

**Playing the Man, Not the Ball:  
Personalisation in Political Discourse**

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## Abstract

*Playing the man, not the ball* in its literal sense relates to a sporting encounter, typically where an individual directs physical aggression towards an opponent rather than the expected and legitimate practice of playing the ball. In the area of political discourse, it is used metaphorically for verbal exchanges which have a personal focus rather than sticking to a topical agenda. It is a form of political communication which can attract media attention, particularly when it is impolite or insulting. It can be derided by members of the public (e.g., see Allen et al., 2014), although some claim it is key to maintaining public interest in politics (e.g., Gimson, 2012). This research project is an investigation into this form of discourse – labelled *personalisation* – within politics in the United Kingdom.

Analyses are based in two high profile settings for political discussion: broadcast interviews and Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). The aims of the interview studies include assessing the forms personalisation can take, its prevalence in mainstream politics, and its function and effectiveness. It becomes apparent that personalised responses to interviewers' questions by leading politicians take many forms and can be used as a control measure when faced with troublesome questions. Findings indicate a shortfall in existing literature on equivocation. The studies of PMQs are focused on disrespectful exchanges between Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition across a 37-year period. Those findings reveal changes across time in the use of personally aggressive language, and how relative politeness can emerge during certain policy debates. Theoretical explanations for the significant differences are discussed. Significant differences between leading figures in their conduct during the exchanges also becomes evident. Indeed, some party leaders are shown to be prominent in their personally antagonistic behaviour, despite having made pledges to the contrary.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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This thesis is submitted in accordance with the University of York's **alternative PhD thesis format**, which permits the inclusion of chapters consisting of submitted/in-press/published papers. On that basis, chapters 3 to 6, particularly in their Introduction sections, involve some repetition of reviews of previous studies. The empirical work presented in this thesis has been published (or is currently under review) in peer-reviewed journals, as follows:

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## Chapter 1 – Literature Review

*Personalisation* (including the American spelling *personalization*) has various distinct dictionary definitions. Even within the area of political communication research, different uses of the word are apparent. For example, Leone (2013, p. 133) uses *personalization* for “the phenomenon of leaders’ profiles eclipsing those of their respective parties”; Thornborrow and Montgomery (2010) use the word with reference to the subjective experience of interviewees. The term *personalisation* is used herein to refer to the practice of directing discourse at someone present, which is intended to be of personal relevance to that person. The phrase *playing the man, not the ball* – often heard in a sporting context for instances where an individual directs their aggression at an opposing player – is used metaphorically here for this form of discourse. A literal example of this could be a footballer kicking an opponent during a match, rather than the expected practice of kicking the ball (see Figure 1.1). A metaphorical example is a politician who, rather than responding to an interviewer’s question with a direct answer, deviates from the agenda by responding with a comment of personal relevance to the interviewer (see Figure 1.2). This form of personalised discourse is comparable to *ad hominem* (to the person) arguments which are discussed at length in the study of argumentation in works of philosophy (e.g. Walton, 1985). Walton cites *the sportsman’s rejoinder* as a classic example of *ad hominem* argumentation. This relates to a sportsman who, when accused of barbarity because of his slaughter of animals for sport, retorts that his accuser is not free from guilt due to their consumption of meat. The purpose of the sportsman’s rejoinder here is to highlight an inconsistency in the standpoint of the accuser. However, as will be made apparent throughout this thesis, personal comments directed at political opponents or, in particular, journalists and interviewers, often contain no element of argument against any viewpoint or the premise of any question.



**Figure 1.1.** A famous example of a footballer *playing the man, not the ball*: Paul Gascoigne (right) and Gary Charles in the 1991 FA Cup Final. (Image – BBC, 2011)



**Figure 1.2.** Stills from a 2009 TV interview. Politician Peter Mandelson (left) was being pressed by interviewer Jeremy Paxman (right) for an answer. Instead, Mandelson repeatedly told Paxman to calm down. The interviewer is pictured immediately after Mandelson’s personalisation. This instance, and this form of personalisation, is discussed further in chapters 3 and 4. (Images – Youtube, 2011)

Distinct from ad hominem arguments, *character attacks* – defined as attempts to damage an individual’s reputation – need not occur within the context of a debate (Icks & Shiraev, 2014). However, like ad hominem, they can be used with the purpose of undermining a person’s credibility. The targets of an attack can include a person’s background, allegiance, or integrity, indeed any aspects of character or behaviour. Personalisation by politicians can be similarly focused, as will be shown below. Icks and Shiraev suggest that, through character attacks, the aim of

the attacker is to influence the way others perceive that person. Personalisation in political discourse may also be used for that purpose, but herein it will be shown that the potential exists for the effects to be more wide-ranging.

The following sections will focus on a review of literature relevant to the study of personalisation in political discourse. The first section will consider articles based on *equivocation* (a potential function of personalisation). Also referred to as evasion, this relates to a form of behaviour that many regard as typical of politicians: a tendency to dodge questions. The extent to which that is true or the reasons behind it are the common themes for such studies. The review will include various definitions of equivocation, and explanations for why it is a salient and much-maligned feature of political interviews. The second section features a review of research into *face* – considered the primary reason for equivocation in political communication (e.g., Bull, Elliott, Palmer, & Walker, 1996; Jucker, 1986). Most of the research covered in the first two sections is focused on broadcast interviews. However, it has become apparent that there is another setting for political dialogue where highly personal verbal exchanges have aroused interest, and even concern. The focus of the third section, therefore, moves to the other key area of political discourse – parliamentary debates – particularly, Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs). PMQs – the highest profile event of the UK Parliament – is when the PM is questioned by government and opposition politicians. The fourth and final section of this chapter is a review of relevant literature featuring personalisation in political discourse.

## **1.1 Equivocation Research**

Definitions of equivocation include “nonstraightforward communication; it appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure, or even evasive” (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990, p. 28), “the intentional use of imprecise language” (Hamilton & Mineo, 1998, p.3), “the gentle art of saying nothing by saying something” (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967, p. 78), and “the rhetorical principle of calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009, p. 215).

A general theory of equivocation was proposed by Bavelas and colleagues (e.g., Bavelas, 1983, 1985; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). The premise of the theory is that people tend to equivocate when faced with a question to which all response options have potentially negative consequences, yet a response is expected. Bavelas et al. (1990) labelled this a *communicative avoidance-avoidance conflict*: referred to herein as a *communicative conflict*. Sometimes referred to as the *Situational Theory of Communicative Conflict* (STCC) (e.g., Hamilton & Mineo, 1998), it highlights the importance of understanding behaviour in terms of the context. An everyday example provided by Bavelas and colleagues is when asked by a dear friend about the suitability of a gift they have given, which the recipient considers unsuitable. Here, the recipient's response options include lying or, potentially, causing offence. In such communicative conflict situations, people tend to avoid these forms of negative response, but take a third option – to equivocate. For example, the recipient responds with “Oh, you are so kind”.

Bavelas et al. (1990) suggested that equivocation can occur on four different dimensions: *sender*, *content*, *receiver* and *context*. *Sender* relates to the extent that what is being said is the speaker's own opinion (the lower the level of opinion expressed, the more the response is equivocal). *Content* relates to the level of clarity of what is being said (less clear being more equivocal). *Receiver* relates to the extent that the words refer to the other person in the situation (less relevant to that person is more equivocal). *Context* relates to the extent that the response directly addresses the question (avoiding giving a direct reply being an equivocal response).

The theory of equivocation, applied in a political context, was addressed in an article by Bavelas, Black, Bryson, and Mullett (1988). Researchers questioned political delegates at a Canadian Liberal party convention, during which a leadership election was taking place. Delegates were asked for their views on the party's electoral prospects under the leadership of one particular candidate (John Turner). The responses of the delegates (who were categorised by the badge they were wearing: either a supporter of Turner, or of the rival leadership candidate) were assessed for levels of equivocation. Only those supporting the rival (Jean Chretien) were adjudged



to be in a communicative conflict, as they alone would be faced with two negative response options. The first of these options – being disparaging about electoral prospects under Turner, who was tipped to win the contest – would mean appearing disloyal to the party. The second – endorsing Turner – would reportedly signal disloyalty to their preferred candidate by endorsing his opponent. The analysis showed that delegates faced with this communicative conflict were significantly more equivocal in their responses, particularly on the *context* dimension (i.e., the extent to which they responded with a direct answer). Whilst their findings did provide evidence for equivocation being a consequence of the situation rather than a characteristic of the individual delegates, there are question marks over their study's methodology. Firstly, it is arguable that the claimed communicative conflict in which supporters of the rival candidate were placed was not so clear-cut: namely, would a casual endorsement of one candidate really be construed as disloyalty to their favoured candidate? Secondly, the researcher posing the questions was not blind to the study, therefore the possibility for a leading element to the questions cannot be ruled out.

Research into the extent of politicians' equivocation includes that by Harris (1991), who analysed 17 TV and radio interviews of various leading UK politicians from 1984 to 1987. She reported that politicians provided *direct answers* to only 39% of interviewers' questions. Direct answers are those which Bavelas et al. (1990) would categorise as unequivocal on the *context* dimension (i.e., a response which directly addresses the question), although no reference was made to Bavelas et al.'s theory in this article. This 39% reply rate was contrasted with reply rates of individuals in other institutional settings which were substantially higher, for example, medical patients (66%) and court defendants (78%). Harris, however, does report that different question structures in other settings would contribute to equivocation variations (e.g., factual questions: common in a court setting, not so in a political interview). Bull (1994), in a study of 33 televised political interviews, also showed that politicians gave direct, or *explicit*, replies to less than half the questions posed. Using the term *reply rate*, he reported a figure of 46%. A comparable reply rate (37%), but in a different cultural context (Taiwan), was reported by Huang

(2009). Bull (1994), like Harris (1991), provided data on the structure of interviewers' questions, though only Harris gave any indication of how question type related to the politicians' responses. For example, Margaret Thatcher (UK Conservative Prime Minister 1979-1990) replied directly to noticeably more polar (Yes/No) questions than Neil Kinnock (UK Labour party leader 1983-1992): 41% and 23% respectively.

Harris's (1991) reported contrasts with non-political figures would be more relevant via analysis of such individuals in a televised interview setting. A study of this nature was conducted by Bull (1997), who analysed the responses of Diana, Princess of Wales, in a 1995 television interview with journalist Martin Bashir. In stark contrast to the relatively low reply rates of politicians, Diana was found to provide explicit answers to 78% of Bashir's questions. Similarly high reply levels were reported for other non-political figures in the public eye. Louise Woodward (the British former au pair convicted of the manslaughter of an eight-month-old child), also interviewed by Bashir, replied to 70%; Monica Lewinsky (former White House intern who was involved in a sexual relationship with the then US President Bill Clinton) replied to 89% of questions posed by news journalist Jon Snow (Bull, 2000).

A recent study making a direct comparison between political and non-political figures focused on televised interviews in Japan (Feldman, Kinoshita & Bull, 2015). Despite the different cultural setting, politicians were again shown to reply to less than half of the interviewers' questions (41% for national politicians), whereas non-political figures replied to 52%. Further analysis here revealed higher rates of equivocation for politicians when in government than when in opposition. This last point provided further support for the STCC of Bavelas et al. (1990), as those with a government record to defend are more likely to be placed in a communicative conflict.

Despite the similarities in the extent of politicians' equivocation found in various studies, how do individuals differ in their methods of evasiveness? To aid identification of individual differences in terms of how politicians equivocate in an interview setting, Bull and Mayer (1993) devised a *typology of non-replies to questions*. Via an analysis of eight TV interviews from 1987 – four with Prime Minister

(PM) Margaret Thatcher and four with Leader of the Opposition Neil Kinnock – they identified 30 different types of non-reply which fit into their typology comprising 11 superordinate categories. This was subsequently expanded in a follow-up study (Bull, 2003a) to 12 superordinate categories comprising 35 different forms of equivocation (see Table 1.1). Bull and Mayer found no significant difference between politicians in the extent of their equivocation. There were also many similarities in their style of non-reply: for example, *making a political point* was by far the most common form of equivocation for both politicians. However, Thatcher was found to be the only one to respond to a question with a personal attack on the interviewer, primarily concerning their neutrality. Further analysis by Bull and Mayer (1993) indicated that Thatcher’s aggressive equivocal responses were highly effective compared to the more defensive tactics of Kinnock. For example, Thatcher’s personal attacks almost always (83%) resulted in the interviewer moving on to a new question; whereas Kinnock’s responses stating he had already answered the question always failed to divert the interviewer.

**Table 1.1.** Typology of Equivocation (Bull, 2003a).

1	Ignores the question
2	Acknowledges the question
3	Questions the question (2)
4	Attacks the question (8)
5	Attacks the interviewer
6	Declines to answer (5)
7	Makes a political point (8)
8	Gives an incomplete reply (5)
9	Repeats answer to previous question
10	States or implies that the question has already been answered
11	Apologises
12	Literalism

*Note.* Figures in brackets = number of subordinate categories.

Confrontational responses were also a feature in an argumentation analysis focused on extreme right-wing politicians in Belgium (Simon-Vandenberghe, 2008). The two politicians – from the dissolved far-right Flemish nationalist party *Vlaams*

*Blok* (Flemish Block) – were facing questions about the renouncement of racist views. Faced with the communicative conflict of either offending original supporters or the potential for legal action, they occasionally responded with personal attacks on the questioner. Their aggressive equivocal responses included offensive personal comments and, interestingly, condescension (e.g., repeating the addressee’s name and the phrase “Don’t get so excited”). This latter form of non-reply was not incorporated in the existing typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993). Simon-Vandenberg suggested that such equivocal tactics might, in the main, be limited to extremist political discourse. Similar discursive techniques used in a TV debate by a British far-right politician (Nick Griffin – then leader of the British National Party) were identified in a subsequent study (Bull & Simon-Vandenberg, 2014). However, the findings below (and the Mandelson example illustrated above) suggest a more widespread use of such personalised forms of equivocation.

The practice of aggressive equivocation was not a feature of the discourse of Swedish politicians, according to Ekström (2009). A conversation analysis of TV and radio interviews from 2002 and 2006 with four leading politicians revealed a tendency to avoid overtly confrontational actions in election campaign interviews. Ekström analysed instances where the politician, in response to a question, declared their refusal to answer. This type of response has traditionally been classed as a forceful violation of interview protocol (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Harris 1991), often a form of hostility directed at the interviewer. However, the Swedish politicians’ actions were reported as being used with the intention of distancing themselves from the question without any hostile criticism of the journalist. As will be shown in the section on parliamentary discourse (below), the tendency for Swedish politicians to avoid using personally antagonistic language extends beyond the interview domain.

An even greater degree of response management was identified in a study of over 100 interviews broadcast in the UK and the USA over a twenty-year period (Clayman, 2001). Clayman proposed a more nuanced view of politicians’ responses in terms of equivocation, contrasting this with what he claimed to be Bull’s (1994)

rather more dichotomous approach. Noticeably, this criticism appears somewhat misplaced, as Bull does propose identification of responses on a continuum: of replies, intermediate replies, and non-replies. Clayman reported that, following a question posing a communicative conflict, equivocation (or “resistance”) is commonplace, but is often very carefully managed by the politician. Equivocation may be overt or covert. When politicians equivocate overtly, they tend to make efforts to avoid reputation damage; for example, they may include a justification for diverting from the topic prior to their diversion. In cases of covert equivocation, they often surreptitiously strive to conceal their evasiveness. One reported covert method is the repetition of a key word from the interviewer’s question embedded in a non-reply. Clayman provided an example of this form of response. The interview, from 1979, was with Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), who was to be a candidate in the forthcoming NUM presidential election. The interviewer apparently sought to distinguish between the politics of Scargill and that of another potential left-wing candidate, Mick McGahey.

Interviewer: What’s the difference between your Marxism and Mister McGahey’s Communism?

Scargill: The difference is that it’s the press that constantly call me Marxist when I do not, and never have er, er, given that description of myself.

Scargill’s repeat of “the difference” appears to be contributing to a direct reply. However, he uses it, not as requested by the interviewer, but as a comparison with how he is portrayed in the press. Clayman (2001) suggests that such covert practices, and those more overt, appear to indicate a desire to limit the negative public perception of being seen to be evasive. Alternatively, these forms of behaviour have evolved to afford the politicians some control of the interview agenda in the face of increasing journalistic hostility towards those in power. Clayman also points out that, by engaging in covert practices, there exists the potential for serious damage to the public’s perception of the politicians’ integrity. They may emerge

unscathed from an adversarial encounter by the skilful application of covert equivocation. However, if subsequent events highlight their covert evasion, as occurred with Bill Clinton, the outcome may be far worse than had they equivocated overtly with some damage control. A number of covert equivocal responses were highlighted from interviews with Clinton when being probed about allegations of extra-marital affairs. In one response, he reformulated the question to the present tense prior to making a confirmation – “There is not a sexual relationship. That is accurate” – giving the impression of a denial of the affair. In time, Clinton’s use of such covert practices became apparent, bringing into question the sincerity of his responses and damaging his reputation.

The scale of equivocal tactics by political figures appears to have advanced in conjunction with an increase in aggressive journalistic practices. Numerous articles have considered the growing adversarial nature of the political interview over the latter half of the twentieth century. Until the mid-1950s, the UK was served by only one television broadcaster, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). The arrival of commercial television, and a “new class of cross-examiners” (Macmillan,<sup>1</sup> 1971, p. 473) heralded a new approach to interviewing politicians. Perhaps the most celebrated of those making the politicians’ experience much more challenging was ex-barrister Robin Day (Atkinson, 1984). Hitherto, interviewers had been far more respectful in their encounters with leading politicians (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Cockerell, 1988): a situation which MP-turned-broadcaster Woodrow Wyatt referred to as the “deferential ‘Yes Sir/No Sir’ approach” (1985, p. 239). Since then, journalists have grown far more antagonistic in their approach to the questioning of politicians – and have become more dominant in the process (Lloyd, 2004). Bull (2012b) suggests there now exists an expectation for journalists to be confrontational in their interviewing style. The growth of aggressive journalism has also been identified in political discourse in the USA (e.g., Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, & McDonald, 2007; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). According to Sabato (2000, p. 19), the “lapdog” journalism of the past was replaced by an increasingly aggressive “junkyard dog” journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Macmillan, UK Conservative Prime Minister, 1957-1963.

There is little doubt that interviews have become far more challenging for those in positions of power; and politicians appear to employ a variety of methods to contend with difficult questions. The theory of equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990) offers a defence against the view that politicians are evasive by nature (Bull, 2003b); it argues that, from such questions, the resultant situation of communicative conflict makes equivocation inevitable. Bavelas et al (1990) suggested various situational contexts where the politician may find herself/himself in a communicative dilemma. For example, politicians may be confronted with an issue on which the electorate or even their own supporters are strongly divided – the communicative conflict here would be the risk of offending those on either side of the divide. For that reason, they may be reluctant to declare an unequivocal standpoint, thereby appearing evasive. Another is ignorance of a particular topic on the part of the politician. In such a situation, rather than the possibility of showing ignorance with an uninformed reply or openly admitting ignorance, they may well aim to disguise their lack of knowledge with an evasive response. Limited airtime in an interview may also present the politician with two alternatives they may wish to avoid: a brief, incomplete reply or a detailed reply, which may appear overly long-winded and result in being cut off. However, according to Bull et al. (1996), Bavelas et al. (1990) fail to offer an explanation for what the politicians are aiming to preserve by their equivocation. Jucker (1986, p. 71) provides such an explanation: “It is clear that what is primarily at issue in news interviews is the interviewee’s positive face”. Jucker went on to suggest 13 different ways in which a politician’s face may be threatened in an interview situation.

## **1.2 Face Research**

Tracy (1990) suggested that, effectively, all contemporary face research has stemmed from the influential article “On Face-work” by Goffman (1955/1967). Goffman defined face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1967, p. 5). Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) further defined face as “the public self-image

that every member wants to claim for himself” (1978, p. 66) and suggest it can be maintained, enhanced or lost. They also proposed two aspects of face: positive and negative. Negative face is an individual’s desire to retain their freedom of action, and to avoid impediment by others. Positive face is an individual’s desire for the approval of others. Jucker (1986) argued that negative face is of little consideration in the news interview setting – after all, by agreeing to be interviewed, the politicians’ freedom of action is suspended, albeit temporarily. Jucker’s view in this respect seems somewhat short-sighted. A classic case of failure to defend negative face occurred in an interview in 2010, prior to the General Election. Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats Leader, 2007-2015) stated “I really think tuition fees are wrong”. After the election, Clegg went on to serve as Deputy Prime Minister in the coalition government, which was responsible for a near threefold increase in tuition fees. Thereafter, he regularly faced criticism for what many considered an abandoned pledge. Jucker, however, does assert that, for politicians, positive face is of paramount importance. Their political survival can be jeopardised if they fail to enhance or, at least, maintain their positive face. Hence, in a democratic system, the preservation of face is an important consideration for any politician.

So the maintenance and enhancement of face can be the objective of any individual in a social setting. Furthermore, Goffman (1955/1967) suggested people may also be motivated to defend the face of certain others. Bull et al. (1996) discussed Goffman’s proposals in terms of the UK political structure. Politics in the UK is based on a party political system: where politicians are representatives of their party, and the status of the party as a whole is of primary importance. They suggested that politicians are inclined to defend the face of political allies – typically, fellow party members – and the shared face of the party itself. Conversely, the face of political opponents – typically, those from other parties – is not something a politician is likely to be motivated to defend in an interview. Bull et al. argued that, in political interviews, face maintenance is of paramount importance. It is more than a mere strategy; it is an aim in itself. They suggest that a politician’s chief motive is the presentation of the optimum face for both themselves and his/her party, whilst damaging the face of their opponents. Furthermore, this concept of face explains



why some questions pose communicative conflicts (as identified by Bavelas et al., 1990); and face maintenance is why politicians equivocate in their responses, or indeed why they reply. For example, if a politician is asked about a manifesto pledge, the lack of a direct reply may reflect badly on the politician or on the party itself.

To test their theory that face maintenance underlies the nature of a politician's response to questions, Bull et al. (1996) devised a typology of ways in which face may be threatened in an interview situation. The typology comprised 19 types of threat arranged into three overall categories of face that the politician may be required to defend: their own, their party's, and that of significant others. From their analysis of 18 party leader interviews conducted during the 1992 UK General Election campaign, over 40% of questions were deemed to have no response options which did not pose a potential face threat (i.e., a communicative conflict). They claimed that the remaining 60%, where the potential to make a *no necessary threat* response existed – be it a reply or a non-reply – offered the possibility to test the theory that politicians tend to take the least face-threatening option. Findings showed that in over 80% of cases, the *no necessary threat* response was made. For example, in the following extract, John Major (UK Conservative Prime Minister, 1990-1997) made such a response in the form of a non-reply.

**Paxman:** If you've got it wrong and if you lose, the party will hang you out to dry, won't they?

**Major:** I haven't got it wrong and I'm not going to lose.

Had Major replied affirmatively to Paxman, that would be a threat to himself; denial would lack credibility. In his non-reply, he avoided both of those options via a justifiable attack on the speculative nature of the question. Bull et al. (1996) also reported some form of equivocal response to the majority of communicative conflict questions, supporting Bavelas et al. (1988, 1990) in that politicians tend to equivocate when posed such questions. Bull et al. claimed these findings to be "highly significant" (p. 282), though they reported no tests of statistical significance.

That said, their results were consistent with the notion of face maintenance underlying a politician's type of response. Furthermore, they claim that their proposed model provided the means to test, not only the competence of politicians in interviews, but also the toughness and neutrality of interviewers.

Thus, Elliott and Bull (1996) used the aforementioned "Face Model" (Bull et al., 1996) to assess the face threats presented to the party leaders in their election campaign interviews. They reported that John Major was asked approximately twice as many questions challenging his personal competence than the other two party leaders. This finding though is perhaps unsurprising for an incumbent Prime Minister, who has recent record of office to defend, unlike the other leaders Kinnock and Paddy Ashdown (Liberal Democrats leader, 1988-1999) – neither of whom served in government. Kinnock was reported to have problems facing a comparatively high proportion of questions concerning policy changes. Noticeably, the authors did not provide any data on how the politicians responded to these communicative conflicts. However, they did propose that, using the face model, the ratio of communicative conflict questions to *no necessary threat* questions could be used to assess the performance of different interviewers.

An article entitled "Level of Threat" (Bull & Elliott, 1998) had precisely that focus; namely, an assessment of the relative toughness and neutrality of six British political interviewers. Using the same corpus of interviews from the 1992 election campaign, the performances of six television interviewers were assessed and compared. With regard to toughness, and by means of the relative proportion of problematic communicative conflict questions to those posing *no necessary threat*, the interviewer who emerged as the "toughest" was Brian Walden. Almost half of Walden's questions (49%) were of the problematic variety. David Frost was reported to be the "softest", with only 29%. It is worth noting, however, that while Frost did ask a lower proportion of the problematic questions, he asked only four fewer of these (37 out of 128, compared to 41 out of 83 from Walden). Furthermore, as the authors suggest, a relatively low rate of communicative conflict questions may lead a politician to a more off-guarded mindset, and consequently unprepared for an

unexpected difficult question. Indeed, Frost's interviewing style being potentially problematic was the view of former Deputy Prime Minister (1997-2007) John Prescott (Wainwright & Elliott, 1995), who said:

I find Frost one of the most deadly myself, because he talks to you in such an easy manner but then slips in the difficult question – the one which gets you into trouble if you're not watching out for it.

To test interviewer neutrality, Bull and Elliott (1998) compared, for each interviewer, the relative proportions of *no necessary threat* questions directed at each of the three party leaders. Five of the six interviewers were reported as giving the Prime Minister the toughest interview (i.e., posing lower proportions of *no necessary threat* questions to the PM than to his political opponents). Gnisci (2008) applied similar methods (Bull et al., 1996; Bull & Elliott, 1998) to test the neutrality and rigour of Italian television interviewers in their questioning of politicians. From the assessment of interviews with 13 politicians (seven left-wing and six right-wing), Gnisci reported no difference in the level of threat posed to politicians on the left or on the right. However, with less than 30% of questions in the Italian interviews posing a communicative conflict, an interesting distinction between the Italian and British interviewers was apparent. The corresponding figure of 40% for British interviews, according to the findings of Bull and Elliott (1998), represented a higher level of face threat for the politicians in the UK.

Threats to face (and subsequent face maintenance) posed to a leading British politician were assessed in a study of Tony Blair (UK Labour Prime Minister, 1997-2007) (Bull, 2000). In a series of interviews from the 1997 General Election campaign, Blair was regularly confronted with questions concerning his party's "modernisation". This referred to Labour's well-documented transformation in policy following their heavy electoral defeat of 1983 – moving the party from a left-wing agenda towards a more central position in British politics. First elected to Parliament on that left-wing agenda in 1983, but subsequently being one of the

leading architects of the transformation to *New Labour*, Blair's dilemma from such questions was reported by Bull as a classic example of a communicative conflict. Namely, if he was disparaging about the former stance of the party, he could appear hypocritical. Indeed, he would risk offending supporters of Labour's more left-wing position of the past. Conversely, failing to acknowledge some criticism of previous policies would leave him open to the accusation of insincerity and inconsistency (i.e., as leader of the transformed party, did he not believe the changes had been necessary?). Bull identified 17 questions posing this dilemma across five different interviews and, in response to all but one, Blair equivocated. However, Blair's equivocation, termed the "rhetoric of modernization" (p. 222), was reported as having a greater purpose than avoiding a difficult question. The following extract highlights such a response to a question from BBC interviewer David Dimbleby.

**Dimbleby:** I know that but did you, have you abandoned, have you, did you believe what you said you believed in the 80s?

**Blair:** Look of course we always believed in the idea of a more just, a more fair society, and the Labour Party believed for a long period of time that the way to do that was for example greater nationalisation, er, was for example simply more increased state spending. The whole process of modernisation David has been to take the Labour Party away from that to keep true to its principles but put those principles properly in a modern setting.

According to Bull (2000), Blair's rhetoric could be seen as a highly skilled form of political manoeuvring: appearing principled and loyal both to old values and those valuing change; and promoting the party to the electorate in its revised form. This dual process of avoiding damage and the potential for political advantage was, according to Bull, further evidence of equivocation in terms of face maintenance and

face enhancement, which was not a consideration of Bavelas et al.'s (1990) theory of equivocation.

### **1.3 Research into Parliamentary Debates**

This section will consider relevant literature based on discourse in a parliamentary setting. Distinct from the one-to-one arrangement of a television interview, here, government ministers face questions from other politicians, including, importantly, those in opposition. It is often conducted in a noisy and partially hostile environment, amid barracking and disparaging vociferation from political opponents. Furthermore, a strict set of rules is laid down to control the behaviour of participants during the debates, which are presided over by an official whose role is to enforce the rules. The studies under consideration here focusing on UK Parliamentary discourse are based on debates within the House of Commons, where the presiding official is known as *the Speaker*.

The apportionment of *floor* in relation to politicians' gender was the focus of one study of parliamentary debates (Shaw, 2000). *Floor* is defined as the ongoing control of a section of a conversation (Edelsky, 1981). Shaw referred to a system of turn-taking where interruptions of the person currently addressing the House occur both legally and illegally (i.e., within and contrary to the rules). From her analysis of a small number of debates, male Members of Parliament (MPs) made significantly more interruptions. This situation of rule-breaking often goes unchallenged by the Speaker and, according to Shaw, affords male MPs greater control of the debates.

By far the most prominent of all debates conducted in the UK House of Commons is Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). These are weekly events where the PM takes and responds to a fixed number of questions posed by MPs, both from government and opposition parties. One rule of the House is the restriction on what is known as unparliamentary language, for example, referring to another MP as a "liar" (House of Commons Information Office, 2010). A study highlighting the

adversarial nature of PMQs, despite such restrictions, reported how questions are often disingenuous and loaded with presuppositions (Harris, 2001). According to Harris, these tactics are employed because there is an expectation on MPs to be face-threatening towards the opposition. Moreover, the system even rewards skilful face-threatening discourse. For example, the public standing of the Leader of the Opposition (LO) is likely to be enhanced by exhibiting such behaviour during his weekly questioning of the PM. Bull and Wells (2012), claiming the article by Harris used only illustrative examples, aimed for a more systematic assessment of PMQs. From their analysis of 18 PMQs sessions, they identified six variations of face-threatening act (FTA) in the LO's questions, and five different response types by the PM. They compared PMQs to "a form of verbal pugilism" (p.46) governed by a set of esoteric rules, supporting Harris (2001) who referred to the confrontational, yet sanctioned, nature of the debates.

Another systematic analysis compared the first 10 PMQs sessions of five recent PMs [Thatcher, Major, Blair, Gordon Brown (Labour PM 2007-2010), and David Cameron (Conservative PM 2010-2016)] (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014). These authors use a different methodology and terminology than those mentioned above. For example, they examined what they refer to as an "Unanswerable question – A question which either appears to be designed deliberately to provoke discomfort and/or evasion, or contains and/or is premised on incorrect information" (p. 263). Though *face* was not referred to directly in this article, it is apparent that these questions are liable to be face-threatening. The following (from Labour MP Dennis Skinner to PM Major) is the example provided by the authors, which clearly posed a potential threat to face.

