

## WOMEN, CIVILITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS: REALITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS

Deborah Cameron, University of Oxford

In most contemporary societies there are no longer any formal barriers to women's participation in politics and public life, but women continue to be under-represented in positions of political leadership and decision-making. Clearly there are many reasons for the persistence of this imbalance, but one that has often been mooted is directly connected to the question of political language. There is a widespread belief that many or most women are alienated and disadvantaged by the competitive, adversarial and frequently uncivil style of speech which dominates much political discourse, and which is at odds with their own preference for a speech-style characterised by co-operation, consensus-seeking and the avoidance of conflict.

In politics as in other professions (like management and academe), this issue has often been addressed through targeted programmes of training which aim to equip women with the skills they are thought to lack. Such interventions are implicitly based on a 'deficit model', treating women's supposed linguistic difference from men as a problem to be solved by changing women<sup>1</sup>. But in recent decades the assumptions of the deficit model have increasingly been challenged by an alternative view: that women's preferred style of speech, though at odds with the prevailing norm, makes a valuable contribution to democratic political discourse, and may even be better suited than the 'male' style to the demands of modern political leadership. In the following discussion I examine the rise of this more positive representation, its relationship to reality (that is, to the findings of empirical studies), and its consequences for women in politics—which are not, I will argue, unequivocally positive.

### Representations: discourse on women's difference, 1997-2021

Women's more 'civilised' political style became a salient topic of discussion in Britain in 1997, when the General Election victory of Tony Blair's 'New' Labour Party brought what was then a record number of women MPs (119) to Westminster. Numerous commentators predicted that this influx of women would change the culture of the House of Commons for the better by making it, as one put it, 'less of a bear-garden'. That view was clearly shared by some of the new women MPs themselves. As Julia Drown of Swindon South explained: 'Women are more co-operative in the way they work. They're not so into scoring points, and more interested in hearing different points of view'. The Edgbaston MP Gisela Stuart concurred, adding that 'democracy is about consensus, not imposing will'. A few years later, women MPs who were interviewed by the politics scholar Sarah Childs maintained that they had brought a less 'combative and aggressive' style of discourse to the House of Commons, and it was evident they viewed this as a positive contribution.<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, when three of the parties contesting the UK General Election were led by women (Natalie Bennett of the Green Party, Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party and Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru), all of whom took part in the two national television debates which were the highest-profile media events of the campaign, Sylvia Shaw and I carried out, as part of a larger case-study<sup>3</sup>, an analysis of the campaign press coverage which revealed that 'women speaking differently' had been a relatively prominent theme. Almost all commentators on this subject evaluated women's difference positively. Admiration for their performance was not confined to left-leaning and pro-feminist newspapers like the *Guardian*, which declared after the first leaders' debate that 'It Was The Women Wot Won It' (April 3 2015)); even the right-wing *Telegraph* observed that the women's 'thoughtful and measured contributions' had 'brought a certain dignity to an occasion that could have descended into chaos and rancour' (May 8 2015). Many items in our sample remarked approvingly on the women's avoidance of uncivil behaviours such as shouting, arguing and interrupting or talking over opponents. They were seen as, in the words of an article in the *Yorkshire Post* (May 8, 2015), 'setting new standards', and making the old standards, epitomised by 'men arguing loudly, irascibly', appear 'out of date, superficial, even trivial'.

Women's lower tolerance for political incivility would also be noted in media commentary on the upheavals that followed the 2016 EU Referendum. In 2019, eight Labour MPs and three Conservatives broke away from their parties to form a new political grouping which eventually took the name 'the Independent Group for Change'. An article in the *Manchester Evening News* (February 24, 2019) suggested it was not a coincidence that seven of the eleven defectors were women. After quoting a statement made by one of the Conservatives, Heidi Allen MP—'I believed I was part of a party that worked collaboratively and had the empathy to feel'—the article continued: 'Britain's political language is not one currently defined by empathy,

understanding or cooperation. It is one of traitors and mutineers, of verbal missiles lobbed across ideological trenches. Of squaring up. For many women on both sides of the ditches...that now feels increasingly oppressive’.

That women prefer the language of ‘empathy, understanding and co-operation’, is treated here as uncontroversial. It is also suggested that this preference is a direct reflex of gender, uniting women regardless of their other ideological commitments. The same assumption has shaped recent discussions of the way political leaders around the world have managed the Covid-19 pandemic. The claim has been made repeatedly that women have done better than men, in part because of their empathetic style of communication; an article in *Forbes* magazine commented approvingly, referring to female leaders such as the New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that ‘it’s like like their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace’. In this case, too, there has been an overriding emphasis on the simple fact of leaders’ femaleness, glossing over not only their political differences, but also the very different situations—geographical, economic, social and cultural—in which they have been dealing with the crisis.

