderly harridans who were ill-dressed, violent and aggressive. There were also suggestions that they were sex-starved, which was why they were happy to throw themselves into the arms of policemen. With such stereotypes presented to them by newspapers, picture postcards and on music-hall stages (Cowman 2007), it is not surprising that readers would be interested in seeing a real-life suffragette, whose exploits they had read about in the newspapers. Teresa Billington was mobbed whenever she spoke in Scotland – when she finally departed from Edinburgh by train the *Evening News* (10 August 1906) reported on the "amusing scenes at the station" where a crowd made up mostly of curious and hostile men followed her and an old woman forced her way into Billington's train compartment to take a close look at her. Miss Billington "was not deceived in any way by the attendance paid to her, and remarked that she thought the people were curious rather than interested or enthusiastic". This supports Kelly's (2004) argument that press coverage of the suffrage question was sometimes more curious than positive. In fact Billington rather blamed the press for her notoriety, remarking that she protested "against certain newspaper statements. She said she had been described in halfpenny newspapers as a woman six feet high. 'And I am not,' she asserted, and added with a smile. 'I don't think I am a very ferocious looking Amazon'" (*Edinburgh Evening News* 7 August 1906).

By this point the suffragettes had become notorious for their very physical run-ins with the police in their attempts to speak to politicians, which led them to interrupt both political meetings and debates in Parliament. Scottish newspapers reported the violence meted out to the women by both police and bystanders. At a meeting to hear Mr Asquith,

> A lady, gaily dressed in summer attire [note that how she is dressed is the first thing that is reported about her], rose in the balcony, and, waving a banner, screamed "Votes for the Women" which gave rise to shouts of "Turn her out," followed by cheers and hooting. Several stewards then ascended the balcony, and approached the ladies. One of the latter fought vigorously with the staff of the flag, which had been torn from her. The audience looked on, and cried "Away with her." She was seized eventually, and thrust bodily down the steps, screaming and gesticulating. Some of her companions met with a similar fate. One of them being seized seemed to fall on the stairs, and roll down part of the way. (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 16 June 1906)

Or a disruption at a meeting held by the trade unionist John Burns:

> Suddenly right in front of the platform, her wild eyes on the speaker, rose a well-dressed woman [note again the description of how she was dressed is first], shouting shrilly the now familiar watchword, "Votes for Women." The audience leapt to their feet, many jeering, many crying 'Duck her in the pond.' It was an exciting scene, the suffragette kept up her cries, gesticulating wildly. (*Dundee Courier*, 25 June 1906)

Looking more closely at these descriptions we can begin to understand why the leadership wished to promote the idea of feminine, dignified women. The newspapers framed the suffragettes as 'wild' and out of control, needing the age-old treatment for women who disrupted masculine spaces – ducking in a pond. In her history of public speech, Jamieson argues that "Long after ducking stools and gossip bridles had become curiosities in museums, the silence they enforced and the warnings they imposed continued to haunt women" (Jamieson, 1988 p. 68 quoted in Van Zoonen 2006 p. 290). Note in particular the descriptions of the women's voices – they scream and shout shrilly. The female voice should not be heard in a public arena. It should be reserved for quiet conversation in the private home. When they try to speak loudly, their voices become distorted and screechy. A shorthand for the suffragettes in newspaper correspondence quickly became "the shrieking sisterhood", emphasising the illogicality and hysteria of their demands. A century later, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross' (1996) study of the press coverage of women MPs at Westminster found that they were also often described in highly emotional terms using "the register of hysteria or aberration". As one female MP pointed out to the researchers, "when I ask a question it's written up as an outburst". A male politician makes statements "and I make outbursts". Higgins and McKay (2015) make similar points about the description of Nicola Sturgeon as a "nippy sweetie" – a colloquialism for a sharp-tongued woman who contradicts the norms of feminine demureness.

