

**Personalised Storytelling in British Political Rhetoric:
Performance, Emotions, and Argument**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

British politicians have been sharing more personal stories since the mid-1990s, yet little is known about precisely what democratic functions, if any, these stories might serve. A prevailing view in the literature is that the genre of personalised storytelling has little to offer political communication, devaluing speech and debate by promoting anecdotal argument, sentimentalism, and personalisation. In this thesis, I investigate how personalised storytelling can be understood differently. I interpret the personal narratives that politicians share as culturally situated symbolic resources, which enable the performative, rhetorical, and emotional negotiation of contemporary political meaning. In my analysis, I develop this understanding by considering how it applies to the democratic processes of political representation and debate. Specifically, I engage with how politicians' stories emerge from and give meaning to contextually grounded practices of political representation and argumentation, before exploring the specific merits and shortcomings of these practices, and the implications they have for the way we understand the relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic communication. I do this qualitatively, by undertaking an interdisciplinary textual analysis of personal stories told by British politicians in conference speeches and parliamentary debates between 2010 and 2018, and by conducting semi-structured interviews with a number of the politicians that shared them. Drawing on long-standing theories of narrative, and recent theories of political performance, rhetoric, and emotion, I offer a critical reappraisal of the role personalised storytelling plays in political speech and debate, which captures (1) its entanglement with the contemporary performance of political representation, (2) its significance as an affective and experiential mode of debate, and (3) its complex strategic, emotional, and altruistic meanings for the politicians who engage in it. I conclude by establishing a set of criteria that aims to capture when, and how, personalised storytelling might work in the interests of representative politics and democratic debate.

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List of Abbreviations

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CNA: Critical Narrative Analysis

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

MP: Member of Parliament

NHS: National Health Service

RPA: Rhetorical Political Analysis

US: United States

SNP: Scottish National Party

TV: Television

UK: United Kingdom

UKIP: United Kingdom Independence Party

Chapter 1 – The Storytelling Politician

1.1. Introduction

“True stories of human suffering can change MPs’ hearts. I’ve seen it happen”, begins a *Guardian* article written by Frank Field (2017), the former Labour MP for Birkenhead. His article was one of many media responses to the preceding day’s extraordinary events in the House of Commons. In what had promised to be a routine parliamentary debate – where MPs had gathered to discuss the government’s refusal to release impact reports regarding its controversial Universal Credit welfare scheme – Field told a story about a meeting he had held with his constituents. He described how he had to persuade a man not to commit suicide, and how another man had spoken of his “lucky week” in which he was invited to a funeral so his family could “finish off the food”. Field argued that both cases exemplified the “destitution” that was being wrought by the government’s welfare reforms. What was so extraordinary about this story was the response of one of Field’s political counterparts – the then Conservative MP Heidi Allen – who was due to speak next. Upon standing, she appeared to be crying, seemingly moved to tears by Field’s visceral description of his constituents’ trauma. Struggling to speak, Allen vowed that “we will work together and make things better”.

Field’s story exemplifies a trend that is now widespread in politics: MPs sharing tearful personal accounts of tragedy, Prime Ministers confiding intimate details of their private lives, and party leaders recounting their meetings with constituents. Political representatives have been increasingly sharing personal stories and anecdotes, be it in their speeches, interviews, or parliamentary debates (McCooley and Lowe, 2010; Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Gooch, 2018). This willingness to speak from personal experience is just one symptom of a political culture in which politicians have turned to more personal styles of communication, and “embarked on strategies to meet people where they are” (Brants and

Voltmer, 2011, p.11; see also Van Zoonen, 2005; Langer, 2010; Stanyer, 2013). But it is an important symptom, and one that seems to be gaining increasing attention in the media (e.g. Parkinson, 2013; Elgot, 2016).

In British politics, some of the more salient stories to attract this attention have come from political leaders. This was no more evident than in the country's first-ever televised general election debate in 2010, where the anecdotes shared by the three main party leaders were a central feature of the event. David Cameron praised the NHS with a story about his severely disabled son, describing how he "went from hospital to hospital, A&Es in the middle of the night, sleeping in different wards in different places". Nick Clegg recounted a visit to a paediatric hospital in Cardiff, where he had spoken to a nurse about staffing complications that were preventing the adequate treatment of sick babies. Gordon Brown spoke of a letter he received from someone who believed she would have died had it not been for the government's new policies on early cancer detection. Throughout the debate, the three leaders would share more than just stories about the NHS: upbringings; visits to Afghanistan, factories, and police stations; and meetings with drug addicts, burglary victims, and trainee chefs were all at some point the subject of a personal narrative. For Atkins and Finlayson (2013, p.165), the occasion was yet more evidence of the now "extensive" use of personalised stories in political speech, which they showed has burgeoned since the middle of the 1990s.

Other stories, perhaps less well known, have come from debates in the Houses of Parliament. In the 2012 mental health debate, several MPs were praised for discussing personal experiences of post-natal depression, anxiety attacks, and suicidal feelings. One MP, Charles Walker, recounted his travails as "a practising fruitcake" with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Since 2016, a number of politicians like Sharon Hodgson – who gave an emotional account of her stillborn daughter in 2018 – have shared personal stories of miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death as part of yearly Baby Loss debates. So too have

MPs opened up about personal experiences in debates on violence against women, like in 2016, when Michelle Thomson described being raped as a teenager.

This willingness to share personal narratives is not limited to a British context. It has long been a facet of US political speech, where “politicians feel that they have to reveal aspects of their personal lives” or else they “will be greeted with suspicion” (Stanyer, 2013, p.2). Ronald Reagan famously had a penchant for storytelling, explaining in 1983 how “now and then to use an anecdote saves a lot of words” (quoted in Oldenburg, 2015, p.103). Gooch (2018) in particular has shown how personalised storytelling increased steadily between 1964 to 2012 in US presidential rhetoric. In the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton famously opened up about his brother’s experience as a recovering drug addict, while his running mate, Al Gore, described his son’s “empty stare of death” after witnessing him get hit by a car at the age of six (Perloff, 1998, p.279; see also Nolan, 1998; Stanyer, 2013). A growing predilection for personalised storytelling has also been noted in Australian political speech, where McCoey and Lowe (2010) have highlighted not only how former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull liked to share narratives about their childhood in media speeches, but also how autobiographical expression has become increasingly predominant in the more formal setting of maiden parliamentary speeches.

What are these stories for? Why have politicians turned to everyday narratives of personal experience to communicate with us and with each other? Why do political representatives feel the need to tell us about their constituents’ and their own most intimate personal experiences? Have politicians become, as one BBC commentator asked, “too obsessed with anecdotes?” (Parkinson, 2013). The traditional answer to these questions has been to treat politicians’ stories with a sense of suspicion (e.g. Mehan, 1997; Nolan, 1998; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014; Fernandes, 2017). A prevailing view in the literature is that they have little to offer democratic communication, encouraging the rise of a more deceptive, sentimentalist, and unsubstantial mode of political discussion. In this study, I

demonstrate how – when explored in line with long-standing theories of narrative and emerging theories of political performance, rhetoric, and emotion – politicians’ stories can be understood differently. Where the former theories emphasise the vital role that stories play in human sense-making (MacIntyre, 1981; Fisher, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Frank, 2010), the latter theories highlight the importance of the personal, the affective, and the experiential in democratic life (Alexander, 2013; Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Coleman, 2013; Hochschild, 2016; Martin, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Drawing on this perspective, my aim is to provide an alternative way of conceptualising the role that personalised storytelling plays in political speech and debate. I approach this task qualitatively by closely analysing a number of stories told by British politicians in conference speeches and parliamentary debates, before asking several of them to reflect on these stories in elite interviews. I interpret the personal narratives that politicians share as culturally situated symbolic resources, which enable the performative, rhetorical, and emotional negotiation of contemporary political meaning. In my analysis, I develop this understanding by considering how it applies to the democratic processes of political representation and debate. At an interpretive level, I engage with how politicians’ stories emerge from and give meaning to contextually situated practices of political representation and argumentation. Then, at a normative level, I intend to explore the specific merits and shortcomings of these practices, and what implications they might have for the way we situate politicians’ stories in relation to democratic communication.

The key contribution of this thesis is that it offers a critical reappraisal of personalised storytelling in political speech and debate. I do so by explaining how it is entangled with the contemporary performance of political representation, and how this has developed in line with changing cultural expectations of politicians. I describe how stories harness affect and experience to underpin political arguments, and the way this contributes to a more emotionally reflexive and personalised character of debate. And I illuminate what

personalised storytelling means to the politicians who engage in it, and how their reasons to do so often represent a complex overlapping of strategic, personal, and altruistic considerations. In providing this reappraisal, I hope to not only enhance our understanding of what politicians' stories do, but also what they *might* do, and what they *ought* to do in political communication. In this way, I can begin to establish a better normative understanding of when and how politicians' stories work in the interests of representative politics and democratic debate.