Is the Prime Minister aware that, once he has had the guts to go to the country, for the first time in his political life he will be sitting on the Opposition Benches? I have been keeping this seat warm for him. After the election, at least half a dozen Tory ex-Ministers will put the knife into him,

because they want his job. Then he will have the galling experience of having to vote for one of those Tory bastards. Which one will it be?  
(Hansard HC Debate, 13 Feb 1997, col. 464)

The findings from that study (Bates et al., 2014) revealed that MPs are more likely to ask unanswerable questions the longer their tenure; and male MPs are more than twice as likely to use this style of questioning. The authors reported that, despite the sharp increase in the proportion of female MPs across their period of analysis [3% in 1979, 22% in 2010 (Keen, 2015)], PMQs sessions have become much rowdier. An earlier article highlighting the conduct of just one PM, John Major, reported that his style of response to questions was polite at the outset of his premiership, but became more aggressive and occasionally insulting (Burnham, Jones, & Elgie, 1995). Parliamentary debates in Australia's House of Representatives have been shown to be similarly aggressive (Rasiah, 2010). Rasiah's analysis revealed that one of the most common forms of evasive response was to attack the opposition. Once again, as with the Bates et al. study reviewed above, the author made no reference to face.

Another article on aggressive discourse in parliamentary debates contrasted the behaviour of British and Swedish politicians (Ilie, 2004). Ilie offered explanations for psychological processes and effects related to offensive rhetoric. She claimed that Swedish MPs are inclined to be insulting to political opponents in more of an ideological sense, whereas insults made by British MPs have more of a personal focus. Furthermore, the intended effect of a politician's insulting behaviour is often to "maximise cognitive differences" with political opponents, and to "minimise cognitive differences" with their political allies (p. 81). In an earlier article, Ilie (2001) proposed that insults can be challenging for the person being addressed, as they can carry an emotional force which can exceed the force of logic. This emotional potency, she suggests, may have an effect not only on the addressee, but also on those who witness the exchange.

## 1.4 Relevant Personalisation Research

This chapter began with acknowledgement of the variation in use of the word *personalisation* in research, including political discourse research. A study which referred to personalisation matching its definition herein was conducted by Hutchby (2011). However, although similar in meaning, there was a difference in direction. His conversation analysis of political interviews in the US highlighted the use of personalisation (including personal insults), but not by politicians. The primary focus there was personalisation from the interviewer to the interviewee, and how that was indicative of non-neutrality in a particular genre of broadcast interviews.

It is also worth pointing out that there are a number of terms used in political communication research which, to some degree, are analogous to personalisation as featured herein. Included in these terms are *incivility* (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005), *impoliteness* (e.g., Tracy, 2017), *rudeness* (e.g., Kienpointner, 2008), *insults* (e.g., Ilie, 2004), and even *outrage* (e.g., Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). However, as the following suggests (and the results of studies in this thesis will show), there are components of personalisation which are not a feature of those above.

One such distinctive feature of personalisation is evident in a study of political communication by Atkinson (1984). In *Our Masters' Voices: The language and body language of politics*, he refers to the transition in UK political interviews which occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s. The transition was from the deferential approach of interviewers, to one that was more adversarial and thus more challenging for politicians. In studying interviews conducted by someone at the forefront of this sea change – Robin Day – he made an interesting observation. Atkinson noted that Day's aggressive approach to questioning could, temporarily, be neutralised by the politician with a modicum of effort: simply by addressing the interviewer by his first name. He reported that Harold Wilson (UK Prime Minister, 1964-1970 & 1974-1976) used this seemingly genial method of personalisation to disarm Day, and thereby gain some short-term control of the interview.



Another PM was reported by Bull and Mayer (1988) to be distinct in her occasional personalised responses to questions. Margaret Thatcher often formally addressed the interviewers by their title and surname, and made personal comments and criticisms. Thatcher's more adversarial style of personalisation appeared to wrong-foot the interviewer and to put them on the defensive. Thatcher's confrontational personalised responses prompted the inclusion of a specific category in the foregoing typology of equivocation (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993). Category 5 in their typology (see Table 1.1 above) – labelled *attacks the interviewer* – was the only superordinate category therein related to equivocation in the form of comments aimed personally at the person posing the questions. The definition provided for this type of equivocation was “criticizes the interviewer as distinct from attacking the question” (Bull & Mayer, 1993, p. 658). The authors included one example of Thatcher's equivocal responses in the form of a personal attack (this is from an interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, and in response to a question related to taxation):

Now I'm not going any further than that Mr. Dimbleby for a very good reason. Yes people like you will try to go on and on and the moment we say one thing you'll find another and then another.

This response by Thatcher is a clear form of equivocation befitting Category 5 in the above typology. Both Thatcher's and Wilson's personalisations reported above can have the apparent effect of disarming the interviewer, affording the politician a greater degree of control at that point, though their two styles were very different. The observation of Wilson's genial approach highlights the potential for a form of equivocal response not represented in the above typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993).

Addressing that shortfall is just one aspect of the research focus of this thesis, which encompasses four detailed investigations of personalisation by politicians. In brief, areas of study include establishing the forms that personalisation takes in an interview setting, followed by the application of that information to evaluate its

prevalence across the mainstream of UK politics. The parliamentary setting will also feature, specifically PMQs, for further detailed analyses of personalised exchanges by leading politicians. These empirical studies, which feature in chapters 3 to 6, will include consideration of the function and effectiveness of personalisation for both modes of political communication. Prior to that, chapter two begins with a review of related research methods, and then moves on to the thesis overview which details the full scope of the empirical studies. Finally, chapter 7 will discuss the overall findings, the importance and practical implications of such research, possible directions for future studies, and what we can conclude from this closer look at personalisation in political discourse.

## Chapter 2 – Methods and Overview

### 2.1 Methods Review

The methods used for the studies of political communication in this thesis are befitting of what has been labelled *microanalysis* (Bull, 2002). In *Communication under the microscope: The theory and practice of microanalysis*, Bull defines this methodology as a distinctive approach to communication via the detailed analysis of audio and video recordings. Furthermore, this microanalytic approach has enabled discoveries in the field of communication research that, otherwise, would not have been possible.

Bull (2002) attributes the development of the microanalytic approach to three major sources of influence: psychiatry (e.g., Sullivan, 1953), information theory and cybernetics (e.g., Ruesch & Bateson, 1951), and structural linguistics (e.g., Trager, 1958). Bull further acknowledges the contributions of a range of theoretical and methodological approaches towards the development of microanalysis. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

The structural approach to studying communication, both verbal and nonverbal (e.g., Schefflen, 1966), considers interaction as highly organised in terms of hierarchy and sequence, which operates within a strict set of social rules. Following its emergence as an approach for psychologists to study communication, it became an alternative to the then prevalent external variable approach (Duncan, 1969). External variable studies focused on associations between nonverbal behaviour and other variables (e.g., personality). It was the structural approach, and the understanding that structure and social context are key factors, which played a part in the development of microanalysis (Bull, 2002).

Conversation analysis (CA) has made a significant contribution towards the microanalytic approach. CA stems, principally, from the work of Sacks in the 1960s (Sacks, 1992) and the recognition that conversation, further to its role in the study of other processes, could be the focus of study itself. CA involves the use of finely

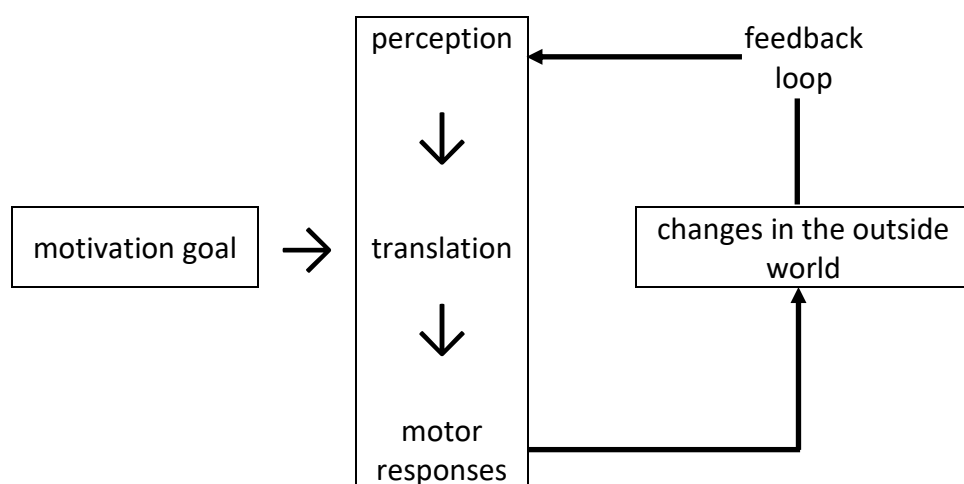
detailed transcriptions of naturally-occurring conversations. Transcripts show the content of a conversation and, via detailed notation, highlight the way it was delivered. Bull (2002) recommends that transcripts are analysed, where possible, with video; thereby, certain nonverbal behaviours which are essential to the interaction are less likely to be overlooked. Noticeably however, conversation analysts (e.g., ten Have, 1990) have pointed out that the CA framework can readily incorporate nonverbal phenomena – for example, gaze direction (e.g., Kendrick & Holler, 2017).

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) is based on the premise that language may be considered a form of action. For example, a bride or bridegroom saying “I do” at a wedding is actually performing an action, rather than merely making a statement. The theory, according to Bull (2002), does not merely distinguish between utterances that perform and those that describe; its basic principle is that every utterance does both. Namely, they have both meaning and force. Furthermore, there can be a third aspect to an utterance: as a consequence of its meaning and force, it may have an effect.

Discourse analysis (DA) is acknowledged as an approach which has been influential on the development of microanalysis (Bull, 2002). Originating from a broad range of disciplines, it has become an established form of analysis in many others in the areas of social science and humanities. Within DA, the term *discourse* can relate to all manner of spoken interaction, both formal and informal, as well as all forms of written text. The DA banner encompasses a number of approaches to the analysis of talk and text. Prominent in DA is the work of Potter and Wetherell (e.g., 1987). They regard language as a form of action, and that an individual’s use of language varies in relation to its function, although not necessarily deliberately or consciously. Bull (2002) cites the example of how someone might describe an acquaintance: the emphasis of personal characteristics may be entirely different when conversing with a close friend than when addressing a parent. These alternative accounts need not differ in accuracy, but may well serve different functions.

Ethology emerged from zoology, and its original focus was the study of the behaviour of animals in their natural environment. The ethological approach (e.g., Darwin, 1872) went on to encompass the study of human behaviour. The tenet of ethology is that naturally occurring communication can be understood in terms of evolution. The study of nonverbal behaviours in the communication of emotion have been of particular interest to social psychology. Indeed, Darwin's proposals, for example, how facial expressions evolved as a means to convey information essential to human survival remain highly influential (Bull, 2002).

The social psychology approach which regards communication as a skill (Argyle & Kendon, 1967) has had a significant influence on the development of microanalysis. Argyle and Kendon proposed that social interaction can be highly skilled and organised, and as such is comparable to certain motor skills, for example, driving a car. Their proposals developed into the social skills model of social interaction (Argyle, 1976), which involves six processes, and which was illustrated in diagrammatic form, as shown in Figure 2.1. The underlying assumption from their original proposals was, if communication is indeed a skill, then interactional expertise may be acquired through training.



**Figure 2.1.** The social skills model of interaction (Argyle, 1976).

The above theoretical and methodological approaches have, to varying degrees, been influential in the development of microanalysis. Unsurprisingly, there are elements of the foregoing approaches that feature in microanalysis which have been subject to criticism (Bull, 2002). Microanalytic techniques include coding systems based on categorisation. Such methods can be used to facilitate quantification, and thereby the potential for inferential analysis. Critics of these procedures include Psathas (1995), who suggested that the reliance of preconceived categories, which tend to be arbitrary and reductionist, lead to data distortion. Bull defends categorisation as a valuable complement to communication research. Carefully considered coding systems can be very informative, and can be adapted accordingly to be highly representative of interactional phenomena. They can reveal patterns of behaviour that may otherwise go unnoticed.

One example of a highly effective coding system is the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) devised by Ekman and Friesen (1978). The FACS describes in detail the entire range of observable facial muscle movements. It is a comprehensive system used to measure facial expressions. The FACS assigned a number to each movement, known as an action unit (AU), including a description and the associated facial muscle (e.g., AU23 - Lip tightener - *Orbicularis oris*). Since its development 40 years ago, it has been used extensively. The FACS has been revised and updated (Ekman, Friesen, & Hager, 2002), and is still used widely today.

Some of the studies in this thesis use coding systems. These include some which are well established (e.g., Bull, 1994, 2003a; John, Bertelli, Jennings, & Bevan, 2013) and some which were designed specifically to address the research aims of the chapter [e.g., the personal attack coding system in chapter 5 (Waddle, Bull, & Böhnke, 2018)]. Furthermore, as a direct consequence of some findings herein, proposals are made for revisions to existing coding systems (e.g., Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993). The methods used throughout this thesis follow the microanalytic tradition (Bull, 2002), updated accordingly in view of the widespread availability of contemporary media. Qualitative analysis features in the studies of chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, complemented by quantitative analysis in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Descriptions of

the respective means of analysis are detailed in the Method sections of each of these chapters. An overview of the empirical chapters and the thesis overall is provided in the following section.

## 2.2 Thesis Overview

This overall research was prompted by a chance viewing of an interview excerpt on an online video-sharing website. It was something of a bruising encounter between the interviewer, Andrew Neil, and the politician, George Galloway (See Figure 2.2A). Notably, Galloway levelled a number of personalised responses at Neil. The personal nature of the replies led the interviewer to retort “You know, I knew that the way you would reply to these questions would be playing the man rather than the ball”. This sort of antagonism between this particular pair is perhaps not so unexpected. BBC broadcaster Neil certainly has a reputation for toughness: “no shrinking violet he” (Greenslade, 1997, p. 44). Former MP Galloway is well known for his confrontational encounters, highlighted during his appearance in the US Senate in May 2005 (See Figure 2.2B). On that occasion, in his responses to the false accusations of taking bribes from the Iraqi regime, it was claimed he demolished his adversary Senator Norm Coleman (Chalmers, 2012).



**Figure 2.2.** (A) Andrew Neil accuses George Galloway of “playing the man” in 2011 (Image – Youtube, 2011). (B) Galloway at the US Senate in 2005. (Image – Liberapedia, 2010)

What became apparent, apart from a good title for a project thanks to Neil's retort, was the research potential from the wealth of excerpts on a freely available platform. The presence of the online videos, a resource not available a few years earlier, provided the opportunity for an up-to-date assessment of equivocation by politicians, particularly of the personal variety. Some of Galloway's responses in that encounter were wide-ranging in their focus, but many were highly personal. Of course, Galloway is an atypical politician – a maverick according to some (e.g., Armitage, 2013) – but what else would a detailed search reveal?

Whilst the Galloway-Neil encounter, coupled with a desire to delve further for such interactions, was the impetus for the project, there were wider research aims. The starting point would be to determine the forms that personalisation can take. That would facilitate investigations into its prevalence across political discourse, its function (or functions) as a style of political communication, and its effectiveness.

Thereby began the first study, which is presented in Chapter 3. Neil's metaphorical retort, with a minor modification, was used for the title: *Playing the man, not the ball: Personalisation in political interviews*. The design allowed an extensive search of online interview excerpts to assess the range of personalisations. Such a study would also provide an insight into how widespread across UK politics this approach was to interviewers' questions. Findings would indicate if there was a shortfall in the existing literature and, in particular, if the typology of equivocation (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993) should be updated.

Chapter 4 covers the study brought about by the findings of the one above. This study used the proposed revisions to the equivocation typology. The analysis facilitated by the revised typology was to assess politicians' personalised rhetoric used in lieu of a direct answer to interviewers' questions. Interviews with party leaders from the campaigns of the 2015 and 2017 General Elections were the source of the analysis. The aim of the research was to assess the extent of personalisation used as a means of equivocation by mainstream politicians. The study takes its title from one of the leaders' responses – *"You're important, Jeremy, but not that*



*important*”: *Personalised responses and equivocation in political interviews*. Incidentally, in this instance, Ed Miliband followed up this personalisation with a reply to Paxman’s question. The study would also include an up-to-date assessment of reply rate overall. These latter findings would allow a comparison in levels of equivocation between recent leading politicians and their counterparts from the 1980s and 1990s (see Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991).

In Chapter 5, the personalisation analysis moves away from interviews to another area of UK politics, Prime Minister’s Questions. PMQs is the weekly high noon showdown between the party leaders (See Figure 2.3); it is sometimes lauded, but often decried for the adversarial behaviour on display during the debates. Prime Minister David Cameron had once pledged to change what was referred to as *Punch and Judy*<sup>2</sup> politics. However, a rise in unfavourable opinion, both press and public, became apparent during his premiership. The PM himself faced much of the criticism for his abusive behaviour (e.g., Chorley, 2013). A particularly salient example occurred in December 2013 when he directed a highly offensive remark at Labour’s Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls, who was sat alongside LO Miliband. On that occasion, Cameron concluded a response to the LO with “You don’t need it to be Christmas to know when you’re sitting next to a turkey”.

Another of Cameron’s personally offensive remarks (this one directed at Miliband) forms the first part of the study’s title in Chapter 5 – “*He is just the nowhere man of British politics*”: *Personal attacks in Prime Minister’s Questions*. The aim there was a detailed evaluation of personalisation in PMQs. To facilitate that, a personal attack coding system was devised. Analysis followed the scope of another substantive study of PMQs by Bates et al. (2014) – the premiership of Thatcher through to Cameron. The study period enabled an assessment of personally antagonistic exchanges over a 37-year span (1979 to 2016), and across five individual premierships. The PMQs research began whilst Cameron was still in office. His resignation in 2016 prompted the collection of additional data. Subsequent analysis

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<sup>2</sup> *Punch & Judy* is a puppet show featuring, amongst others, the characters Mr Punch and his wife Judy. Traditionally associated with British seaside resorts, and popular with families, it is often characterised by domestic strife and violence between the puppets.

revealed not only the relative politeness of new LO Jeremy Corby, but a significant shift in the approach of Cameron.



**Figure 2.3.** Prime Minister David Cameron facing the Labour benches at PMQs. (Image – Holt, 2015)

The study presented in Chapter 6 was a further detailed evaluation of the same 1,320 speaking turns featured in the foregoing PMQs study. Research of US Presidential press conferences has shown journalistic aggression to have an association with the topic under discussion. Effectively, when questioning the President on issues of foreign policy, journalists tend to be less aggressive in their approach. Such a scenario prompted an investigation for the existence of something similar in PMQs. Using the existing dataset already coded for personal attacks, the exchanges were further evaluated for question topic. A well-established political science coding procedure – from the *UK policy agendas project* (John et al., 2013) – was used to identify the topic of each question. Findings are discussed in terms of theoretical explanations including intergroup theories, and those connected to phenomena from US political research – the *rally 'round the flag effect* and *politics stops at the water's edge*.

Chapter 7 is a general discussion of the thesis overall. It will consider the findings of the studies in the preceding chapters and what they have revealed about

personalisation in political discourse. There will be an appraisal of their implications and the importance of political communication research as a whole. That will be followed by the author's recommendations for future investigations into personalisation in political discourse.

A further feature of the final chapter is a review of an additional PMQs study which stemmed from the coding procedure designed by the author and detailed in chapter 5. Results from that new study (Bull & Waddle, 2018) have already attracted the attention of the media, most notably being discussed on the BBC's *Daily Politics* show. Coincidentally, the programme was hosted by the journalist and broadcaster Andrew Neil, whose "playing the man rather than the ball" retort kicked the whole thing off.

## Chapter 3 – Playing the Man, Not the Ball: Personalisation in Political Interviews

This chapter is based on: Waddle, M., & Bull, P. (2016). Playing the man, not the ball: Personalisation in political interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 35(4), 412-434.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.1 Abstract

A challenging question can prompt a variety of responses from politicians in their attempt to save face. Criticising the interviewer is one such tactic identified in previous research. The focus here was on this form of personalisation: responses directed personally at the interviewer, often used as a substitute for a straight answer (i.e., *playing the man, not the ball*). Sampling online interview videos, analysis revealed a broad range of personalisations: many critical, but also non-critical, including flattery, banter, and advice to calm down. These tactics are discussed as effective responses, which can disarm, wrong-foot, neutralise, or beguile interviewers, often shifting control towards the politician. Furthermore, personalised rhetoric appears more widespread than previously suggested – featuring in the communicative style of many mainstream British politicians. A new typology of personalisation is proposed, designed to fit within the existing overall equivocation typology for the benefit of future empirical research.

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<sup>3</sup> The author, Maurice Waddle, designed the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the article under the supervision of Professor Peter Bull.

## 3.2 Introduction

The televised political interview, a regular feature of UK news broadcasting, has become a primary method of communicating with the electorate. Ostensibly, only an interaction between two individuals, in reality it is dialogue aimed potentially at millions (Heritage, 1985). It has, however, evolved into an entirely different situation since the apparent servility of interviewers in the early years of television. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the first and only UK television broadcaster through to the mid-1950s. Until then, interviewers often kowtowed to the politicians' agenda – a situation described by former politician and broadcaster Woodrow Wyatt (1985, p. 239) as the “deferential ‘Yes Sir/No Sir’ approach”. Today, politicians are faced with a much tougher task.

The age of interviewer deference expired around that time with the emergence of a more adversarial interview style conducted, perhaps most notably, by ex-barrister Robin Day (Atkinson, 1984). Changes in broadcasting legislation led to the launch in 1955 of ITV (Independent Television) – a commercially funded service – bringing to an end the BBC's television broadcasting monopoly. Day's combative approach began in the 1950s working on the new commercial television network: a notable shift from the uncontroversial, conservative approach to interviewing politicians maintained hitherto by the BBC (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Cockerell, 1988). Day (1989) reports in his autobiography *Grand Inquisitor* that changes in TV journalism at that time resulted in a less sycophantic interviewing style: “Politicians were asked questions which the public wanted them to answer” (p. 92). Harold Macmillan (1971), the UK Conservative Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, refers in his memoirs to a “new class of cross-examiners” (p. 473). Today, the adversarial approach to interviews is not just a routine occurrence, but has become something of a journalistic requirement (Bull, 2012b). A similar trend towards aggressive journalism has been documented in reports of American political discourse (e.g., Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, & McDonald, 2007; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Sabato (2000, p 19) suggests that “lapdog” journalism was eventually replaced by a far more aggressive “junkyard dog” journalism.

In light of such changes towards a far more challenging experience, how has this affected the behaviour of the politicians? The turn-taking format of interviews (e.g., Greatbatch, 1988), where journalists ask questions and politicians are expected to provide an answer, is often violated by politicians' deviation from the topical agenda set by the interviewer (Greatbatch, 1986). Such uncooperative behaviour typically occurs following a question which is potentially problematic for the politician, hence they attempt to establish some control over the topic of discussion. Research conducted in Canada (Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988) showed that, when delegates at a political conference were faced with questions offering two alternative disagreeable responses (appear disloyal to the party, or to a leadership candidate), they tended to avoid giving direct answers. So their equivocation was a consequence of the interview situation, not a characteristic of the individual per se. The researchers compared such dilemmatic situations to everyday occasions where one has to choose between lying or causing offence, for example, to a close acquaintance who invites opinion on their unflattering new hairstyle. Here, the response alternatives are both negative, yet a response is expected – a situation labelled a *communicative avoidance-avoidance conflict* (Bavelas et al, 1988; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). In the case of political interviews, Bavelas et al. (1988; 1990) propose that the challenge of conflictual questions and the subsequent communicative dilemma are the primary reason for politicians' equivocation.

In most interviews, politicians are likely to be challenged with conflictual questions: questions which require a response, but where the options open to the politician are negative and, therefore, potentially damaging. Face, "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1955/[1967, p. 5]), is the variable at risk and what the politician aims to preserve in these situations, according to Jucker (1986). Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) define face as "the public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself" (1978, p. 66). They propose it can be maintained, enhanced or lost and that it has two aspects. The first, *negative face*, is the desire for unrestricted action; the second, *positive face*, is the desire for approval by others. Jucker (1986) identifies positive face as the aspect most at risk in the

interview situation. Following an interviewer's question, the option to respond without a potential face-threat may exist. Alternatively, many questions can be more challenging for the politician in that all main response options have the potential for face damage. For example, in 1992, UK Conservative Prime Minister John Major was asked if his party was wrong to have removed from office his predecessor (Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister 1979-1990). An affirmative response would risk offence to those who voted against her; a negative one might offend her supporters. A third option, equivocation, might make him appear evasive. All three responses would risk face damage – arguably, equivocation carried the lowest risk.

Bull and Elliott (1998) used the aforementioned alternative definitions of interviewer questions (*no necessary threat or potential face threat*) to evaluate the performance of six broadcast journalists during the 1992 UK General Election. They proposed that a higher proportion of the latter conflictual questions, where all response options contain potential face threats, was indicative of interviewer "toughness". They reported that the proportion of conflictual questions posed by each journalist ranged from a "soft" 29% to a "tougher" 49%. Bull's (2003a) analysis of party leader interviews during the 2001 General Election campaign showed that 58% of questions from interviewers posed a dilemma for the politician. Only 19% of questions from members of the public were similarly problematic. Politicians' responses to the questions also differed: 73% of the public's questions were answered (i.e., provided the information as requested), compared to only 47% posed by interviewers. Comparable results, where the politicians' reply rates indicated that they had answered less than half the questions posed, were found in earlier research by Harris (1991), who reported a reply rate of only 39%. A recent analysis of broadcast interviews in Japan found that politicians' reply rates were significantly lower than the reply rates of nonpoliticians, and that reply rates were lower for politicians in government than for those in opposition (Feldman, Kinoshita, & Bull, 2015).

Bull (2003a), expanding on earlier research (Bull & Mayer, 1993), identified 35 distinct categories of reply which do not fully answer the interviewer's question.

The equivocation typology emerging from that research was arranged into 12 superordinate categories; for example, *questions the question*, *attacks the question* and *makes a political point*. Only one of their categories (labelled *attacks the interviewer*) refers to instances where the politician's method of equivocation is via comments directed personally at the journalist. Bull (2003a, p. 117) defines this as "criticises the interviewer as distinct from attacking the question". It is this method of response, labeled herein *personalisation*, which is the focus of this current research. But does that existing category encompass the full range of personalisations used by politicians in interviews? Furthermore, does an equivocal response aimed personally at the interviewer have to be a critical one to be effective? Atkinson (1984, p. 174) reports that Harold Wilson (UK Labour Prime Minister 1964-1970 & 1974-1976) was "the first politician to discover how an utterly simple conversational device could be used to neutralize, albeit temporarily, the forceful interviewing style of Robin Day". Wilson's method was simply to address Day by his first name.

Atkinson's (1984) observation of the effectiveness of Wilson's style is an early example indicating a potential function of such non-adversarial personalised rhetoric. Indeed, it signals the distinct possibility of similar discursive styles in present-day politics. Furthermore, if the journalistic approach to asking questions has grown in aggression, perhaps some politicians counter that by targeting the interviewer in person. The phrase *playing the man, not the ball* is often used in sport when an individual is seen to direct his aggression at an opponent, e.g., kicking an opposing player instead of the ball in a football match. The phrase is used metaphorically herein for instances where the focus of a politician's response is the interviewer, rather than the interviewer's agenda. This form of discourse has parallels with attacks *ad hominem* (to the person), covered extensively in philosophical literature (e.g., Walton, 1987). An argument *ad hominem* can be an attempt to devalue another's argument by highlighting an inconsistency with an aspect of their personal circumstances. For example, a teenager may argue that their parent's advice to not smoke due to health risks is somewhat devalued because they smoke themselves. However, personal comments directed at an interviewer need



not be an argument against any presented viewpoint. The term *personalisation* is used here as it refers to any attempt by the politician to play the interviewer into the interview proceedings, as opposed to the expected practice of adhering to the topical agenda.

The aim of the current research was to ascertain the range of these personalisations, non-critical and critical, used by politicians in their responses to interviewers' questions. Collection of such information would indicate whether the existing equivocation typology should be reappraised. Research was conducted using online video recordings of interviews of UK politicians. In the years since the existing equivocation typology was devised in previous studies (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993), the quantity of readily accessible interview recordings has become substantial. Consequently, it was predicted that evidence would be gathered for politicians' use of personalisation in interviews which extend beyond the category *attacks the interviewer*. From such findings, a new equivocation typology will be proposed with a replacement category *personalisation*. This will feature a sub-typology of subordinate categories including critical and non-critical response types. The revised model will benefit future research in the evaluation of politicians' behaviour and performance in interviews – research addressing trends, styles, effectiveness, and the extent of personalisation across the political spectrum.

### **3.3 Method**

#### **3.3.1 Participants**

The participants in the final analysis of this study comprised eight politicians (the interviewees) and eight broadcast journalists (the interviewers). The politicians were Gordon Brown, Chris Bryant, James Callaghan, George Galloway, Boris Johnson, Martin McGuinness, Peter Mandelson, and Dennis Skinner. The interviewers were Anna Botting, Kay Burley, Robin Day, David Dimbleby, Andrew Neil, Cathy Newman, Jeremy Paxman, and Tim Willcox. More detailed descriptions of individuals are

provided throughout this report, which refer to their positions at the time of the interview unless stated otherwise. Table 3.1 shows details of each interview.

**Table 3.1.** Interview details (ordered by broadcast date).

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Interviewer</b>	<b>TV channel</b>	<b>Broadcast date</b>
George Galloway	Cathy Newman	Channel 4	30 March 2012
Boris Johnson	Jeremy Paxman	BBC Two	4 October 2011
George Galloway	Andrew Neil	BBC Two	21 June 2011
Chris Bryant	Kay Burley	Sky News	9 September 2010
Gordon Brown	Jeremy Paxman	BBC One	30 April 2010
Peter Mandelson	Tim Willcox	BBC News	20 February 2010
Peter Mandelson	Jeremy Paxman	BBC Two	4 March 2009
George Galloway	Anna Botting	Sky News	6 August 2006
George Galloway	Jeremy Paxman	BBC One	6 May 2005
Martin McGuinness	Jeremy Paxman	BBC Two	27 April 2005
Dennis Skinner	David Dimbleby	BBC	10 April 1992
James Callaghan	Robin Day	BBC	October 1971

### 3.3.2 Apparatus

All interviews were sourced from the video-sharing website YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com>) and viewed online.

### 3.3.3 Procedure

The initial search for interviews was conducted by entering terms into the YouTube search facility related to famous British television interviewers, for example, “Paxman”. The search results were then scoured for examples suitable for analysis. Only television interviews by established broadcast journalists with current or former members of UK parliaments were considered. Clicking to view any video of interest led to a raft of related search results, thereby expanding the search field.

Each of the selected examples was analysed for instances where the politician responded to a question or a statement by directing attention to the interviewer

personally. This was adjudged to have occurred when the politician made a response which was of personal relevance to the interviewer. Personalisations might be critical, accusatory, insulting, advisory, playful or complimentary. The manner of the personalisations could be serious, patronising or jocular, and could take the form of a comment, a statement or a question.

The final corpus, comprising extracts from just twelve interviews, was drawn from a far greater collection of interview recordings. Observational analysis was conducted as part of a wider ongoing research project and totalled over six hours of online video material from 44 different interviews. The videos ranged from short clips to complete interviews, observed by the author. A proposed typology of personalisation comprising different categories of personal focus was devised from those analyses. This was adjudged to encompass all instances of personalisation observed in the larger set of broadcast interviews. The final corpus was selected to highlight clear examples of the individual personalisation categories. Extracts from these twelve interviews were transcribed verbatim for further analysis. The author and a second researcher conducted the final analysis of the transcriptions independently, categorising each instance accordingly, and any disagreements were resolved by discussion.

### **3.4 Results**

Seven categories of personalisation used by politicians in interviews were identified. These categories make up the typology of personalisation shown in Table 3.2. The first five can all be described as the focus of a personal attack on the interviewer. The sixth subsumes intimations that the interviewer is in an agitated state. The final category, *blandishments*, does not identify any specific personal focus, but encompasses any complimentary utterance directed at the interviewer.