Looking at the descriptions of the clashes between suffragettes and the authorities it is noticeable how frequently they contain descriptions of women's clothing becoming damaged or ripped off. A story from the *Motherwell Times* of 1905 (20 October) describes how "during the scuffle Miss Pankhurst's skirt was torn off". An attempt to enter the House of Commons in 1906 was described by the *Courier* as "Struggling and shouting and protesting, the suffragettes were got out into the Palace Yard leaving a trail of hats, cloaks, scarves, woe-begone fragments of millinery, and other feminine finery" (24 October 1906). The *Dundee Telegraph* managed to combine the image of women's ripped clothing with the implied suggestion that all suffragettes really wanted was to feel a man's arms around them: "There has been a great destruction of millinery, and, we fear, the costumes of some of the ladies may not have been improved in those glorious moments when they found themselves in the strenuous but unwilling embrace of stalwart London bobbies" (24 October 1906). A correspondent to the *Fife Free Press* described the women as “falling into the arms of a burly policeman crying how nice votes for women” (19 October 1907).

One enterprising Dundee haberdasher took out an advertisement in the *Courier*: “Re The remnants of female finery picked up last night in the House of Commons, Notice is hereby given that none of the costumes which failed to stand the strain were fashioned at 43, Commercial Street by HEGGIE THE TAILOR” (24 October 1906). Another advert suggested that suffragettes given “the cold shoulder” by Mr Asquith should shop at Heggie’s for a new coat (15 October 1906). Such enterprise on the part of a specialist in women’s clothing is not surprising when we consider the placing of many stories about women’s politics – on the “women’s page”, surrounded by advertisements for clothing and beauty aids. Parkins (1997, p. 41) argues that, for the suffragettes, fashionable dress “in fact linked and politicized apparently discrete areas of life (street/house/platform)” and was neither superficial nor a distraction from the campaign but was in fact an integral part of a woman’s performance as a suffragette. To have such fashionable dress ripped from her body or damaged by fights with policemen was therefore more than an attack on her person, it was an attack on her claim to statehood and her politics.

These fights left their mark on women’s bodies as well as their clothing. The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* featured an interview with several suffragettes directly after arrests at an Asquith meeting.

> ‘They wouldn't have left a rag of our clothes if they’d had their way,’ declared Mrs Roe [who is described as a prominent and handsome suffragette]. ‘Look at my chiffon! And I've got bruises, too. I tell you my husband hardly knew me when I got home.’ Little Miss Kenney and tall Miss Billington groaned in unison. ‘My arms are black and blue all the way with the great thumbs of those policemen,’ said Miss Kenney, stroking her biceps. ‘How did you learn boxing?’ asked a pressman. “It seems to come natural to me,’ replied Mrs Roe, who is plump and very comely. (18 June 1906)

These are almost sexualised descriptions of the women – flaunting their chiffon clothes, stroking themselves, groaning – whilst described as handsome and comely. While the sexualisation of modern women politicians in the press has been evidenced in some detail by studies such as that undertaken by Ross *et al* (2013) it is interesting to see this example of a similar approach 100 years earlier.

It was actually a Scottish suffragette who first undertook a hunger strike. Marion Wallace Dunlop, a Scottish illustrator living in London, was arrested for defacing a wall with suffrage slogans. She was sentenced to one month’s imprisonment. Prison authorities refused to treat suffragettes as political prisoners, which would have meant imprisonment in the First Division where they were allowed to wear their own clothes. Instead they were placed in the Second Division with other criminals. As the *Edinburgh Evening News* triumphantly reported: “Of course, they are not allowed to wear their own clothes; they are supplied with a very ugly dress with a white cap, and are given big ugly boots, often odd in size” (27 October 1906). Rolley (1990) comments on how prison must have been a particular ordeal for stylish suffragettes whose elaborate hairstyles were difficult to keep up with no access to hairpins. Dunlop was refused treatment as a political prisoner, and began a hunger strike that lasted 91 hours before she was released.