1.2. Research Aims and Questions

When, in an attempt to shed light on the impact of the government's welfare reforms, Frank Field decided to recount his interactions with the distressed universal credit claimants from his constituency, he was drawing on a genre of communication believed by much political thought to be problematic (e.g. Mehan, 1997; Nolan, 1998; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014; Fernandes, 2017). In most literature, what politicians do with personal stories has been deemed, at best, extraneous to the more serious business of rational decision-making, deliberative democracy, and informed citizenship. At worst, it has been considered a contaminating influence, with key facets of the genre said to render it a normatively debased way of communicating the political: the personal paving the way for the unsubstantial, the emotional beckoning the irrational, and the anecdotal outweighing the quantifiable (for further discussion of these criticisms, see Chapter 2). This, in turn, has reflected a long-standing concern that political arguments based on anecdotal accounts are either "unscholarly, unscientific, or trivial" (Oldenburg and Leff, 2009, p.2).

It is fair to say that politicians' personal stories sometimes fit such a description. Whether it is David Cameron's infamous tale in the 2010 leaders' debate about meeting a "40-year-old black man from Plymouth", or Nigel Farage's anecdote in a 2014 press conference about "feeling awkward" hearing foreign languages on a train, specious

examples of storytelling can sometimes speak to a sense that politics would be better off if politicians stopped sharing their anecdotes. Yet, such a belief does not seem appropriate in the case of Frank Field, who, upon concluding his speech, explained that he had told his story to address a broader, seemingly vital political question: “How do we represent here the desperation of many of our constituents, when many of us feel that we cannot offer them hope?”. The mismatch between what Frank Field seemed to be doing with his story, and what the dominant literature suggests politicians normally do with stories, is indicative of a wider problem for political theory that this thesis aims to address. That is, if politicians’ stories are of little value when it comes to speech and debate – because they are emotional, anecdotal, or personal – then how can we begin to explain the moments, however rare, where they appear to serve important and potentially valuable political functions, whether that is powerfully illustrating political problems, cultivating public praise for authentic and relatable speech, or in Field’s case, allowing him to make present the painful personal experiences of his constituents?

Given the pronounced role that personalised storytelling, in recent decades, has come to play in political rhetoric, this problem has become increasingly pressing to address, and it is one that I intend to grapple with over the course of the thesis. As I explore in more detail in the following chapter, at the root of this problem are the reasons why much normative political theory has tended to dismiss stories. Rather than attending to individual examples of storytelling, and the motives and intentions that may guide their use, personal stories have been rejected primarily because *they are personal stories*. In other words, as a genre, personalised storytelling has been deemed inherently unsuited to healthy and desirable political communication. Regardless of how a politician may use a particular story, the primary concern is that it will promote anecdotal forms of argument rather than those that are more systematic and evidentially valuable (Jamieson, 1988, p.151; Hyman, 1998; Miller, 2002), emotional reactions instead of rational and considered critique (Mehan, 1997; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014), and personal experiences ahead of a more

substantive, collective, and informed engagement with political representatives, their ideas, and the wider political system (Nolan, 1998; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014; Fernandes, 2017). Since the elevation of the personal, emotional, and anecdotal is an unavoidable aspect of the genre, the normative value of personalised storytelling in speech and debate, in such a reading, is predetermined.

As I will demonstrate, these fears can be located across a wide range of distinct yet overlapping strands of normative political thought: a deliberative concern with the way emotional and experiential discourse can undermine rational standards of reason-giving (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1996; Miller, 2002), unease among some sociologists about the role of impassioned, therapeutic, and sentimental expression on political culture (Rieff, 1966; Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2004), and a belief among many political scientists and communication scholars that personalisation undermines and trivialises the public's mediated engagement with politicians, events, and issues (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Schedler, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004). What connects these strands of thoughts are two things. The first is a belief that stories are a normative problem for politics, straining against a desirable mode of democratic communication. The second is that this is an unavoidable product of the genre. So long as politicians are sharing personal stories, they are engaging in an anecdotal, emotional, and personal mode of communication, and this can only be a bad thing for representative politics, democratic debate, and citizen information needs. This, at a theoretical level, precludes the possibility that politicians' personal stories can do anything important or valuable in the social and political world.

I explore these objections further in the next chapter, but in short, there are two key reasons why they are in need of re-examination. The first is the central role that personal narrative plays in our lives. We tell stories to help us make sense of who we are, to give meaning to our relationships, and to derive morals, purpose, and coherence from our experiences and the experiences of others. In our everyday interactions at home, at work, at

social events, and through media platforms, we are well-versed in sharing and hearing anecdotes, and realising “the essential function of personal narrative – to air, probe, and otherwise attempt to reconstruct and make sense of actual and possible life experiences” (Ochs and Capps, 2001, p.7). The political sphere is not exempt from this process. Our political identities, beliefs, and actions are in part shaped by the stories we tell, hear, and have heard before (Coleman, 2013; 2015; Hochschild, 2016), with characters, events, and morals that engross us, resonate with our lives, and identify us with politicians, groups, and causes. As Mayer (2014, p.3) puts it, “stories are not the surface of politics; they are at its heart”.

It seems strange that we would seek to exclude such a genre from the speech of politicians when it is such a vital meaning-making device in both our day-to-day and political lives. To steer politicians away from this more ubiquitous and inclusive communicative form, and solely towards the technical and arcane language of statistical, critical, and legal argument, would be to miss that there is a certain democratising potential in their personal stories. Particularly in our current political context – where public frustrations with politicians are often mediated by a lack of affinity, and a sense that politicians are remote and out of touch – it is worth exploring the possibility that their attempts to speak through a more relatable, engaging, and culturally accessible genre may not entirely be a bad thing (Coleman, 2003; 2005; Manning and Holmes, 2013; 2014).

Relatedly, the second reason why the abovementioned objections need re-examining concerns the way we conceptualise politics, and more specifically, the practices of political debate and representation. The act of political representation, the way politicians argue about political issues, and the way we relate to these processes are all bound up with and mediated by affect, experience, and personal performance. Democratic debate requires a variety of symbolic forms that help us to approximate truth, develop insight, and widen engagement, and both emotional and experiential forms of persuasion have a culturally

important role to play in realising such an ideal (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Martin, 2016). Political representation is not simply procedural, but also aesthetic and performative, relying on an emotional connection between politicians and citizens, which is established and mediated through the convincing public enactment of personal traits, and the persuasive demonstration of a mutual relationship (Ankersmit, 1997; 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004; Saward, 2006; 2010; Alexander, 2013; Craig, 2016; Peetz, 2019).

Emotions, in such a reading, do not restrict effective democratic practice, nor do they preclude rationality. Rather, they are a precondition of it, and their expression speaks to the mutually constitutive relationship between feelings and democratic life (Marcus, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). From this alternative conception of politics, it would be odd to dismiss politicians' personal stories on the basis that they are anecdotal, emotional, or personal. With a wide body of theory now beginning to highlight the cultural and political importance of the experiential, the emotional, and the personal in political representation and debate, a better approach would surely be to investigate and understand the part that stories might play in these essential democratic processes. If not, we are at risk of missing something vital about the way these practices play out in contemporary democracy, and in danger of overlooking the myriad ways in which personalised storytelling might shape, vitalise, or undermine them. My aim in this thesis, then, is to address this problem by answering the following research questions:

- What role do personalised stories play in the contemporary performance of political representation?
- How should we conceptualise the emotional and experiential arguments that these stories engender, and the rhetorical functions that they serve in contemporary political speech and debate?

- Can politicians' personal stories contribute to more desirable and normatively valuable practices of political representation and argument? If so, how, and under what conditions?

I further expand on the theoretical and empirical rationale for these questions in the following chapters, but at the heart of them is an attempt to reconceptualise our understanding of why, how, and to what ends politicians tell stories. The first question is concerned with enhancing our understanding of the relationship between personalised storytelling and the contemporary enactment of political representation. The second asks how politicians' stories function rhetorically in speech and debate, and what their emotional, experiential, and therapeutic arguments mean for the contemporary practices of political debate and deliberation. The third is geared towards reconceptualising precisely what normative value we think stories might have in democratic communication, and what different practices of storytelling might mean for relationships between citizens and representatives, and for our notions of effective democratic debate. When do politicians' stories work for democracy, and when do they work against it?

1.3. Thesis Overview

By adopting an interdisciplinary methodological and theoretical approach to politicians' personal narratives, my hope throughout this thesis is to develop a new theory of personalised storytelling in politics. This theory, crucially, is one that moves us beyond the traditionally suspicious perspective, approaching politicians' stories from a standpoint that is more sensitive to the central role of narrative in human communication, and the cultural, affective, and performative dimensions of politics. It explains storytelling's centrality to the performance of contemporary political representation, demonstrates its function as an emotional and experiential mode of debate, and accounts for how politicians themselves see narrative account giving in relation to their communicative practices.

In Chapter 2, “The Suspicion of Stories”, I elaborate on the question of why this task is necessary in the first place, before summarising the theoretical framework used to undertake it. I delve deeper into what I term the suspicion of stories, which describes the tendency among many critics to treat personalised storytelling as something that devalues or corrupts political representation and democratic debate. I explore in more detail the common criticisms that underpin this view, and the wider theoretical assumptions guiding the belief that stories, as a genre of political communication, are inherently problematic due to their personal, emotional, and anecdotal qualities. While the important contribution of this body of work has been to draw our attention to way personal stories can be used problematically by certain politicians, I argue that it locates these problems in the wrong place, attributing them to specific features of the stories themselves, rather than the motives or goals that govern their misuse on specific occasions.