A description of each category follows, including selected interview extracts provided as illustrative examples. The relevant sections of dialogue are italicised and

underlined. [Transcript symbols used in this and in the following chapters are defined on page 168.]

**Table 3.2.** Typology of Personalisation. In response to a question, the interviewee may allude to one or more of the following categories.

<p><b>1. Interviewer bias</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal views</li> <li>• Political allegiance</li> </ul> <p><b>2. Broadcast organisation bias</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme content</li> <li>• Coverage imbalance</li> </ul> <p><b>3. Interviewer competence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical inaccuracies</li> <li>• Erroneous statements</li> <li>• Lack of intelligence</li> <li>• General incompetence within the interview</li> <li>• Poor quality research</li> </ul> <p><b>4. Interviewer conduct</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confrontational behaviour</li> <li>• Discourteous behaviour</li> <li>• Motives to generate loss of face</li> <li>• Lack of harmony between interviewer and interviewee</li> <li>• Lack of advance notice of the interview content</li> <li>• Dishonesty</li> </ul>	<p><b>5. Interviewer history</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career history</li> <li>• Previous conduct</li> <li>• Private life</li> </ul> <p><b>6. Interviewer frame of mind</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Agitation</li> </ul> <p><b>7. Blandishments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flattery</li> <li>• Banter</li> <li>• Familiarity</li> <li>• Ingratiation</li> </ul>
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*Note.* The title of category 7 is a coverall term for all instances of complimentary or amicable personalised utterances. The bulleted points are included for explanatory purposes, not as proposed sub-divisions, and are not necessarily exhaustive.

### 3.4.1 Interviewer Bias

This category covers politicians' dialogue suggesting the interviewer is in some way biased in their personal views. It also includes accusations of political allegiance. The following is an extract from a 1992 interview of Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Dennis Skinner by political broadcaster David Dimbleby. Labour had lost the general election held the previous day. Earlier in the interview, Skinner suggested that Labour policy on proportional representation (PR) had changed just six days before the election in response to polls showing 21-22% support for the Liberal Democrats. This shift, Skinner suggested, led to a problematic diversion for his party: having to

respond to questions about PR, and diverting them from their intended strategy. Dimbleby questioned Skinner about the putative shift in the Labour Party strategy. In this example, Skinner makes an accusation of interviewer bias by suggesting that Dimbleby is a supporter of PR.

**Dimbleby:** No I was talking about– (Skinner continues talking about Europe) I meant about PR. No I meant about– It was about PR that you said the strategy changed. I was asking you what the strategy had been and how they intended to–

**Skinner:** Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby. *I know you're one of the chattering classes that believes in proportional representation*–

**Dimbleby:** You don't know anything about what I believe Mr– You don't know–

Another example occurred in a 2010 interview concerning the emerging revelations of illegal voicemail interception by certain sections of the press (dubbed “the phone hacking scandal”<sup>4</sup>), particularly at the newspaper *News of the World*. Labour MP Chris Bryant’s personalised response was directed at Sky News presenter Kay Burley. In this instance, Bryant (a victim of phone hacking) suggests that Burley has an opinion on former editor of *News of the World* Andy Coulson<sup>5</sup> and should air her view.

**Burley:** Erm, if Andy Coulson is guilty of phone tapping, and it seems

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<sup>4</sup> The phone hacking scandal refers to media malpractice conducted, most notably, by the News International tabloid newspaper *News of the World* (prompting its closure in 2011). Journalists were accused of accessing the personal voicemails of public figures and private citizens. The scandal gave rise to an official inquiry into press practices held from 2011 to 2012, chaired by Lord Justice Leveson.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the interview Coulson was Prime Minister David Cameron’s communications chief. He had resigned as editor of *News of the World* in 2007. In June 2014 Coulson was found guilty of conspiracy to intercept voicemails.

that that will eventually, may or may not become the case, what should happen to him?

**Bryant:** To be honest, I think Andy Coulson is a sideshow in all of this. That's not my interest. I didn't refer to Andy Coulson in the debate at all.

**Burley:** But I am now.

**Bryant:** Well you've obviously got a view so tell the, tell the nation what you think your view is.

**Burley:** I'm here to play devil's advocate, Sir. [...]

The next extract is from a disharmonious interview between Respect Party MP George Galloway and Sky News presenter Anna Botting, where Galloway directed several personalisations at the interviewer. With the focus on the Middle East, Botting was questioning Galloway about his support for the Islamic political/militant organisation Hezbollah<sup>6</sup> and their actions in their ongoing conflict with Israel. One of the politician's responses was:

**Galloway:** Are we going to shout over each other? Anna, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. You are totally wrong in saying that in most people's eyes Hezbollah are terrorists. In most people's eyes, Israel is a terrorist state. It's the fact that you cannot comprehend that fact that leads to the bias, which runs through all of your reporting, and every question that you've asked me in this interview.

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<sup>6</sup> Hezbollah is an Islamic political/militant organisation, based in Lebanon, and was engaged in military conflict against Israel.

### 3.4.2 Broadcast Organisation Bias

Distinct from interviewer bias is the second category of personalisation, broadcast organisation bias. This encompasses responses by the politician where they suggest that the organisation represented by the interviewer is, or was previously, lacking in impartiality. Typically, examples are criticisms of programme content or imbalanced levels of coverage, not of personal bias. Again from the interview following Labour's defeat in the 1992 General Election, and continuing in his response to Dimbleby's question about the shift in Labour strategy concerning PR, Dennis Skinner included the following accusations:

**Skinner:** *and we had it rammed down our throats. We had it rammed down our throats for about three week [sic]. Every time Paddy Backdown<sup>7</sup> opened his mouth about it, you went on about it and turned it into an agenda item.* The truth is that Ashdown and his party got 18%. Proportional representation has not been supported in this election. *And I'm fed up of hearing on your programme today, all these people trotting out that, that the Labour party's got to get in bed with the Liberals.* The whole thing is a nonsense. [...]

Skinner's response here includes two instances of personalisation related to broadcast organisation bias. Despite their seemingly personal reference to Dimbleby, namely, "you went on about it" and "on your programme", they are classed as distinct from referring to personal views as they allude to content and coverage in recent BBC broadcasts.

The BBC was also the target in a 2005 interview in a response directed at Jeremy Paxman (presenter of BBC current affairs programme *Newsnight*) by the Sinn

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<sup>7</sup> Skinner occasionally referred to Paddy Ashdown (leader of the Liberal Democrats from 1988 to 1999) as "Paddy Backdown". He used this nickname as he believed Ashdown's political views were not always consistent.

Fein<sup>8</sup> politician Martin McGuinness. McGuinness, whose earlier membership of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA<sup>9</sup>) was not disputed, was asked by Paxman if he was still a senior member of the IRA. Here, McGuinness directs his accusation of untruthful comments not at the interviewer, but at the broadcast organisation.

**Paxman:** In light of this evidence, will you admit you're on the IRA Army Council?

**McGuinness:** Well, I didn't hear any evidence at all. I'm not on the IRA Army Council. I'm not a member of the IRA. And I think, given the fact that we are a week away from an election and that Sinn Fein is an Irish Republican party absolutely dedicated to Irish freedom and the establishment of a sovereign republic, quite interesting that the British Broadcasting Corporation would choose to put out such untruthful comments about the Sinn Fein leadership rather than, Jeremy, rather than-

**Paxman:** Sorry, you're making a political point now. I want to deal with facts if I may.

### 3.4.3 Interviewer Competence

The third category includes personal attacks where the politician refers, in a derogatory sense, to the competency or performance of the interviewer. These can include suggestions of stupidity, mistakenness or general incompetence. In the following example from the 1992 Skinner/Dimbleby interview, the politician is critical of David Dimbleby's performance within the interview, accusing him of a lack of clarity.

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<sup>8</sup> Sinn Fein is an Irish political party, with elected members of UK and Irish parliaments, whose main political aim is a united republican Ireland.

<sup>9</sup> The Provisional IRA was a paramilitary organisation, previously engaged in an armed campaign, with the objective of a united republican Ireland.



**Dimbleby:** No I was talking about– (Skinner continues talking about Europe) I meant about PR. No I meant about– It was about PR that you said the strategy changed. I was asking you what the strategy had been and how they intended to–

**Skinner:** Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby. I know you're one of the chattering classes that believes in proportional representation–

In the next example, Respect MP George Galloway, following his victory in the Bradford West by-election in 2012, disputes Channel 4 News presenter Cathy Newman's account of electoral history.

**Newman:** You're defining your terms very clearly and quite narrowly, but within those terms a sensational victory. What do you put it down to?

**Galloway:** I don't know why you're being so churlish about this. I know more about left-wing history than you do, I assure you. But anyway, I put it down to a tidal wave of alienation in the country, and not just in Bradford, against the Tweedledee-Tweedledum<sup>10</sup> politics of the major parties. [...]

The final example in this category is from the Bryant/Burley interview concerning the phone hacking scandal. In this instance the politician suggests a lack of intelligence on the part of the interviewer.

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<sup>10</sup> Tweedledee and Tweedledum are fictional characters from children's literature; they are often used as a synonym to refer to two people who are, in some way, very similar. Here, Galloway uses the term in a derogatory sense aimed at the three major parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat).

**Burley:** So you are in a position to have listened to the debate and to have read the report. As a result, you are content to say that on telly?

**Bryant:** I have just said it. *You don't– You seem to be a bit dim, if you don't mind me saying so. [...]*

#### 3.4.4 Interviewer Conduct

The fourth category refers to instances where the politician's responses make reference to the interviewer's behaviour in the interview, including their motives, a contentious line of questioning, or a lack of harmony between them. Typically, examples are accusations of impoliteness, discourtesy, hostility, or objections to troublesome practices – but not comments questioning the interviewer's neutrality. The category also covers instances where the politician makes a personal attack on the integrity of the interviewer in relation to the current encounter. This is distinct from any suggestion of previous conduct or reputation. The following shows George Galloway's response to Jeremy Paxman's question immediately after Galloway's electoral success in 2005. Standing for the first time as a Respect Party candidate, he had just ousted the sitting Labour MP, Oona King (the woman who Paxman refers to in his opening question). In this example, Galloway objects to Paxman's question and criticises him for not acknowledging his recent election victory.

**Paxman:** Well we're joined now from his count in Bethnal Green and Bow by George Galloway. Mr Galloway, are you proud of having got rid of one of the very few black women in Parliament?

**Galloway:** *What a preposterous question. I know it's very late in the night, but wouldn't you be better by, starting by congratulating me for one of the most sensational election results in modern history?*

**Paxman:** Are you proud of having got rid of one of the very few black women in Parliament?

**Galloway:** I'm not— Jeremy, move on to your next question.

In his 2005 interview with Jeremy Paxman, Martin McGuinness objects to Paxman's questions and criticises his interview style by accusing him of interrupting the answers to his questions:

**Paxman:** Well you are expecting us to believe your bold assertions that you've virtually never heard of the IRA as far as I can see. You could at least tell us how we can repose any confidence that you have the faintest idea what they're thinking?

**McGuinness:** Well, I mean, I've taken enough of this nonsense from you over the course of the last couple of minutes Jeremy. Do have the decency, if you will allow me to answer fully the questions that you ask—

**Paxman:** Well I've just asked you how he was told and you won't answer the question.

**McGuinness:** No, listen Jeremy. You may have a reputation for bullishness and provoking people—

**Paxman:** No I'm not— I'm not interested— I'm just trying to ask you a question and get an answer.

**McGuinness:** Yeah, but I'm not going to play this game Jeremy. I'm not going to play this game with you. I have come from my constituency, done you the courtesy of being here to answer questions, I think the least you can do is to allow me to answer those questions. If you are going to— Well, there you go— there you go again—

The following is an extract from a 1971 interview with the future Labour Prime Minister (1976-1979) James Callaghan, who at the time was a member of

Labour's shadow cabinet. Callaghan repeatedly resists political broadcaster Robin Day's attempts to press him for his views on the deputy leadership of the Labour Party and the post holder, Roy Jenkins. In his responses, Callaghan indicates that Day's motives are troublesome and face-threatening.

**Day:** Mr Callaghan, do you think that Mr Jenkins should remain as Deputy Leader, in these circumstances, knowing his views?

**Callaghan:** Mr Day, you've been an interviewer for a long time, and you knew before you even phrased the question that you wouldn't get me to comment on that particular matter in the light of what I've said to you. Now have another try if you like but you won't get any further with it. Why not turn to more profitable line?

**Day:** Because it's a matter of great interest to a lot of people here.

**Callaghan:** Well in that case you'd better discuss it with Mr Jenkins but you're not going to get me to make statements that you'll then throw at Mr Jenkins and try to set us at each other's ears. I'm not going to take part in that game to satisfy a television panel. Now let's turn to something else.

In the next example from 2011, George Galloway challenges political broadcaster Andrew Neil over the content of the interview. At this point, in the latter stages of the interview, Neil criticises the politician for personalising, rather than answering his questions – namely, “playing the man rather than the ball”. (The category *Interviewer History* [below] includes the extracts of Galloway's personalisation which preceded this section of dialogue and prompted this comment.) Here, in his response, Galloway makes a further personal attack by objecting that he was not given advance notification of the adversarial nature of the interview.

**Neil:** You know, I knew that the way you would reply to these questions would be playing the man rather than the ball.

**Galloway:** Well, you're the one playing the man, Andrew. And you didn't even have the grace, you didn't even have the grace, you didn't even have the grace to tell me that this was the kind of interview it was going to be.

The final extract in this category shows a personal attack on the integrity of the interviewer in relation to the ongoing interview. This occurred in the 2010 Sky News interview concerning the phone hacking scandal. Here, Chris Bryant gave Kay Burley an example of a recent message left on his phone in order to highlight the potential sensitivity and necessity for confidentiality of an MP's voicemails. Burley retorted that, by this time, he would have re-established the security of his voicemails by changing his PIN<sup>11</sup>. Bryant pointed out that PIN numbers were not an issue in his case, and goes on to accuse Burley of dishonesty.

**Bryant:** [...] but it might, if you're an MP, have been a message from the Home Secretary relating to a specific sensitive case, or for that matter, it might have been from a constituent, like my last phone message was last night, recounting a pretty horrific incident that they certainly wouldn't want to be in the public domain, or read over by some random journalist, breaking the law.

**Burley:** Presumably you changed your PIN so that wouldn't have happened. Uhm—

**Bryant:** No, no, no, that's not true. You see— No, no, no, no, look, listen, listen. That is simply untrue. It was nothing to do with PIN numbers in my case.

**Burley:** OK, that, that was the impression that we got from Yates of

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<sup>11</sup> Personal Identification Number (PIN) is a private code number used for accessing phone messages.

the Yard.<sup>12</sup>

**Bryant:** *Well don't lie, then. Don't lie. Don't say what you don't know, madam.*

### 3.4.5 Interviewer History

The fifth category incorporates instances where the politician attempts to switch the focus to the interviewer's track record, be it in relation to previous conduct or their employment history. Personalised familial references would also fit this category. In the following two extracts from the 2011 Neil/Galloway interview, Andrew Neil quizzes George Galloway about his level of support for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Iranian President 2005-2013). The first attack refers to Neil's previous employment by multinational media magnate Rupert Murdoch. The Fox News Channel, of which Galloway appears to imply he is aware of examples of political bias, is a part of Murdoch's media holding company News Corp.

**Neil:** Now you worked for Press TV, this er Iranian TV outfit in London. Is it true that when you interviewed Ahmadinejad, the the the ruler of of [sic] Iran, you began by saying that you, you told him you, "I require police protection in London from the Iranian opposition because of my support for your election campaign. I mention this so you know where I'm coming from"?

**Galloway:** Andrew, I hadn't known I was on trial er today. I thought you wanted my expertise on Syria. *You used to work for Rupert Murdoch of Fox News. We could, I think, quote some choice*

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<sup>12</sup> John Yates (often referred to in the press as "Yates of the Yard") was a senior Metropolitan Police officer involved in the phone hacking investigation.

things from Fox News. And the short answer is no. I supported, I, like ABC, supported the fact that Ahmadinejad won the election. I didn't support his election in any way and I defy your–

In the second of these two extracts, Galloway again refers to Neil's previous employment before continuing his attack with personalisation befitting the first category (interviewer bias).

**Neil:** Is that be [*sic*] conceivable for any BBC interviewer to say to the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition, "I'm a big supporter of yours. I just want you to know that before I begin the interview"?

**Galloway:** It's very conceivable on Fox News that you used to work for. Very, very conceivable. The difference is, you see, you think that because you support and are associated with right wing drivel that nobody will cast that up at you.

### 3.4.6 Interviewer Frame of Mind

The sixth category covers instances where the politician suggests that the interviewer's current state of mind is one of agitation or anger. Whilst the examples herein relate to comments regarding interviewer behaviour, a distinct category is proposed as no obvious element of criticism may be apparent and, conceivably, the delivery could be couched in expressions of concern. Furthermore, examples generally coincide with repetitive speech, including using the interviewer's forename, and an apparent effort by the politician to wrest some control of the situation. As the following shows, examples tend to take the form of advice to calm down. In the first extract from a 2009 interview, Labour peer and cabinet minister

Peter Mandelson vies for the conversational floor during Jeremy Paxman's questioning. Mandelson repeats his insistence that Paxman should be less agitated.

**Paxman:** [...] Is that not something which is your responsibility?

**Mandelson:** No—

**Paxman:** Is there anything—

**Mandelson:** I'm afraid it's not my responsibility—

**Paxman:** Is there anything that is—

**Mandelson:** It's not the government's responsibility either.

**Paxman:** Is there anything that's the responsibility—

**Mandelson:** Hold on Jeremy—

**Paxman:** Is there anything that's the responsibility—

**Mandelson:** Just calm down.

**Paxman:** Look, you said—

**Mandelson:** Just calm—

**Paxman:** No—

**Mandelson:** Just calm down a minute and listen to the answer.

**Paxman:** All right. Well you've just told us. The answer is "No, that's not your responsibility".

**Mandelson:** Just—

**Paxman:** What about the—

**Mandelson:** Jeremy—

**Paxman:** question of you saying now you want—

**Mandelson:** Jeremy, calm—

**Paxman:** right regulation, not light regulation? Is that not your responsibility?

**Mandelson:** Calm down a minute and— If you'll just calm down for one moment perhaps I can get a word in. My view of regulation

is, that the regulatory framework that was designed in Britain during the last ten years was, broadly speaking, basically, a good design. What I do, however, think and what



I've said before and what the Chancellor has said is that the regulatory framework that we put in place received an almighty and unprecedented shock. If you're asking me that whether all parts of that regulatory system—

The second example is an extract from a Peter Mandelson interview in 2010 with BBC news presenter Tim Willcox. When questioned about the then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown (who had recently been interviewed by journalist and TV presenter Piers Morgan – including discussing the death of Brown's baby daughter in 2002), Mandelson again uses this form of personalisation.

**Willcox:** On an individual point Lord Mandelson - Gordon Brown. Aren't the sceptics right when they look at interviews he's given recently, his deathbed conversion to the alternative vote? They look at a Prime Minister who's desperately trying to hang on to political life, desperately trying to save his political skin. I mean, he's never been in favour of the alternative vote system in the past, has he? I mean, this is something he's always ruled out. He's always said he didn't want to use his children as props, and there he is, talking on an ITV show about—

**Mandelson:** OK, Tim—

**Willcox:** the loss of his daughter.

**Mandelson:** Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. I think I probably know a little bit more about the Prime Minister's views on what you attach such importance to, the alternative vote, than you do. I remember having a conversation with the Prime Minister in 1997 about changing our electoral system and no, he was not opposed to the alternative vote. So if you think that's so important, you'll have to take the truth from me.

### 3.4.7 Blandishments

The final category covers instances where the politician makes personal references to the interviewer which, in contrast to the previous categories, are distinctly positive forms of personalisation. It is worth pointing out here that it is apparent from the politicians' intonation in these examples that there was no intended sarcasm or irony. The first example is from a 2011 interview between former Conservative MP Boris Johnson (Mayor of London since 2008) and Jeremy Paxman. In his response to a question about attested political differences between himself and Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, Johnson playfully uses flattery by referring to Paxman's acclaimed interviewing skills.

**Johnson:** *I'm sufficiently versed in the ways of the media and indeed your brilliant interviewing technique* to know that if I talk now about the differences between me and David Cameron, whatever they may be, all the things I want to say and I've been saying in that hall about what we're doing in London will be completely obscured in some kind of Tory split story, which is all you're trying to–

In the same interview, Johnson is asked about the prospect of again becoming an MP, and a future Conservative party leader. His response, delivered in a bantering manner, includes flattery of Paxman:

**Paxman:** And there are no circumstances under which you would allow your name to go forward to become an MP while you are Mayor of London?

**Johnson:** Absolutely. No, that would be wrong. You can't seek a mandate to do–

**Paxman:** So what's the scheme then, you become the first Tory leader in the House of Lords since, what, Lord Salisbury or

someone?

**Johnson:** (laughs) But I— What I always wonder, I mean, always baffles me— I'm going to be your campaign manager, that's what I'm going to do, 'cause as I've said, you have a better chance than I do, Jeremy, you're, you know, I think you might well, you've got the gravitas, you've got the name recognition, you know, you're kind of, everybody knows that you're probably quite Conservative, even though you sort of levitate over party policy, I think you'd be an ideal candidate. Listen, you know, what about it? Down the line Dave's eventually going to, going to pack it in, and, and—

The following extract is taken from an interview with the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, during the 2010 General Election campaign. Brown uses flattery on interviewer Jeremy Paxman when faced with a particularly personal line of questioning towards the end of the interview.

**Paxman:** Why do you think people don't seem to like you?

**Brown:** I don't— That's for people to make up their own mind—

**Paxman:** Do you not— It's a great article of faith in the Labour Party. The Party is bigger than any individual—

**Brown:** You're such a nice guy Jeremy. You're such a nice guy—

**Paxman:** (laughs)

**Brown:** You can say to me that people don't like me, and look—

**Paxman:** (tries to interrupt)

**Brown:** Let people make up their own mind. You know, this is, this is an election—

**Paxman:** I'm just wondering about your position. Do you never wonder, in this long marches [*sic*] of the night, three or four o'clock in the morning, am I a liability?

**Brown:** (laughs) I sleep, I sleep through the night Jeremy. I don't think that. Look, I've looked—I've studied history, and there's not a Prime Minister or a Leader of the Labour Party that hasn't had difficulties and hasn't had real problems to deal with. We have had to deal with a global financial crisis. We've had to deal with what you rightly called was an outrageous expenses crisis. We've had to deal with these things in the course of the last few years, and I understand people's frustrations. I understand people are wanting to make up their mind on the basis of looking at why did this global crisis happen, why did this expenses crisis happen. That's why there's so many undecided voters at the moment. They've got a right to look at what happened and say "could, could, what can we do for the future?" But I think when people come to a conclusion they say "Who's best for jobs? Who's best for the NHS? Who's best for industry? Who's serious with a plan for the future? Who's concentrating on substance?" And they come to us.

**Paxman:** Prime Minister, thank you.

### 3.5 Discussion

It is apparent from these findings that the range of personalisations used by politicians in their responses to interviewers' questions extends beyond those specified in the existing equivocation typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993). There are clear examples above which fall well outside their one existing personalisation category *attacks the interviewer*. For instance, in the final example above, Gordon Brown's equivocal response to a face-threatening question is aimed personally at Paxman, yet contains no element of criticism. The previous example shows Boris Johnson applying a similar technique. In the interview of Peter

Mandelson by Paxman, Mandelson uses a different technique, but nor does his repeated advice for the interviewer to calm down quite fit the existing category.

The aim of this research was to assess the types of personalisation employed by politicians when facing questions in broadcast interviews. Focusing on responses directed personally at the interviewer, the research question was whether a reappraisal of the existing equivocation typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993) is necessary. The findings support the hypothesis that sufficient evidence has been collected to warrant a revision. Evaluation beyond identifying the range of personalisations was not a priority here, however, it is clear that many of these instances of personalisation, critical and non-critical, were used as methods of equivocation, and some very effectively. For example, the use of flattery by Brown may not have fully deflected Paxman from his personally face-threatening line of questioning, but it did effect a change in the tone of the interview, apparent by the mutual laughter. Whilst Paxman did rephrase the question once, Brown used the apparent change to defend his record and promote his party, and continued until the end of the interview. Similar effectiveness was evident from personalisation categorised as relating to the interviewer's frame of mind. In the first of those extracts, Peter Mandelson repeats his insistence that Paxman, who was merely fulfilling his interviewer role by asking questions, should be less agitated. His advice, perhaps intentionally, appeared to increase Paxman's agitation: an apparent disarming effect, from which Mandelson took the opportunity to divert the interview agenda. These examples are comparable to the observation by Atkinson (1984) that former Prime Minister Harold Wilson could temporarily neutralise an aggressive interviewer merely by using their first name. Wilson's tactic of establishing "an air of familiarity" (p. 174) is matched by the approach of Boris Johnson in his banter with Jeremy Paxman. These varying forms of personalisation appear to have the potential to wrong-foot the interviewer during the course of the questioning process. As the preservation and enhancement of face is a prime consideration for politicians during interviews, the mastery of adroit personalisation can be a communicative asset.

This notion of equivocation as a communicative skill has not escaped the attention of political communication researchers, or of politicians themselves. Bull (2000) analysed the interview performance of Tony Blair (Labour Prime Minister 1997-2007) during the 1997 General Election campaign. Blair's equivocation in response to questions concerning radical changes in Labour Party policy in the years since their heavy electoral defeat of 1983 was reported by Bull as being highly skilled. One of Blair's political opponents, William Hague (Conservative Party leader 1997-2001), referred to his "skill for ambiguity" which allowed him to emerge unscathed from situations where other politicians might have suffered serious reputation damage (Hague, 2002).

Though personalisation might not have featured in Blair's equivocation, a study of right-wing politicians in Belgium highlights its application when dealing with questions posing a communicative conflict (Simon-Vandenberg, 2008). The politicians, previously from the dissolved far-right party Flemish Bloc (Vlaams Blok), employed personalisation tactics as a method of equivocation when asked if racist views had been abandoned. When confronted with the communicative dilemma of risking offence to previous supporters or of provoking further legal action, they occasionally opted for the damage-limitation alternative of critical personalisation, including attacking the programme presenter's integrity. Condescending forms of address, for example, the continual use of personal names, were also evident. The two MPs in that study were described as having "generally recognised debating skills" (p. 347). As one of their ploys when faced with a communicative conflict was to personalise, this seems consistent with findings here which indicate that adroit personalisation can be a communicative asset.

It has been proposed previously that, beyond challenging the neutrality of the interviewer, attacks of a personal nature may, principally, be characteristic of the discourse of extremist politicians (e.g., Simon-Vandenberg, 2008). However, examples here indicate that some politicians from mainstream parties are not averse to using such rhetoric. Dennis Skinner, whilst admittedly one of the more left-leaning Members of Parliament, has been a Labour MP since 1970, and Party Chairman

(1988-1989), yet is shown here to use personalisation. Arguably, the methods highlighted here of Peter Mandelson are not overly dissimilar to the condescension attributed to the far-right Belgian politicians; yet Mandelson (Lord Mandelson since 2008) was a cabinet minister in the Labour government at the time of both interviews. Indeed, even a politician holding the office of Prime Minister has been shown to employ personalisation - though not in the form of an attack. In response to a face-threatening question, Gordon Brown, arguably a man not renowned for his jocularity, beguiles a convivial reaction from interviewer Jeremy Paxman. Such findings indicate that personalisation in various forms is spread more widely across politics than was previously assumed.

On the basis of the findings herein, it is proposed that the existing equivocation typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993) be subject to the following revisions: the superordinate category *attacks the interviewer* should be replaced with *personalisation*. This new category will encompass the seven subordinate categories shown in Table 3.2. The proposed revisions offer a number of potential benefits for future research into political discourse. The new model can be used to evaluate instances of personalisation and will facilitate research aiming to identify the politicians who employ this method and the categories of personalisation they use. Furthermore, when, and by whom, is it used most effectively?

Research investigating effectiveness could be further facilitated via combination of this typology of personalisation with the concept of follow-ups (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Developed in the context of classroom discourse, follow-ups are defined as the third and final component of a sequential triad, and have recently been extended to the analysis of political discourse (Bull, 2012a). In that context, the sequential triad comprises the interviewer's question, the politician's equivocal response, then the follow-up response by the interviewer. Analysis of the interviewer's follow-up should indicate whether the equivocal technique, in this case a specific category of personalisation, was effective. For example, the interviewer sticking to his/her agenda and insisting on an answer would signal no effect – conversely, a different question, or perhaps a softening in their tone, would imply a

degree of success. It may also be interesting to compare the effect of personalisation in different situations. For example, is it more prevalent or effective in press conferences, where there are more than two participants? It is reasonable to assume that the presence of others may factor in the follow-up response of a journalist, especially when the politician's personal comment provokes a salient widespread reaction, such as laughter.

Future research might also investigate the possibility that personalisation has become more commonplace in broadcast interviews. Recent research in other areas of political discourse has shown an increasing tendency towards adversarialism. For example, Clayman et al. (2007) indicate a trend towards more aggressive questioning in American presidential press conferences. In the UK, research into Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) (weekly parliamentary debates where the Prime Minister responds to questions posed by government and opposition politicians) has shown that impolite and face-threatening discourse aimed at opposition politicians is an intentional and even expected strategy (Harris, 2001). Bull and Wells (2012) propose that the status of politicians is enhanced by such behaviour. Bates, Kerr, Byrne, and Stanley (2014) propose that PMQs is becoming increasingly theatrical, more dominated by the two party leaders, and indeed more rowdy. With such evident trends in political discourse in mind, the "heightened emphasis on a personality driven style of politics" (Bates et al., 2014, p. 275), and the reputations of some broadcast journalists, it is not unreasonable to suggest that politicians' personalisation in interviews may be expanding.

This study stemmed from the notion that, via the use of an expanding modern medium, there was a distinct possibility of unearthing equivocation techniques outside the existing equivocation typology (Bull, 2003a; Bull & Mayer, 1993). Indeed, it should be borne in mind that the very presence of an interview clip on a video-sharing website indicates the increased likelihood of there being entertaining interaction – which may include personalisation. However, there was no intention to conduct a quantitative analysis here, but to use this valuable resource to update the model accordingly. The proposals herein are presented as an essential upgrade in the



interests of future equivocation research and, specifically, to facilitate quantitative analysis of personalisation in political discourse. Enhancing our awareness of specific communication behaviour must be beneficial to discourse researchers, scholars of politics and, perhaps, the electorate. Lloyd (2004) has argued that increasing hostility of journalists towards politicians has clouded what the electorate can glean from interviews. He suggests that the encounter has degenerated into a battle between two heavily armed adversaries at the expense of being a source of required information. Indeed, personalisation may have become a significant weapon in the politicians' expanding arsenal. Bull (2012b) argues that the rise of adversarial journalism could lead to public disillusionment with the political process and contribute to voter apathy. Whatever the causes, methods, and consequences of politicians' equivocation, measures which enhance transparency are of appreciable value. Furthermore, a clearer understanding of a communicative style that some politicians use with a purposeful mastery has benefits for communication skills training.

To conclude, this research into politicians' interview behaviour has achieved its aim in discovering a broad range of personalisation methods, including those which are not critical of the person asking the questions. Examples have been provided demonstrating how these tactics are used as forms of equivocation in response to tough, face-threatening questions. The function and effects of personalisation were discussed in detail, including how certain forms may be used to disarm, wrong-foot, neutralise, or beguile interviewers during their questioning process. A revision of the existing equivocation typology is proposed. Namely, a revised category *personalisation* incorporating seven sub-categories: blandishments, comments related to interviewer agitation, and five distinct types of personal criticism. It is further suggested that implementation of this revised model will benefit political discourse research and increase transparency of the communicative styles of those elected to represent us.