One reason for the focus on women’s shrieking voices is because, to address the sometimes very large and often hostile crowds who came to see and frequently heckle the suffragettes, it was necessary to shout. Particularly hostile crowds might pelt the speakers with mud or even physically attack them. In Dundee, Adela Pankhurst and three other suffragettes were attacked by an enraged crowd when they attempted to set up their own meeting close to one being addressed by Churchill. The women were actually attacked by stewards of the meeting, as an irate letter to the *Courier* made clear the next day:

> The rosetted hooligans tore the cover of the car, broke the framework, cut at least one of the tyres with their knives, and attempted to overturn the car with the women in it. Then they proceeded to personal violence. Several of them seized one of the women by the arms, and attempted to drag her to the ground. One especially brave brute twisted the same woman's scarf or veil round her throat, and, pulling both ends, attempted to choke her. Finally they tore up the turf from the road side, and commenced to bombard the women and the chauffeur from all directions, repeatedly hitting the occupants of the car most dangerous blows on the face and body. (18 October 1909)

Even if not physically attacked, the women were frequently heckled by the crowd, although newspaper accounts remark on what accomplished and patient speakers suffragettes such as Teresa Billington were. A good example of the constant to and fro with the crowd can be found in a verbatim report of an open-air meeting held by Teresa Billington at Cupar Market published by the *Dundee Courier* (10 October 1906). Standing in a wagonnette she addressed a meeting that was

> … pretty lively on account of the interruption from several farm hands who had been indulging rather freely …. Miss Billington said she liked interruptions, but was not at all fond of the bar-parlour politician (Laughter.) … A good many people were proud of Mr Asquith's cleverness, but they forgot that even clever people could make mistakes. They did not question his cleverness, but he had no right to stand between them and their votes. (A Voice —"Fine lassie.") (Another Voice—"Are ye ge-ttin' mairrit?"—laughter.) "I may, some time, but I am going to get the vote all the same." (A Voice —"It will be Home Rule, then, with you"—laughter.) "No, it will be two with equal rights…" (A Voice "Wait until ye get mairrit, lassie, and ye'll no' seek a vote then" —laughter.)

For many of the critics of the suffragettes, marriage was the answer. A married woman would not have the time to be concerned with politics and thus a problem would be solved and woman returned to her proper place in the home. As a letter writer to the *Southern Reporter* (28 March 1912) argued: "If I could give every young suffragette a home of her own I am certain I would thereby transform her right away into an anti-suffragette."

We can see a slightly different stereotype of the suffragette emerging here – not the man-hungry elderly harpy but the frivolous reckless girl in search of excitement who only needs to settle down into marriage to forget all about politics. A letter-writer to *The Scotsman* (4 November 1912) suggested that "many girls call themselves suffragettes for amusement, or excitement", while a joke in *The Motherwell Times* (2 August 1912) had one suffragette telling another that "If we want to get the young girls interested in our meetings we must have something to attract them". The second suffragette responded: "Which had it better be? Refreshments or men?" Despite the difference in appearance, it was implied that both the harpy and the frivolous girl were after the same things – excitement, attention and the feel of a man's arms around them as the police were forced to intervene. However, once a woman had a child, it was implied, she would discover her true calling. It was for this reason that the Women's Freedom League, a break-away group from the WSPU that was particularly strong in Scotland, issued a series of postcards entitled "The Suffragette at Home" showing well-known members of the WFL bathing babies, cleaning ovens and making jam. The story evidenced here was that women could be interested in politics and still be good homemakers.

It also had the result of raising the spectre of married women – with babies – one day becoming politicians if the suffragettes got their wish. A letter writer to the *Southern Reporter* (28 March 1912) sketched out the horrors of such a scene:

> It might then be possible to read in the *Times* ... "The War Secretary, Mrs —who is devoted to her baby, brought him to the House along with her, and in the course of her speech on the German peril had to pause several times to adjust the feeding bottle." Or … "The Premier was yesterday expected to make a full statement on the acute Eastern problem, but was unable to be present as her little boy was very ill with teething troubles and mumps."