This, I suggest, results in genre determinism, and the view that stories are fundamentally incompatible with democratic communication, whether this is because they represent a bad form of argument, a turn towards the irrational, or a means of deceptive, apolitical, and trivial personalisation. I then flesh out the emerging theories of performance, rhetoric, and emotion that I believe challenge such an understanding. I show how these theories give us reason to believe that the same genre features that critics commonly draw upon to reject politicians’ stories – like the way they promote experiential argument, emotional expression, and personal demonstration – can be considered important and potentially valuable components of contemporary democratic life. I then turn to long-standing theories of narrative to show why – as a central means of human sense-making, understanding, and moral evaluation – the genre of storytelling is far from incompatible with politics. Rather, it is a vital symbolic resource for the negotiation of political meaning. Such an understanding, I argue, is suggestive of a need to re-examine how we conceptualise politicians’ personal stories, and what this might mean for their role in the contemporary practice of political representation and debate.

Chapter 3, “Studying Politicians’ Stories”, details the methodology adopted to engage in this task. I outline a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and multimethod approach to politicians’ personal stories. I describe how I applied elements of performance, discourse, and rhetorical analysis to narrative data drawn from conference speeches, parliamentary debates, and elite interviews with politicians, and I explain how this process was underpinned by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). I suggest that these methods of data collection, analysis, and theory-building offer an innovative standpoint from which to reassess the suspicion of stories. I reflect on some of the shortcomings of this methodology, but I also explain how it addresses some of the common gaps in existing approaches. This multimethod, qualitative approach, I argue, leaves me uniquely placed to generate interpretive and normative insights into the performative, rhetorical, and discursive negotiation of political meaning through stories, and its mutually constitutive relationship with the political processes of representation and debate.

Chapter 4, “Storytelling, Performance, and Political Representation”, marks the start of the empirical phase of the project, and features the first part of my textual analysis. Here, I begin to reconceptualise personal stories and anecdotes as entangled with contemporary representative politics. Inspired by aesthetic and performative theories of representation, which highlight the culturally situated, stylistic, and constitutive aspects of the claims politicians make when attempting to speak on behalf of the public (e.g. Ankersmit, 1997; 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004; Seward, 2006; 2010), I set out one of the key arguments of the thesis: politicians draw on stories and anecdotes to perform representation in a style of communication that is more affective, ordinary, and experiential. I argue that this both emerges from, and sustains, a wider performative context in which political representatives are judged against a more emotionally reflexive and personal criteria, and are expected to demonstrate varying degrees of affinity and authenticity (Coleman, 2011; Manning and Holmes, 2014). I explore two crucial aspects of this process: one is the way politicians tell personal stories about themselves to enact their ordinariness and relatability, the other is the

way they tell personal stories about the public to demonstrate a more empathetic, personal, and attentive representative relationship.

This understanding, I argue, challenges the determinism inherent in the suspicion of stories, and the notion that personalised storytelling must always strain against the proper practice of political representation. Instead, given that legitimate democratic representation partly depends on the convincing public enactment of these emotional traits and personal connections, which can signify both resemblance and relationship, I suggest that personalised storytelling is in fact congruous with its enactment. Not all personal stories are in harmony with legitimate or desirable representation, and they can have both a positive and negative impact on the relationship between politicians and the public. This, crucially, often depends on how well these performances go, and the intentions that are brought to them. To illustrate this, I refer to some of the moments where these storytelling performances succeed, and where these storytelling performances fail, before exploring how they illuminate some of the promises and pitfalls of conducting representation through personalised storytelling.

If Chapter 4 is concerned with the relationship between personalised storytelling and notions of performance and political representation, then Chapter 5 is concerned with its relationship to rhetoric and political debate. In “Storytelling, Political Debate, and Emotional Rhetoric”, I ask what it means for political argument if politicians are increasingly debating political issues through emotional, experiential, and therapeutic personal stories. I examine some of the common criticisms made of politicians who talk in such terms, particularly by those who lament the rise of ‘therapy rhetoric’ (Rieff, 1966; Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2004). I then explain why such criticisms are problematic. Since emotion, affect, and experience are valuable and important aspects of democratic politics, I suggest that storytelling represents an important genre through which they can be discussed, mediated, and expressed in political debate.

I apply this understanding to a further textual analysis of politicians' stories from speeches and parliamentary debates. I demonstrate how these stories function as *affective rhetorical strategies* (Martin, 2013a; 2016), with arguments that are premised on the cultivation of empathy, compassion, and emotional identification. At a wider ontological level, these stories encouraged what politicians would often term a 'human side' of debate. This logic of debate was local, embodied, and reflexive, and it was geared towards making the personal political. Rather than contradicting a more rational mode of rhetoric, I claim that this logic of narrative debate was often complementary to the more systematic, impersonal, and quantifiable logic of statistical debate. I show how personal storytelling represents a vital means by which politicians supplement quantitative debate with qualitative illustrations of how issues impact the 'people behind the statistics'. I discuss how these stories were not always a productive force in debate, and why we may want to heed some of the criticisms highlighting their rhetorical shortcomings. Nevertheless, I suggest that their potential lies in their ability to incorporate recognition, solidarity, and understanding into political debate, cultivating more intimate modes of publicness (Berlant, 2008). This, in turn, gives us reason to rethink how we understand the relationship between stories, emotions, and argument, and at a wider level, how we perceive the place of the experiential and the therapeutic in political rhetoric.

In Chapter 6, "From the Strategic to the Subconscious: What It Means to Share Political Stories", I build upon the findings of my textual analysis by exploring my interviews with politicians. I interpret the thoughts, experiences, and justifications of politicians who engage in personalised storytelling, exploring why they share personal stories, what it feels like to share those stories, and how they reflect on the genre and its relationship to their wider communicative practices and roles. Here, I analyse the narratives that politicians draw upon to shape and give meaning to their narrative account giving in political speech and debate. The key claim of the chapter is that politicians attribute meaning to their storytelling in much more complex and varied terms than those typically suggested by the suspicious

perspective, with their justifications, experiences, and reflections often resembling a complicated enmeshing of psychological, personal, and political considerations. I identify four distinct yet interlinking narratives that characterise how politicians make sense of their personalised storytelling: *strategic*, *emotional*, *dutiful*, and *humanising*.

I argue that the *strategic* narrative echoed typical understandings of why politicians engage in personalised storytelling, highlighting how they saw it as a powerful device that could help them to achieve political change. *Emotional*, *humanising*, and *dutiful* narratives, on the other hand, did not. Instead, I suggest that they highlighted the significant degree of personal and emotional involvement that mediate politicians' experiences of storytelling; the importance they attribute to sharing stories to combat elitism and to demonstrate their humanity, authenticity, and relatability; and the way personalised storytelling was entwined with their roles as political representatives. Such narratives, I suggest, lend credence to the arguments made in the earlier chapters, while also further emphasising why it is important to reassess what we think politicians' stories do in political speech and debate.

Chapter 7 is my concluding chapter, in which I ask the question: "How Can Storytelling Benefit Democracy?". I summarise the main arguments put forward in response to the research questions set out at the beginning of the thesis, before considering their wider implications for our understanding of personalised storytelling and political communication. The key aim of the chapter is to draw together the theoretical insights developed over the thesis – regarding the relationship between storytelling, representative politics, and democratic debate – and to ask how they might allow us to establish a criteria for understanding how and when politicians' stories work in the interests of political communication. In this way, while much of the thesis addresses why existing benchmarks for evaluating the normative value of personalised in political speech and debate are in need of revision, I end the thesis by tentatively suggesting new ones.

To this end, I revisit the three key theoretical concepts at the heart of this thesis: performance, argument, and emotion. I argue that each of these concepts offer an important entry-point for evaluating the ways in which different practices of personalised storytelling might strengthen or weaken democratic communication. I demonstrate how Chambers' (2009) notions of deliberative and plebiscitary rhetoric can allow us to decipher when politicians' stories are facilitating democratic argument. I suggest the democratic value of stories involves assessing not only the types of emotions they produce, but also the extent to which they help to cultivate a "sophisticated discourse of emotionality" in contemporary politics (Richards, 2004). In performative terms, I suggest that an important benchmark is how well given stories might produce feelings of affinity, efficacy, and authenticity in representative politics (Coleman, 2003; 2011; Manning and Holmes, 2014).

What connects these chapters, then, is their concern with how we conceptualise personalised storytelling in politics: beginning with why dominant ways of theorising personalised storytelling in politics have been problematic, turning to the question of how we might go about theorising and analysing it differently, before offering an alternative account of storytelling's relationship to the practices of political representation and debate. By approaching stories in this way, the key claim of this thesis is that we can make the important step away from suspicion, and towards a focus on how politicians' stories might better work in the interests of democratic communication.

Chapter 2 – The Suspicion of Stories

2.1. Introduction

In much political thought, politicians' personal stories have been treated with a sense of suspicion. It has been argued that they are deceptive and distracting, and used by politicians to shroud suspicious political goals by recourse to personal discourse (Souto-Manning, 2014). They have been said to be extraneous, unscientific, and 'merely anecdotal' forms of political argument, and incapable of the reliable generalisations that can come from more 'representative', statistical political information (Jamieson, 1988, p.151; Hyman, 1998). They have been described as "compelling" (Mehan, 1997) and "bewitching" (Salmon, 2010), stirring the passions in such a way that renders citizens incapable of reasoned political judgement. Storytelling, from this viewpoint, is thought to be complicit in the increasing tabloidisation, personalisation, and theatricality of political communication, where a focus on issues of style, image, and performance is seen to be undermining more serious, informed, and rational discussions of public issues (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Schedler, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004).