## **Chapter 4 – “You’re important, Jeremy, but not that important”: Personalised Responses and Equivocation in Political Interviews**

This chapter is based on: Waddle, M., & Bull, P. (2018). *“You’re important, Jeremy, but not that important”: Personalised responses and equivocation in political interviews*. Manuscript submitted for publication.<sup>13</sup>

### **4.1 Abstract**

This study was an assessment of personalised equivocation in political interviews, namely, politicians’ responses to questions which, in lieu of an explicit reply, are directed personally at the interviewer. Twenty-six interviews with current and recent UK party leaders were analysed in terms of questions, replies, and personalisation. Most personalised responses contained elements of criticism, although over a quarter were more amicable. For the eight featured politicians, the use of such responses was adjudged to be more about individual communicative style than their position on the political spectrum. Only one politician did not respond in this manner, indicating a more widespread use of personalisation than has been previously suggested. Furthermore, an evaluation of interviewer follow-ups showed its effectiveness as a diversionary tactic in the face of troublesome questions. In terms of the proportion of questions which receive a full reply, a general reply rate analysis highlighted how current political leaders have changed little from their predecessors.

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<sup>13</sup> The author, Maurice Waddle, designed the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the article under the supervision of Professor Peter Bull.

## 4.2 Introduction

A study by Waddle and Bull (2016) (presented in chapter 3) was conducted to assess the range of personalised language used by politicians in interviews. Specifically, the study focused on comments directed at the interviewer, often used in lieu of a direct answer to their questions. They likened this form of rhetoric, metaphorically, to the footballing expression *playing the man, not the ball*. In terms of a political interview, this form of behaviour – labelled *personalisation* – was defined as “any attempt by the politician to play the interviewer into the interview proceedings, as opposed to the expected practice of adhering to the topical agenda” (p. 415).

The practice of a politician directing a personal response at the interviewer in the face of a difficult question has not gone unnoticed in communication research. Over twenty years earlier, Bull and Mayer (1993) showed that former Prime Minister (PM) Margaret Thatcher occasionally responded in this manner. A primary purpose of that study was to identify the different ways in which politicians avoided giving direct answers to interviewers’ questions. Consequently, a typology of equivocation was devised, which was further expanded by Bull (2003). From those two studies, 12 superordinate categories of equivocation (subdivided into 35 subordinate categories) were identified. The fifth of those categories, labelled by Bull and Mayer (1993) *attacks the interviewer*, was the form of response occasionally employed by Thatcher, and subsequently renamed *personalisation* by Waddle and Bull (2016).

The need for the revised label arose when it became apparent that not all equivocal responses directed personally at political interviewers were of a critical nature. For example, towards the end of an interview during the 2010 General Election campaign, BBC broadcaster Jeremy Paxman asked the then PM Gordon Brown a particularly difficult question: “Why do you think people don’t seem to like you?”. After a brief initial equivocal response, Brown followed that with “You’re such a nice guy Jeremy. You’re such a nice guy”. This seemingly genuine flattery prompted genial laughter in the interviewer and appeared to take the sting out of the difficult situation with which Brown was faced. He used the apparent change in the tone of the interview to defend his prime-ministerial record and to promote his party.

Waddle and Bull (2016), in their analysis of online video-recordings of 44 British political interviews, identified seven categories of personalisation used by the politicians. One category – *blandishments* – encompasses flattery akin to the foregoing instance, and other such pleasantries. Another refers to instances where the politician’s comments relate to the interviewer’s frame of mind, typically including advice to calm down; the following was from an interview, again by Jeremy Paxman, with the then Labour cabinet minister Peter Mandelson.

**Paxman:** Is there anything that’s the responsibility–

**Mandelson:** *Hold on Jeremy–*

**Paxman:** Is there anything that’s the responsibility–

**Mandelson:** *Just calm down.*

**Paxman:** Look, you said–

**Mandelson:** *Just calm–*

**Paxman:** No–

**Mandelson:** *Just calm down a minute and listen to the answer.*

**Paxman:** All right. Well you’ve just told us. The answer is “No, that’s not your responsibility”.

**Mandelson:** *Just–*

**Paxman:** What about the–

**Mandelson:** *Jeremy–*

**Paxman:** question of you saying now you want–

**Mandelson:** *Jeremy, calm–*

**Paxman:** right regulation, not light regulation? Is that not your responsibility?

**Mandelson:** *Calm down a minute and– If you’ll just calm down for one moment, perhaps I can get a word in. My view of regulation is [...]*

The above form of personalised response, whilst not a particularly good-natured one, does not need to include personal criticism, and can be used as a means of equivocation. Waddle and Bull's (2016) remaining five categories relate to comments of a distinctly critical nature. All seven categories of personalisation used by politicians in interviews are detailed in the subsequent section (listed in Table 4.2). The purpose of the current study was to use this categorisation system devised by Waddle and Bull (2016) to evaluate the extent of personalisation in recent interviews. Previous research on political interviews broadcast between 1987 and 1991 (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993) showed that, of the three politicians who featured, only Thatcher used personalisation as a means of equivocation. Here, a corpus of 26 interviews from the general election campaigns of 2015 and 2017 was analysed, each with the leader of a UK political party and broadcast on TV. To follow, prior to a detailed introduction to the current study, is a review of relevant research literature on questions, replies, evasion, and personalisation in broadcast political interviews.

#### 4.2.1 Previous Research – Questions

In democratic nations, interviews are typically conducted to obtain information from politicians on their policies or the actions of their party, be it in government or in opposition. One purpose of research on political interviews has been to assess the extent to which politicians provide direct answers to the questions they are asked (e.g., Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991). However, identifying what constitutes a reply goes hand in hand with what is identifiable as a question. That process, however, is somewhat less straightforward than it seems. Consequently, to better facilitate the quantitative analysis of interviews, Bull (1994) proposed a method to clarify identification of both questions and replies. Questions typically take an interrogative form (e.g., "Did you authorise that?"), but not always. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) refer to questions that are *declarative* in form, which are often voiced with rising intonation at the end of the statement (e.g., "You authorised that?"). Indeed, a request for information may not only be, syntactically, of non-interrogative

form but even contain no verb. For example, in a 2017 interview of PM Theresa May, Jeremy Paxman was asking about net migration to the UK:

- Paxman:** Can you tell us what it is now?  
**May:** Yes it was 248,000 in the last set of figures.  
**Paxman:** *Non-EU migrants?*  
**May:** Was about 170, 175,000.  
(Sky UK, 2017)

Clearly, the second turn of Paxman here is a request for information, but contains no verb; these are referred to as *moodless* questions (Jucker, 1986). Harris (1991) suggested that political interviews include substantial numbers of questions that are non-interrogative in form, and that these are put forward by the interviewer for the politician to express agreement or disagreement.

Questions in interrogative syntax fit one of three distinguishable forms based on the type of expected reply (Quirk, et al., 1985). Those seeking affirmation or negation are defined as *yes-no* (or *polar*) questions (e.g., “Will there be tax increases?”). Those seeking a reply from an open range are identified as *wh*-questions; these feature an interrogative word, namely, *how* (the only one not to begin with *wh*), *who*, *why*, *when*, *which*, or *what* (e.g., “What does that mean?”) [Bull (1994) added *where* to this list]. Those which present two or more alternatives are referred to as *alternative* (or *disjunctive*) questions (e.g., “Was that the fault of the Chancellor, or are you to blame?”).

In addition to the three interrogative types (yes-no, alternative, and wh-questions) and the two non-interrogative (declarative and moodless), Bull (1994) added a third non-interrogative type: *indirect*. Bull (2009, p. 217) defines indirect questions as “a means of asking questions through reporting that of another”. He provided the following example (in which the question’s force is not expressed directly, but is expressed via a subordinate clause): “Many people have asked the

question why did you go to war in Iraq". Bull's (1994) analysis identified over 1,000 questions from 33 political interviews, and all were identifiable as one of these six question types.

#### 4.2.2 Previous Research – Replies and Evasion

As questions are identifiable as a request for information, a reply is a response which provides the requested information. In terms of political interviews, assessment of replies is interesting in that it addresses the unflattering view which prevails in the public perception: that politicians, in general, are evasive (Harris, 1991). Harris's study was conducted to evaluate the extent to which politicians do give straight answers to questions. From 17 political interviews conducted between 1984 and 1987, mostly with leading UK politicians, Harris found that *direct answers* were provided to just over 39% of the questions asked. Bull's (1994) clarification of questions and replies in political interviews proposed three types of response to interviewers' questions: *Replies* provide, explicitly, the information requested; *Non-replies* are a failure to provide the information; *Intermediate replies* sit midway on a continuum between replies and non-replies. Intermediate replies include instances where the politician's answer is not stated explicitly but is implied, instances where the politician gives only a partial answer, and instances where an assessment of whether a reply was forthcoming cannot be made because the politician was interrupted. Bull's analysis of 33 interviews with leading UK politicians conducted between 1987 and 1992 found that 45.6% of questions received an explicit reply. Noticeably, this figure, termed *reply rate*, is comparable to the figure of 39.3% which Harris (1991) reported for direct answers from an entirely different set of interviews. More recent studies, although of only a small set of interviews (Bull, 2016, 2017), are indicative of even lower reply rates by current party leaders. All of the above studies are consistent in showing that leading UK politicians tend not to give full replies to the majority of interviewers' questions.

Of course, studies of equivocation in interviews and press conferences extend beyond UK politics. Researchers have examined the practices of politicians worldwide, including, the United States (e.g., Clayman, 2001; Clementson & Eveland, 2016), Malaysia (Nur Zahraa & Siti Rohana, 2016), Montenegro (Vuković, 2013), Taiwan (Huang, 2009), and Turkey (Çakir, Kökpınar Kaya, & Kara, 2016). Such studies, however, either did not set out to evaluate reply rates, or where statistics are reported, they are not always suitable for comparison with the foregoing UK studies. A clearer comparison can be made with a study of Japanese politicians (Feldman, Kinoshita, & Bull, 2015), where, from a series of interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013, national politicians gave direct replies to 41.4% of questions. This figure is noticeably similar to the reply rates reported for UK politicians in the 1980s and 1990s (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991).

#### 4.2.3 Previous Research – Personalisation

The study of personalisation in politics has meant different things to different researchers. For example, Thornborrow and Montgomery (2010) utilise the term to relate to subjective experiences of interviewees. Leone (2013, p. 133) defines it as “the phenomenon of leaders’ profiles eclipsing those of their respective parties”. Here, the term is used for discourse directed at a person present, with the intention of having personal relevance to that individual. This form of personalisation in political communication has been investigated in areas beyond the broadcast interview. For example, in Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) – the UK Parliament’s highest profile event – Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2018) investigated personal attacks in the question-response exchanges between the leaders (study presented in chapter 5). Their evaluation of what are, effectively, personal attacks showed that, of the five PMs between 1979 and 2016, David Cameron was the most personally aggressive. In one period of Cameron’s premiership (the ten PMQs sessions before the 2015 General Election), over 60% of his responses to LO Ed Miliband contained a personal attack. Whilst acknowledging the differences between the two modes of political communication, particularly the rivalrous situation which exists between the leaders,



Waddle et al. proposed that, similar to political interviews, a potential function of personalisation in PMQs is equivocation.

An extensive literature search shows that evaluations of this form of personalisation have not been the primary focus of political interview research. However, close scrutiny of research into evasion does yield some findings. These tend to be from studies utilising the aforementioned typology of equivocation (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer 1993). The fifth category from that typology (*attacks the interviewer*) is an equivocal response to a question in the form of critical personalisation directed at the interviewer. In Bull and Mayer's analysis of 15 interviews with three leading politicians, only Margaret Thatcher resorted to personal criticism; 13% of her equivocal responses contained a personal attack on the interviewer.

An analysis of evasive techniques over a series of 20 interviews held between 2001 and 2010 was conducted by Mehdipour and Nabifar (2011). They used the typology of equivocation discussed above (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer 1993) to evaluate the responses of two high profile figures in US politics: Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. They reported a total of 362 questions asked; 146 of which received an equivocal response. Only one of these equivocal responses – given by Rice – was identified as an attack on the interviewer.

Çakir et al.'s (2016) analysis covered eight interviews of Turkish politicians in 2011. They reported that two of the eight politicians used a personal attack on the interviewer as an equivocal strategy. Overall, just over 4% of the equivocal responses were identified as that form of personalisation. However, it is difficult to contrast those findings with the foregoing UK studies because, for the Turkish study, only 68 evasive responses are reported across 1,182 minutes of interview time. Interestingly, Çakir et al. identified three additional evasive strategies, one of which – using humour – matches the personalisation category *blandishments* proposed by Waddle and Bull (2016). Çakir et al. show PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to be a frequent user of humour in lieu of a direct answer. Waddle and Bull noted such practices by senior Conservative politician Boris Johnson. For example, when questioned about aspiring

to be party leader by Jeremy Paxman in 2011, he bantered with the interviewer that he (Paxman) might want the job:

**Johnson:** (laughs) But I— What I always wonder, I mean, always baffles me— *I'm going to be your campaign manager, that's what I'm going to do, 'cause as I've said, you have a better chance than I do, Jeremy, you're, you know, I think you might well, you've got the gravitas, you've got the name recognition, you know, you're kind of, everybody knows that you're probably quite Conservative, even though you sort of levitate over party policy, I think you'd be an ideal candidate. Listen, you know, what about it? Down the line Dave's eventually going to, going to pack it in, and, and—*

It is apparent that such personalised rhetoric can be a feature of responses to interviewers' questions. To date, however, personalisation has not been the specific focus of research into evasiveness by politicians. This study aims to address that shortfall.

#### 4.2.4 The Current Study

The focus herein is an analysis of interviews with UK party leaders from the last two general election campaigns. It is apparent from the foregoing reviews, that personalised equivocation is more diverse than the critical comments used by Thatcher, as reported by Bull and Mayer (1993). The intention here was an assessment of interviewers' questions and politicians' responses in accordance with the methods of Bull (1994). The politicians' responses were further assessed for personalised language using the categories of personalisation proposed by Waddle and Bull (2016). Due to the scope of personalisation analysis now broader than the

relatively narrow *attacks the interviewer* responses of Thatcher in the 1980s, it was predicted that personalised equivocation levels would be higher in these recent interviews. For the same reason, there was an expectation that more politicians would be observed using personalisation as an equivocal response than had previously. It was also predicted, as suggested by recent studies of single interviews (Bull, 2016, 2017), that the overall reply rate of current politicians would be lower than those of their predecessors.

## **4.3 Method**

### **4.3.1 Participants**

The politicians who featured in the analysed interviews were all leaders of UK political parties at that time. In 2015 they were: David Cameron (Conservative PM), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats), Nigel Farage (United Kingdom Independence Party [UKIP]), and Ed Miliband (Labour). In 2017 they were: Jeremy Corbyn (Labour), Tim Farron (Liberal Democrats), Theresa May (Conservative PM), and Paul Nuttall (UKIP). The interviewers were Evan Davis (BBC), Andrew Marr (BBC), Andrew Neil (BBC), Jeremy Paxman (Channel4/Sky News), and Robert Peston (ITV). Details of each interview are displayed in Table 4.1.

### **4.3.2 Apparatus**

Videos of the interviews were accessible from either [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) or [youtube.com](http://youtube.com). Online searches (detailed below) led to the following websites for interview transcripts: [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), [facebook.com](http://facebook.com), [news-watch.co.uk](http://news-watch.co.uk), [politicshome.com](http://politicshome.com), [skygroup.sky](http://skygroup.sky), and [spectator.co.uk](http://spectator.co.uk). Online transcripts could not be located for three interviews; these were transcribed by the author. Specific webpage details for the transcripts are provided at the end of the bibliography section.

**Table 4.1.** Details of the 26 interviews analysed.

Politician	Interviewer	Date	Broadcaster	Duration
Cameron	Davis	15 April 2015	BBC	27:55
Cameron	Marr	19 April 2015	BBC	17:11
Cameron	Paxman	26 March 2015	C4 & Sky	18:26
Clegg	Davis	13 April 2015	BBC	27:52
Clegg	Marr	3 May 2015	BBC	13:32
Farage	Davis	22 April 2015	BBC	27:49
Farage	Marr	22 March 2015	BBC	9:08
Farage	Marr	3 May 2015	BBC	9:59
Miliband	Davis	20 April 2015	BBC	28:37
Miliband	Marr	26 April 2015	BBC	15:10
Miliband	Paxman	26 March 2015	C4 & Sky	16:10
Corbyn	Marr	23 April 2017	BBC	23:16
Corbyn	Neil	26 May 2017	BBC	27:35
Corbyn	Paxman	29 May 2017	C4 & Sky	16:39
Corbyn	Peston	28 May 2017	ITV	16:57
Farron	Marr	30 April 2017	BBC	9:20
Farron	Neil	1 June 2017	BBC	27:42
Farron	Peston	23 April 2017	ITV	10:46
May	Marr	30 April 2017	BBC	23:40
May	Neil	22 May 2017	BBC	27:46
May	Paxman	29 May 2017	C4 & Sky	16:32
May	Peston	30 April 2017	ITV	19:40
Nuttall	Marr	23 April 2017	BBC	6:09
Nuttall	Marr	21 May 2017	BBC	6:23
Nuttall	Neil	29 May 2017	BBC	27:35
Nuttall	Peston	28 May 2017	ITV	5:11
Total				477:00

*Note.* Interviews by the BBC's Andrew Marr with the leaders of UKIP were shorter in duration than the others, but, during both campaigns, they were interviewed twice. Interviews by Jeremy Paxman – broadcast as *The Battle for Number 10* on Sky News and Channel 4 (C4) – were conducted on both occasions with only the two leaders who might be elected PM.

### 4.3.3 Procedure

General election campaigns were selected as the basis of the analysed interviews because, at such times, broadcasters typically include all major party leaders. Also, particularly for leaders of the largest parties, airtime tends to be similar. General elections in the UK can be as much as five years apart, but the two most recent

elections were separated by just over two years: 7 May 2015 and 8 June 2017. Accordingly, it was decided to include interviews from both the 2017 and the 2015 election campaigns to provide a larger sample of relatively recent material. The date of the 2015 General Election was set by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which schedules general elections every five years (House of Commons Library, 2017). Official campaigning began on 30 March 2015. On 18 April 2017, the PM announced her intention to call an early election. In accordance with the Act, agreement was required by two-thirds of the House of Commons; the motion was passed the following day. Internet searches were conducted for videos of complete interviews between the above dates (30 March - 7 May 2015 and 18 April - 8 June 2017). Searches were also conducted for online interview transcriptions; where these were not available, they were transcribed by the author. Using the videos and the transcripts, the interviews were analysed for personalisation and reply rate separately. Both analyses (detailed below) were conducted in full by the author. In each case, initial analysis was based on the transcripts. To facilitate accuracy, anything even vaguely ambiguous from the transcript alone was checked using the videos.

**4.3.3.1 Personalisation.** Personalisation analysis involved assessing each of the politicians' responses for comments directed personally at the interviewer. [Similar analyses have also been conducted by the author on exchanges in PMQs, which an interrater reliability test (Cohen, 1960) showed to be highly reliable ( $k = 0.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Waddle et al., 2018)]. Instances of personalisation were then coded in accordance with the categories identified by Waddle and Bull (2016), as listed in Table 4.2. Seven categories of personalisation were identified in that study; each one is defined below.

Five of the categories are distinctly critical: effectively, personal attacks. The first of these – *interviewer bias* – relates to suggestions that the interviewer has, or is displaying, biased personal or political views. An example of this can be seen in a response to a question by Labour politician Dennis Skinner. Skinner was being questioned by the BBC's David Dimbleby in 1992 about Labour Party policy on the

voting system *proportional representation* (PR). Skinner's reply included an accusation of bias towards PR: "Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby. *I know you're one of the chattering classes that believes in proportional representation*".

**Table 4.2.** Categories of Personalisation. Equivocal responses directed personally at the interviewer by the politician may allude to one of the following.

- 
1. Interviewer bias
  2. Broadcast organisation bias
  3. The interviewer's competence
  4. The interviewer's conduct
  5. The interviewer's history
  6. The interviewer's frame of mind
  7. Blandishments
- 

*Note.* Category 7 covers genial and complimentary personal comments (e.g., flattery and banter). Table adapted from Waddle and Bull (2016).

The category *broadcast organisation bias* relates to instances where personally directed comments are critical of the organisation represented by the interviewer, particularly in relation to programme content and coverage. Dennis Skinner followed up the above with a response identified as such:

**Skinner:** *and we had it rammed down our throats. We had it rammed down our throats for about three week [sic]. Every time Paddy Backdown opened his mouth about it, you went on about it and turned it into an agenda item. The truth is that Ashdown and his party got eighteen percent. Proportional representation has not been supported in this election. And*

*I'm fed up of hearing on your programme today, all these people trotting out that, that the Labour party's got to get in bed with the Liberals. The whole thing is a nonsense. [...]*

*Interviewer competence* is the category which includes personal comments which are disparaging about the interviewer's performance, their level of knowledge, or their intellect. The opening sentence voiced by Skinner in the first example above – “*Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby.*” – is classed as an attack on Dimbleby's competence in the interview. A further example can be seen in a response by the then Member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway. Responding to a question from Channel 4 News presenter Cathy Newman in 2012, he began by disputing her knowledge of electoral history: “*I don't know why you're being so churlish about this. I know more about left-wing history than you do, I assure you.*”

The fourth category – *interviewer conduct* – relates to personal criticism of the interviewer's behaviour in the ongoing interview. Examples can include suggestions that they are being discourteous, dishonest, confrontational, or that their line of questioning is motivated to be damaging for the politician. In the following example, George Galloway was being questioned in a BBC interview shortly after his successful election to Parliament as a Respect Party candidate in the 2005 General Election. Jeremy Paxman's question referred to Labour MP Oona King, who had just lost her seat to Galloway:

**Paxman:** Well we're joined now from his count in Bethnal Green and Bow by George Galloway. Mr Galloway, are you proud of having got rid of one of the very few black women in Parliament?

**Galloway:** *What a preposterous question. I know it's very late in the night, but wouldn't you be better by, starting by*

*congratulating me for one of the most sensational election results in modern history?*

Another example of personalisation identifiable as interviewer conduct is taken from a 1971 BBC interview of Labour politician, later PM, James Callaghan. Here, Callaghan takes exception to Robin Day's questioning about his views on Labour's Deputy Leader Roy Jenkins:

**Callaghan:** Well in that case you'd better discuss it with Mr Jenkins *but you're not going to get me to make statements that you'll then throw at Mr Jenkins and try to set us at each other's ears. I'm not going to take part in that game to satisfy a television panel.* Now let's turn to something else.

The fifth category – *interviewer history* – incorporates criticisms related to an interviewer's reputation and professional or personal history. For example, in a 2011 BBC interview, George Galloway was being quizzed by Andrew Neil about his level of support for the Iranian President. Galloway's response included "*You used to work for Rupert Murdoch of Fox News. We could, I think, quote some choice things from Fox News*".

Whilst the above five personalisation categories relate to comments critical in nature, this is not necessarily true of the sixth – *interviewer frame of mind*. This covers instances when the politician suggests that the interviewer is in a state of anger or agitation, and typically takes the form of advice to "calm down". An example of such rhetoric, by Peter Mandelson, is shown in the Introduction section above.

The final category, *blandishments*, relates to personalised comments by the politician which are distinctly positive in nature. Included are instances of flattery, banter (examples of these, by Gordon Brown and Boris Johnson, are also shown in



the Introduction above), indeed any personalised utterance with an apparent intention to generate conviviality.

**4.3.3.2 Reply rate.** For this analysis, it was first necessary to identify the interviewers' questions in accordance with the procedures for political interview research by Bull (1994), as described above. Thereby, each question was coded as either a *yes/no*, *wh-*, *alternative*, *indirect*, *declarative*, or *moodless* question. [In accordance with previous research (Feldman, 2016), small talk questions<sup>14</sup> were not included.] Some questions, though relatively rare, could be coded as more than one type (e.g., when the interviewer posed a double-barrelled question). Coding the questions in this manner facilitates an assessment of whether the requested information has been provided in the politician's responses. Thus, an evaluation was made as to whether the politician had made a reply, an intermediate reply, or a non-reply (Bull, 1994), also described above. This analysis was conducted in full by the author. To confirm reliability, an interrater evaluation was conducted on over 15% of the corpus, which was also analysed independently by a second researcher. In terms of identification of questions, an interrater reliability test (Cohen, 1960) was applied and resulted in  $k = 0.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . As for the identification of replies, a further test resulted in  $k = 0.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . According to statisticians Landis and Koch (1977), the first of these represents "almost perfect" agreement, and the latter is very high on their range of "substantial" agreement (p. 165), confirming the high reliability of this analysis overall.

## 4.4 Results

The results of the reply rate analysis are shown in Table 4.3. The overall reply rate for the entire 26 interviews was 37.69%. The reply rate for the 2015 interviews combined

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<sup>14</sup> Occasionally, the interviewer and politician briefly exchange small talk, typically before the start of the interview. Small talk questions like "Shall we get our mutual celebrations for the Arsenal victory out of the way first?" are not included in the analysis. This example occurred in the Peston-Corbyn interview. Both men are supporters of Arsenal Football Club.

was 42.82%; for 2017 it was 33.80%. Overall reply rates for individual politicians were: Cameron 33.93%; Clegg 40.00%; Farage 49.45%; Miliband 47.46%; Corbyn 29.63%; Farron 28.75%; May 31.71%; and Nuttall 49.45%.

**Table 4.3.** Politicians' full replies to questions.

Politician	Interviewer	No. of questions	Replies	Reply rate %
Cameron	Davis	49	18	36.73
Cameron	Marr	33	12	36.36
Cameron	Paxman	30	8	26.67
Clegg	Davis	35	17	48.57
Clegg	Marr	20	5	25.00
Farage	Davis	48	21	43.75
Farage	Marr	23	16	69.57
Farage	Marr	20	8	40.00
Miliband	Davis	37	13	35.14
Miliband	Marr	39	18	46.15
Miliband	Paxman	42	25	59.52
Corbyn	Marr	43	15	34.88
Corbyn	Neil	48	12	25.00
Corbyn	Paxman	46	12	26.09
Corbyn	Peston	25	9	36.00
Farron	Marr	10	1	10.00
Farron	Neil	49	12	24.49
Farron	Peston	21	10	47.62
May	Marr	37	11	29.73
May	Neil	52	19	36.54
May	Paxman	46	14	30.43
May	Peston	29	8	27.59
Nuttall	Marr	16	8	50.00
Nuttall	Marr	9	5	55.56
Nuttall	Neil	55	28	50.91
Nuttall	Peston	11	4	36.36
Totals		873	329	37.69

The personalisation analysis was cross-referenced with the reply-rate analysis to evaluate the use of personalised comments in equivocal responses (instances where the politician failed to provide a full reply). On this basis, only non-replies and intermediate replies were assessed. Personalisation by the politician directed at the interviewer within an explicit reply was thereby disregarded. For example, in the

following extract, Jeremy Paxman was pressing Ed Miliband on whether he would make deals with the Scottish National Party. Miliband bantered with Paxman, but as he also made a direct reply here (answering “No” to a yes-no question), this personalisation was not accounted for.

- Paxman:** You are, if you have any chance of forming a government you will won't you?
- Miliband:** No, *don't be so presumptuous*. We've got six weeks to go, six weeks to go, *you don't get to decide the election results six weeks before the general election*. You're important Jeremy but not that important. It's the British people who decide.  
(Sky News & C4, 2017)

Table 4.4 shows the results of the personalisation analysis. Overall, 7% of the 544 responses which were not full replies contained personal comments directed at the interviewer. The politician with the highest level of personalisation on this basis was Nigel Farage, with 17.39%. Percentage rates for other politicians were: Nick Clegg – 12.12%; Tim Farron – 10.53%; Ed Miliband – 9.68%; David Cameron – 5.41%; Theresa May – 5.36%; Jeremy Corbyn – 3.51%. None of Paul Nuttall's equivocal responses contained personalisation.

All instances of personalisation from these 26 interviews were identifiable in accordance with the categories identified by Waddle and Bull (2016). The most common type was befitting the category *interviewer conduct*, with 44.74% identified thus. One such example occurred as interviewer Robert Peston pressed Tim Farron on his views about gay sex. Farron's personalised response related to the line of questioning Peston was pursuing: “*Robert, Robert, I think if I'm honest with you it's possible that I'm not the only person who's getting tired of this line of questioning*”.

**Table 4.4.** Equivocal responses containing personalisation.

Politician	IR	1 IR bias	2 BO bias	3 IR comp.	4 IR conduct	5 IR history	6 IR FoM	7 Bland.	Total
Cameron	Davis				1			1	2(6.45)
Cameron	Marr								0
Cameron	Paxman				1			1	2(9.09)
Clegg	Davis			1				1	2(11.11)
Clegg	Marr			2					2(13.33)
Farage	Davis	1		3	2			1	7(25.93)
Farage	Marr								0
Farage	Marr				1				1(8.33)
Miliband	Davis							2	2(8.33)
Miliband	Marr				2			1	3(14.29)
Miliband	Paxman							1	1(5.88)
Corbyn	Marr				1				1(3.57)
Corbyn	Neil								0
Corbyn	Paxman			1				1	2(5.88)
Corbyn	Peston				1				1(6.25)
Farron	Marr								0
Farron	Neil			2	3				5(13.51)
Farron	Peston				1				1(9.09)
May	Marr				3				3(11.54)
May	Neil							1	1(3.03)
May	Paxman					1			1(3.13)
May	Peston				1				1(4.76)
Nuttall	Marr								0
Nuttall	Marr								0
Nuttall	Neil								0
Nuttall	Peston								0
Totals		1	0	9	17	1	0	10	38(6.99)

*Note.* Shows numbers of politicians' responses to questions which were not full replies and which contained personalisation. Percentages in parentheses. IR = Interviewer; BO = Broadcast organisation; comp. = competence; FoM = frame of mind; Bland. = Blandishments (e.g., flattery, banter).

Blandishments, which includes flattery and banter, accounted for 26.32%. An example from this category was apparent in the following exchange. Jeremy Paxman, citing the words of a member of the public, was querying whether Ed Miliband had the strength of character for the role of PM. Miliband's response was both jocular and equivocal:

**Paxman:** Right. In that event you would be leader of our country. You know what people say about you because it's hurtful but you can't be immune to it. A bloke on the Tube said to me last week "Ed Miliband goes into a room with Vladimir Putin, the door is closed, two minutes later the door is opened again and Vladimir Putin is standing there smiling and Ed Miliband is all over the floor in pieces."

**Miliband:** *Was that David Cameron that you met on the Tube?*  
(Sky News & C4, 2017)

Comments identified as being critical of an interviewer's competence accounted for 23.68%. One such example followed a question by Evan Davis about UKIP income tax policy; Farage responded with: "*Well you ought to do your research a bit better because you are wrong about the top rate of tax.*"

The following exchange includes the only response identified as befitting the category *interviewer bias*. Here, Farage's response appears to question the neutrality of interviewer Davis:

**Farage:** *I tell you what's interesting— [IR] let me now attack the liberal Metropolitan elite, in the shape of you talking to me, alright? When you interviewed David Cameron, when you interviewed Miliband and Clegg, you know, did you go through a list of their, not just council candidates— [IR] No, no, let me finish, let me finish. [IR] But it's very interesting— [IR] It's interesting that you do what everybody in the liberal Metropolitan elite does, you pick up a comment from somebody in UKIP made on Facebook, probably late at night. What you never do is challenge the other leaders about why their elected councillors— [IR] and officials are serving prison sentences— [IR] are serving prison sentences— [IR] for*

*paedophilia, are serving prison sentences for racial assault and yet just one person in UKIP says this and you attempt to portray that as being the party– [IR] and it's not.*

PM Theresa May made the only personalised response focused on the interviewer's history, namely, making reference to Paxman's reputation. Paxman's persistence in asking May about her view on UK membership of the European Union led her, eventually, to make a personal comment about the interviewing style for which he has become renowned:

**Paxman:** OK. So you've changed your mind?

**May:** What I am now doing–

**Paxman:** Have you changed your mind?

**May:** I think there are huge opportunities–

**Paxman:** Have you changed your mind?

**May:** *Jeremy, I know that you have– use this tactic and you want me to answer–*

(Sky UK, 2017)

There was one response by Farage which was critical of the broadcast organisation (the BBC). However, this followed a question by the BBC's Andrew Marr asking Farage about the future of the corporation and, importantly, contained no element of personal criticism, so was not coded as this form of personalisation. There were no personalised comments making reference to the interviewer's frame of mind.