Again, the suggestion was that mothers would be too busy and distracted to perform their duties as politicians adequately. Edwardian policy-makers and philanthropists urged all women to pay more attention to their duties as wives and mothers, particularly in response to a high mortality rate in all classes of society and concerns about the future of the British Empire (Lewis 1984; Rolley 1990). Braybon (1981) points out that, in the years before the First World War, no analysis of women's labour was complete without a discussion of how women's work affected their families. Discussion of how their work might affect the women's own health focused on whether it left them fit enough to bear healthy children. While working-class women's involvement in the work force was accepted as an unfortunate necessity, commentators were united in their belief that the proper place for a married middle-class woman was in the home. The choice for such women was usually seen as a stark one between a career and marriage and a family, and therefore the suggestion that the enfranchisement of women might see married women, who should be focused on their domestic duties, entering the public sphere of politics was a shocking one to many. For some, this is still problematic today. In 2014, Jo Swinson MP was criticised for wanting to take her baby through the voting lobby at the House of Commons during late debates (*The Telegraph* 6 January 2014).

The response to violent militancy

After the collapse of the 1910 Conciliation Bill, which would have given the vote to at least some women, violent militant action sprang up all over the country. The suffragettes focused their attention on damaging property in the hope that property-owners and insurance companies would put pressure on the government to change its mind. Window-breaking was undertaken in co-ordinated attacks, post-boxes were set on fire or had acid poured inside, telegraph wires were cut, and golf courses and bowling greens were cut up. In Scotland arson attacks were made on buildings such as the church at Whitekirk in East Lothian, the grandstand at Ayr Racecourse, Leuchars station, Ashley Road school in Aberdeen, a wing of St Andrews University and Farrington Hall in Dundee. An attempt was made to blow up Burns' cottage in Alloway and the Wallace Monument near Stirling was attacked. The whole country was on "suffragette watch" and any group of well-dressed women was suspect. After an arson attack on a castle in Perthshire, the *Courier* (5 February 1914) reported that "five strange women bearing the appearance of suffragettes" had been seen getting off a train at a nearby station. The *Daily Mail* reported that "any unaccompanied lady in sight, especially if she carried a hand bag, became the object of menacing suspicion" (Parkins 1997, p. 42). Before a meeting to hear Winston Churchill speak, the whole of St Andrew's Halls in Glasgow was searched by police. They found nothing but a lady's furs on the rooftop – proof that a suffragette had been there apparently, and again demonstrating the wealthy and well-dressed nature of such women (12 January 1910).

The Scottish press became a key arena for arguments for and against the suffragettes' actions to be played out. Whilst many of the more liberal newspapers had by this time acknowledged the justice of women's demand for the vote, editors and readers were becoming alienated by the trail of destruction that was being left across the country. Demands for punishment became more and more extreme – and many of them focused on the women's bodies. A columnist for the *Arbroath Herald* told readers

> A lady has made a suggestion to me with regard to the Suffragettes …. She suggests that all the ladies who are convicted should have their heads shaved on entering and leaving prison. Also there ought to be a law against their wearing wigs to cover their hairless heads. She thinks this would prevent many joining the "militant" ranks. I am doubtful. It might frighten some of the youthful and good-looking girls. But, as everyone knows, they are very few in number amongst the "wild women", who are mostly "plain" and "of uncertain age", besides being careless of dress, as well as rather hairless by nature! (23 May 1913).

The *Stirling Observer* (8 July 1913) suggested "a public horse-whipping on the spot". A correspondent to the *Dundee Courier* (18 December 1913) wanted suffragettes to be "well spanked" and the *Advertiser* (6 May 1908) advocated they be "taken to a side room by some strong female warder, there to receive 50 skelps on a safe place". The *Arbroath Herald* (22 May 1914) reported that "in Birmingham three men attacked a Suffragette in the street, stripped her, burned her clothes in tar, and then fled". Militant tactics and the hunger strikes of the suffragettes evidently frustrated both the authorities and newspaper readers. The women should take their punishment and go to prison quietly. Solutions to the problem were focused either on the suffragettes' appearance – stripping them, shaving them – or infantilising them by spanking as you would a naughty child.