As I will argue in this chapter, such a perspective is problematic. It seems to run contrary not only to traditional conceptions of personal narrative as something central to human cognition, argument, and interaction – as "storytelling animals" (MacIntyre, 1981, p.201) – but also to what some politicians like Frank Field (2017) seem to think they are doing when they tell emotive personal stories "to change MPs' hearts". The central premise of this chapter is that such suspicion presents an overly negative view of political storytelling, one that is in serious need of reassessment. Not only is it backed up by very little empirical evidence, but it treats storytelling as fundamentally incompatible with political representation and debate, resting on theoretical assumptions that are increasingly at odds with the contemporary nature of democratic culture: namely positing that issues of style, emotion, and the personal have no place in the political sphere.

In order to properly understand what is happening when politicians tell stories, I suggest that we need to move beyond the traditional approach of dismissing stories as unimportant, or worse still, dangerous. Though not denying that politicians' stories can at times be specious and misleading, I will aim to show that this is more the product of dubious *motives* and *goals* than anything inherently problematic about storytelling as a *genre* of political communication. Where critics of political storytelling have tended to conflate these issues, viewing particularly spurious instances of storytelling as grounds for wholesale dismissal of the genre, I intend to offer a more balanced perspective.

As such, I develop a new theoretical framework in this chapter for conceptualising politicians' personal stories. This framework emerges in response to some of the common criticisms of storytelling politicians, and is drawn from a wide range of political, social, rhetorical, and media and communication theory. It aims to capture, on the one hand, the present political context as one in which politicians' personal narratives might have culturally and politically significant functions. Here, it will be suggested that some of the key objections levelled against political stories – namely regarding their emotional, personal, and anecdotal characteristics – should be re-examined against a backdrop of recent theory that highlights, amongst other things, the central role that emotions play in mediated political life (Marcus, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), the cultural and political importance of affective and experientially motivated modes of political discourse and argumentation (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Martin, 2016), and the significance of style, the personal, and performance as mediators of the political process (Alexander, 2013; Craig, 2016), particularly when it comes to aesthetic and symbolic understandings of political representation (Ankersmit, 1997; 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004; Saward, 2006; 2010; Peetz, 2019).

On the other hand, this theoretical framework also aims to capture how the fundamental relationship between humans and narrative makes storytelling an indispensable part of our politics, however grand or personalised this endeavour may be. As a vital tool of

human sense-making, understanding, and moral evaluation, it will be suggested that narrative is an essential means by which democratic societies negotiate the political (Mayer, 2014; Hochschild, 2016). The political is here understood as a process whereby different storied accounts of the social world vie for public consideration, and for their attendant interpretations, meanings, and values to be impressed upon events, incorporated into the legislative process, and realised in the hearts and minds of citizens (Bennett and Edelman, 1985; Coleman, 2015a). In this way, far from aberrant, I suggest that personalised storytelling is an important symbolic resource for the performance of political meaning, and a central device through which politicians and citizens can describe, interpret, and take political action. This understanding, I argue, is suggestive of the need for new directions and questions when it comes to studying politicians' stories.

2.2. The Suspicion of Stories

The suspicion of stories is premised on the belief that the use of personal stories and anecdotes by politicians is fundamentally incompatible with democratic communication (Mehan, 1997; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014). This suspicion, as I understand it, can be distilled into three interrelated concerns about stories as a genre of political communication. First, stories, unlike statistical information, are said to represent 'merely anecdotal' and ungeneralisable forms of political information, which means that, as an argumentative form, they should be kept out of serious political deliberation and debate (Jamieson, 1988; Hyman, 1998; see also Oldenburg, 2015). Second, it is argued that stories, as examples of personal discourse, can be used strategically by political actors to subtly convey harmful political discourse, or to conceal their hegemonic political goals (Souto-Manning, 2014; see also Fernandes, 2017). Third, stories are said to stir our emotions in dangerous ways, getting in the way of reasoned and deliberative political judgement (Mehan, 1997; Dryzek, 2000, p.69; Miller, 2002; see also Polletta and Lee, 2006, p.702). The result of this, it is argued, is that political storytelling is just one symptom of a

wider turn to more impoverished forms of personalised and emotive political discourse, which is seen as a threat to deliberative standards, and a strain on citizen information needs (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Schedler, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004).

This position has perhaps been most clearly articulated in Souto-Manning's (2014) development of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA). CNA is an offshoot of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which interrogates discourse – understood to be the linguistic practices and meanings that are both constitutive of and constituted by social and political conditions – as sites of hegemonic struggle (Fairclough, 1993, p.93). For Souto-Manning (2014), political storytelling is part of this discursive hegemonic struggle, evidenced by the way political actors use personal stories and anecdotes to conceal broader, potentially oppressive ideological goals. She offers a rather bleak assessment of how stories are used by political actors, concluding that “stories (as a genre) serve as a means for language to be used for colonization, to be espoused without critical questioning of its components or parts” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.165).

She draws on two particularly salient examples of political storytelling by former presidents of the USA and Brazil – George W. Bush and José Inácio Lula da Silva – who are said to use stories about ordinary citizens to justify and conceal their detrimental economic policies. By allowing these actors to couch hegemonic linguistic practices in terms of the personal and the everyday, she argues that stories provide actors with unique opportunities to circulate and defend their harmful political ideas (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.162). The reason why they are able to do this, in her opinion, owes much to the dangers of storytelling as a *genre* of communication:

When a story is being told, it is harder for one to dialogue with the narrator; it is harder to disagree because it is not an explicit position. Narrative tellings are more rhetorically powerful because they tend to stir our emotions in a way that more

expository language and texts do not. As a result, it is harder to challenge ideology disguised in narrative formats. Disseminating political views through narratives, through storytelling, gives the false impression of the absence of political views and ideological concepts (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.165).

In this short extract, Souto-Manning (2014) exemplifies some of the common criticisms levelled at political stories. They “stir our emotions”; they use language that is less “expository”; and they retain the “false impression” of being apolitical and non-ideological. The assumption is that these are decidedly negative traits, making it harder for citizens to challenge ideology.

These criticisms of stories have their roots in some commonly held normative ideas about *how* political discourse and debate *should* be conducted. In the first case, the idea that stories may wrongly “stir our emotions”, at the expense of more reasoned judgement, suggests that reason and emotion are dualistic systems of thought that strain against each other. This is an idea that has informed much of the literature on political deliberation. The deliberative model is particularly concerned with how democratic legitimacy can arise from the cultivation of inclusive communicative scenarios, *foras*, and practices, in which interlocutors are given ample and equal opportunity to give reasons, to pass judgement, and to scrutinise ideas before decisions are taken on key political issues (Habermas, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

Though some are more flexible about the communicative styles which can be adopted in this process (Young, 2002), many scholars tend to demand universalistic standards of debate in which legitimacy rests on impartial and rational forms of reason-giving. This reason-giving must be free from “distortion”, factors like emotion, self-interest, and partisanship, which are all said to disproportionately alter the universal standards whereby reasons should be given, discussed, and understood (e.g. Habermas, 1996). In

these lofty standards of deliberation, emotion is deemed anathema because, as Martin (2013a, p.464) puts it, it “bypasses reason and invites participants to accept arguments on the basis of unexamined feelings and automatic responses to symbols that do not bear rational scrutiny”.

Mehan (1997), for example, has been particularly critical of the emotive aspects of political stories, and how this can overpower what he sees as a more reasoned debate over key issues. He focuses on the debate surrounding California’s Proposition 187, an initiative which sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from being able to use non-emergency health care, public schools, and state services. Mehan (1997, p.263) argues that the debate illustrated “the power of compelling anecdotes over scientific evidence”. He shows how supporters of the bill argued their case by drawing upon sensationalist stories of immigrants illegally crossing the US-Mexico border, who were said to be “taking your jobs” and “abusing your social services”. Political opponents of the initiative, in contrast, argued in more reasonable ways, using statistical evidence and research studies to back up their claims (Mehan, 1997, p.263). Though less reasonable, he argues that the emotive and personal nature of the anecdotal arguments made them more effective and persuasive, with demonstrably negative consequences for Californian politics. As he puts it, “the clever manipulation of compelling anecdotes that appealed to personal self-interest trumped the statistically based research that appealed abstractly to the public good” (Mehan, 1997, p.267).

Brown’s (1999) contribution – the concept of “anecdotal racism” – illustrates why we must be sensitive to the ways in which storytelling may draw on emotions in ways that are undesirable for democratic communication. He examines what he terms the “racialized anecdote”, an increasingly common feature of parliamentary debates that connects tales of urban deprivation, loss of community, and failing public services to the issue of race (Brown, 1999, p.46). He traces the rise of this type of anecdote back to 1968, and to the growing

political influence of Enoch Powell with his famous “Rivers of Blood” speech. Importantly, Brown (1999, p.27) links the emergence of this discourse to a historical change in political culture, in which increasingly sensitive attitudes to race necessitated “a new language that racializes the experience, or rather perceived experience, of immigration and ‘black’ settlement”.