The final assessment for personalisation was to gauge its potential for effectiveness. This was achieved by analysis of the interviewers' follow-up: whether or not, following the personalisation, there was a clear repeat or reformulation of

the question. Of the 38 instances of personalised equivocation, only 14 were followed by the same question or a reformulation of it.

## 4.5 Discussion

This study was focused on recent televised political interviews in the UK. Included were interviews with leaders of UK parties: all held and first broadcast during the 2015 or 2017 general election campaigns. The primary focus was an assessment of personalisation by the politicians, namely, personal comments directed at the interviewer in lieu of a direct reply to their question. To facilitate the evaluation of personalisation used in this way, an analysis of questions and replies was also necessary. The second of these analyses would highlight whether or not a question had received a full reply, and where this was not the case, these responses featured in the personalisation assessment. A consequence of the second analysis was an up-to-date evaluation of reply rate – the extent to which politicians answer interviewers’ questions. The results of both the personalisation and reply rate analyses are discussed below.

### 4.5.1 Personalisation

Across all 26 interviews (11 in 2015 and 15 in 2017), there were 544 equivocal responses by the politicians. 7% of these responses included personalised comments aimed at the interviewer. Waddle and Bull (2016) identified seven types of personalisation used by politicians in interviews. Five of these were evident from the current corpus. The most common – almost 45% – was comments about the interviewers’ conduct. Over a quarter were of the more genial variety – labelled *blandishments*. Just short of a quarter were comments making reference to the interviewers’ competence. There was only one example of a politician levelling an accusation of personal bias at the interviewer. There was also only a single example of a personalised response fitting the category *interviewer history*; namely, the

current PM referring to Jeremy Paxman's reputation. There were no personalised responses matching the categories *broadcast organisation bias* or *interviewer frame of mind*.

Findings here support Waddle and Bull's (2016) personalisation typology in that all personalised equivocal responses were identifiable as one of the seven types therein. A notable absence in these interviews from the personalisation typology was that labelled *interviewer frame of mind*. Previous research by the author has shown this specific form of personalisation to be used on a number of occasions by Labour politician Peter Mandelson. One such case is highlighted in the Introduction. Another occurred during an interview by the BBC's Tim Willcox, when Mandelson repeated the phrase "calm down" four times. A further instance of this highly personal response was evident during a press conference, where Mandelson and other leading Labour politicians were being questioned by journalists, including Sky's Adam Boulton. On that occasion, Mandelson repeatedly told Boulton to calm down. The obvious conclusion from these observations is that this form of response is not widely used, but is an occasional tactic of Mandelson's, and one which he uses somewhat successfully to achieve greater control of the conversation.

For the individual politicians in this study, UKIP leader Nigel Farage directed the largest proportion of personal comments at the interviewers. Over 17% of his equivocal responses contained personalisation. Liberal Democrat leaders Nick Clegg and Tim Farron came in at 12% and almost 11%, respectively; Labour leader Ed Miliband was at just below 10%. The two sitting PMs, David Cameron and Theresa May, were at just above 5%. The current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was below 4%. Interestingly, Farage's successor as UKIP leader, Paul Nuttall, directed no personal comments at the interviewers during his equivocal responses. Comparing these figures to previous findings (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993), only Farage was a more frequent user of personalisation than former PM Margaret Thatcher, whose reported rate of personalised equivocation was 13%. It is important to note that previous research did not encompass as broad a range of personalisation as this study, chiefly, the inclusion of more genial tactics (labelled blandishments). However,



only one of Farage's personalisations was identified thus, so, even without blandishments, the former UKIP leader's personalisation was still slightly higher than Thatcher's.

As only one of the political leaders in this study used personalised equivocation at a level above that of former PM Thatcher, this does not represent support for the prediction of higher levels by the recent politicians. However, all but one of the eight politicians here occasionally resorted to personal comments in lieu of a direct reply; previous research (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993) reported personalisation tactics by only one of three leaders analysed. So, as expected, more politicians were observed using personalised equivocal responses. This may be indicative of an increased likelihood for politicians to be personal in their responses. However, as the current method is broader in scope, and the videos and transcripts of the interviews from the 1980s and 1990s were not at our disposal, this could not be confirmed.

A closer look at one of the politicians analysed here highlights a notable distinction. At just over 5% of his equivocal responses containing personal comments, former PM Cameron was one of the lowest users of personalisation across these interviews. In contrast, an entirely different picture emerged from an analysis in a parliamentary setting (Waddle et al., 2018). When responding to questions from his political opponent, his personal aggression then was highest of the five PMs analysed. In one period of ten consecutive sessions of PMQs, almost 62% of his responses contained a personal attack on the LO. The salience of this sharp difference in one politician's behaviour across two distinct modes of political communication is perhaps more noteworthy with consideration of the timings. The PMQs sessions and Cameron's interviews both took place between January and April 2015. Clearly, the then PM had a tendency to respond with personal antagonism towards a political opponent. The same tendency was not a feature of his behaviour towards political interviewers.

**4.5.1.1 Functionality.** In terms of the effectiveness of personalised equivocation; namely, whether it has the potential to divert the interviewer from what the politician may deem a troublesome question, analysis showed that on 63% of occasions, the question was not repeated or reformulated. This falls somewhat short of the 83% reported for Thatcher's interviews following her personal attacks on the interviewer (Bull & Mayer, 1993). However, Bull and Mayer contrasted the effectiveness of that technique with some of the more defensive means of equivocation used by Thatcher's political opponent, Labour leader Neil Kinnock. Those varied from only 25% effective, to entirely ineffective (i.e., the interviewer always followed with a repeat or reformulation of the question). Taking account of those previous findings, the 63% result from the current study suggests that personalised equivocation – *playing the man, not the ball* – has the potential to be an effective strategy in diverting the interviewer from a troublesome line of questioning.

Cameron's clear disparity in personalisation across the two modes of political discourse suggests that personalisation in PMQs serves a different purpose than in interviews. Some of the potential functions cited in Waddle et al.'s (2018) PMQs research are not transferable. For example, personal criticism may serve to magnify cognitive differences between political opponents (Ilie, 2004). Indeed, particularly in the run up to a general election, party leaders may be motivated to make personal attacks in an attempt to reveal shortcomings of their opponents and to promote themselves. Attacks on an interviewer suggest a somewhat different motivation.

Waddle et al. (2018) also discuss how personalisation in PMQs might function as a means of equivocation. Ilie (2004) proposes that the emotional force of a personal attack outweighs its rational force. Conceivably, if personalisation has an emotional effect on an opposition politician, an interviewer might be similarly affected. Arguably, an interviewer does not expect to become the focus of a politician's response. The interviewer's role is to set the agenda (Greatbatch, 1986). Occasions when they become the topic of conversation might serve to distract them from their line of questioning. Indeed, even personalisation which is amicable may

engender a similar reaction. Atkinson (1984) expressed such a view from his observation of former PM Harold Wilson. Wilson's reported personalisation was merely to address the interviewer by his first name. A tactic which could "neutralize, albeit temporarily, the forceful interviewing style of Robin Day" (p. 174).

#### 4.5.2 Reply Rate

Reply rate – defined as the percentage of responses which explicitly provide the information as requested in the interviewers' questions – was also assessed. For the 2015 interviews this was 43%, for 2017 it was 34%, giving an overall reply rate across all 26 interviews of almost 38%. Research on interviews from the 1980s and 1990s found rates of just over 39% (Harris, 1991) and close to 46% (Bull, 1994). Although recent analyses of individual interviews have hinted at lower reply rates by current leading politicians (Bull, 2016, 2017), the more comprehensive analysis here suggests an overall similarity with their predecessors.

Individually, a broader range of reply rates was apparent across the eight political leaders. Amongst the lowest, and supportive of recent findings by Bull (2016, 2017), were the current leaders of the two main political parties: LO Corbyn at just below 30%, and PM May just short of 32%. Lowest of all across these interviews was Farron, at below 29%. Others, in ascending order of reply rates, were former PM Cameron 34%, Clegg 40%, and Miliband at over 47%. Highest in their reply rates were the UKIP pair, Farage and Nuttall. Their identical reply rate figures (49.45%) showed they gave direct replies to almost half of the questions. Their apparent similarity in this aspect of interview conduct stands in stark contrast to their levels of personalisation, where, in that analysis, they were polar opposites.

### 4.5.3 Conclusions

The basis of this study was an investigation into personalised rhetoric in equivocal responses by politicians. Featured interviews were with leaders of four UK political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative, and UKIP). This allowed an assessment across the mainstream political spectrum. Interviews were held during the last two general election campaigns (2015 and 2017) – the recency of these would facilitate an up-to-date analysis, and allow a comparison with findings from the study of interviews from around a generation ago. The method of analysis also provided an opportunity to make comparisons in reply rate – the extent to which politicians give explicit answers to interviewers' questions. Overall, the reply rate was 38%, not dissimilar to the overall rates reported for politicians from the 1980s and 1990s (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991).

In terms of personalisation, results here were supportive of the typology devised by Waddle and Bull (2016). All equivocal responses directed personally at the interviewer were identifiable in accordance with the typology. Five of their seven categories were identified in this corpus. Most were of the critical variety; though over a quarter were good-natured. The type of personalisation seemingly a tactic of former cabinet minister Peter Mandelson – repeatedly telling the interviewer to calm down – did not feature here. Overall, 7% of equivocal responses (occasions when a full reply was not forthcoming) contained personalisation. The politician highest in personalised rhetoric was Nigel Farage, with over 17% of his equivocal replies identified thus. However, his successor as UKIP leader, Paul Nuttall, made no such responses. The interpretation from these findings is that their position on the political spectrum is not a factor, suggesting it is more a matter of personal style. Also on an individual level, another finding of interest related to former PM David Cameron. A relative frequent user of personal attacks on opponents at PMQs (Waddle et al, 2018), he did not exhibit a similar tendency in these interviews.

The reported effectiveness of personalisation (Bull & Mayer, 1993) – the strong likelihood of it diverting the interviewer from repeating a question that has gone unanswered – was supported by the results of this study. Bull and Mayer also

reported that PM Margaret Thatcher was the politician inclined to direct personal responses at the interviewer. Results for the eight party leaders here showed only Farage to have a greater inclination for personalised equivocation than Thatcher. This finding, coupled with the now broader scope of identifying personalisation, is not evidence of increased levels by recent politicians. However, all but one of the eight leaders directed responses personally at the interviewer in lieu of a straight answer. It seems for most politicians, playing the man, in one form or another, is not beyond the pale.

## Chapter 5 – “He is just the nowhere man of British politics”: Personal Attacks in Prime Minister’s Questions

This chapter is based on: Waddle, M., Bull, P., & Böhnke, J. R. (2018). “He is just the nowhere man of British politics”: Personal attacks in Prime Minister’s Questions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1177/0261927X18767472<sup>15</sup>

### 5.1 Abstract

Views from the media, the public, and from inside Parliament have expressed discontent with, reportedly, recent high levels of personally antagonistic behaviour in PMQs. The focus of this study is a fine-grained analysis of language classified as a personal attack. A personal attack coding system was devised, and significant individual differences between Prime Ministers and increases across individual premierships were observed. Of the five Prime Ministers between 1979 and 2016, David Cameron was the most personally aggressive, though a significant decrease followed Jeremy Corbyn’s appointment as Leader of the Opposition. Potential explanations for recent highs include heightened TV and social media attention coupled with sports-like reporting and party expectation, and not discounting individual personalities or intergroup theories. Suggestions for the functions of personal attacks include highlighting differences, disarming or deconstructing adversaries, and equivocation. Further explanations are offered for the relative politeness of Cameron vs Corbyn.

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<sup>15</sup> The author, Maurice Waddle, designed the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the article under the supervision of Professor Peter Bull. Dr Jan Böhnke advised on statistical techniques.

## 5.2 Introduction

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

The overall adversarial nature of the weekly debates is increasing in its resemblance to “an unpleasant football match”, according to an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, with “secret grudge matches, settlement of scores, and covert fouls committed when the players hope the ref is not looking” (Hoggart, 2011). In 2014, respected TV news presenter and journalist Tom Bradby wrote on Twitter “PMQs has become completely, utterly pointless. But for what it’s worth, I think [David Cameron] needs to watch the rudeness” (Bradby, 2014). Furthermore, the Speaker (the parliamentary official charged with keeping order during debates in the House of Commons - currently John Bercow) claims the public have a strong aversion to the rowdiness on display (Hardman, 2015). Indeed, Bercow’s disquiet for the potential damage to Parliament’s reputation is apparent by his persistent criticism of PMQs (Reid, 2014). Of course, name-calling in parliamentary debates is not restricted to Cameron. A question during PMQs in 2014 directed at Cameron from LO Miliband

included “It is not so much ‘The Wolf of Wall Street’ but the dunce of Downing Street” (Hansard, HC Debate, 2 Apr 2014, col. 876). In his response, Cameron referred to the sale of the nation’s gold when Labour was in government and branded Miliband, and Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls who was sat alongside him, as “the two muppets”.

Is the foregoing publicity and public dissatisfaction indicative of any real change in parliamentary behaviour? Confrontation and hostility were reported features of LO/PM clashes in PMQs when Harold Wilson (Labour PM 1964-1970 & 1974-1976) and Edward Heath (Conservative PM 1970-1974) were leaders of their respective parties around half a century ago (Jones, 1973). Are the latest political leaders more antagonistic and rude than recent predecessors? Concern over an apparent increase in incivility in recent years has been reported for American politics (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012). Sobieraj and Berry (2011) analysed political commentary on American TV, radio, blogs, and in newspaper columns. Similarly, they suggest highly dramatic incivility – termed “outrage” – has increased. Debate over the various aspects of political incivility has been widespread (e.g., Muddiman, 2017). Also in the USA, Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin (2010), who investigated negative campaigning on political websites, suggest there has been an online increase in personal antagonism towards political opponents. Personally antagonistic language directed at opposing politicians is certainly one aspect of incivility – and the focus of the current research into PMQs. It is clear that the development of a reliable measure to facilitate quantitative analyses would help to answer these questions.

### 5.2.1 Previous Research and Theory

Of course, the behaviour of politicians in parliamentary debates, including PMQs, has not escaped the attention of researchers. One study focusing on the then PM John Major (Burnham, Jones, & Elgie, 1995) claimed he became less forthcoming in his responses and more impolite than earlier in his premiership. Impoliteness was also the focus of research by Harris (2001), who assessed PMQs from the concept of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson’s



highly influential theory, the purpose of politeness is to avoid threatening another's face – *face* being a person's "positive social value" (Goffman, 1955/[1967, p. 5]) – which can be maintained, enhanced, damaged, or lost during social interaction. Harris (2001) indicated that impoliteness is a systematic feature of PMQs, supporting the suggestion of Culpeper (1996) of the importance of impoliteness in certain contexts, rather than it being little more than a marginal feature. Harris proposed that impoliteness in PMQs is not only an accepted mode of interaction but also one which is approved and even rewarded.

Bull and Wells (2012) performed a systematic analysis of the language used in 18 PMQs sessions from 2007. They identified six different ways that the LO can threaten the face of the PM in their question, and five counter measures that the PM uses to defend face in his/her responses. They supported Harris's (2001) notion of the expectation of face-threatening behaviour in PMQs, claiming MPs enhance their reputations via aggressive communication. Murphy (2014), from a sample of six PMQs sessions, identified seven different face-threatening acts in questions to the PM, and five in the PMs' responses. Furthermore, he highlighted five "impolite linguistic strategies" (p. 91) - defined as face threats deemed highly impolite and confrontational. A more extensive study by Bates, Kerr, Byrne and Stanley (2014) examined PMQs across a 31-year period. Comparing the opening sessions of the five most recent PMs at that time, they reported findings supporting their claim that PMQs was becoming more rowdy, including increases in the number of interruptions. Findings also indicated an escalation in the average number of interventions by the Speaker to call the House to order. They also reported a greater likelihood for MPs to ask *unanswerable* questions<sup>16</sup> the longer their tenure, plus increasing domination of the proceedings by party leaders.

Though the process of questioning leading government figures is an opportunity for any MP to shine (Giddings & Irwin, 2005), PMQs has come to be dominated by two main players: the LO and the PM (Bates et al., 2014) – their weekly

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<sup>16</sup> Questions deemed difficult to reply to without potential face damage, or based on inaccurate information.

clashes resembling a gladiatorial contest (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). PMQs has been described as a performance by a select group of famous actors “displaying a standard repertoire of rhetorical skills” played out in front of a packed gallery (Lovenduski, 2012, p. 320) – and, since 1989, to the TV-viewing public.

Despite the undoubted valuable contributions of the aforementioned studies to the understanding of communication and behavioural styles of parliamentarians, both as a group and as individuals, they are no barometer of rudeness and personal disrespect. Waddle and Bull (2016), in describing personalisation as having a specific purpose in the context of political discourse, proposed a typology of personalisation to evaluate the discursive practices of politicians (study presented in chapter 3). They identified seven distinct types of personalisation, often used as a control measure in the face of a challenging question. However, the basis of their model and its intended application was the political interview. Whilst there are obvious similarities – in both interviews and PMQs, politicians are subjected to a potentially troublesome questioning process – there are obvious differences. In a political interview, there is an expectation on the interviewer, typically a broadcast journalist, to be seen to remain impartial; there is no such obligation on the person asking questions in PMQs (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). Interviews tend to be conducted on a one-to-one basis, without interruption; PMQs is played out in the presence of several hundred MPs, often to a cacophony of interruptive shouts, barracking, or laughter. Interviews, typically subject to broadcasters’ regulations, and with an agenda set by the interviewer (Greatbatch, 1986), tend to at least resemble a free-flowing conversation; in PMQs, the speaking turns of individual participants are prompted by the Speaker, and they are expected to conform to parliamentary regulations. Despite these differences, personalisation tactics may be similarly employed in the parliamentary setting, both to protect one’s face and to attack the face of opposition members.

### 5.2.2 A Brief History of PMQs

Questioning of the Prime Minister in Parliament first became a regular and frequent event in 1961 (House of Commons Information Office, 2010b). Until 1997, PMQs took place twice weekly – on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Parliament was sitting – typically lasting 15 minutes. It became a single weekly event for around 30 minutes each sitting Wednesday from the outset of Tony Blair’s premiership in 1997. Each session begins with the same tabled routine question from an MP chosen via a random selection process known as the *shuffle* (Coe & Kelly, 2009). The purpose of the first question is to ask the PM to list their official engagements, which in turn receives a stock answer. Following this parliamentary ritual, the MP can then ask a *supplementary* question on a topic of their choice. The PM need not have any prior knowledge of a supplementary question, thereby allowing the potential for unpredictability and surprise. The PM then faces further supplementary questions from both opposition and government MPs. Generally, members can ask only one question, giving them no opportunity to follow up on the PM’s reply. The LO, however, is permitted six questions, therefore has adequate opportunity for follow-ups to the PM’s reply should they wish. Control of the proceedings is the responsibility of the Speaker, who, among other things, has a duty to admonish members who use language deemed unacceptable.

### 5.2.3 Research Focus

The focus of the current research was an evaluation of the level of personalisation – categorised as personal attacks – by the two main players in PMQs: the PM and the LO. To conduct such an analysis, it was necessary to clarify personal attacks appropriate to this specific mode of political communication. The coding system, described in detail in the subsequent section, is based primarily on language characterised as disrespectful. The period of analysis partially follows that of Bates et al. (2014), namely, the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. Besides providing a means of identifying

personalisation, analysis here extends beyond the scope of their research insofar as it encompasses both the early and latter periods of each of the five PMs. This feature specifically enables an evaluation of the research aims: to assess levels of this form of personalisation over a period spanning five decades, and within the tenure of each PM.

More specifically, this research tests two hypotheses. Firstly, as the findings of Bates et al. (2014) indicated an increase in rowdiness, arguably, that could in part be a consequence of increased personal disrespect by the main players. Thereby, it was predicted that analysis here would reveal higher levels of such antagonistic language by the more recent leaders. Secondly, Bates et al. also indicated an increased likelihood for MPs to become more troublesome in their questioning the longer their tenure, and Burnham et al (1995) suggested that John Major's impoliteness grew throughout his time in office. Therefore, it was also predicted that findings would indicate an increase in personal attack levels by the PMs across their premierships.

## **5.3 Method**

### **5.3.1 Participants**

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

### 5.3.2 Apparatus

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

### 5.3.3 Procedure

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

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

When this research began, David Cameron was the current PM. Therefore, at that time, unlike his predecessors, there was no actual period immediately preceding the end of his tenure. On that basis, the then most recent PMQs sessions (January to March 2015) – the last 10 before the 2015 General Election – were used as an appropriate representation of his latter period. This situation changed when, following the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) on

23 June 2016, Cameron announced his decision to resign as PM. Cameron's premiership ended on 13 July 2016 when he was succeeded by Theresa May. Rather than discard the 2015 Cameron premiership data, this forms part of the analysis in the *Original Study* here. Additional data was then collected from the period immediately prior to Cameron's departure from office; this was analysed in the *Follow-up Study*. Table 5.1 shows this in detail.

**Table 5.1.** The ten blocks of PMQs sessions analysed in each study.

PM	Period (Code)	Dates of PMQs sessions
Margaret Thatcher	Early (MT1)	22 May 1979 – 7 Feb 1980
Margaret Thatcher	Late (MT2)	8 May 1990 – 27 Nov 1990
John Major	Early (JM1)	29 Nov 1990 – 23 Apr 1991
John Major	Late (JM2)	3 Dec 1996 – 20 Mar 1997
Tony Blair	Early (TB1)	21 May 1997 – 19 Nov 1997
Tony Blair	Late (TB2)	21 Mar 2007 – 27 Jun 2007
Gordon Brown	Early (GB1)	4 Jul 2007 – 5 Dec 2007
Gordon Brown	Late (GB2)	6 Jan 2010 – 7 Apr 2010
David Cameron	Early (DC1)	13 Oct 2010 – 19 Jan 2011
David Cameron ( <i>Original study</i> only)	Late (DC2)	14 Jan 2015 – 25 Mar 2015
David Cameron ( <i>Follow-up</i> only)	Late (DC2)	13 Apr 2016 – 13 Jul 2016

For the sessions at the beginning of Thatcher's premiership, transcripts were accessed from <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>. Thatcher first became PM on 4 May 1979. The website was checked from that date onwards for occurrences of PMQs: identified via the headings 'Commons Sitting of [date]' / 'ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS' / 'PRIME MINISTER'. Only Q/R exchanges from Callaghan and Thatcher were selected. This process continued through to the 60th Q/R exchange on 7 February 1980. Transcripts from the subsequent blocks of PMQs (Thatcher's last through to Cameron's last) were accessible from <https://www.parliament.uk/> via the following links: *Parliamentary business > Publications & records > Commons Hansard archives > By date*. Every Tuesday and Thursday, up to the end of Major's premiership (2 May 1997), was then checked for occurrences of PMQs. From that date onwards – the outset of Blair's premiership – the same method was used, though now PMQs had shifted to Wednesdays only. An easier method for PMQs in more recent years

was available, also via the Parliament website: *Parliamentary business > News > Parliament, government and politics > Parliament > Prime Minister's Questions* – though this applied only to sessions from 26 November 2008 onwards.

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

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

Kinnock to PM Thatcher [HC Deb, 22 May 1990, col. 167]), it would not be identified as personalisation here.

Another example is a claim that the member opposite is mistaken about a particular issue. Should the comment resemble “The Leader of the Opposition is wrong”, this would not qualify; but, a statement like “As usual, the Leader of the Opposition is wrong” implies an enduring negative character trait, therefore would qualify. Furthermore, comments by the LO that the PM failed to answer the question are common in PMQs. Again, however, only those which imply this is typical of the PM, or contain an element of disrespect (e.g., “She dodged the question then, and she is trying to dodge it now” LO Kinnock to PM Thatcher [HC Deb, 28 June 1990, col. 483]) are classed as a personal attack. See Table 5.2 for further details of comments which qualify as a personal attack.

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

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



**Table 5.2.** Personal attacks in PMQs.

Comments focused on the member opposite which contain or are couched in personal disrespect, e.g.,	Examples
Negative personality statements	<i>The truth is he is weak and despicable and wants to crawl to power in Alex Salmond's pocket.</i> (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288])
Implications of an enduring negative character trait	<i>If he had an ounce of courage, he would rule it out.</i> (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288]) <i>Is not the truth that, just like on every other issue, we get broken promises from this Prime Minister?</i> (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 19 Jan 2011, col. 834])
Negative names/labels	<i>Every forecast the right hon. Gentleman has made about the economy has been wrong. [...] He has made misjudgment after misjudgment on every single question.</i> (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 18 Mar 2015, col. 756]) <i>He is just the nowhere man of British politics.</i> (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 24 Nov 2010, col. 261]) <i>He is a socialist – a crypto-communist.</i> (PM Thatcher to LO Kinnock [HC Deb, 18 Oct 1990, col. 1375])
Aspersions/disparaging insinuations	<i>He is being funded to the tune of £47 million by the hedge funds. Everyone knows that is why he is refusing to act, but what is his explanation?</i> (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 4 Feb 2015, col. 265]) <i>He says the election is all about me and him, but the one thing he wants to avoid is a televised debate between me and him.</i> (LO Miliband to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 4 Mar 2015, col. 939])
Patronising, condescending remarks	<i>That is a much better question; I think we are making some progress.</i> (PM Cameron to LO Miliband [HC Deb, 20 Oct 2010, col. 939])
Mockery	<i>If the Prime Minister is going to have pre-prepared jokes, I think they ought to be a bit better than that one – probably not enough bananas on the menu.</i> (LO Cameron to PM Brown [HC Deb, 10 Feb 2010, col. 904])
Badgering	<i>The Prime Minister claims to be a numbers man, so is it 90 percent, is it 95 percent or is it 98 percent? Come on.</i> (LO Cameron to PM Brown [HC Deb, 25 Jul 2007, col. 836]) <i>I have to say to him– He talks about job insecurity and my two months to go– It might be in my party's interests for him to sit there; it is not in the national interest. I would say: for heaven's sake man, go!</i> (PM Cameron to LO Corbyn [HC Deb, 29 Jun 2016, col. 294])

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

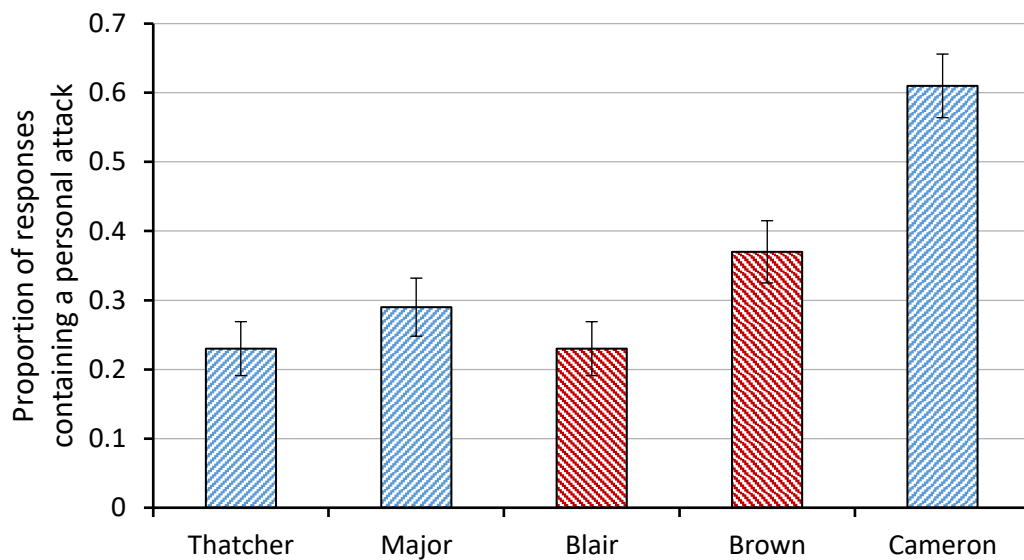
## 5.4 Results

### 5.4.1 Original Study

This study was based on the early and late periods of each PM. Research began in 2015, whilst Cameron was still the incumbent PM. Consequently, his latter period was represented by the latest at that time: the 10 sessions immediately prior to the 2015 General Election, when he was opposed by LO Miliband. Statistical analysis was conducted via a generalised linear model (GLM). This was chosen due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable – the level of personalisation by either the PM or the LO. Within each GLM there were two factors: politician (e.g., individual PMs in the first analysis) and time period (early and late), and subsequently an interaction effect to assess the difference between periods for each politician.

The first analysis was conducted to assess the personalisation by the five PMs in their responses to questions from the LO. Figure 5.1 shows overall personalisation (early and late periods combined) by each PM. It is apparent that, except for Blair, PMs tended to be more personally disrespectful in their responses than their predecessors. Cameron responded with significantly more personal attacks than

each of the other four PMs ( $p < .001$  in all cases) – a total of 72 from his overall 120 (60 earliest and 60 latest) assessed responses, equating to 60%. Total overall personal attacks by Thatcher, Major, Blair, and Brown were found to be 29 (24.2%), 36 (30%), 29 (24.2%), and 45 (37.5%), respectively. Brown’s personalisation was significantly higher than Thatcher’s and Blair’s ( $p = .022$ ). Table 5.3 shows the quantities for each politician by period.



**Figure 5.1.** Personal attacks by PMs.

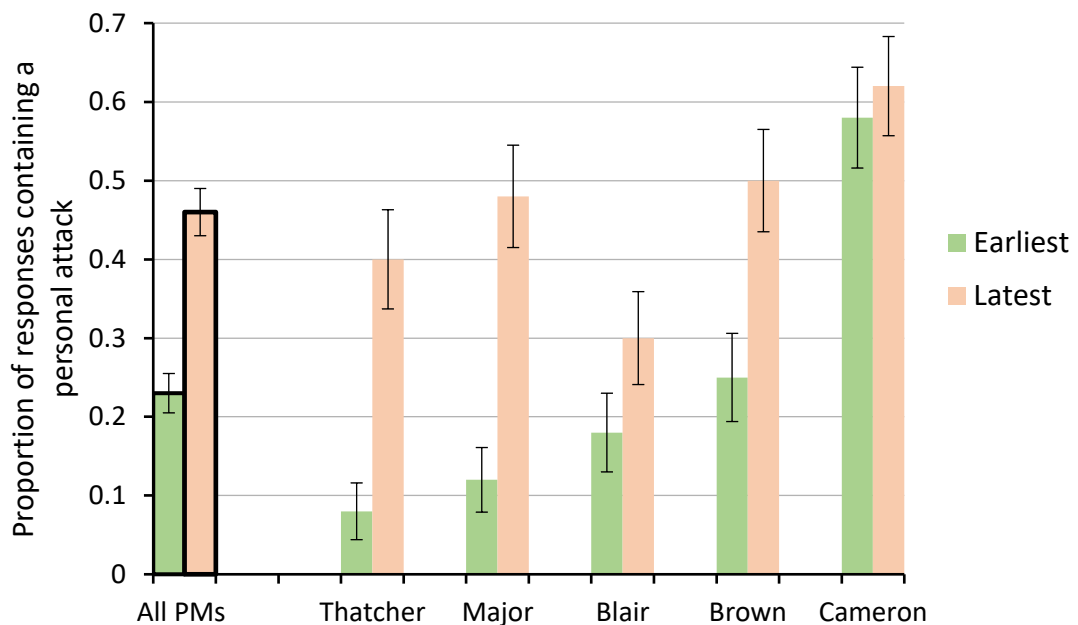
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM. Blue = Conservative, Red = Labour. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 5.2 shows comparisons in PM personalisation between the early and latter periods. Firstly, for the PMs combined, significantly more personal attacks took place towards the end of their premierships ( $p < .001$ ). Individually, all five PMs increased in their use of personal attacks. To test for significance here, Bonferroni correction was applied due to multiple tests (five early/late period comparisons), which adjusted the significance threshold from .050 to .010. So, whilst each PM’s personalisation total was higher in their last 60 responses than in their first 60, the only significant increases were Thatcher’s ( $p < .001$ ), Major’s ( $p < .001$ ), and Brown’s ( $p = .005$ ). The increases in personal attacks by Blair and Cameron were found to be non-significant ( $p = .139$ ,  $p = .709$ , respectively).