How long this situation would have lasted we do not know, but in August 1914 the First World War broke out and the WSPU immediately agreed a truce with the government. Many of the suffragettes threw themselves into a new cause – war work, which they hoped would demonstrate once and for all the value of women and their right to become British citizens. In late 1916 an inter-party conference in the House of Commons recommended that women over a certain age be given the vote and the resulting bill became law in February 1918. In December 1918 women over the age of 30 with a property qualification were allowed for the first time to vote in a general election.

In 1919, the American-born Lady Nancy Astor was the first women MP to enter the House of Commons. She represented the Conservative party and was stepping into her husband's old seat on his assumption to the House of Lords. How did the press respond? By describing Lady Astor was wearing when she entered the chamber of the House of Commons for the first time.

> Lady Astor was becomingly dressed in a plain black tailor-made costume, and a close-fitting velvet toque. The roll-collar of her white silk blouse, with V-shaped neck, overhung her coat collar. The only jewellery she displayed were her wedding ring and a gold wristlet watch (*Aberdeen Daily Journal* 2 December 1919).

And so started the game of trying to decode women politicians' clothing choices. Nancy Astor usually wore black and white to the House of Commons. On the one occasion that she wore a "fiery-red dress" to the House her choice of clothing was covered extensively by the press and it was immediately assumed that she was either challenging or joining the Labour party by wearing this "revolutionary colour" to "please the eyes of the Reds" (*Derby Daily*

Telegraph 5 December 1928). Which brings us back neatly to Nicola Sturgeon's own red dress, and the assumption all those years later by *The Observer* that her choice of clothing makes a statement about her politics and her own challenge to the Labour party.

Conclusions

The roots of the modern media's obsession with the appearance, weight, bodies, clothes and even sexuality of modern women politicians can be found in the newspaper coverage of the suffragettes. The suffragettes were different, they were a story that sold newspapers and readers were anxious to learn more about them and their activities. They were women who made a spectacle of themselves, they placed themselves on display, stood on stools, in carts and in the roadside to make speeches, they marched, thousands strong, in processions, they stood up in meetings and struggled with policemen. They made themselves visible in what until then had been a purely masculine space – that of politics. What they wore was important to them because they saw their femininity as a justification for their inclusion in the body politic and therefore wished to present themselves as both dignified and feminine. They also made a conscious attempt to counter the "shrieking sisterhood" narrative presented in much media coverage. Many of the readers of the Scottish press, particularly in the early years of the century, would have had little chance of seeing a suffragette "in the flesh" and therefore descriptions of the appearance and behaviour of these women were important elements of news stories about "the cause". How they dressed, spoke and behaved was a key element in the presentation of their argument for enfranchisement. Demonstrations and meetings also made suffragette spectacles appropriate for coverage by the new profession of photo-journalism.

We can thus see that these early women politicians were covered by the press in a very similar way to the coverage meted out to contemporary women politicians, with a focus on appearance, body and home lives. However, in comparison to the modern woman politician, the suffragettes saw the construction of themselves as feminine and domestic as necessary in order to claim a place in the public sphere – the idea that their special abilities as women and mothers meant that they could offer different views and skills to those of male politicians. Their claim to a place in government was based on the idea that women's experiences of domestic economy and as mothers could offer a different and complementary approach to issues relating to children, the poor and the sick. For modern women politicians, whose remit can cover the whole of public policy and government, this identification with "women's issues" can be problematic. However, the focus on appearance, body and home lives remains and is amplified by celebrity culture. And there is still the assumption that when a woman wears a red dress she is making a political statement. The personal is truly political.

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