Brown (1999, p.34) argues that these anecdotes, which connected tales of broken British communities to the issue of immigration, were adopted by proponents of Powellism because they “understood that it was necessary to submerge or redefine ‘race’ within other social topics or concerns that would act as conduits for it”. Crucially, he argues that “its penetration into popular consciousness is achieved through the emotional identification the story affords” (Brown, 1999, p.46). The story vivified and personified the idea of a violated sense of order and British identity, thus creating an emotional identification that was inherently racialised.

This is related to another key concern about political stories articulated by Souto-Manning (2014, p.165), that they are “rhetorically powerful” despite using “less expository language”. A common criticism of political stories is that, despite being compelling forms of argument, they represent ‘merely anecdotal’ forms of evidence. Jamieson (1988, p.56) summarises this position well in her critique of the way Ronald Reagan used anecdotes and personal stories to make general arguments:

The specific dramatic tale does not a generalization justify. Reagan comfortably leaps from anecdote to generalized assertion. The dramatic tale has more power to involve and to propel that leap than do statistics that would better warrant the claim.

Because they focus on individual instances of subjective experience, and cannot attain statistical significance, anecdotes are said to be ungeneralisable and unsubstantiated forms

of political argument. Though, as Jamieson (1988) acknowledges, their dramatic and emotive content can make them particularly effective at enlivening issues, mobilising public opinion, and winning political arguments, the fact that they are unscientific means that they do not hold much evidentiary value for qualifying important political claims (Gilens, 1999).

As Hyman (1998, p.801) puts it, “anecdotes provide no mechanism for assessing truthfulness, typicality, or frequency”, which makes it “hazardous to generalize from what may well be an isolated or aberrant observation”. To illustrate this, he goes on to criticise particularly salient examples of anecdotal evidence given by US presidents, such as Reagan’s powerful caricature of the “welfare queen [...] who drove Cadillacs, and used food stamps to buy steaks”, and Clinton’s use of the personal stories of five women to defend vetoing a bill that would have banned partial-birth abortions (Hyman, 1998, p.804). Such a position is exemplified by the common and disparaging criticism of political storytelling as “legislation by anecdote”, where important policy decisions and debates are said to be based on unrepresentative anecdotal data (Hyman, 1998, p.849). This criticism of political storytelling, then, carries an important normative assumption about how political arguments should be made, and how political truth can be arrived at: namely, that political information, debate, and law-making is legitimate only when it satisfies certain rationalist conditions of ‘objectivity’, which depend on supposedly universal mechanisms of impartiality like generalisability and statistical significance. Stories and anecdotes, crucially, do not satisfy these conditions.

The suspicion of stories also reflects wider concerns about the personalisation and tabloidisation of politics (Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004). The former refers to the idea that politics is increasingly dominated by an emphasis on political actors, their individual traits, and their personalities and political personas, where the latter refers to the idea that political discourse and news reporting has become less substantive and more image-focused, appealing more to popular audiences through content oriented towards entertainment,

celebrity, and show business. Critics of this development, like Crouch (2004) and Franklin (2004), see personalisation and tabloidisation as heralding a new era of 'image' politics, where declining standards of political debate, information, and citizenship are attributable to a political communication ecology dominated more by personality, style, and image than by policy programmes, issue content, and reasoned debate. Franklin (2004, p.24), in particular, has been extremely vocal in his critique of the way British politics has turned into a "media democracy" where "politicians and policies are packaged for media marketing and public consumption" (p. 24).

As such, normative concerns abound over strategic uses of the personal by politicians, motivated by what has been termed the 'game' of political communication. In this game, politicians are said to skirt around thoughtful discussions of political issues, opting instead for modes of communication more likely to engender self-preservation, successful persuasion, and electoral victory. This, in turn, is said to be encouraged and enabled by a conflict-oriented news media interested primarily in the strategies politicians employ and the images that they try to cultivate (see Craig, 2016 for further discussion). Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p.33), for example, have suggested that this turn away from substantive journalism towards "strategic coverage" – where the language of competition, and winning or losing dominates; where "performers, critics, and audience hold attention"; and where "performance, style, and perception of the candidate are central features" – has eroded public interest and trust in politics. They argue that a "spiral of cynicism" has emerged: "reporters and politicians justify their own cynical discourse by saying that it is required by the other", and in doing so, "each reinforces the assumption the other brought to the exchange".

This understanding is guided by what has elsewhere been described as an 'anti-theatrical prejudice' in political thought (Barish, 1985; Peetz, 2019). In this way of thinking about politics, any attempt to perform by politicians, or to cultivate a persona, is perceived to

be, by its very nature, artificial and manipulative. Their efforts to demonstrate personal characteristics are chalked off as 'acting', said to be concealing an "imagined pure and genuine reality that is free from the mask of performance" (Peetz, 2019, p.7). This prejudice is such that, as Peetz argues (2019, p.8), "to some political scientists, performance only functions as an antipolitical corruption within politics". In particular, she singles out Schedler's (1997, pp.13-4) notion of 'aesthetic antipolitics' as a particular example of this school of thought, described as follows:

aesthetic antipolitics subverts the power of words through the power of images. It downgrades political deliberation and decision-making to mere acts of backstage performance and as a countermove pushes theatrical forms of action to the centre stage of politics [...] With aesthetic antipolitics the political sphere suffers from intrusion and foreign occupation by the logic of theatre and drama [...] the façade prevails over the face, beauty over truth, the symbolic act over verbal communication, the magic trick over the real measure, the virtual over the actual, [...] character and the display of virtue over programs and the evidence of success, [...] the symbols of family life over the insignia of public life, [...] the credible expression of emotions over the plausible lining up of arguments.

This notion of 'image' politics, as Scammell (2015, p.8) puts it, is "loaded with normative critique, suggestive of style over substance, personality over policy, desire-fed consumers over critical citizens"; image becomes "associated with a threat to democratic ideals: artifice, illusion and manipulation". This idea runs through the literature on political storytelling. Souto-Manning (2014, p.165), as discussed, sees political storytelling as dangerous precisely because its focus on the personal and the everyday allows it to "retain the false impression of the absence of political views and ideological concepts". Similarly, Salmon (2010) argues that politics has become increasingly dominated by a "storytelling machine", where market strategists, spin doctors, and public relations experts conjure up

emotive personal stories about political leaders to manipulate public opinion and to hide political realities. Central to the suspicion of stories, then, is the idea that politicians use personal stories and anecdotes to construct images that are deceptive or untrue. And, whether it is by appealing to emotions, by drawing on compelling rhetoric, or by focusing on the personal, it is clear that this suspicion leads to a view of stories as a debased and dangerous genre of political interaction: one that subjects the rational to the emotional, the political to the personal, and the substantive to the stylistic.

2.3. Disentangling the Suspicion of Stories: Against Genre Determinism

While the suspicion of stories offers some valuable contributions to our understanding of political storytelling – prompting us to question and critique how politicians’ stories might be misleading and deceptive – it presents an overly negative view of the *motives* behind political storytelling, which has led to a blanket dismissal of storytelling as a *genre* of political communication. There is no denying that politicians do sometimes tell stories towards suspect ends. Indeed, Mehan (1997), Brown (1999), and Souto-Manning (2014) have all offered examples of occasions where the uniquely emotive and personal dimensions of storytelling have been used to undermine and curtail what Mehan (1997, p.249) calls “universalistic appeals to the general good, a higher morality, and universal human rights”. Yet, the idea that this is a natural product of storytelling as a communicative form, or that political storytelling must always be leveraged in service of some deceptive or hegemonic political goal, is overly cynical.

Not only does this genre determinism look increasingly suspect when examined under the lens of recent approaches to political style, emotion, performance, and rhetoric, but it jars with traditional conceptions of personal narrative as something central to human argument, communication, and cognition. These theoretical issues stem from a wider methodological problem. There has been little empirical work undertaken with regard to

political storytelling, and this means that much of the suspicion of stories is built around a small number of isolated and cherry-picked examples, where storytelling has been used for particularly dubious ends. Importantly, this has meant that any sincere and potentially beneficial instances of political storytelling have been neglected. These problems, taken together, mean that there is an increasing need to challenge such genre determinism, to reassess politicians' personal stories, and to establish a more nuanced understanding of the role they play in politics.

2.3.1. *Stories and Emotion*

The first prevalent critique of political stories that needs to be examined is the notion that they stir the passions and promote emotional responses to political phenomena, hindering the capacity for more reasoned judgement (Mehan, 1997; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014). From this perspective, emotion is set against reason, deemed antithetical to considered judgement. Yet, the idea that reason and emotion are two separate, antagonistic phenomena has been well-challenged by findings in neuroscience, and particularly by Marcus' (2002) idea of the 'sentimental citizen'. Marcus (2002) argues that emotions have a necessary and valuable role to play in political reasoning and deliberation, precisely because they make reasoned and conscious political judgement possible. His idea is inspired by recent findings in neuroscience, which hold that human experience and perception is always first filtered through emotional systems before being presented as conscious information that can be 'reasoned' (Damasio, 1994).