**Table 5.3.** Number of turns containing a personal attack (pers.) within each period.

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

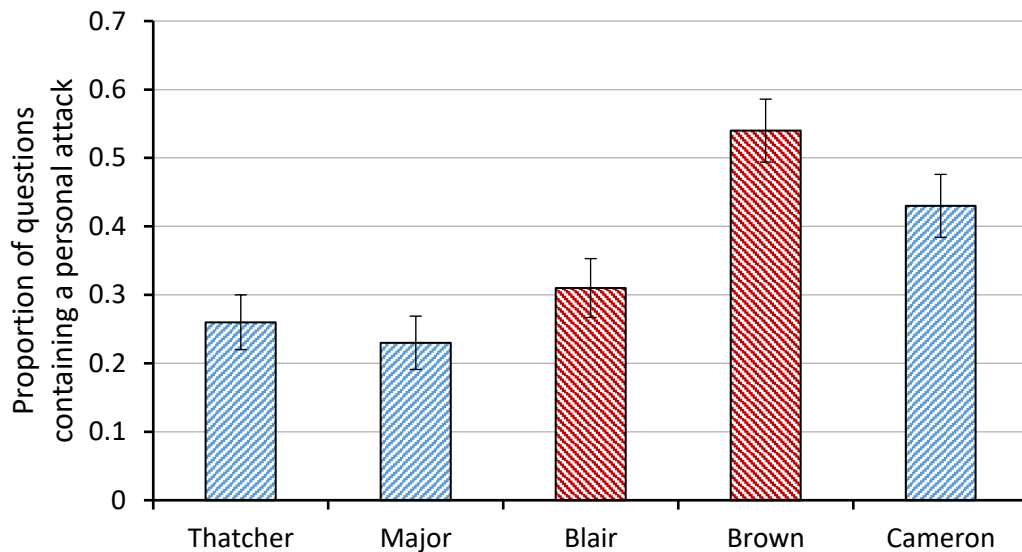
*Note.* There are 60 turns per politician per period. Values in parentheses are the percentages of those 60 turns which contained a personal attack. In Blair’s early period, Major was LO for only 3 sessions and asked 13 questions, Hague followed as LO and asked the remaining 47 questions.



**Figure 5.2.** PM personal attacks by period.

*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

The next analysis was focused on personal attacks directed at the PM in the LO questions. Figure 5.3 shows how each of the five PMs fared overall (early and late periods combined) in the proportion of questions they faced which contained a personal attack. Brown, who across his entire premiership was opposed by LO Cameron, received the most personal attacks. Personalisation directed at Brown was significantly higher than that directed at Thatcher, Major, and Blair ( $p < .001$  in all cases), but not significantly higher than that directed at Cameron ( $p = .091$ ). Cameron as PM, who faced LO Miliband in both early and late periods, also received significantly more personal attacks than Thatcher ( $p = .004$ ) and Major ( $p = .001$ ) but not Blair ( $p = .061$ ).

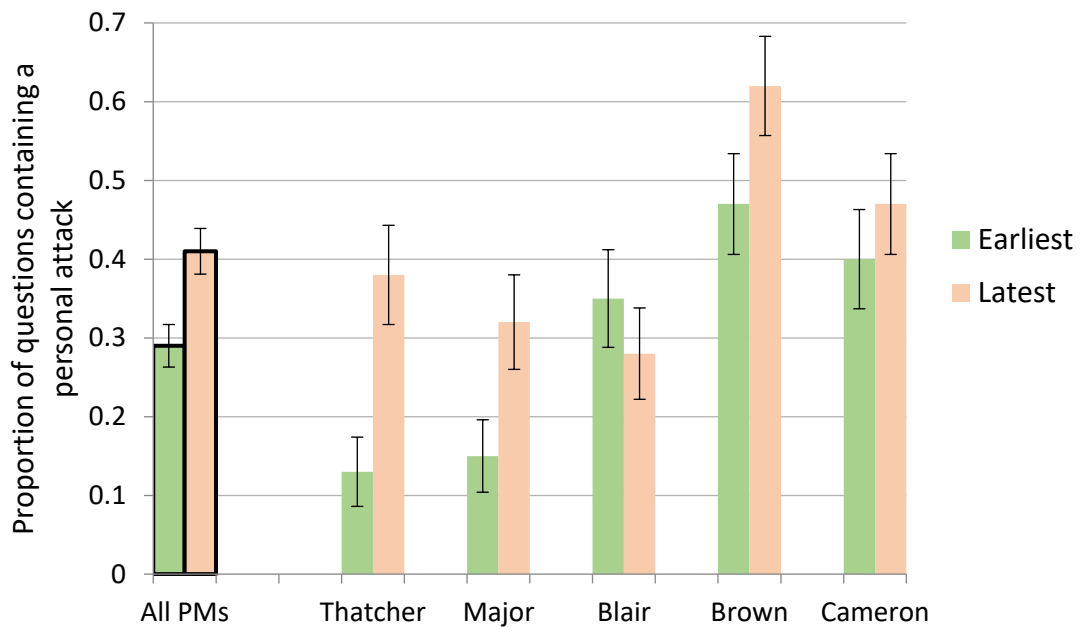


**Figure 5.3.** LO personal attacks directed at each PM.

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

Blue = Conservative PM, Red = Labour PM. Error bars represent standard error.

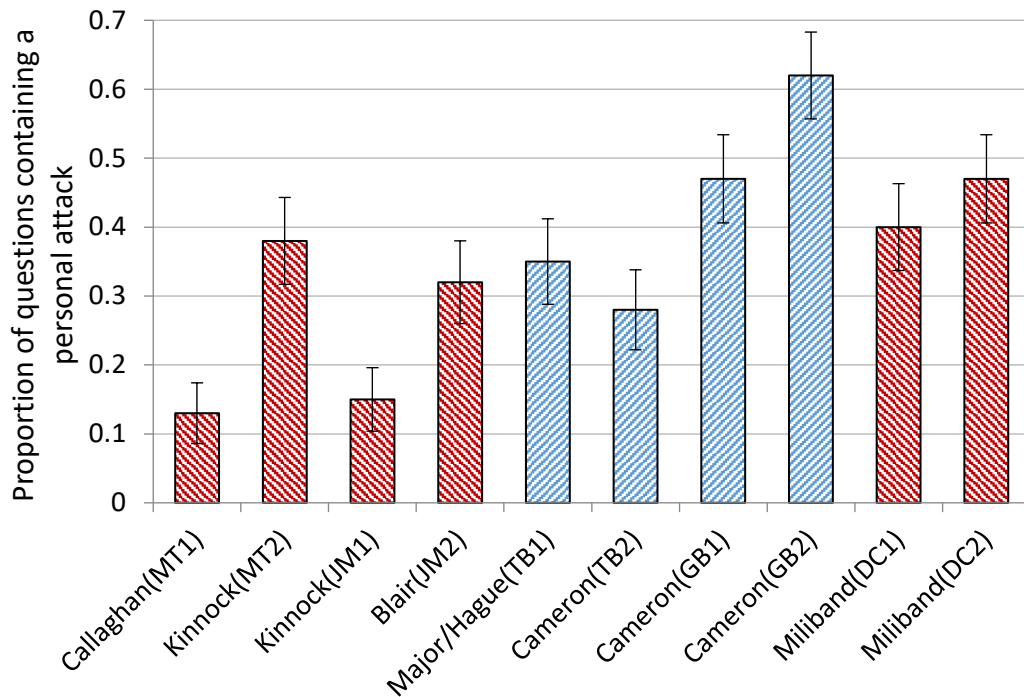
Figure 5.4 shows a comparison of time period for LO personalisation. Firstly, on a combined basis, significantly more personal attacks were found in the latter periods ( $p = .003$ ). Individually, all PMs except Blair received more personal attacks in the latter periods of their premierships, though the only significant difference (following Bonferroni correction) was for Thatcher ( $p = .003$ ).



**Figure 5.4.** LO personal attacks directed at PMs by period.

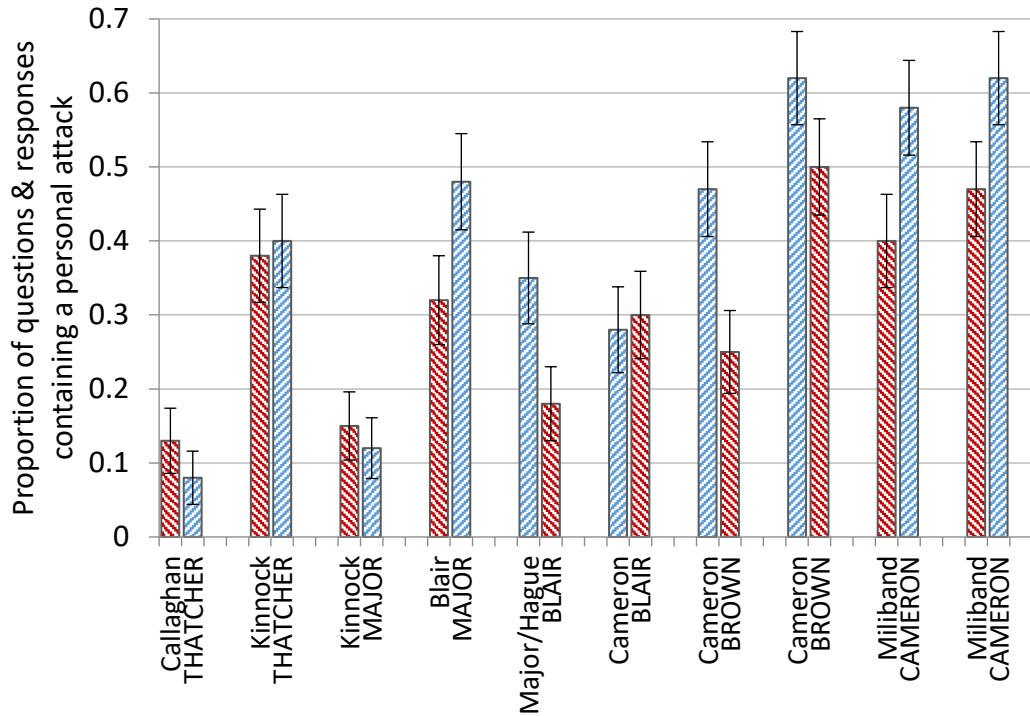
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM. Error bars represent standard error.

In terms of personalisation by individual LOs, again it was Cameron who was the most personally offensive. Figure 5.5 shows the individual LO performances. Focusing on single periods, Cameron in opposition at the end of Brown’s premiership used the highest number of personal attacks against any PM. Indeed, there were significantly more LO personalisations in that period than any other (ranging from  $p = .019$  to  $p < .001$ ), except for Cameron at the start of PM Brown’s tenure ( $p = .101$ ) and Miliband in PM Cameron’s latter period ( $p = .101$ ). Conversely, Cameron in opposition at the end of Blair’s premiership was one of the least personally offensive LOs: significantly greater than only Callaghan opposing Thatcher ( $p = .047$ ).



**Figure 5.5.** Personal attacks by LOs (PM/period code in parentheses).  
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Red = Labour LO, Blue = Conservative LO. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 5.6 shows how each PM compared to their respective LO (both early and late periods) in the use of personal attacks. The most noticeable difference was at the start of Brown’s premiership, when he received more from LO Cameron than he delivered ( $p = .015$ ). However, following Bonferroni correction due to multiple comparisons, none of the differences was statistically significant. The phi coefficient ( $\phi$ ) was then computed to assess the association between question and response. This gave some indication of how the level of personalisation in the LO’s question might prompt something similar in the PM’s response. Interpretations of effect sizes were based on Cohen (1969). Results indicated that, overall, there was a small effect ( $\phi = 0.27, p < .001$ ). For each period, there was mostly only a small effect or no effect: MT1  $\phi = .24, p = .067$ ; MT2  $\phi = .27, p = .039$ ; JM1  $\phi = -.15, p = .237$ ; JM2  $\phi = .27, p = .034$ ; TB1  $\phi = .10, p = .421$ ; TB2  $\phi = .15, p = .235$ ; GB1  $\phi = .31, p = .017$ ; GB2  $\phi = .31, p = .017$ ; DC2  $\phi = .05, p = .696$ . There was just one medium effect: PM Cameron’s early period when he was opposed by LO Miliband (DC1  $\phi = 0.41, p = .001$ ).

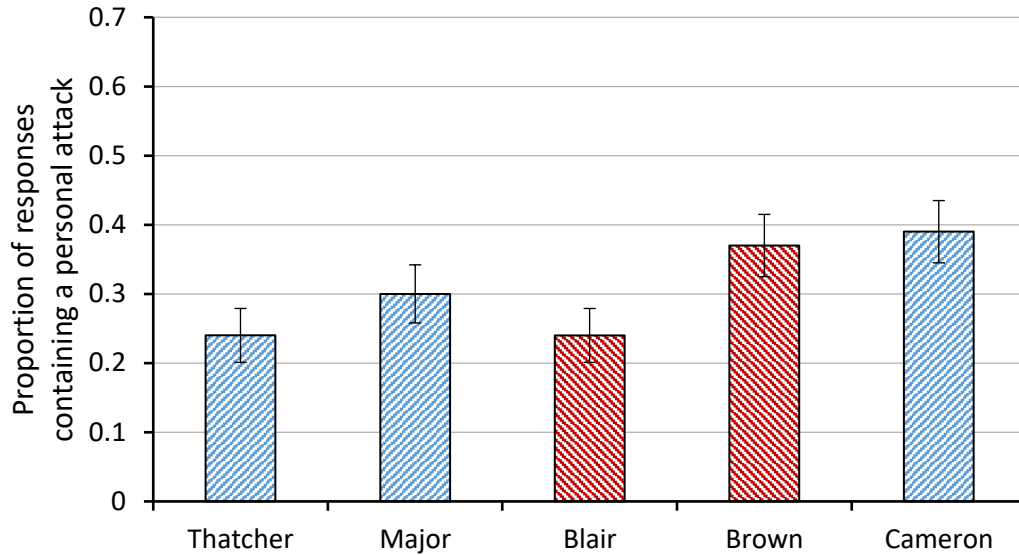


**Figure 5.6.** Personal attacks by PMs (in capitals) and their respective LOs. *Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM. Red = Labour, Blue = Conservative. Error bars represent standard error.

#### 5.4.2 Follow-up Study

In this study, Cameron’s latter period was now represented by his final 10 sessions prior to resignation in July 2016. Throughout those sessions he faced questions from LO Corbyn. Table 5.3 above shows the personalisation data from that period, indicating that PM Cameron’s overall personalised responses were now down to 39.2%. [The following figures include some duplicated representations from the original study, retained to aid evaluative comparisons.] Figure 5.7 shows that, as in the original study, Cameron was highest in personalisation use overall compared to the four preceding PMs; however, now he was significantly higher than only Blair and Thatcher ( $p = .012$ ).



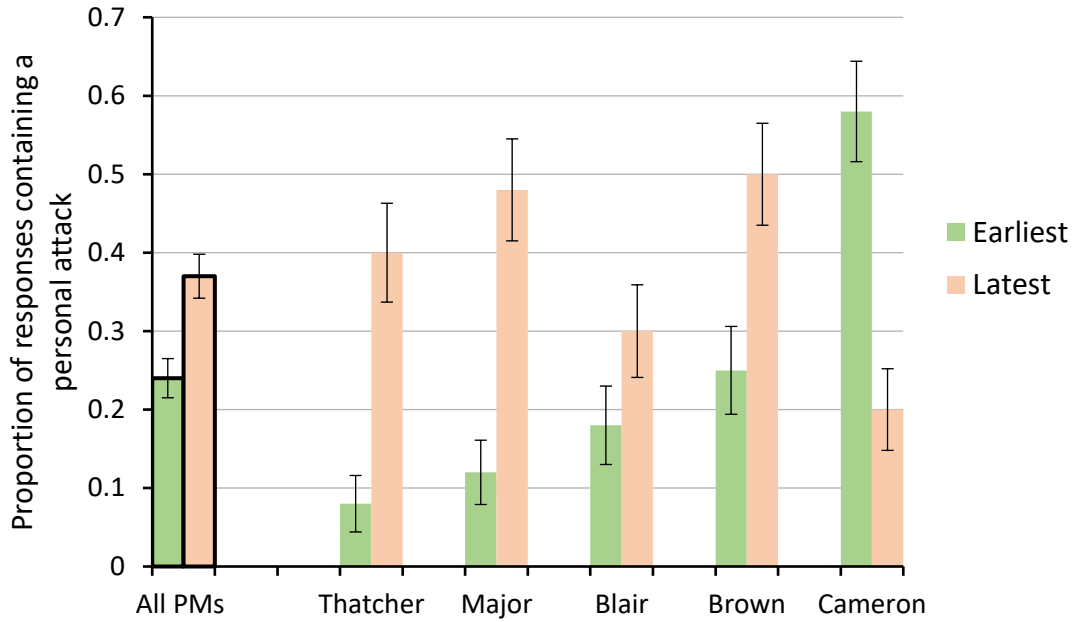


**Figure 5.7.** Personal attacks by PMs.

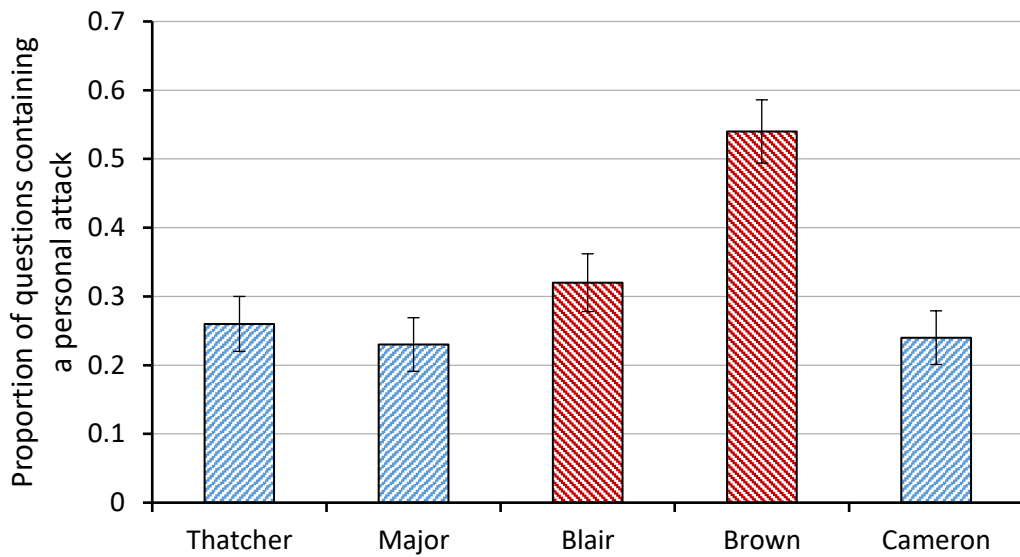
*Note:* 'Proportion' relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM. Blue = Conservative, Red = Labour. Error bars represent standard error.

Figure 5.8 shows that, whilst the differences between early and latter periods for the PMs combined was now reduced, there was still a highly significant increase in the latter periods ( $p < .001$ ). For Cameron's premiership alone, analysis now shows that he was the only PM to score lower on personalisation in his last 10 sessions than his first 10, making significantly fewer attacks (Bonferroni correction applied) in his latter period ( $p < .001$ ).

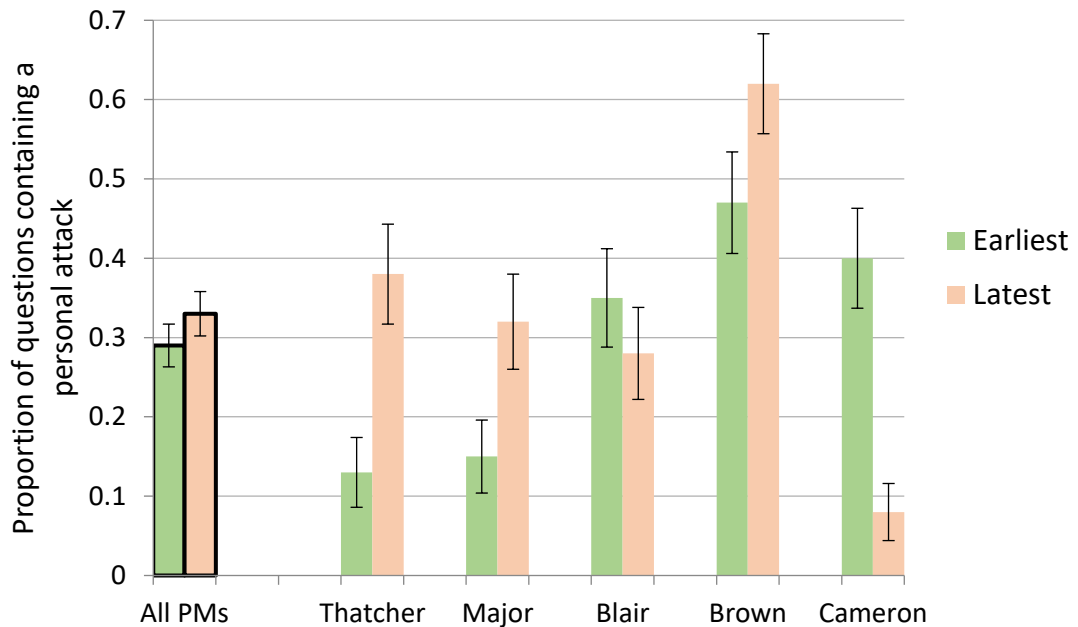
Figure 5.9 shows the levels of LO personalisation received by each PM. Cameron was now found to receive one of the lowest levels of personal attacks of any of the five PMs, and significantly lower than Brown ( $p < .001$ ). Figure 5.10 shows that there is no longer a significant difference in combined LO personalisation between early and latter periods ( $p = .320$ ). Individually, Cameron was now found to receive significantly fewer personal attacks (Bonferroni correction applied) at the end of his premiership than at the start ( $p < .001$ ).



**Figure 5.8.** PM personal attacks by period.  
*Note:* 'Proportion' relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Error bars represent standard error.



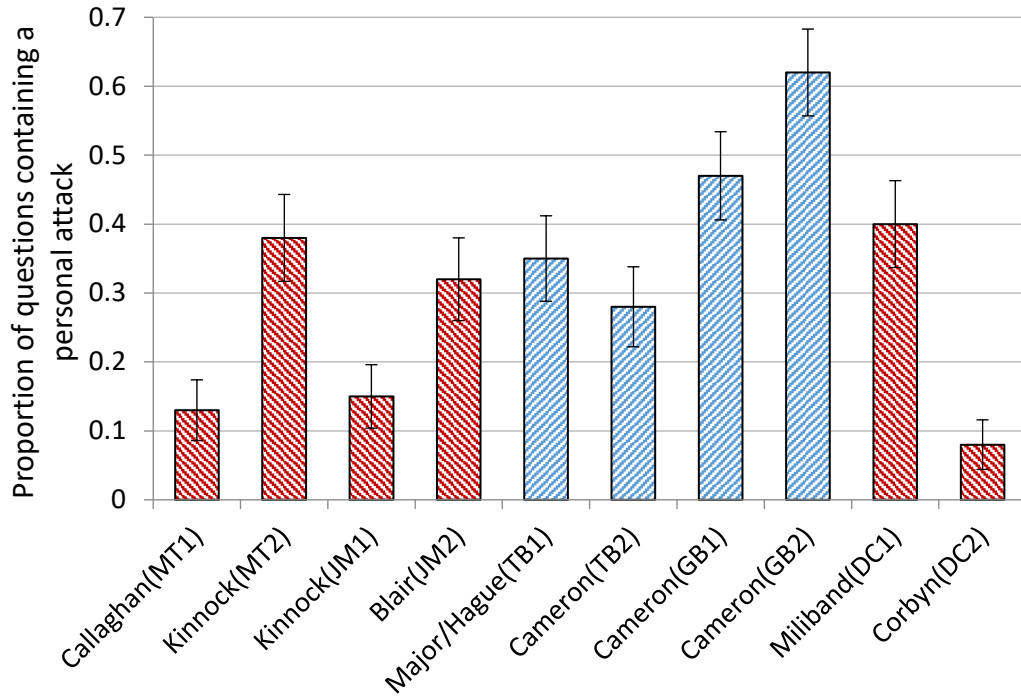
**Figure 5.9.** LO personal attacks directed at each PM.  
*Note:* 'Proportion' relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Blue = Conservative PM, Red = Labour PM. Error bars represent standard error.



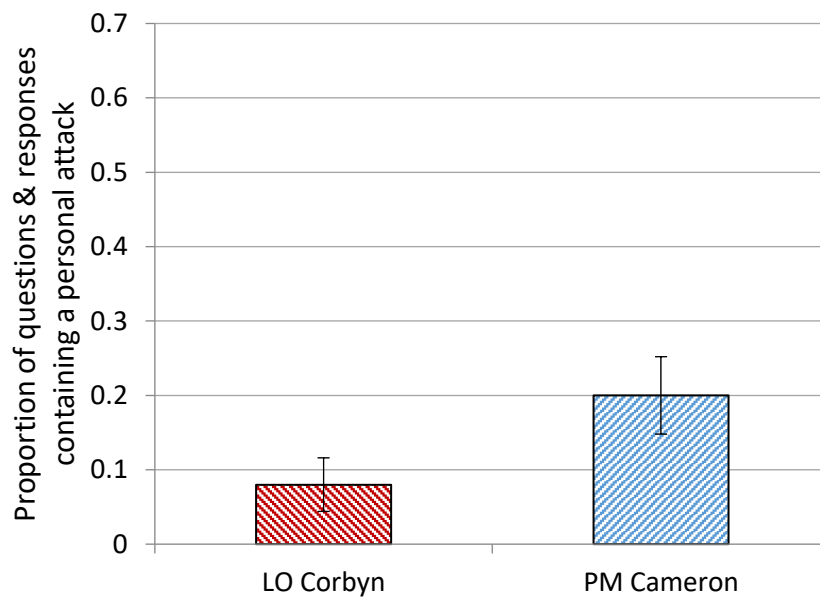
**Figure 5.10.** LO personal attacks directed at PMs by period.  
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Error bars represent standard error.

When personalisation by individual LOs was examined (see Figure 5.11), Corbyn was found to subject PM Cameron to fewer personal attacks than any opposition leader to their respective PM. His level of personalisation was lower than all other LOs: significantly so in all cases (ranging from  $p < .001$  to  $p = .007$ ) except for Kinnock opposing Major ( $p = .261$ ) and Callaghan opposing Thatcher ( $p = .382$ ). Figure 5.12 shows the personalisation comparison between the LO and the PM in Cameron’s latter period. Though PM Cameron was more personally offensive than LO Corbyn in this period, the difference was not significant ( $p = .075$ ).

Again the phi coefficient was computed to assess the level of association in terms of personalisation between question and response. This revealed no effect of LO Corbyn’s questions on Cameron’s responses ( $\varphi = 0.15$ ,  $p = .243$ ).



**Figure 5.11.** Personal attacks by LOs (PM/period code in parentheses).  
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Red = Labour LO, Blue = Conservative LO. Error bars represent standard error.



**Figure 5.12.** Personal attacks in Cameron’s latter period (2016).  
*Note:* ‘Proportion’ relates to the estimated marginal means from the GLM.  
 Red = Labour, Blue = Conservative. Error bars represent standard error.

## 5.5 Discussion

The findings from this research into personalisation in PMQs (from Thatcher's premiership beginning in 1979 to Cameron's ending in 2016) revealed higher levels of personal offence by the more recent PMs. Comparing a combination of the beginning and end periods of their premierships, revealed Cameron used more personal attacks than the other four PMs. This was particularly true when considering the findings of the *original study* – facing LO Miliband both when he became PM in 2010 and in the latter period in 2015 – which showed he used significantly more personal attacks than the other PMs. From the findings of the *follow-up study* (conducted due to PM Cameron's resignation during this research), his levels were significantly higher than both Thatcher and Blair. Cameron's immediate predecessor Brown was also significantly higher in personalisation than Thatcher and Blair. The *original study* revealed the highest level of personal antagonism by a PM: when responding to questions from LO Miliband in 2015, over 60% of Cameron's replies contained at least one personal attack. The findings support the hypothesis of higher levels of personal disrespect by the most recent leaders, and are consistent with Bates et al. (2014), who reported recent inflated rowdiness in PMQs.

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

Turning now to personalisation aimed at the PMs, Gordon Brown, who was opposed by LO Cameron across his entire premiership, received the most personal attacks. Evaluating a combination of the beginning and end periods of each premiership, showed the attacks directed at Brown were significantly higher than for each of the other PMs. When comparing early and latter periods, higher levels of personalisation occurred later in the premiership of Thatcher, Major, and Brown, though the only significant increase was for Thatcher. Similarly, the original study showed PM Cameron was subjected to an increase in personal attacks from LO Miliband, though not statistically significant. In contrast, the follow-up revealed Cameron was subjected to a significant decrease in personalisation at the end of his tenure, receiving the lowest number of personal attacks of any PM in any period.

The personal attacks directed at PMs were examined more closely in terms of personalisation by individual LOs by period. Again, Cameron was the most offensive. His highest level of personalisation directed at the PM was in Brown's latter period, significantly higher than by any other LO in any period except his own opposition in Brown's early period or that which he himself faced from Miliband in 2015. Despite the highest levels of personalisation appearing latterly in the research period, the follow-up study revealed a new low in LO personal attacks in 2016: Corbyn, who during his bid for the Labour leadership in 2015 called for a "new kind of politics" (ITV, 2015), by this measure appears to have delivered on his promise.

### 5.5.1 Rationale for Heightened Personalisation

Leaving the relatively polite 2016 exchanges for the moment, let us consider the high levels of personal attacks occurring latterly in this research. The British political system and its particular style of majoritarian democracy – an electoral system that tends, artificially, to create parliamentary majorities rather than power-sharing – lends itself to an antagonistic, confrontational political culture (Lijphart, 2012). Furthermore, this culture is reflected in the layout of the chamber where parliamentary debates are held: opposing benches, where the party of government

face the party of opposition (Flinders et al., 2016). The chamber is more befitting confrontation than consensus (Gimson, 2012). But the system and layout have remained relatively unchanged for much longer than the period covered in this research. However, one noticeable change is the advent of television coverage of parliamentary proceedings, and almost certainly as a consequence, heightened media attention. Bates et al. (2014) propose an increase in adversarial behaviour may be due to the presence of television cameras – broadcasting live to the nation, and across the world in the case of PMQs – and a rise in *personality politics* dominated by party leaders. The heavy focus on the main players is a view supported by Reid (2014), who suggests PMQs is now considered an LO/PM contest. Reid further suggests that the leaders' performances are commented on and scrutinised, not just in print and broadcast media, but also on social media. Reports often take the form of a sports report. Contributors to the various forms of media discuss the performance of the PM and LO in terms of "goals scored" (Lovenduski, 2012. p. 320). The contest resembles "a form of verbal pugilism" (Bull & Wells, 2012, p. 46), and in the vein of sports reporting, each week a winner is declared (Reid, 2014).