The examples just given are snapshots illustrating the development of a particular language ideology—a set of ideas and beliefs about language, gender and politics—between the late 1990s and the present, and they suggest that there has been a shift over time. Initially the virtues of women’s speech-style were most often framed in terms of complementarity: women’s presence in increasing numbers would tone down the extremes of incivility which had been able to flourish in heavily male-dominated political settings such as the ‘bear-garden’ of Westminster. Later on, however, we see a growing tendency to frame women’s style as superior to men’s—more ‘modern’, more democratic, more in tune with what contemporary citizens want from their leaders. This was especially noticeable during the 2015 General Election campaign, when the performance of the women party leaders was enthusiastically hailed by commentators across the political spectrum. While it was not literally true that the women ‘won it’—the election was won by the Conservatives, led at the time by David Cameron, and only one of the three female-led parties (the SNP) increased its representation at Westminster—the women did score a symbolic victory in the ideological battle over language and discourse. Though we might think this narrative has been complicated by subsequent events (such as, in Britain, the fallout from the EU Referendum, and the continuing rise in many parts of the world of a right-wing populist politics whose extreme incivility—exemplified in the discourse of Bolsonaro, Duterte, Trump, et al.—is part of its appeal), it is evident that the language ideology under discussion here has survived: it has featured, as noted above, in attempts to craft a more ‘moderate’ political response to the post-referendum Brexit debate, and it has resurfaced more recently in commentary on political leaders’ handling of the pandemic. How far, though, is this representation of women’s difference grounded in any observable reality?

### **Realities: empirical evidence about gender and political communication**

Examining the relationship between reality and representation was one of the main aims of the case-study Sylvia Shaw and I carried out of the 2015 UK General Election campaign, for which we analysed not only the press coverage I have already referred to, but also the televised debates in which the three women party leaders participated alongside a total of four men: David Cameron (Conservative), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat), Ed Miliband (Labour) and Nigel Farage (UKIP). Our analysis of participants’ linguistic performance uncovered significant and sometimes stark discrepancies between the actual behaviour of the women party leaders and the way their behaviour was described in press coverage.

First, it was not possible to identify a set of linguistic features or strategies which consistently distinguished the men as a group from the women as a group. In both groups individual differences were much more striking. Among the women, for instance, Nicola Sturgeon and Natalie Bennett were on many measures (e.g. number and length of speaking turns, frequency of interruptions and challenges) far more different from each other than Sturgeon was from any of the men. The most plausible explanation for this has nothing to do with gender. Whereas all the other leaders had honed their debating skills as members of a UK or European legislative assembly, Bennett had never held elected office, and before 2015 she was virtually unknown outside her party. Her performance reflected her inexperience, making her an outlier not only in relation to the other women, but in general.

Second, our analysis did not support the perception that the women behaved with greater civility—that they avoided such adversarial tactics as arguing, challenging, insulting, interrupting or talking over others. Natalie Bennett did partially match the perception, in that her use of the tactics just listed was quite infrequent, but the other two women used them freely. Nicola

Sturgeon stood out, not only among the women but among all the participating leaders, for the frequency with which she interrupted others' turns or interjected comments while others were speaking, almost invariably using these interventions to challenge, argue with or attack the current speaker. Her repeated challenges to Ed Miliband could reasonably be described as 'badgering' or 'goaded', and she openly insulted Nigel Farage (who was also sternly upbraided, to applause, by Leanne Wood).

Only one of the claims made about the women's performance was confirmed by empirical analysis: they did generally refrain from using adversarial or uncivil tactics towards each other, and they sometimes intervened to support one another's contributions. The way this was commonly interpreted, however—as an expression of female solidarity and evidence of women's more co-operative and supportive style—overlooks an alternative explanation of their behaviour as the result of political calculation. The three women had nothing to gain by attacking or arguing with one another: their parties were not competing for the same votes (Plaid Cymru was only contesting seats in Wales, the SNP in Scotland and the Green Party mainly in England), and they were all fighting the election on a similar platform of opposition to the austerity policies pursued by the coalition government. Tactically, then, it made sense for them to collaborate rather than competing, just as it made sense for the two coalition leaders to do the same (something nobody attributed to their shared maleness). Had the coalition parties been represented in 2015 by the women who led them in subsequent elections (Theresa May led the Conservatives in 2017 and Jo Swinson the Liberal Democrats in 2019), there is no reason to think Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett would have treated those women as sisters rather than adversaries.