For Marcus (2002), emotional responses like 'enthusiasm' and 'anxiety' are central to political deliberation, because they activate neural systems that provide a basis for political reasoning and action. Anxiety, for instance, is said to activate our surveillance system, the emotional system that we use to monitor our environment for danger. In politics, anxiety pulls us away from our usual habits to alert us that there is something in our environment

that needs to be considered in detail, prompting us to seek out and consider different political information. In contrast, enthusiasm, the pleasure we feel upon the successful realisation of habitual behaviour, is what prompts us to support and engage with particular political causes, and to acknowledge and enjoy deliberative processes of argument. Without anxiety, Marcus (2002) argues that citizens would have no reason to set aside habitual behaviour and seek out alternative forms of political information and argument. And, likewise, without enthusiasm, citizens would have little reason to sustain and develop motivation for deliberative behaviour *at all*. The idea that reason and emotion should be set against each other, in his eyes, is simply flawed, because “only by being emotional *and* rational can democratic citizens be at their very best” (Marcus, 2002, p.148).

Neuroscience shows why the alleged dichotomy between reason and emotion makes little sense in biological and physiological terms, but we can also problematise this dichotomy from a psychosocially oriented understanding of emotion. Indeed, where neuroscientific approaches tend to treat emotions as private or internal feelings that are triggered by different neural systems, it is also important to appreciate the way they are laden with socio-political meanings and functions. As Martin (2013a, p.470) puts it, “emotions are not just private and subjective but shape – and are shaped by – our social interactions”. That is, emotions are symbolic and public, and they take on different meanings as they are negotiated, expressed, and interpreted through human sense-making and communication. Ahmed (2004), for example, has coined the term “affective economies” to describe how particular emotions are historical and contingent, and socially and publicly aligned with particular bodies and objects in different moments and contexts.

In such a reading, rather than felt, bodily *reactions* to phenomena that occur at an individual level, emotions are understood as *dispositions* or *orientations* that are shareable, contestable, and unstable. They emerge from affect, which I distinguish here as being rooted in unconscious states of mind and emergent bodily sensations that are not yet labelled,

interpreted, and expressed. Affect becomes emotion as these states are consciously integrated and given linguistic description, “invaded by texts, symbols, and representations” (Wetherell, 2013, p.356). Emotions are the “observable human responses that come with attendant feelings”, where affects “describe the unconscious intensities and movements that provoke and stimulate emotion” (Martin, 2013a, p.462). As Hoggett (2009, p.176) suggests, “once an affect (such as anxiety) has found an object, it becomes an emotion (such as fear)”. Affect and emotion, therefore, are interdependent:

Without affect, feelings essentially do not ‘feel’, for it is affect that provides the intensity with which we experience emotions like pain, joy, and love, and more important, the urgency to act upon those feelings (Papachrissi, 2015, p.5).

Emotions infuse our attempts to apprehend ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us, inclining us towards particular self-concepts, groups, and beliefs. In this way, “rather than distortions of reason, emotions are conduits of affect that prompt feelings and orient cognition” (Martin, 2013a, p.462). This process also informs our sense of what particular emotions mean; who, when, and towards whom we should feel them; and whether they are desirable, legitimate, or not. Reddy (2001, p.129) introduced the term “emotional regime” to describe “the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them”, and that are dominant in different political, historical, and cultural contexts and periods. Hochschild (2002, p.118) has further explored how these emotional regimes are organised according to social and political conventions, involving a “set of taken-for-granted feeling rules (rules about how we imagine we should feel)” and a set of “framing rules (rules about the way we should see and think)”.

This means that emotions also have a clear political and collective dimension. Papachrissi (2015), for example, has shown how emotional discourse underpins “affective publics [...] networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected

through expressions of sentiment". Berlant (2008, p.10), in similar terms, has suggested that sentimental expression can connect people who do not even know each other. Her idea of "intimate publics" refers to publics who feel connected and recognised through shared cultural products, texts, and histories that foreground "emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness". Taken together, these psychological and sociological understandings show why any separation between the emotional and the political is untenable. So long as our political identities, relationships, and beliefs are negotiated emotionally, and so long as our practice and understanding of that same emotional negotiation is informed and bounded by power relationships, social structures, and political decisions, then the emotional *is* political and the political *is* emotional.

As Samuels (1993, p.56) has put it, there is a "political level of the psyche", which means that we can understand "political processes as psyche speaking, and internal processes in terms of politics". In other words, there exists a persistent two-way street between our inner lives and our outer lives, an intimate relationship between that which we might traditionally think of as emotional, psychological, and private, and that which we might traditionally think of as rational, collective, and public. They emerge from and impact upon each other, and so to speak of any separation between reason and emotion is to miss that they are both two sides of the same coin. In this understanding of the human mind, "reason and emotions are inseparable because the subject is constituted through its affective relation to other objects" (Martin, 2013a, p.470). There is no detached rational self that can exist outside of these relations, and so our political identities, actions, and beliefs are always mediated by affects and emotions.

Whether we take a neuroscientific or psychosocial approach to emotion, they both have similarly important implications for the way we understand the relationship between stories and emotions in politics. If, as they suggest, reason and emotion are interdependent;

political subjectivity is the product of both conscious and unconscious processes; and sensed, affective experience is essential to democratic practices like citizenship, debate, and deliberation, then it seems unfair to dismiss stories on the basis that they stir our emotions. Instead, it is perhaps better to ask what kinds of stories invoke emotions in ways that strengthen democratic communication, and what kinds of stories invoke emotions in ways that we may want to avoid. Wahl-Jorgensen (2012), for example, has argued for a more nuanced understanding of emotional discourse in political life. In her view, we should make a distinction between discourse that is designed to evoke emotions of empathy and solidarity, and discourse that is designed to evoke feelings of intolerance and hatred. Where the former is said to cultivate emotions that are positive for the democratic process, bringing about better mutual understanding and identification between citizens, the latter can lead to a breakdown of tolerance and acceptance.

Such a conceptual distinction is arguably too neat, and there are exceptional cases where empathy and solidarity may work against democratic principles, like the kinds of nativist empathy and strong emotional identification suggested by Brown's (1999) racialised anecdotes. The wider argument, however, is clear: we should not simply dismiss the role emotions play in public life, but instead seek to establish the different ways in which they may underlie political processes with both positive and negative consequences. There is now an emerging body of research dedicated to this normative task, and which is attempting to redress the long-standing neglect of emotion in the study of politics. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5, but its conclusions are considerably different to the ones espoused by those suspicious of stories. Far from seeing emotion as antithetical to rational thought, or as standing in opposition to political ideals, it is instead viewed as an important mediator of political life, central to the way key stakeholders – politicians, the media, and citizens – all relate to, make sense of, and communicate politics (e.g. Coleman, 2013; Martin, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Quite how politicians' personal stories fit into this picture is, as of yet, unclear, but there is reason to believe that their emotional and experiential dimensions are worthy of further enquiry. For Wahl-Jorgensen (2012), personalised storytelling is a genre of political communication conducive to the kinds of empathy and solidarity that she deems central to positive democratic communication. Moreover, some recent approaches to deliberative theory have established that the kinds of emotional engagements afforded by personal stories can be instrumental to democratic practices of inclusive communication (Barnes, 2008; Van Stokkom, 2012). In Van Stokkom's (2012) study of Dutch interactive policy experiments, he finds that, where rational argumentation often failed to change participants' opinions, storytelling was one genre of emotive communication that helped interlocutors to change their minds and see their fellow deliberators' points of view.

Similarly, Polletta and Lee (2006) have examined storytelling in the context of public deliberation post-9/11. Like Van Stokkom (2012), they see the emotional dimensions of stories as valuable for public communication, where the exchange of personal experiences had a unique capacity to induce empathy between different political subjectivities. As psychologists have recognised, stories can be particularly powerful in this regard, because they can engender identification between tellers and listeners, and vicariously 'transport' individuals, allowing them to "understand what it is like to experience the described events" (De Graaf et al., 2012, p.804).

While this gives us a good idea of how emotional personal stories function in deliberations between citizens, we know little about their role in the speeches and debates of politicians. In this regard, it is certainly important to note that the relationship between stories and emotions in politics can be a complex one, fraught with both dangers and potentialities. We only have to return to Brown's (1999) concept of 'anecdotal racism' or Mehan's (1997) discussion of California's Proposition 187 to see how emotional stories – ones invoking fear and anger – can be told to damaging effect. So far, when analysing what politicians do with

the emotive dimension of stories, approaches to political storytelling have only acknowledged one aspect of this relationship: the dangers. But what if some stories told by politicians can invoke emotions, create empathy, and induce identification in ways that might be positive for the political communication process?

2.3.2. *Stories and Argument*

Another common criticism of politicians' personal stories that needs to be re-examined concerns their relationship to argumentation. Pervading the suspicion of stories is the notion that political storytelling is dangerous because it represents a subjective and unscientific mode of political argument, one incapable of providing generalisable data on which legitimate political decisions can be made, unlike statistics or quantifiable information. This idea – that political information is only relevant or legitimate when it is quantifiable – is problematic. Not only have studies have cast doubt on the extent to which citizens use statistics when formulating political attitudes (Herda, 2010; Lawrence and Sides, 2014), but inscribed in this criticism of political storytelling is the very idea that there is such a thing as objective political truth, attainable through standardised mechanisms of quantification. What emerges from such a perspective is the dangerous notion that statistical interpretations of political reality are non-judgemental and value-free, when in reality they are not. Like all political knowledge, statistics are rhetorical, influenced by power imbalances, and subject to processes of selection and framing, the smallest of which can have demonstrably different effects on audiences (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981; Van Dijk, 2000; Katchergin, 2015). Far from being objective, statistical accounts are constitutive of the political reality that they purportedly reflect.