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

Expectation and intense public scrutiny are less powerful arguments for increased personalisation across individual premierships. One possibility arises when a PM's latter period comprises the final sessions before a general election. On those occasions, there will be more at stake; leaders will be more inclined to go on the attack, increasing the potential for exchanges higher in hostility. This may explain the higher levels of personal attacks in Major's and Brown's latter periods, and in Cameron's when he faced LO Miliband in 2015 prior to the General Election. However, Thatcher's and Blair's latter periods did not occur immediately prior to an election, and, notably, Thatcher was more personally disrespectful than earlier. Her increase was almost five-fold while responding to a similar level from LO Kinnock.

Levels of personalisation might also be related to leaders' personalities, their individual debating strategies, or interpersonal relationships between opponents. Highly personalised exchanges between political opponents may well be reflective of a contempt they hold for each other. Indeed, high levels of contempt could be fuelled by processes predicted by intergroup theories (see Dragojevic & Giles, 2014). Furthermore, a leader's personality or personal style will undoubtedly factor in their conduct at the Dispatch Box<sup>17</sup>. For example, Cameron's "rude" exchanges have attracted much press comment relating to his personal style (e.g., A. M. Brown, 2011). However, assessment of these factors was not a focus of this research, but there is an obvious potential for their relevance.

## 5.5.2 Potential Functions of Personalisation

The view that offensive personalisation is a normative behaviour in PMQs was one shared by former Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe, who argued that opponent humiliation is an accepted norm (Lovenduski, 2012). Murphy's (2014) observations in relation to personal exchanges included the suggestion that negative personalisations tend to be voiced by the LO because he is frequently compared with

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<sup>17</sup> A box on each side of the central table in the House of Commons chamber from where the leaders speak at PMQs.



the PM. Thus, any damage inflicted on the premier may enhance an LO's reputation. Furthermore, rude questions tend to prompt rude responses, partly because a PM may seem weak if s/he does not respond in kind. Murphy's observations were offered as evidence for the proposal of Culpeper (2011) that, in interaction, impoliteness is reciprocated. Here, analysis found no large effects of question on response in relation to personal attacks, though the lack thereof is not necessarily indicative of unreciprocated personal antagonism. Indeed, the PM may respond to a question containing personalisation without retaliation, but release a barrage of personal attacks in subsequent responses. These results (corrected for multiple comparisons) revealed no significant personalisation differences between any PM and their respective LO in 11 periods of 60 Q/R exchanges. Arguably, this is further empirical evidence for Culpeper's suggestion that impolite behaviour tends to be reciprocated. However, whether in these exchanges the antagonism was prompted by the LO or the PM remains to be seen.

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

Ilie (2004) compared Swedish and UK parliaments, and reported language differences in the use of insults. She suggested that insults by Swedish politicians tended to focus on ideological issues, whereas their British counterparts focused more on personality characteristics. Moreover, British politicians tend to make negative personal references about the intelligence and wit of their opponents

because these personal attributes are encouraged, and a sharp and ready wit is essential in British parliamentary debates. Ilie proposed a further function of this form of personalisation: the rational force of a personal attack is outweighed by its emotional force. In the highly contested environment of PMQs, emotive personal language may indeed be used to disarm or deconstruct political adversaries.

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

A further consideration for the functionality of personal attacks in PMQs is one leader's motive to highlight their differences from their opponent. In his analysis of language used in a military training facility, Culpeper (1996) suggested that, whilst one function of politeness is recognition of similarities between interlocutors, impoliteness is a denial of that. Focusing on parliamentary discourse, Ilie (2004) proposed that insults are directed at opposing politicians to magnify their cognitive differences. The party leaders are likely to step up their personal attacks in latter periods as, in some cases, these coincide with the time of an approaching general election. Therefore, they will be motivated to highlight differences to gain support.

Mindful of the widespread coverage of PMQs, the leaders' use of such tactics is comparable to *playing to the crowd*.

### 5.5.3 Individual Differences and Differences of Opinion

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

There are also opposing views on the general conduct of members in PMQs. In addition to the criticisms by some concerned for how the public may be turned off by the rudeness on display, including the disquiet of the Speaker himself (Reid, 2014), others are approving. For example, an article parodying Punch and Judy in its title – *PMQs: That's the way to do it!*<sup>18</sup> (Gimson, 2012) – refers to the event not only as a "test of courage" but also as "one of the few genuinely popular bits of British politics"

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<sup>18</sup> "That's the way to do it!" is a phrase often shouted by Mr Punch (see footnote on page 41) after striking another puppet character.

(p. 11). Personal negativity being far from repellent to political engagement is reflected in a study of American political incivility (Brooks & Geer, 2007), which reports that the electorate may indeed be stimulated by such exchanges.

#### 5.5.4 Cameron vs Corbyn

The analysis of the 2016 sessions was conducted because of the somewhat unexpected presentation of an actual final period in Cameron's premiership. Corbyn's alternative approach to questioning the PM had attracted not only press attention but also academic (e.g., Bull, Fetzer, & Waddle, 2016). His arrival at the Dispatch Box in PMQs prompted one article to label him "the saint in the bear pit" (Lees, 2015). Would his approach affect any changes in the recent high levels of personalisation? The evaluation here of Cameron facing questions from LO Corbyn revealed some of the lowest levels of personalisation across the 37-year period of analysis. Corbyn's personal attacks were the lowest of any LO, and Cameron's were curtailed to below one third of that from the previous year when responding to Miliband. This sudden decrease in antagonism raises some interesting questions. In the case of Corbyn, he appears to have followed up on his pledge for politics of a different kind; but why the change in Cameron's approach? This may fit with Culpeper's (2011) proposal of reciprocated impoliteness; or, more specifically, reciprocated *politeness* towards an LO less inclined to personalise. Another possibility for Cameron's restrained language when facing Corbyn could be his consideration to avoid damaging his own face. Verbal aggression directed at Corbyn – at seventeen years older, and with his new, politer approach to questioning the PM – could be construed by some to be something of an own goal for Cameron. Furthermore, opinion poll ratings for Labour around that time were lower than for any other period of opposition since the advent of modern polling in the 1950s (Hughes, 2016). Thus, Cameron and his advisors may have taken the view that attempting to damage Corbyn in their exchanges at PMQs was not in their party's interests. Indeed, Cameron referred to this view during his final PMQs when quoting from correspondence (seemingly, from a supporter) urging him to respond with

“Sensible, sober, polite answers to Mr Corbyn. Let him create his own party disunity” (HC Deb, 13 Jul 2016, col. 288).

One noticeable aspect of Corbyn’s new approach was to include questions to the PM which were sourced from, and referencing by forename, members of the public, typically sent to the LO by email. In Corbyn’s first PMQs session as LO, all six of his questions were of this type. Although Conservative MPs often derided these questions, arguably Cameron might have inhibited his personal attacks when addressing a question from a member of the public. However, Corbyn’s use of these questions gradually decreased, within a few weeks dropping to just one per session (Bull, et al., 2016), and by the time of the analysis period (Cameron’s last 10 sessions), they were used only once in occasional sessions. Another possible reason for Cameron’s newfound restraint in personalisation relates to the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU. Within the analysis period, campaigning was underway for the upcoming referendum. Both Cameron and Corbyn were campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU. This unusual situation of the leaders of the two main political parties being on the same side in a major issue to be put to the electorate may have factored in the reduced antagonism. Indeed, in the two sessions immediately prior to the referendum in June 2016, neither leader made a personal attack. Between 11 May and 29 June 2016, 18 consecutive LO/PM Q/R exchanges passed without personalisation. This is a sequence unparalleled in these analyses, stretching back to 1979.

### 5.5.5 Conclusions

This research was conducted to devise a reliable method to identify and measure personalisation in PMQs. From the results, it is apparent that David Cameron’s pledge in 2005 to bring an end to Punch and Judy politics was not followed by a sustained decrease in the name-calling behaviour he referred to in his speech at that time. From a relatively low start when in opposition to PM Tony Blair, perhaps indicative of a continued intention to adhere to his pledge, his personalisation grew

across his time as LO to a high point in opposition to Gordon Brown in 2010. It then remained high across his premiership up to the General Election of 2015. Until that point, all PMs from Thatcher onwards made more personal attacks on their respective LOs latterly in their premierships than at the beginning. Across the same time frame, other than for Blair's premiership, there was a similar trend for LO personal attacks to be higher in the PMs' latter periods. Significant differences emerged from analysis of Cameron's final period prior to his departure in 2016. His exchanges with Jeremy Corbyn, whilst not devoid of personal attacks, were far more polite, with a threefold reduction in attacks by Cameron compared to those directed at LO Ed Miliband, and the lowest level of any LO by Corbyn.

As to the reasons for the highest levels of personalisation occurring latterly in this research period (1979 to 2016), one possibility is the effects of intensified scrutiny and commentary reminiscent of a gladiatorial contest, which has grown since televising PMQs began in 1989. Broadcasting and reporting on leaders' performances has escalated with the growth of social media. These factors will have increased the likelihood for party leaders to indulge in *playing to the crowd* behaviour, conscious that personal damage inflicted on their opponent will receive nationwide attention. The different levels of personal attacks may also reflect inter-individual differences between politicians (e.g., personality) or inter-pairing differences on political spectra, neither of which was a focus here [for assessment measures see, e.g., Feldman & Valenty (2001), Lester (1994), and Post (2003)]. This study shows promising results for the coding system of personalisation. Combining this system with measurement approaches for potential causes of personalisation could provide further validation.

Potential functions of personalisation include highlighting cognitive differences between themselves (particularly in the run-up to a general election), attempting to disarm or deconstruct their opponent via a concentrated attack on aspects of their character, and equivocation. The notion that, following a difficult question, a PM may make an equivocal response in the form of a personal attack

could be analysed in a future project – using this personalisation coding system in conjunction with an evaluation of the fullness of answers (e.g., Bull, 1994).

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

## Chapter 6 – Curbing Their Antagonism: Topics Associated with a Reduction in Personal Attacks at Prime Minister’s Questions

This chapter is based on: Waddle, M., & Bull, P. (2018). *Curbing their antagonism: Topics associated with a reduction in personal attacks at Prime Minister’s Questions*. Manuscript submitted for publication.<sup>19</sup>

### 6.1 Abstract

This study of leaders’ exchanges in Prime Minister’s Questions considers the potential for foreign policy debate to be associated with uncharacteristic personal respect between political opponents. Using an existing dataset coded for a specific form of verbal aggression – personal attacks – questions to the Prime Minister spanning a 37-year period were further analysed for policy topic. Compared to questions and responses focused on domestic policies, foreign policy exchanges were significantly lower in personal attacks. Discussion includes the possibility of this being a British example of the old US adage *politics stops at the water’s edge*. Credible theoretical explanations include intergroup theories, and one linked to another US political science phenomenon (the *rally ‘round the flag effect*), specifically, *patriotism*.

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<sup>19</sup> The author, Maurice Waddle, designed the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the article under the supervision of Professor Peter Bull.



## 6.2 Introduction

A study by Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, and MacDonald (2007) – imaginatively entitled *When does the watchdog bark?* – evaluated the varying nature of questions in US presidential news conferences. *The watchdog* relates to news journalists who question the President at those events. Expanding their canine metaphor use, *bark* signifies questioning practices identified as aggressive in nature. An earlier publication by the same researchers (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & MacDonald, 2006) highlighted an increasing trend in journalistic aggression directed at the President. Latterly, their specific focus was the conditions under which the aggressive questioning was associated. Their analysis spanned a 48-year period (1953-2000), from the presidencies of Eisenhower through to Clinton. They measured aggression via a multi-dimensional analysis of the journalists' questions. Measures included directness, assertiveness, and adversarialness. They reported aggressive questioning to be associated with declining economic performance, and to be more likely in second terms of office. However, and most relevant to the focus herein, they reported that questions related to foreign policy were significantly lower in aggression than those related to domestic policy. Furthermore, this gentler approach linked to foreign policy questioning has remained stable across the latter half of the twentieth century. Would a similar situation be apparent in UK politics – namely, in questions to the Prime Minister?

Below is a review of research related to this phenomenon, and how it has been defined and explained. To follow will be a summary of the process by which the UK Prime Minister (PM) is questioned – not by journalists but by government and opposition politicians – a regular parliamentary event known as Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). The measure of aggression in PMQs is based on personally antagonistic language in the exchanges between political opponents. This form of *personalisation* is described in the Method section below.

### 6.2.1 Research Review

Relevant research connected to foreign policy, particularly overseas military action, includes analysis of the *rally 'round the flag effect* (RE). The RE has received widespread attention from researchers of US politics with regard to the actions of the electorate, journalists, and the political elite. It relates to claims of a short-term boost in presidential popularity due to the nation's involvement in an international crisis (Mueller, 1970). Empirical research findings vary in support for the RE: from supportive (e.g., Kernell, 1978; Mueller, 1970) to casting doubt (e.g., Brody, 1991; James & Rioux, 1998; Lian & Oneal, 1993; Oneal & Bryan, 1995). Theoretical explanations for the effect include *patriotism* (e.g., Lee, 1977) and *opinion leadership* (e.g., Brody, 1991). The *patriotism* explanation is based on a tendency for people to unite behind their leaders when the nation's interests are under threat, or when a threat is perceived. At such a time, some may regard critical opposition of the President to be potentially detrimental to the nation. This perspective has its basis in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986): the notion that people support and maintain favourable views of their own group, particularly at a time of potential intergroup conflict. The *opinion leadership* explanation suggests that dramatic events of an international focus engender an abatement in apparent criticism by political opponents, or may even prompt them to be somewhat supportive (see Kam & Ramos, 2008). Consequently, the President may benefit from a higher approval rating and an increase in public support, albeit temporarily, due to the kinder rhetoric from the political elite. Oneal and Bryan (1995), however, claim that media coverage of the President's response to international crises is a prominent factor in the size of a rallying effect. The influence of elite debate on any RE is reportedly a complex one, according to Groeling and Baum (2008). They point out that, as well as the partisan affiliation of the elite debater, the credibility of their message is also a factor.

Lambert, Schott, and Scherer (2011) considered the RE from a social psychology perspective via an evaluation of participants' responses, some of whom watched video clips of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attack on the USA (hereafter, 9/11). The 9/11 attacks boosted the approval rating of the incumbent

President, George W. Bush, by almost 40 percentage points. In the aftermath of 9/11, his rating (90%) was the highest ever recorded for a US President; beating the previous record (89%) held by his father, George H. W. Bush, during the Gulf War in 1991 (Gallup News, 2018). Lambert et al. considered the potential for elicitation of the RE from a range of testable psychological models. Firstly, under the banner *security-based models of threat*, they included anxiety-based formulations of authoritarianism (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991), motivated-social-cognition theory (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), terror-management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), and uncertainty-management theory (Van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, & Van den Ham, 2005). A common theme from these four models is a motivation for people to feel secure, and a grave external threat like 9/11 should engender a sense of alliance with a leader or an administration with the means to reinforce security. Secondly, they proposed an alternative model: one contingent upon anger. The anger-based model, derived from Anderson and Bushman (2002), proposes that a provocation like 9/11 can prompt an angry reaction against the offending outgroup. This reaction may turn people towards those able to retaliate, in this case, the Commander-in-Chief (the US President). Results from the study by Lambert et al. (2011), calculated from participants' responses to a battery of questions, were more supportive of the anger-based model than those centred on anxiety. Their findings suggested that, in a situation which provokes anger, support will increase for a politician deemed likely to respond with aggressive action.

In addition to increased support for the President following a crisis due to an external threat, there is also the potential for a more general rally in favour of government institutions. This was highlighted in a study by Parker (1995), who analysed public opinion during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Another analysis – focused on opinion following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 – showed a surge in public trust in the government to levels not seen since the mid-1960s (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003).

Thus far, this review has considered evidence of reduced journalistic aggression in foreign policy questioning (Clayman et al., 2007), and increased public

support during international crises from the RE literature. Is there a tendency for opposition politicians to display similar restraint and supportiveness in relation to foreign affairs? The opinion leadership explanation associated with the RE concerns the rhetoric of opponents, but it is claimed their lower levels of criticism may be due to a lack of information on the crisis situation (Brody & Shapiro, 1989). However, there is research evidence for higher bipartisan support in foreign policy over domestic policy (e.g., King, 1986), where the adage *politics stops at the water's edge*<sup>20</sup> is commonly quoted. Subsequent research suggests this bipartisanship is declining (e.g., McCormick & Wittkopf, 1990; McCormick, Wittkopf, & Danna, 1997; Meernik, 1993). These studies, typically concerned with congressional voting, do not relate specifically to interpersonal behaviour between opposing politicians. In this sense, the research evidence is more scarce.

The focus now turns to British politics, where studies of the RE are far fewer, though there is some empirical evidence for its existence (e.g., Chowanietz, 2010; Lai & Reiter, 2005). The following reviews are concentrated on UK parliamentary discourse research and, chiefly, the highest profile frequent event in UK politics, and the specific focus of this study, PMQs. Before reviewing relevant research, a brief history and procedural summary of PMQs is presented.

## 6.2.2 PMQs in the UK Parliament

Though the questioning of the PM by other MPs has been a feature of parliamentary proceedings since long before the twentieth century, PMQs did not become a regular scheduled event until 1961 (House of Commons Information Office, 2010b). Until 1997, PMQs was programmed for around 15 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays whenever Parliament was sitting. Since 1997, the event has been scheduled for each sitting Wednesday, beginning at noon, and lasting around 30 minutes. After the ritual of the opening routine question, where an MP asks the PM to list his/her official

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<sup>20</sup> "Politics stops at the water's edge" was an opinion voiced by Senator Arthur Vandenberg in a call to unite US politicians in the early part of the Cold War.

engagements, the MP is granted the opportunity to follow up with a *supplementary* question on a topic of their choosing. There is no requirement for the PM to be given any prior knowledge of a supplementary question, therefore the potential for unpredictability and surprise exists. The session continues with further supplementary questions from MPs, each followed by a response from the PM. The questioning MPs are chosen randomly from a selection process known as the *shuffle* (Coe & Kelly, 2009). Generally, MPs are limited to a single question, but the Leader of the Opposition (LO) may ask up to six, affording her/him the opportunity to follow up on the PM's response should they wish. The person charged with keeping order during PMQs is known as *the Speaker*. An important duty of the Speaker is to admonish MPs should they use language deemed unacceptable, for example, accusing other members of lying. Historical examples of *unparliamentary* language which the Speaker has objected to include blackguard, rat, hooligan, guttersnipe, git, stoolpigeon, swine, coward, and traitor (House of Commons Information Office, 2010c).

**6.2.2.1 Related Research and Opinion.** PMQs is renowned across the world for the adversarial nature of the debate. An article by respected journalist Simon Hoggart summarised it thus: "It is the most famous parliamentary session anywhere in the world. In Britain it is both reviled and relished. The present Speaker, John Bercow, knows that for the most part the public dislikes the schoolboy rowdiness and tries periodically to quieten things down. He rarely succeeds for long" (Hoggart, 2011). Lovenduski (2012) assessed PMQs in relation to gender, and concluded that the event continues to be characterised by ritualistic adversarial confrontation associated with masculine culture. Harris (2001) reported that there is an expectation on MPs for what she termed *systematic impoliteness* towards political opponents, and that face-threatening acts are commonplace. Bull and Wells (2012) analysed 18 PMQs sessions and claimed that MPs' reputations are enhanced by engaging in aggressive communication; they described the event, figuratively, as "a form of verbal pugilism" (p. 46). Bates, Kerr, Byrne, and Stanley (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of five recent PMs and reported, among other findings, an

increase in rowdy behaviour in PMQs and a growing dominance of the proceedings by the party leaders. Research by Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2018) covered the same five premierships, but focused specifically on personal attacks between party leaders. Findings revealed increases in attacks across each premiership, and the highest levels of personal antagonism by the more recent leaders, particularly PM David Cameron.

The PMQs studies above highlight the confrontational, impolite, aggressive, disorderly, and disrespectful interpersonal behaviour associated with debates in the UK Parliament, but what evidence is there, if any, for restrained conduct linked to non-domestic issues? The extensive analysis of Bates et al. (2014) included an evaluation by question topic, but only to compare their relative proportions across premierships. Shaw (2000) conducted a gender-based study of UK parliamentary debates, though not specifically of PMQs. She compared the behaviour of male and female MPs in terms of rule violations, and included the topic of each debate analysed. One form of rule violation – illegal interruptions – includes criticisms of the speaking MP. Shaw described such interruptions as a strong marker of power and dominance in the debates. Though a relatively small data corpus, and not including any inferential statistics, it was noticeable that none of the debates had fewer illegal interruptions by MPs than that which focused on foreign affairs.

**6.2.2.2 Current Research Focus.** The purpose of this research is an evaluation of PMQs, with the focus on question topic and how that might be reflected in the nature of interpersonal behaviour between the main players in these debates (the party leaders). Analysis of behaviour is based on the recent study of personal attacks in PMQs across a 37-year period (Waddle et al., 2018) (presented in chapter 5). Therein a coding system was devised to identify personal attacks in the questions and responses – referred to also as *personalisation* (described below). Personalisation was defined in an earlier research project on political interviews as “discourse directed at someone present which is intended to be personally relevant to them” (Waddle & Bull, 2016, p. 432) (study presented in chapter 3). The focus of Waddle et al.’s PMQs personalisation research was exchanges between the LO and the PM; the

analysis period from 1979 to 2016 covered the early and latter sessions of Margaret Thatcher's premiership through to David Cameron's (a total of 1,320 speaking turns). Here, those findings are used in conjunction with an identification of question topic – based on the UK Topics Codebook<sup>21</sup> (John, Bertelli, Jennings, & Bevan, 2013). Although the method here differs from that of Clayman et al. (2007), Waddle et al.'s personal attack coding system is an equally valid assessment of aggression in political communication. Furthermore, whilst PMQs discourse research has been wide-ranging, the current focus is the first of its kind.

Consideration of various research findings contributed to the hypothesis for this study. Clayman et al. (2007) found significantly lower aggression from journalists when questioning the US President on foreign policy issues. Articles centred on the RE have reported reduced criticism by elite political opponents in association with national security crises (e.g., Chowaniec, 2010; Kam & Ramos, 2008); and there is evidence from the US of increased bipartisan support for non-domestic policy issues (e.g., King, 1986). Finally, although of a relatively narrow scope, Shaw's (2000) study of UK parliamentary debates showed foreign affairs to be associated with the lowest levels of illegal interruptions. Conceivably, illegal interruptions are a form of parliamentary verbal aggression. With these findings in mind, it was reasoned that analyses here would reveal the highest levels of personal attacks by party leaders during questions connected to domestic policies, and thereby politer interaction to be associated with foreign policy.

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<sup>21</sup> Developed by the UK Policy Agendas Project, the UK Codebook uses original categories from the US version from the *Comparative Agendas Project* created by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. Its aim is to create a consistent record across time of political and public policy issues receiving attention in parliament (as well as in the media and public opinion). It includes topics specific to the UK. Topic codes are detailed in the Method section.

## 6.3 Method

### 6.3.1 Participants

There were five PMs and eight LOs included in this study. Some politicians featured as both PM and LO. The PMs were Margaret Thatcher (Conservative PM 1979-1990), John Major (Conservative PM 1990-1997), Tony Blair (Labour PM 1997-2007), Gordon Brown (Labour PM 2007-2010), and David Cameron (Conservative PM 2010-2016). The LOs were those in opposition to the respective PMs at the times of each analysis period. They were James Callaghan (Labour LO 1979-1980), Neil Kinnock (Labour LO 1983-1992), Tony Blair (Labour LO 1994-1997), John Major (Conservative LO 1997), William Hague (Conservative LO 1997-2001), David Cameron (Conservative LO 2005-2010), Ed Miliband (Labour LO 2010-2015), and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour LO 2015-present).

### 6.3.2 Apparatus

Transcripts of PMQs sessions were accessed from Hansard via two official websites: <https://www.parliament.uk/> and <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>. Hansard is the official record of UK Parliament proceedings. It is not an entirely verbatim transcription – obvious errors and repetitions are removed in the editing process – but it forms a substantial, near comprehensive record of the spoken words of MPs in parliamentary debates (House of Commons Information Office, 2010a).

### 6.3.3 Procedures

**6.3.3.1 Dataset.** The dataset for this research comprised the same questions and responses used in the previous study by Waddle et al. (2018). There, the intention was to devise a method to identify personal attacks in PMQs, then to look for differences in the use of such personalised language between party leaders and



across premierships. On that basis, the first and last 60 question-response sequences from each of the five premierships were used. Analysis was restricted to those exchanges from only the permanent LO and the PM. When that research began, Cameron was the current PM; so, to represent his latter period, the most recent at that time was used: the final sessions prior to the 2015 General Election. Following the referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU) – held on 23 June 2016 – Cameron resigned as PM. His resignation prompted further data collection from his actual latter period, his final sessions from 2016. The current study does not include comparative analyses between PMs or across premierships, but uses the existing coded dataset comprising 660 questions and 660 responses to analyse personal disrespect in relation to question topic. Table 6.1 shows the PMQs sessions which incorporate these 1,320 speaking turns.

**Table 6.1.** PMQs sessions analysed.

<b>PM</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Session dates</b>
Margaret Thatcher	Early	22 May 1979 – 7 Feb 1980
Margaret Thatcher	Late	8 May 1990 – 27 Nov 1990
John Major	Early	29 Nov 1990 – 23 Apr 1991
John Major	Late	3 Dec 1996 – 20 Mar 1997
Tony Blair	Early	21 May 1997 – 19 Nov 1997
Tony Blair	Late	21 Mar 2007 – 27 Jun 2007
Gordon Brown	Early	4 Jul 2007 – 5 Dec 2007
Gordon Brown	Late	6 Jan 2010 – 7 Apr 2010
David Cameron	Early	13 Oct 2010 – 19 Jan 2011
David Cameron	Late (2015)	14 Jan 2015 – 25 Mar 2015
David Cameron	Late (2016)	13 Apr 2016 – 13 Jul 2016

**6.3.3.2 Personal Attacks.** The coding method was based on language characterised as disrespectful. Full details of the coding procedure for personal attacks can be found in Waddle et al. (2018) (and in chapter 5). To summarise, identification of a personal attack was based on comments aimed specifically at the member opposite which contained or was couched in personal disrespect. Table 6.2 shows forms that personal attacks can take, with illustrative examples. Each turn – the LO’s question

and the PM's response – was analysed for instances of personal disrespect, and coded as either 0 (containing no personal attack) or 1 (containing at least one attack).

**Table 6.2.** Personal attacks in PMQs.

<b>Comments containing or couched in personal disrespect, e.g.,</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Negative personality statements	PM Cameron: <i>If he had an ounce of courage, he would rule it out.</i> (HC Deb, 11 Mar 2015, col. 288)
Implications of an enduring negative character trait	LO Miliband: <i>Is not the truth that, just like on every other issue, we get broken promises from this Prime Minister?</i> (HC Deb, 19 Jan 2011, col. 834)
Negative names/labels	PM Cameron: <i>He is just the nowhere man of British politics.</i> (HC Deb, 24 Nov 2010, col. 261)
Aspersions/disparaging insinuations	LO Miliband: <i>He is being funded to the tune of £47 million by the hedge funds. Everyone knows that is why he is refusing to act, but what is his explanation?</i> (HC Deb, 4 Feb 2015, col. 265)
Patronising, condescending remarks	PM Cameron: <i>That is a much better question; I think we are making some progress.</i> (HC Deb, 20 Oct 2010, col. 939)
Mockery	PM Cameron: <i>Apparently, someone can go around to his office, and he stands on a soapbox to make himself look a little taller.</i> (HC Deb, 4 Mar 2015, col. 938)
Badgering	LO Cameron: <i>The Prime Minister claims to be a numbers man, so is it 90 percent, is it 95 percent or is it 98 percent? Come on.</i> (HC Deb, 25 Jul 2007, col. 836)

*Note.* Table based on Waddle et al. (2018)

**6.3.3.3 Question Topics.** Prior to the actual coding of question topic, an established list of topics (or policies) to select from was required, and one befitting the broad range likely to be encountered in PMQs. For this purpose, the *UK policy agenda codebook* (John et al., 2013) was used, which comprises 19 major topics and over 200 subtopics. The titles of the major topics are shown in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3.** List of topics.

<b>Code number</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
1	Macroeconomics	Economy
2	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration, & Civil Liberties	Civil Lib.
3	Health	Health
4	Agriculture	Agriculture
5	Labour & Employment	Employment
6	Education	Education
7	Environment	Environment
8	Energy	Energy
10	Transportation	Transport
12	Law, Crime, & Family issues	Law/Crime
13	Social Welfare	Soc. Welfare
14	Community Development, Planning & Housing Issues	Housing
15	Banking, Finance, & Domestic Commerce	Commerce
16	Defence	Defence
17	Space, Science, Technology, & Communications	Tech
18	Foreign Trade	Foreign Trade
19	International Affairs & Foreign Aid	Foreign Affairs
20	Government Operations	Govt. Ops
21	Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial & Territorial Issues	Public Lands

*Note.* Code numbers as John et al. (2013).

Coding of the topic of each LO question was conducted by the author. Most questions were readily identifiable as one topic. Occasionally, the LO's turn included more than one question. In these cases, if more than one topic was apparent, the topic of the final question in the turn would take precedence for coding. For question turns where the LO made no obvious reference to a topic, the preceding questions were assessed for the ongoing topic. The following question is a rare occurrence in terms of ambiguity for coding of topic, but is used to highlight the coding procedure.

A pattern seems to be developing. It is quite simply this: the Prime Minister has a Health Secretary who is imposing a contract on junior doctors, against the wishes of patients, the public and the rest of the medical profession; and he has an Education Secretary who is imposing yet another Tory top-down reorganisation that nobody wants. When will his Government show some respect and listen to the public, parents and patients, and indeed to professionals who have given their lives to public service in education and

health? When will he change his ways, listen to them and trust other people to run services, rather than imposing things from above?

(LO Corbyn to PM Cameron [HC Deb, 27 Apr 2016, col. 1424])

The above question from Corbyn includes two questions within the turn, therefore the final one is coded. In isolation the final one here shows no obvious topic, therefore what preceded it is considered. In this case it is apparent that there is no single predominant topic; Education and Health appear equally weighted. Therefore, account is taken of the preceding turns to establish the ongoing predominant topic; in this instance it was Education.

In some instances, although relatively rare, an LO's turn does not include an actual question. The following is an example of this. Under such circumstances the coding is based on the predominant topic of the LO's turn; in this case it was Health.

The very problem that the health service has had is an ideological Tory Government causing difficulties. That is why we have 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses. If the Prime Minister believes his case on the health service, education and other issues, let him have the courage of his convictions and put the matter to the country now.

(LO Blair to PM Major [HC Deb, 4 Mar 1997, col. 707])

To check reliability of coding here, an interrater reliability test was conducted utilising the coded dataset available from the UK Policy Agendas Project (<http://www.policyagendas.org.uk>) (John et al., 2013) via the Comparative Agendas Project (<http://www.comparativeagendas.net>). Their dataset spans PMQs from 21 May 1997 to 17 December 2008 – a total of 9,062 questions to the PM. 180 questions from this study's dataset (coded blind to theirs) featured in their dataset. This enabled a reliability evaluation using over 27% of the coded questions. The result of the interrater reliability test using Cohen's (1960) kappa was  $k = 0.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating *substantial agreement* (Landis & Koch, 1977).