In the case of Nicola Sturgeon we have some evidence on this point from her performances in the Scottish Parliament. This institution, the largest of the three devolved UK assemblies which came into being in 1999, was explicitly intended to be a more egalitarian and less confrontational forum than the House of Commons: that intention informed the design both of its building (which features, for instance, a semi-circular debating chamber), and its procedures. Women were involved in the planning for the new Parliament, and they were also represented among its founder-members. Though they were and still are a numerical minority of MSPs, they have had greater power, influence and visibility than their counterparts at Westminster: women have led each of the three main parties (between 2015 and 2017 the SNP, Labour and the Conservatives all had female leaders), and a woman has been First Minister since 2014. In theory, then, there has been every opportunity for women to normalise a less adversarial style of political discourse at Holyrood than the one that prevails at Westminster. But the extract below<sup>4</sup>, from an exchange between Nicola Sturgeon and the Labour opposition leader Kezia Dugdale at First Minister's Questions in 2015, suggests that in practice that opportunity has not been taken:

*NS= Nicola Sturgeon (SNP); KD = Kezia Dugdale (Lab); PO = Presiding Officer; MSP= member of the Scottish Parliament; (.) = brief pause; \_\_ = stressed; [ ] = overlaps with surrounding discourse*

NS:        when it comes to education (.) when it comes to health (.) when it comes to justice and getting crime levels down to a forty-one year low (.) I'll leave Labour to coin a phrase from Kezia Dugdale (.) carp from the sidelines (.) I will get on with delivering the action that the people of Scotland need [MSPs: Laughter] and deserve [MSPs: Applause]

PO:        Kezia Dugdale (.) Miss Dugdale

KD:        the First Minister mentions the polls let us talk about the polls she might be popular in them but her record on education isn't (.) [MSPs: Applause] just one person in three in Scotland think your record on education is up to scratch if you are proud of that great but don't expect any congratulations from me you can turn and the back benchers will clap you but just one person in three thinks you have a good record when it comes to education [MSPs: Applause]

In this exchange the two women leaders use the same rhetorical strategies which have prompted criticism of the analogous Westminster ritual, Prime Minister's Questions, as a testosterone-fuelled political 'Punch and Judy show'. Sturgeon boasts about her administration's achievements ('getting crime levels down to a forty-one year low') and taunts her opponent with the observation that since her party is not in power, she can only 'carp from the sidelines'. Dugdale counter-attacks by raising the subject of education, on which polls show most Scots are dissatisfied with the SNP's performance: 'if you're proud of that, great, but don't expect any congratulations from me'. Each point scored in this verbal combat draws appreciative applause from the speaker's supporters in the Chamber.

Other studies of political discourse have found that women do not differ significantly from men in their use or avoidance of adversarial tactics. In the US, for instance, studies of Senate and gubernatorial races have found male and female candidates are equally likely to make negative attacks on opponents.<sup>5</sup> In research on the UK's legislative assemblies Sylvia Shaw found that although women MPs she interviewed, like those interviewed by Sarah Childs, considered their style of discourse to be less competitive and more collaborative than the male norm, their actual performance in House of Commons debates did not entirely match their self-reports<sup>6</sup>. Women did differ from men in being less likely to intervene illegally (i.e., without being either called by the Speaker or given way to by the MP currently speaking), but on the 'legal' floor they competed actively and effectively, gaining speaking time in proportion to their numbers. Women in the Scottish Parliament were found to make more illegal interventions than their Westminster counterparts: this, Shaw suggests, may reflect the fact that women at Holyrood are not positioned to the same degree as 'interlopers', trespassers on historically male turf who feel continually under pressure to prove their worth through punctilious observance of the rules<sup>7</sup>. Shaw's findings raise the possibility of an alternative to the familiar argument that male-dominated institutions suppress women's own stylistic preferences and force them to adopt masculine discourse norms. Perhaps, on the contrary, male-dominated institutions constrain women to be different in certain ways (e.g., to avoid rule-breaking), and where their position is more secure, as in the Scottish Parliament, those constraints are loosened and they become *less* different from men.