But perhaps most damaging of all is that this perspective leads to an erasure of that which makes truth political: its contestability. Coleman (2018) has been particularly critical of the notion that democratic legitimacy depends on an objectivised “quest for capital-T Truth”,

one that can be revealed through practices of quantification and statistical probability. This discourse of objectivity, he argues, leads to “an adroit redesignation of instrumental bias as impartial revelation”, the performative outcome of which is a closure of the space for the discussion of counter-truths, which resultantly “seem like expressions of empirical irresponsibility” (Coleman, 2018, p.161). This is antithetical to democratic politics, dominated as it is by a multitude of voices, perspectives, and values, most of which are conflicting and irreducible to any single, empirically verifiable notion of truth. Given that most important political issues cannot be empirically validated or conclusively resolved – often revolving around abstract, moral, and culturally situated questions of what things ‘mean’ – he argues that the normative fulfilment of democratic politics rests on the cultivation of intersubjective judgement, founded upon principles of social curiosity, collective interpretation, and the ability to work through disagreement.

Crucially, this demands a wide range of symbolic resources, mediums, and genres capable of negotiating difference, prompting social inquisitiveness, and establishing shared meanings. In other words, it requires a diversity of rhetorical forms. As appeals to *logos*, there is no doubt that statistics are one such indispensable form. They offer *more* generalisable information than stories, but this information can still only ever provide a selective account of political reality, foregrounding disembodied, quantified, and aggregated political knowledge at the expense of knowledge that is more qualitative, affective, and subjective. Yet, in order to cultivate intersubjective judgement, we need to acknowledge the legitimacy of other rhetorical forms insofar as they provide different avenues for the negotiation, interpretation, and contestation of intersubjective political meaning. This means also acknowledging, as Martin (2016, p.143) does, that the aim of political rhetoric “is as much to capture mood and sentiment, as it is to reason logically”. Democratic debate thus requires a broad-spectrum of vibrant and diverse argumentative forms that can engage citizens’ and politicians’ attentions, produce different subject positions, and elaborate the space for democratic engagement (Martin, 2013a).

Indeed, recent work has shown how stories may be one such argumentative form, performing important rhetorical functions in contemporary politics (Oldenburg and Leff, 2009; Oldenburg, 2015). In their work on political anecdotes, Oldenburg and Leff (2009, p.2) take issue with the tendency to criticise or dismiss anecdotal arguments as “unscholarly, unscientific, or trivial”. Through close textual analyses of speeches delivered by important US political figures, they argue that political anecdotes combine two rhetorical tropes – *ethos* (argumentative proofs derived from the speaker’s character, ideals, and values) and *synecdoche* (the use of a part to represent a whole) – in ways that are central to the construction of a presidential image and identity. Politicians use anecdotes to draw upon individual instances of personal experience in ways that make *ethotic* arguments about their character, which can become *synecdochic* representations of their overall presidential identity, and a guide towards how they may act generally in office. Given that, as they argue, questions of character and image are central to contemporary presidential rhetoric, Oldenburg and Leff (2009, p.8) claim that we would be wrong to dismiss anecdotes as “insufficient forms of evidence that lead to fallacious generalizations”. Instead, they ask us to appreciate that anecdotes have valuable rhetorical functions, enabling citizens to convert “narrative incidents into larger themes that are *enthymematically* viewed as the personal extensions, enactments, and embodiments of presidential candidates”.

Part of the problem with objectivist critiques of stories is that they ignore the culturally and politically situated nature of rhetoric. It is impractical to suggest that politicians should argue according to lofty standards and forms that are not deemed culturally relevant or popularly accessible, because to do so asks them to weaken their arguments, while guaranteeing that numerous citizens would either be shut out of or disinterested in the debate. Atkins and Finlayson (2013, p.162), for example, argue that we should see the increasing use of political anecdotes as part of what they term a “populist” shift in the rhetorical culture of British politics. They find that, since the middle of the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the use of anecdotes by political leaders in their conference

speeches. These anecdotes fall into two distinct types: stories leaders tell about themselves, and stories leaders tell about interactions with other people. They too highlight the important argumentative functions of stories, arguing that they resemble a “dense convergence of rhetorical forces and processes” (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, pp.164-165). Drawing on a variety of rhetorical concepts and theory, they conclude that anecdotes can be a:

proof from an authority [...] an illustration of reality; a model for imitation; an affirmation of ethos; a representation of an ideal; a spur to emotion; a claim about the structure of reality. Where they involve the use of everyday language and descriptions of everyday experiences, anecdotes may also engender identification not merely between persons, but between ways of thinking (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, pp.164-165).

Through a short qualitative analysis of anecdotes from famous British political leaders, Atkins and Finlayson (2013, p.170) show how the increasing use of anecdotes is linked to a cultural change “in expectations of what counts as valid evidence” and “of how claims may be justified”. In other words, the growing use of anecdotes represents a significant change to the rhetorical culture of British politics, wherein “‘the people’ has a special authority to validate and legitimate claims about the world and what is to be done about it” (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, p.173). Their observations can be connected to wider theoretical claims about rhetorical culture, such as those made by Kane and Patapan (2010), who have observed that the rhetoric of leadership is increasingly becoming an ‘artless art’. They contend that contemporary democratic leaders are faced with a “paradox”, a need to “avoid fine oratory in favour of a rhetorical style that sounds un-rhetorical” (Kane and Patapan, 2010, p.371). This, they argue, is accelerated by media changes, but is also crucially built into the very foundations of democracy, where notions of popular sovereignty and trust demand that political leaders use ‘ordinary’, relatable rhetoric that avoids ‘talking down’ to citizens.

For Atkins and Finlayson (2013), the growth of political storytelling seems to be related to this 'artless art' of leadership rhetoric, where anecdotes allow political leaders to make claims about the political world in ways that are popular, relatable, and 'ordinary'. In this way, far from being redundant argumentative forms, stories might in fact represent valuable, culturally situated rhetorical tropes that perform important functions in contemporary political debate. With little empirical research exploring this however, the question remains: precisely what democratic functions do these personalised stories serve?

2.3.3. Stories, Style, and Performance

The final criticism of personalised storytelling that needs to be reassessed is the notion that it is a genre of communication complicit in manipulation, deception, and declining standards of political debate, foregrounding image, personality, and style, ahead of more substantive and ideological issues. The idea that politicians use stories to distract citizens away from their 'real' motivations and programmes, or to appeal to their lowest political tastes and interests, presents a very cynical view of their motives. Such approaches to political communication are simplistic, and as Finlayson (2007, pp.552-3) puts it, "presume political oratory to be merely a cover for dubious interests". These critiques often engage with very few examples of manipulative political storytelling, and they only tend to focus on the heavily mediated context of leaders' speeches. Here, it is not clear whether politicians are simply deploying stories deceptively, as claimed by Souto-Manning (2014) and Salmon (2010), so much as they are responding to the stylistic and performative demands of contemporary political culture (Pels, 2003).

As Corner and Pels (2003, p.5) have argued, recent decades have witnessed a "re-styling of politics" as a result of the "three Cs": consumerism, celebrity, and cynicism. These have caused fundamental changes to the media environment and political culture, with politics now operating on the basis of "more eclectic, fluid, issue-specific and personality-

bound forms of political recognition and engagement” (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.7).

Democracy more closely resembles what Manin (1997) termed ‘audience democracy’, a situation in which “representatives are performers making and selling policies and policy proposals”, “constituencies are spectators”, and “journalists are reviewers” (de Beus, 2011, p.22). A comprehensive body of work has shown that, in this transformed environment, the role of a politician has fundamentally changed.

Growing disaffection means that politicians must take greater measures to display a mixture of relatability and authority in their media performances, navigating a ‘complex-double address’ that requires them to counteract cynicism by delicately balancing performances of ordinariness (‘being like us’) with performances of extraordinariness (‘being like a leader’) (Drake and Higgins, 2012; Coleman and Firmstone, 2017). The demands of modern-day celebrity mean that politicians must increasingly tap into popular culture when communicating with citizens, projecting personas, developing media personalities, and divulging intimate aspects of their private lives and past experiences (Corner, 2000; Smith, 2008; Langer, 2010; Parry and Richardson, 2011). And, the increasing volatility of ‘citizen-consumers’, coupled with the strategic imperatives of courting media attention, means that politicians must go to extra lengths to advertise themselves, their stances, and their political proposals to voters (Scammell, 2015). These developments in political culture thus demand varying gradations of style-conscious, mediated social performance from politicians: social performance, here, is the assemblage of embodied, verbal, gestural, textual, and visual communicative practices that politicians adopt in their attempts to “display for others the meaning of the social situation” (whether they consciously or unconsciously adhere to, or desire to project, such a meaning) (Alexander, 2004, p.529). Style, on the other hand, is the manner in which these different performative repertoires and practices are fused together to create particular aesthetic and symbolic impressions (Pels, 2003).