## 6.4 Results

Table 6.4 shows the descriptive statistics related to question topic and the occurrence of personal attacks in both the questions from the LOs and in the responses of the PMs. In terms of topic frequency, questions on economic issues were the most common, closely followed by those focused on government operations. Together, these two topics accounted for close to half (46.67%) of the questions to the PM in this dataset. There were no environment or energy questions. Only 7.42% of the questions were identified as focused specifically on foreign affairs.

**Table 6.4.** Personal attacks in questions and responses (full topic range).

Topic	No. of Qs	LO questions		PM responses	
		Containing an attack	% containing an attack	Containing an attack	% containing an attack
Economy	161	50	31.06	53	32.92
Civil Lib.	10	3	30.00	4	40.00
Health	60	21	35.00	21	35.00
Agriculture	14	2	14.29	7	50.00
Employment	28	7	25.00	8	28.57
Education	38	10	26.32	15	39.47
Environment	0	–	–	–	–
Energy	0	–	–	–	–
Transport	3	2	66.67	2	66.67
Law/Crime	22	9	40.91	5	22.73
Soc. Welfare	38	16	42.11	19	50.00
Housing	8	1	12.50	1	12.50
Commerce	22	7	31.82	7	31.82
Defence	42	9	21.43	8	19.05
Tech	1	0	0.00	0	0.00
Foreign Trade	8	1	12.50	0	0.00
Foreign Affairs	49	7	14.29	5	10.20
Govt. Ops	147	69	46.94	68	46.26
Public Lands	9	5	55.56	0	0.00
Totals	660	219	–	223	–

*Note.* LO = Leader of the Opposition. PM = Prime Minister. Qs = questions. See Table 6.3 for full topic details.

Disregarding topics occurring infrequently (<20), questions related to government operations contained the highest proportion of personal attacks, and

prompted a similarly high level of attacks in the PMs' responses – both in excess of 46%. Questions concerning social welfare and issues of law/crime also featured high levels of attacks by the LOs – over 40% in both cases. For social welfare, half of the responses contained a personal attack by the PM; but for law/crime, less than a quarter were identified similarly disrespectful. Mid-range levels of personal attacks were associated with economy and health questions. Topics lowest in personal disrespect between the leaders were Defence, with around one in five turns containing an attack, and Foreign Affairs, where only 14% of questions and 10% of responses contained a personal attack.

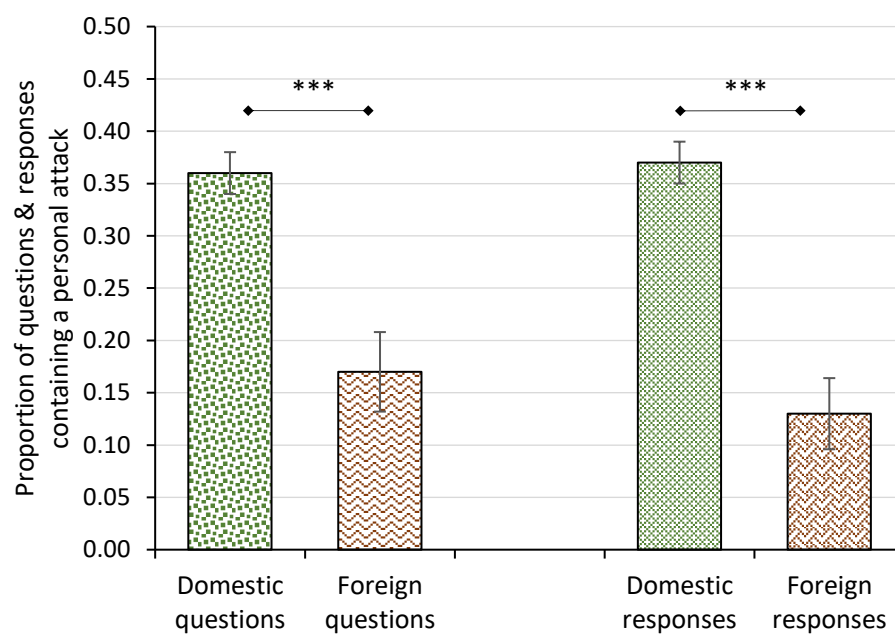
A generalised linear model (GLM) was used to conduct inferential analyses. Prior to that, and to suitably address the main research question, it was necessary to establish a valid distinction between topics befitting foreign policy and those of a domestic agenda. Based on research investigating bipartisanship in US politics (e.g. Meernik, 1993), the following dichotomy was used. For this new variable, topics previously coded Defence, Foreign Trade, and Foreign Affairs were chosen as a justifiable representation of *Foreign (non-domestic) Policy*. The remaining topics, each predominantly of a non-international nature, were coded as *Domestic Policy*. The above method is comparable to Clayman et al. (2007), who compared domestic affairs questions with questions on foreign/military affairs. Table 6.5 shows the descriptive statistics.

**Table 6.5.** Personal attacks in questions and responses (Domestic-Foreign dichotomy).

Topic (overall)	No. of Qs	LO questions		PM responses	
		Containing an attack	% containing an attack	Containing an attack	% containing an attack
Domestic	561	202	36.01	210	37.43
Foreign	99	17	17.17	13	13.13
Totals	660	219	–	223	–

*Note.* LO = Leader of the Opposition. PM = Prime Minister. Qs = questions.

Questions centred on domestic policy issues were more than twice as likely to be couched in personal disrespect as those aligned with foreign policy matters. The GLM analysis revealed that this difference was highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). Similarly, responses by the PMs were more inclined to include personal attacks when debating domestic issues, though here the difference was almost three-fold, and again highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). Figure 6.1 shows the proportions of personal attacks in the questions and responses in relation to domestic or foreign policy.



**Figure 6.1.** Personal attacks in LO questions and PM responses.

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

Error bars represent standard error. Domestic Qs,  $N = 561$ ; Foreign Qs,  $N = 99$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Finally, to evaluate the association between questions and responses, the phi coefficient ( $\phi$ ) was computed. This analysis provided an indication of how the personalisation coding of the LO’s question (containing an attack or not) might prompt something similar in the immediate response by the PM. Effect size interpretations were based on Cohen (1969). For the domestic questions, there was only a small effect of question on response ( $\phi = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, for the foreign questions, there was a large effect ( $\phi = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## 6.5 Discussion

The descriptive analysis focusing on how the levels of personal disrespect in the leaders' exchanges related to individual question topics revealed a range of findings worthy of discussion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequent topic in this corpus of 660 parliamentary questions was Macroeconomics. Clayman et al. (2007), in their analysis of US presidential press conferences, reported aggressive journalistic questioning to be strongly associated with a declining economy. Though relatively high in personal aggression – almost one third of those LO questions and PM responses contained a personal attack – economic debate in PMQs was not associated with the highest levels of disrespect. When topics which occurred rarely were discounted (e.g., Transport, of which there were only three questions), exchanges on government operations were the most personally antagonistic. Here, where aggression was measured via personal attacks on the leaders, there are logical explanations for the highest levels of personal aggression linked to government operations questions. As the subtopics of Government Operations encompass donations to parties or candidates, government mismanagement, misconduct in public life, sleaze, and scandals related to leading government personnel, high levels of personal disrespect are somewhat inevitable. Indeed, close to half (47%) of questions on government operations included a personal attack. Questions related to health, law and crime, and social welfare also scored highly in personal disrespect (35%, 41%, and 42%, respectively). Relatively low levels of personal attacks (around 20%) were associated with leaders' exchanges linked to defence issues. Debate of foreign affairs in PMQs was associated with the lowest levels, where attacks on their political opponent occurred in only 14% of questions, and in 10% of responses.

Noticeably, the topic Foreign Affairs includes policy issues related to the European Union. The UK's membership of the EU (and a host of contingent matters affecting the UK) has been one of the most contentious issues in British politics for around 30 years. The UK's relationship with the EU<sup>22</sup> has adversely affected at least

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<sup>22</sup> The UK joined what was then known as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. In a referendum held in 1975, the UK public voted by 67% to 33% to remain a member. In the referendum of 2016, 52% voted to leave the EU, 48% to remain.



three premierships to a high degree. In 1990, PM Margaret Thatcher's stance on EU issues prompted a leadership challenge, culminating in her departure from office. The premiership of her successor, John Major, was dogged by disharmony within his own party due to European issues. Famously, in an unguarded moment in 1993, Major was heard referring, reportedly, to Eurosceptic<sup>23</sup> cabinet ministers as "bastards" (Routledge & Hoggart, 1993). Most recently, the UK's relationship with the EU brought David Cameron's premiership to an abrupt end. Cameron had campaigned for the UK to remain a member of the EU; the referendum on 23 June 2016 resulted in what has become known as *Brexit* – the UK's decision to leave the EU. The following day, Cameron announced his decision to resign.

Despite this apparent contention in UK politics related to the EU, the inclusion of EU debate in the topic Foreign Affairs did not have a marked effect on the low level of personal attacks associated with non-domestic debate. For the inferential analysis, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Defence questions were categorised as *Foreign (non-domestic) Policy*; all other question topics were categorised as *Domestic Policy*. Using that distinction, analysis revealed significantly lower levels of personal disrespect in foreign policy questioning. Similar significance was evident in the PMs' responses to the questions. These findings are in line with the stated hypothesis and, taking personal attack levels as a valid assessment of aggressive questioning, support those of Clayman et al. (2007) who found reduced aggression from journalists when probing US Presidents on foreign policy matters.

Previous research has proposed a potential function of personal attacks to be an attempt to deconstruct political opponents (Reid, 2014; Waddle et al., 2018). Support for this proposed function can be found in the memoirs of a former PM's advisor, Alistair Campbell (2007). His role as Director of Communications to PM Tony Blair included preparation for PMQs. Their strategy to attack LO William Hague, claiming his renowned wit came at the expense of sound political judgement, fits the notion of deconstruction. Thus, if personal attacks are considered an unsupportive action towards a political opponent, findings here are analogous with research of US

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<sup>23</sup> A *Eurosceptic* is a person opposed to the UK's increasing involvement with the EU.

politics showing higher bipartisan support in foreign policy over domestic policy (e.g., King, 1986).

### 6.5.1 Rationale for Respectful Foreign Policy Discourse

The findings herein of significantly lower personal disrespect by political elite when debating foreign policy raises the question: in a political system famous for its verbal aggression, what lies behind this politer behaviour? This section will consider explanations for this particular UK version of *politics stops at the water's edge*, with speculation on the cogency of the foregoing theories and schools of thought.

Lambert et al. (2011) applied a social psychology perspective to the RE associated with 9/11. In their analysis, they considered testable psychological models in relation to an upsurge in support for the US President following the terrorist attack. They claimed findings were not supportive of explanations based on *security-based models of threat* (which highlight people's motivation to feel secure) towards elicitation of the RE. In terms of PMQs, arguably, the LO, a politician whose political aim is to become PM and to lead his/her country, would be unlikely to limit personal attacks on their opponent due to a need to feel secure. From their results, Lambert et al. favoured an anger-based model, derived from Anderson and Bushman (2002). They suggested an act of aggression on the nation could spark anger towards the outgroup (the aggressor), which can then engender support for a leader deemed able and prepared to retaliate. An act of aggression on the UK could well provoke anger in any politician. However, the current assessment of foreign policy discourse covered non-domestic topics in general, not a specific act of armed aggression. Therefore, an anger-based explanation here appears inappropriate.

There are two prominent explanations for the RE: *opinion leadership* (e.g., Brody, 1991) and *patriotism* (e.g., Lee, 1977). The argument behind opinion leadership is that national leaders benefit from a boost in public approval ratings at times of international crises due to reduced criticism, and sometimes increased support, from elite political opponents. It is further argued that a key factor in the

reduction is that opposition politicians may be less well informed on the crisis situation than those in power (Brody & Shapiro, 1989). The LO asking the questions at PMQs is indeed the most prominent elite political opponent, and may be at a disadvantage in terms of information. A lack of information on a crisis situation might cause an opponent to curb their personal criticism, especially when a crisis is yet to fully unfold. Such situations, however, can only be the exception in the broad scope of non-domestic question topics here, therefore do not provide a fitting explanation.

The patriotism view is, perhaps, a more appropriate explanation for reduced personal disrespect during foreign policy debate in PMQs. The school of thought for patriotism driving the RE is based upon a tendency for the public to unite behind national leaders when the interests of the nation are perceived to be under threat. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this explanation follows the proposition that, at such times, people have an increased sense of attachment to the ingroup. Thereby, people tend to rally behind their group leaders to preserve the status of their group. When LOs are questioning PMs on matters related to foreign policy, it is plausible that patriotism may feature in the nature of their discourse, and equally plausible that it may be less of a feature when the agenda is a domestic one. The three original question topics categorised as *non-domestic* (Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Defence) have an element of ingroup status preservation in the face of outgroup competition (or worse), and to a degree that the domestic topics do not. So, conceivably, in matters of foreign policy, an LO may be affected by a sense of patriotism and therefore less inclined to attack, or at least want to avoid appearing unpatriotic in the eyes of the electorate.

**6.5.1.1 Intergroup Theories.** The argument presented above is in line with intergroup theories, and how they relate to language and interpersonal communication (see Dragojevic & Giles, 2014). A model proposed by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) argues that during intergroup encounters, conflict may be reduced because of a common ingroup identity. At certain times, a superordinate group may increase in salience, reducing that of intergroup distinctions (see Ellis, 2006). For example, national identity may at times take precedence over party differences when

foreign policy is the topic of discussion. The heightened emphasis of a shared identity over a distinct party identity, albeit temporary, may lead to more respectful exchanges between political opponents. This intergroup explanation may account for the reduction in disrespect between politicians from opposing parties during debates of a non-domestic nature.

### 6.5.2 Question-Response Relationship

Much of the foregoing previous research focused on analysis of only one side of a discursive process. For example, Clayman et al. (2007) analysed journalists' questions to the President. Others considered elite opinion of the President (e.g., Groeling & Baum, 2008). Here, with the focus on UK party leaders, analysis covered both the questions to the PM *and* the responses by the PM. This enabled assessment of the relationship between question and response, namely, whether a personal attack in the LO's question tends to be followed by similar disrespect in the PM's response. In the previous study reported in chapter 5 (Waddle et al., 2018), via a phi coefficient analysis, there was only a small effect of question on response overall. However, there were no significant differences (following Bonferroni correction due to multiple comparisons) in any period between political opponents in their levels of personal attacks. Conceivably, a PM may respond to a question couched in disrespect without any personalised retaliation, but then step up the attacks in subsequent responses. This latest study provided the opportunity to evaluate the question-response association in relation to question topic. Analysis revealed only a small effect for the domestic questions and responses. This matches the previous study where, in the assessment of early and late periods for each of the five PMs, with the exception of one medium effect, there were only small effects or no effect. Here, however, there was a large effect of question on response when the topic was foreign policy. The inference thereby is that the level of respect shown to the PM in foreign policy questions has a strong likelihood of being reciprocated in the response by the PM to the LO.

### 6.5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study utilised an existing dataset already coded for personalisation via the personal attack coding system (Waddle et al., 2018). The opportunity was taken to further evaluate the corpus of questions in a distinct way, though one with the potential to be highly relevant. It should be acknowledged that there are five different PMs and eight different LOs involved in the exchanges here. Both of these factors have the potential to be related to personal attack levels. Indeed, significant differences between individual politicians in terms of their overall personalisation were revealed in the previous study. Conceivably, politicians may also display individual differences in relation to their personalisation levels during, specifically, foreign policy debates. Furthermore, significant differences in personal attack levels across premierships were also found in the previous study. However, it was decided not to take account of these factors here, in part, because of the uneven distribution of foreign policy questions; for example, Blair faced only two questions identified as foreign policy in the early period of his premiership, but faced 16 in his latter period. A future research project might expand the data collection and look more closely at individual differences between politicians or across time. In this latest research, however, a sizeable dataset was utilised to test the prediction that, like US press conferences (Clayman et al., 2007), foreign policy questioning in PMQs tends to be associated with a politer style of communication.

### 6.5.4 Conclusions

The focus of this research was an assessment of personal attacks in PMQs in association with the topic of the question and, consequently, expanding the analysis of foreign policy discourse into this specific area of UK politics. Research into US politics, specifically, presidential press conferences (Clayman et al., 2007), showed that questioning of national leaders by journalists was lower in aggression when the topic was a non-domestic one. On a similar vein, though reportedly declining over recent decades, there is evidence of increased bipartisan support for the US

President for foreign policy matters (King, 1986). Such findings tend to be accompanied by the old adage *politics stops at the water's edge*. Here, analysis of exchanges between party leaders in PMQs revealed something similar. Foreign policy questions were significantly lower in personal disrespect than those associated with domestic policies. The patriotism explanation (e.g., Lee, 1977) for another phenomenon from US political science, the *rally 'round the flag effect*, could have some merit in this UK context. A sense of patriotism, or at least a desire to avoid appearing unpatriotic, may account for an LO's reduction in personal attacks when debating foreign policy with the leader of the nation. Intergroup theories (see Dragojevic & Giles, 2014) complement the patriotism explanation. The emergence of a common ingroup identity (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) may at times take precedence over their usual political rivalry when the agenda is foreign policy, thereby making personal attacks less likely. Furthermore, for questions on foreign policy, in terms of personalisation, the LOs' questions had a large effect on the PMs' responses. The tendency for PMs to respond with a personal attack was significantly reduced – almost threefold – when the topic was non-domestic. To summarise, this study has highlighted a tendency for personally aggressive discourse between elite political opponents to be greatly reduced when debating foreign policy. The famous adversarialism of PMQs has been likened to a bear pit (Lovenduski, 2012). Switching from an ursine metaphor back to a canine one, this research has highlighted conditions under which the barking subsides.

## Chapter 7 – General Discussion

This overall research was kick-started by a chance viewing of an interview in which the interviewer and, more importantly, the politician were highly personal in their exchanges. Political interviews in democratic nations have, in recent decades, evolved into a format where the interviewer, typically a broadcast journalist, sets the agenda and puts questions to the politician based on that agenda. Research has shown (e.g., Bull 1994; Harris, 1991) that the politician, more often than not, does not fully answer the question. However, what is less of an expectation, is when the interviewer becomes the focus of the politician's response. Thereby began this research project – with an investigation into personalised exchanges by politicians. It soon became apparent that *personalisation*, as it was labelled, was more widespread in political interviews than existing literature suggested. To address the shortfall, the project developed with the following aims:

- To assess the forms that personalisation can take in interviews
- Armed with that knowledge, to evaluate the prevalence of personalised exchanges by mainstream politicians and comparisons with their predecessors
- To assess the effectiveness of personalised responses as a function of equivocation
- In view of press comment and reported public dissatisfaction with the levels of personal antagonism in PMQs, to extend the research into parliamentary debates and perform similar analyses.

Previous investigations into equivocal responses by politicians in interviews (e.g., Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993) have shown that personal criticism directed at the interviewer could be one such response. Another study suggested that, beyond accusing an interviewer of being somewhat biased, personal attacks were the domain only of extremist politicians (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008). The analysis reported in chapter 3 showed politicians' personal responses to be far more diverse in nature, and that diversity to be a feature of mainstream politics. Certainly most personalisations tended to have an element of criticism, but the critical focus was

wide-ranging. A typology was proposed comprising seven categories of personalisation: five of which relate to distinct forms of criticism.

The sixth category – comments relating to the interviewer’s frame of mind – is a form of response occasionally favoured by former Labour cabinet minister Peter Mandelson. These typically take the form of advising the interviewer to calm down. Observations revealed Mandelson using this form of response when the interviewer seemed reasonably calm. However, the effect of being told repeatedly to calm down can provoke irritation, which the politician appeared to use for greater control of the agenda. The seventh category – *blandishments* – covers amicable personalised responses, observed being made by leading Conservative and Labour politicians. Perhaps the most salient of these came from the then PM Gordon Brown in response to a highly face-threatening question from Jeremy Paxman. Rather than addressing the question, Brown temporarily shifted the attention to the interviewer by flattering him. This introduced mirth into the situation, and Brown used the change in tone to his own advantage.

The above study revealed the need for an upgrade in how we understand the full scope of politicians’ equivocation, though it was only via a collection of illustrative examples. The study covered in chapter 4 followed up on the recommendations from the foregoing study for an up-to-date quantitative analysis of equivocation, including a detailed focus on personalisation. Using a corpus of 26 recent interviews with UK party leaders, the typology proposals (Waddle & Bull, 2016) were supported; namely, all instances of personalised equivocation by the politicians matched one of the seven categories. Seven percent of all equivocal responses contained personalisation. Most were forms of personal criticism; however, also supportive of the foregoing study, over a quarter were the good-natured variety – befitting the blandishments category. Personalisation was evaluated as an effective form of equivocation for the politician: in almost two-thirds of cases, the interviewer did not follow up with a repeat of the unanswered question. In these terms, the effectiveness of a personalised response was previously reported for politicians from a generation earlier (Bull & Mayer, 1993). In their study, Bull and Mayer showed that only



Margaret Thatcher made such a response. Here, seven of the eight politicians did so, perhaps because of its potential to divert the interviewer away from the troublesome line of questioning. Interestingly though, the personal style used effectively by Mandelson – advising the interviewer to calm down – did not feature in the recent interviews.

As a consequence of the coding procedure for the study in chapter 4, there was an additional opportunity to compare recent politicians with their predecessors: this time in reply rate. By this measure, for the eight politicians overall, little had changed in the proportion of questions to which they gave explicit responses. Results showed a reply rate of 38%, similar to that for politicians in the 1980s and 1990s (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991) – again, indicative of a tendency for most questions in political interviews not to receive a full reply.

The focus shifted away from broadcast interviews for the next two chapters. The study in chapter 5 was an investigation into personalised exchanges in PMQs: the weekly event in the UK Parliament where the PM is questioned by MPs. Scheduled for 30 minutes, although it frequently overruns, there are six questions and responses which typically attract the greatest attention. These are the exchanges between the LO and the PM, which, each week, are scrutinised and commented on across all forms of media. Often spoken of as a showdown between the leaders, any personal attacks feature highly in the subsequent reports.

The study of personal attacks in PMQs presented in chapter 5 was based on language characterised as disrespectful. A personal attack coding system was devised, which was used to analyse LO-PM exchanges across a 37-year span. David Cameron was the PM whose level of personal attacks was the highest: peaking in the period prior to the 2015 General Election. In that period of ten PMQs sessions (60 LO-PM exchanges), 62% of his responses contained a personal attack on LO Ed Miliband. When Cameron was the LO back in 2010, he made a similar number of attacks on the then PM Gordon Brown. These findings suggest something of a shortfall in Cameron's 2005 pledge to bring an end to "Punch and Judy politics".

Conversely, the results also suggested that the pledge made by another politician was met with more success. During his campaign in 2015 to be Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn expressed his desire for things to be done differently in his denouncement of the “clubhouse theatrical abuse” in the leaders’ exchanges (Wintour, 2015). However, perhaps the most noteworthy change to occur after his appointment was not the relative politeness of the new LO. Notably, there was a significant decrease in PM Cameron’s personal attacks. Whether the PM’s reduced personalisation was a direct result of Corbyn’s approach is open to speculation. Indeed, in the months following Corbyn’s appointment, some opinion polls showed the popularity of the new LO’s party to be at an all-time low (Hughes, 2016). On that basis, Cameron and his advisors may have decided that personal attacks on Corbyn were not in the interests of the Conservative Party. Another alternative explanation relates to the EU Referendum. The 2016 analysis period coincided with campaigning for the referendum. As both leaders campaigned for the UK to remain a member of the EU, this somewhat unusual electoral collaboration may have been a factor in the uncharacteristic politeness.

A noticeable feature of Corbyn’s apparent new approach to PMQs was his use of questions sourced from members of the public. In his first session as Labour leader at PMQs, all of his questions were so sourced. For example, one of his questions began “I have a question from Steven, who works for a housing association” (HC Deb, 16 September 2015, col. 1038). The possibility that the PM might be less inclined to respond with an attack to a question attributable to a member of the public was advanced in the chapter 5 study. However, there, it was discounted as the reason for the findings showing Cameron’s reduced attacks on the LO because, by the time of that analysis period, Corbyn’s use of these questions had become infrequent. Nonetheless, because the LO had regularly asked such questions in his earliest sessions (a period not covered by the foregoing study), the opportunity was taken to compare their interactional effects with questions not so sourced. That investigation (Bull & Waddle, 2018) was conducted via two different measures. Firstly, in terms of reply rate, the “public questions” had no effect in changing the levels associated with the PM’s responses. Conversely, a second analysis using the personal attack coding

system showed that the public questions had the effect of reducing the PM's attacks down to a level comparable with the relatively polite LO.

The final study of this thesis, presented in chapter 6, is another which follows on from the first PMQs study (chapter 5). Research in the US has shown that, in Presidential press conferences, so-called journalistic aggression tends to be reduced when the questions relate to foreign policy (Clayman et al., 2007). Taking the personal attack coding system as a valid measure of verbal aggression between politicians, would a similar scenario exist in PMQs? To perform such an assessment, the dataset of 660 LO-PM exchanges from the chapter 5 study was further coded for question topic [using the UK Topics Codebook (John et al., 2013)]. Via a comparative analysis with domestic policy exchanges, both LO questions and PM responses were significantly lower in personal attacks when the topic was foreign policy. A number of explanations were considered for this British parliamentary version of *politics stops at the water's edge*. One of the most credible relates to intergroup theories. The usual rivalry between party leaders often takes the form of personal antagonism in their PMQs exchanges; these may be curbed during foreign policy debate when, conceivably, a common ingroup identity temporarily takes precedence (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

A second explanation worthy of consideration is one related to the US political science phenomenon, the rally '*round the flag effect*. It is claimed (e.g., Lee, 1977) that *patriotism* engenders a sense of unity with national leaders during foreign policy crises. The school of thought behind this stems from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which proposes that attachment to one's ingroup increases when there is an external threat. In terms of foreign policy debate in parliament, much of it will not be centred around crises related to an external threat to national security. However, all three foreign policy topics (foreign trade, foreign affairs, and defence) can relate to national interest, often in the face of external competition. During such debate, the LO may refrain from dialogue which undermines the PM. Conceivably, personal attacks will then be less likely, if not out of patriotism, then at least out of a desire to avoid being considered unpatriotic.

## 7.1 Implications and Importance

It is the author's view that research of this nature is of vital importance in any democratic nation. Via microanalysis of political discourse, we can increase our understanding of communication practices. This can be beneficial in two ways. Firstly, it increases transparency; aspects of political discourse are revealed which, without such fine-detailed analyses as featured herein, might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, we have seen how personalised responses to tough questions can be far from critical; and how conviviality can be effective in dealing with such a question. Similarly, we saw how at least one politician may contend with a face-threatening question by insisting a seemingly calm interviewer should calm down. Furthermore, the use of quantitative measures enables a range of comparisons, both contemporarily and across time. For example, recent politicians tend to answer questions to a similar extent to their counterparts of a generation earlier. It has also been shown how one PM, despite his expressed dissatisfaction with hostile parliamentary debate, went on to display the highest levels of personal antagonism. Then, following a change of personnel in the party opposing him, his language became significantly less disrespectful.

The second benefit from increasing our understanding relates to communication skills training. For instance, from an interviewer's perspective, being aware of the means by which politicians try to evade questions affords them and others the opportunity to devise countermeasures. Consider the Mandelson example: if after his first utterance of "calm down" the interviewer retorted "Ah, is this where you repeatedly tell me to calm down so you can avoid answering my question?", it is conceivable that he would be unlikely to pursue that tactic. It is also worth considering the perspective of politicians themselves. Whilst any research endeavour used to improve the lot of national politicians is unlikely to meet with public approval (Weinberg, 2012), they need to be prepared for the challenges they face. Of course, critics may claim such research can facilitate the dodging of questions. But the actions of some political interviewers have developed into what has been labelled "hyperadversarialism" (Fallows, 1996). Consider the 2012

interview of Conservative junior minister Chloe Smith. Many have claimed she faced a “mauling” by Paxman in an interview where she was ineffective in dealing with some of his questions, to the point of causing long-term damage to her reputation (e.g., Freedland, 2012).

## **7.2 Recommendations for Future Research**

One form of political discourse research which was not an aim of this project is that of cross-cultural comparisons, although some studies reviewed here have had such a focus (e.g., Ilie, 2004; Vuković, 2013). The coding systems devised during the course of this research, for both interviews and parliamentary debates, would facilitate such comparative analyses in terms of personalisation. For example, it would be a worthwhile exercise to contrast the levels of personal disrespect found in UK parliamentary debates with those of other parliamentary democracies; or to make international comparisons in politicians’ personalised equivocation. Furthermore, it would be interesting to ascertain the international compatibility of the coding systems, and the modifications which may be necessary to suit other cultural settings.

A further direction for future research relates to the specific methods used here. Almost without exception, analyses across the studies of this thesis benefitted from the use of both transcribed and video-recorded materials. The interview studies were based on videos sourced online; where the interview transcriptions were not accessible, these were created by the author. For the parliamentary studies, Hansard (the official written record of parliamentary proceedings) is now freely available, also online, as are the videos of the debates. The exception was the PMQs sessions from the early period of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, which began in 1979 (the televising of parliament did not begin until 1989). Accordingly, the textual analyses of Thatcher’s latter period, the PMQs sessions of all subsequent premierships, and all interviews, were supported by the available video recordings. What became apparent during the personalisation analyses was that ambiguity from the transcript

was often resolved due to nonverbal communication observable on the videos, for example, intonation, gesture, and the reaction of other people present. This opens up the possibility of a fine-detailed analysis to identify aspects of nonverbal communication associated with personalisation. Findings from such studies would be beneficial in the area of political discourse research, as well as making an interesting contribution to nonverbal communication literature in a wider sense.

### **7.3 Conclusions**

As the foregoing studies suggest, personalisation has the potential to serve a range of functions in political discourse. In the face of a troublesome line of questioning, personal criticism may wrong-foot an interviewer who did not expect to become the focus of attention. Insisting that an interviewer (who is merely fulfilling their duties and showing no sign of agitation) should be more calm, can have the effect of provoking irritation. The politician may then use their mood change to gain some control of the agenda. Similarly, a good-natured response such as flattery or banter can effect a change of tone, taking the sting out of a face-threatening situation. Each of these may be an effective means of equivocation, in that they have the potential to divert the interviewer from the question which the politician deems problematic.

In PMQs, personalisation in the form of personal attack may also be an equivocal response. As was philosophised almost two centuries ago, if an opponent has a better argument, there is always the option to insult them (Schopenhauer, 1831). Furthermore, personal attacks can serve to highlight differences between opponents – a strategy that politicians may resort to in the run-up to an election. It is also proposed that a personal attack's rational force is outweighed by its emotional force (Ilie, 2004). In those terms, focused attacks on personal characteristics may function to deconstruct and disarm political opponents.

The study presented in chapter 6 showed how, during foreign policy debate, political rivals tend to curb their personal aggression. Attacking their opponent under

such circumstances may, in the eyes of the electorate, appear unpatriotic. It is perhaps worth remembering the outcome of the literal *playing the man, not the ball* instance pictured on page 14. After Paul Gascoigne made his lunge at his opponent Gary Charles, it was he who was stretchered off.

## Transcript Symbols

- [...] indicates that a section of the speaker's turn has been omitted.
- indicates (if within a turn) that the speaker made an abrupt change to the ongoing sentence, or (at the end of the turn) that the speaker was interrupted.
- [IR] indicates that the interviewer's turn has been omitted.



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