That interpretation would be compatible with a point which has been demonstrated repeatedly in language and gender research—that contextual factors have a greater influence on speech-style than the speaker's gender in and of itself. Speech-style is not a fixed attribute that individuals carry with them into every situation: it is shaped by, and so varies with, the norms and the interpersonal dynamics of the context in which discourse is produced. For that reason, it cannot be assumed that opening up an institution to a previously un- or under-represented group will automatically change its discourse norms. Newcomers are likely to converge towards the style which is expected, solicited and valued in that context. This generalisation has been found to hold in studies of several professions which were historically dominated by one sex. For example, women police officers have been shown to adopt the direct, low-affect style traditionally used in policing<sup>8</sup>, while male nurses use the empathetic, high-affect style associated with nursing<sup>9</sup>. Though these occupational styles have come to be seen as gendered, so that, for instance, women police officers are sometimes perceived as 'acting/talking like men', what they reflect more directly is the demands of the occupation itself: it is not simply because they are men/women that police officers/nurses are expected to project authority/empathy (on the contrary, in fact, originally it was the demands of the role that determined who was considered capable or incapable of undertaking it).

The same principle applies to politics. Political cultures may differ in the kind and degree of incivility they tolerate, and political institutions may define and regulate (un)acceptable conduct differently, but it is difficult to imagine a form of democratic politics that would not require politicians to engage in at least some competitive, adversarial and potentially uncivil behaviours. Democratic political systems are generally organised around parties representing competing interests; they require the parties periodically to compete for votes; and they include mechanisms for holding executive power to account. Competitive and adversarial modes of discourse serve a purpose in systems that have these characteristics. And in practice, the evidence suggests that women are no less able than men to deploy those modes of discourse, even if they tell researchers otherwise. The perception of female politicians as 'different' is, at the very least, an oversimplification, and at the extreme it is an outright misrepresentation.

Yet even if it is inaccurate, the perception might be thought to work in women's favour, on the basis that it is better for women to be idealised than to be disparaged as 'deficient' and in need of remedial training. From some feminist perspectives, though, these are arguably two sides of a single coin. The idealisation of women and the disparagement of women have coexisted in patriarchal discourse for millennia; though one may be experienced as more overtly oppressive than the other, both contribute to maintaining inequality.

### **The unequal burden of civility**

It is not a coincidence that the qualities which women's speech is said to exemplify include co-operativeness, supportiveness, empathy and civility. This is a gender-stereotype derived from a series of overarching binary oppositions (active/passive, rational/emotional, goal-oriented/relational, etc.) which have a long history of being invoked to describe the differing natures,

and so justify the traditional social roles, of men and women. It was this understanding of women's nature that justified, for centuries, their exclusion from the western public sphere. Historically, the claim that any self-respecting woman would be repelled by the 'bear-garden' atmosphere of the debating chamber or the hustings was a claim that women were by nature unfitted for politics. Today women are no longer told they should leave the distasteful business of wielding power to men, but they could easily get the impression that their participation is valued less for the contribution they might make as individuals, and more for the civilising influence it is imagined they will collectively exert. For most women in politics this is not an advantage. Rather it is a burden, another expectation that women, far more than men, must put thought and effort into managing—and always in the knowledge that all their options come with costs.

We talk about a female 'preference' for civility, but civility is also a female obligation. Women are routinely held to higher standards of civility than men, because the avoidance of incivility is part of the definition of socially acceptable femininity (witness the fact that many forms of uncivil speech—for instance, shouting, swearing and expressing anger—may be condemned in specifically gendered terms, as 'unladylike'). In politics, however, where certain kinds of incivility are both conventional and to some extent functional, this gendered preference/obligation faces women with a dilemma. If they eschew incivility they may be perceived as lacking in authority or toughness, but if they do not eschew it that may raise questions about some other 'ilities'—likability, relatability and electability.

The dilemma women face is illustrated by the findings of a study which analysed the representation of party leaders' speech in TV news reports on the Canadian General Election campaigns of 1993 and 1997, in which three of the competing parties were led by women. Focusing on what might seem like a minor detail—what verbs of speaking were used to report leaders' public utterances—the researchers Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt found that women leaders' statements were significantly more likely than men's to be reported using verbs that implied a markedly aggressive or antagonistic stance, such as *attack*, *blast*, *fire*, *lash out*, *shoot back*. Men's speech, by contrast, was typically reported using the neutral verbs *say* and *tell*.<sup>10</sup> Gidengil and Everitt did consider the possibility that the women really had adopted more aggressive stances, perhaps in an effort to counter the perception of women as 'not tough enough'; but analysis comparing their speech with that of the male leaders did not support that hypothesis. The researchers concluded that the gendered pattern of verb-use reflected the common-sense understanding of aggression as a masculine trait, which is both more noticeable and less acceptable when displayed by women. They also suggested that the media's linguistic choices had influenced perceptions of the women leaders:

Aggressive speech verbs elicit negative affect, whether the purported speaker is male or female, but ...female candidates are more likely to be portrayed as blasting, attacking, and accusing. As a result, viewers are likely to form a more negative impression of female candidates<sup>11</sup>.

In a more recent election, the 2020 US presidential campaign, the treatment of the most prominent female candidate, Kamala Harris, provided a striking illustration of the double standard: when Harris resisted being interrupted by Mike Pence during their Vice-Presidential debate, reminding him that 'I'm speaking', she was described not only as aggressive and disrespectful, but as a 'smug, patronising, power-hungry bitch'. It had been a different story at a Senate hearing in 2017 when Senator Harris was the one doing the interrupting, and the man she interrupted, former Attorney-General Jeff Sessions, complained: on that occasion she was reprimanded by the Chair. By contrast, a male Senator, Angus King, who had interrupted Sessions equally frequently earlier in the day was not complained about or reprimanded<sup>12</sup>. Sylvia Shaw observed something comparable in the UK House of Commons. As I noted above, the one significant male-female difference her analysis identified was that women made fewer illegal interventions, a pattern that held even when differences in status and seniority were controlled for. This may partly have reflected women's greater reluctance to break the rules, something a number of them told Shaw they disapproved of; but Shaw also found that women who did break the rules were more likely to be sanctioned by the Speaker than men who did the same.

These cases, which suggest that women are expected both to show more respect for others' speaking rights and to display a higher level of tolerance for infringements of their own rights, show why the idealisation of women's more co-operative and civil discourse style does not necessarily work to women's advantage. By meeting gendered expectations women may avoid being sanctioned, and they may even be praised for their 'dignified' behaviour. But those benefits are largely symbolic, whereas the costs are material. Women who do not interrupt, nor resist when they are interrupted, will end up with a smaller

share of the available speaking time, and thus less influence on the debate or the discussion; they will consequently appear less politically effective than the men who are permitted to dominate.

## Conclusion

Women's difference may be seen through a 'deficit' lens, as a handicap they must overcome, or it may be celebrated for 'setting new standards' of democratic debate, but in either case what is being represented is an ideological construct: widespread beliefs about women's more co-operative and civil political discourse are not substantiated by the evidence of research, which has generally found more similarities than differences in the verbal behaviour of male and female politicians. In this article I have argued that discourses which valorise women's speech-style are not, in practice, as helpful to women in politics as they might appear. Partly this is because even positive stereotypes are limiting: they set up normative expectations which at least some members of the group they apply to will be unable or unwilling to meet. But in the case of political discourse there is an additional problem. Democratic discourse is not and cannot be uniformly 'civil' (especially if that is taken to mean the consistent avoidance of conflict or confrontation). Requiring women, but not men, to model a 'kinder, gentler' politics, and sanctioning them more harshly than men for deviations from that norm, means relegating women to the margins, while men continue to occupy the centre.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Cameron, 'Language and the problem of women's authority', in A. Bardazzi and A. Bazzoni (eds.), *Gender and Authority across Disciplines, Space and Time*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020, pp.17-33.

<sup>2</sup> S. Childs, 'A feminised style of politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 6, no.1, 2004, pp. 3-19.

<sup>3</sup> D. Cameron and S. Shaw, *Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election*, Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from Cameron and Shaw, *Gender, Power and Political Speech*, p.135. The transcription is the authors' own, slightly adapted for reasons of space.

<sup>5</sup> M.C. Banwart and M.S. McKinney, 'A gendered influence in campaign debates? Analysis of mixed-gender United States Senate and Gubernatorial debates', *Communication Studies*, vol. 56, no.4, 2005, pp. 353-373.

<sup>6</sup> S. Shaw, 'Governed by the rules? The female voice in Parliamentary debates', in J. Baxter, ed., *Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006, pp.81-102.

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of the way gendered patterns of language-use differ among the UK's legislative assemblies see S. Shaw, *Women, Language and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> B. McElhinny, "'I don't smile much anymore": affect, gender and the discourse of Pittsburgh police officers', in J. Coates, ed., *Language and Gender: A Reader*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 1998, pp.309-327.

<sup>9</sup> J. McDowell, 'Talk in feminised occupations: exploring male nurses' linguistic behaviour', *Gender & Language*, vol. 9, no.3, 2015, pp.365-89.

<sup>10</sup> E. Gidengil and J. Everitt, 'Talking Tough: Gender and Reported Speech in Campaign News Coverage', *Political Communication*, vol. 20, no.3, 2003, pp.209-232.

<sup>11</sup> Gidengil and Everitt 'Talking Tough', p.227.

<sup>12</sup> M. Baffy, 'Doing "being interrupted" in political talk', *Language in Society*, vol. 49, no.5, 2020, pp. 1-27.