Far from simply engendering a “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p.33), the performative nature of mediated politics is therefore essential to contemporary democratic practice. Politics is a “communicative practice”, which is to say that it necessitates “embodied subjects who can perform and engage in speech acts in a domain that is public”, in front of others who “can witness and freely respond to those performances and speech acts” (Craig, 2016, p.1). This process is not extraneous to ‘real’ politics, but instead constitutes it. Political meanings are contested; democratic processes are enacted; and identities are negotiated as politicians engage in social performance. When politicians’ social performances are effective, they generate verisimilitude. Observers “take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” and “matters are what they appear to be” (Goffman, 1959, p.17). Their political meanings become realised; their actions seem credible; and their identities become sites of emotional connection.

The suspicious perspective of stories, and broader critiques of personalisation and tabloidisation, see this development as one that corrupts the terms on which political representation takes place. No longer are we said to care about our politicians’ policies and political positions, but instead we care about their personalities and performances. These criticisms are often premised on the traditional view of representation as a formal and procedural activity. Citizens, well-educated on potential representatives and their accompanying policy positions, are said to ratify a representative to act on their behalf, whose job it is to ‘make present’ their voices, interests, and concerns in the policy-making process (Pitkin, 1967). In this reading, representation is a descriptive, one-way process, one that requires representatives to mimetically reproduce the interests of their constituents. If representatives and represented are bound together by emotional and stylistic concerns, rather than shared political interests and policy positions, this formal process of aggregating interests into policymaking and holding representatives to account becomes muddled.

However, such an approach ignores that political representation is a cultural and aesthetic relationship, one in which style, persona, and celebrity are in fact legitimate and valuable considerations (Pels, 2003; Street, 2004). Representation should not be seen as a merely procedural endeavour, but as an ongoing, dynamic, and constitutive process, characterised by a process of performative, discursive, and rhetorical claims-making (Ankersmit, 1997, 2002; Saward, 2006; 2010). It involves, as Saward (2010, p.71) notes, “the depicting of a constituency as this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests”. In their campaign speeches, television interviews, or parliamentary debates, politicians “make representations of their constituencies, their countries, themselves”; they “make claims about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two”; and “they argue or imply that they are the best representatives of the constituency so understood” (Saward, 2006, pp.301-2). This claims-making renders representation a creative process, premised on the way representatives “mould, shape, and in one sense create that which is to be represented” (Saward, 2006, p.310). Representation, in this sense, becomes entangled with questions of culture, style and argument, because as Saward (2006, p.303) argues, representatives must “tap into familiar contextual frameworks” when making claims about themselves, their constituents, and the political world.

For Pels (2003) and Street (2004), the legitimacy of contemporary representation thus depends on style-conscious and culturally relevant forms of communication that can enable this process and thereby bridge the ‘aesthetic gap’ that exists between citizens and representatives (Ankersmit, 1997; 2002). Because citizens operate in different spheres from politicians, and are not always capable of, nor interested in, being educated on the ins and outs of their ideological and programmatic leanings, style represents an important way that they can engage with politics. It allows citizens to “regain their grip on complex political reality by restoring mundane political experience to the centre of democratic practice” (Pels, 2003, p.50). In contemporary political culture, performances of ordinariness and extraordinariness, the cultivation of a persona, and markers of celebrity all operate

stylistically as vehicles through which politicians “condense” the political (Corner, 2000, p.398), crystallising different ideas and values in a way that “fuses matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual” (Pels, 2003, p.45). Politicians’ stories are a part of this process, because they are “mobilized to animate, iconize, and stabilize political identities” (Smith, 2010, p.x).

Crucially, a style and performance conscious approach to political discourse sees this not as a threat to representation, but in fact what makes it culturally accessible; insofar as popular sovereignty is inscribed in democracy, the grounds of political representation need to be popularly relevant. As Van Zoonen (2005, p.3) puts it, “politics has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens; otherwise, it becomes an alien sphere, occupied by strangers no one cares and bothers about”. In such an understanding, far from undermining the legitimacy of political representation, performance is necessary to its realisation. Notions like trustworthiness and credibility emerge from the convincing public enactment of such traits by politicians, and the resultant suspension of disbelief by citizens who interpret such representations to be ‘true-seeming’ (Peetz, 2019).

What is at stake, then, is not just how stories might help citizens engage with their representatives, but also how they might make citizens *feel* about them. Many contemporary democracies seem to be experiencing a crisis of representation, one in which citizens feel increasingly remote and disconnected from their political representatives (Hay, 2007; Fox, 2012). In a more procedural understanding of representation, this issue is one of responsiveness: politicians are not translating their citizens’ desires into concrete political decision-making. While this is certainly one part of contemporary disaffection with politics, aesthetic and performative theories of representation afford us with another explanation: there has been a failure to address the “increased dependence on believable performance that inheres within the representative system” (Peetz, 2019, p.14).

More than just an issue of delegation, citizens tend to speak in emotive terms when explaining their disaffection, often dwelling on traits like honesty, empathy, and likeness ahead of responsiveness (Coleman, 2005; Manning and Holmes, 2013). As Manning and Holmes (2014) argue, modern-day connections (or disconnections) between representatives and citizens are often bound up with the emotion of affinity – understood to be a sense of ‘likeness’ and resemblance – and whether politicians are seen to have some sort of connection to, or understanding of, the everyday lives of their citizens. In this current crisis of representation, it is not clear that citizens want more responsive and available politicians, so much as they want some sort of mutual understanding with their representatives. As Coleman (2003, p.756) puts it:

The last thing that citizens want is to be reached more easily by politicians. Their idea of connection, if they have one, is that politicians should be seen to live in the same world as them: not necessarily to be like them, but certainly to know what it is like to be them. Both politicians and citizens want one another to enter their realities: to see the world as the other experiences it.

What has so far been neglected by critics of political storytelling is the role that stories might play in the contemporary representative relationship, where notions of resemblance and mutual understanding are key. In this dynamic and aesthetic process of representative claims-making – in which politicians must rhetorically construct and perform particular ideas of themselves and their constituents – might some political stories actually help to cultivate affinity, and induce more emotional connections between citizens and politicians? Could politicians telling moving personal stories about their past experiences, or their constituents’ past experiences, provide opportunities where citizens and representatives can come to “see the world as the other experiences it” (Coleman, 2003, p.756)? A quote from Heidi Alexander MP at the end of a mental health debate alludes to this function of storytelling: “it reassures everyone outside this place that we are also human beings, as well as Members

of Parliament”. Or equally, do some stories work against a more desirable and authentic representative relationship? When, for example, David Cameron told a story about a “40-year-old black man from Plymouth”, and was later found to have confused the details and to have misrepresented a man’s views, did this reinforce a view of politicians as distant and out of touch?

These theoretical ideas thus offer us a space in which we can reconsider the suspicion of stories and begin to offer a more balanced assessment of the role that political storytelling plays in democratic practice and political culture. So far, this has only been considered in Coleman’s (2015a) theoretical exploration of how storytelling and performance are central to elections. First, he problematises the notion that elections are simply competitions between politicians who challenge each other for citizens’ “rational calculation of self-interest”. Most evidence, he argues, suggests that citizens seldom realise, let alone vote for, the candidates and parties that might represent their ‘rational interests’ (Coleman, 2015a, p.169). Instead, he argues that what citizens actually do when they vote is much simpler, and much less demanding: they accept certain storied accounts of reality ahead of others. Elections are better understood as “contests in which narratives compete for public attention and approval”, where voting is the pragmatic result of citizens accepting certain narratives as more resonant and believable than others (Coleman, 2015a, p.169). For Coleman (2015a, pp.168-9), this makes the performance of stories central to contemporary elections, because it is through these performances that notions of the *demos* can be contested and constituted:

Elections exist to give tangibility to the abstract notion of ‘the public’. They weave narratives around the word ‘we’, thereby giving substance (potentially, at least) to the central protagonists of the democratic drama: the *demos* itself. It is precisely because the agentic force of ‘we the people’ cannot be captured by the reductive psephological quantification of swings, majorities, percentage turnouts, and vote-to-

seat ratios that democracies need periods of political performance in which stories are told about who we think we are, what we think we deserve, who we think politicians are, and who we think they think we are. Elections are storytelling contests in which the demos comes to be represented by identifying with competing and contested narratives about itself.

Of the many stories involved in this process, few are more important than politicians' narratives, the stories that political leaders tell about themselves and constituents as they attempt to encapsulate the public mood. Crucially, these stories have performative and aesthetic dimensions; they represent attempts to "rhetorically construct a public by addressing people as if they would know which moral category they belong to" (Coleman, 2015a, p.171). Whether they are telling stories about the squeezed middle class, or recounting tales of citizens disaffected by immigration, it becomes clear from Coleman's (2015) analysis that the performance of stories is a central part of what politicians do during election time, with demonstrably important consequences for how a democratic public comes into being. This gives us more reason to believe that the suspicion of stories is misplaced. Rather than viewing stories and anecdotes as something that corrupts or distorts democratic practice, Coleman (2015a) suggests that it could be something central to it. This calls for more empirical and theoretical work that looks at political storytelling from the perspective of political style and performance. In what other ways might we conceive of political storytelling as central to democratic practice? In what other democratic contexts might storytelling be important? What kinds of stories do politicians tell – or perform – as part of these practices, and why do they do so?

2.3.4. Humans, Stories, and Politics

The suspicious interpretation of politicians' personal narratives is radically different to traditional understandings of what people do with stories. If theories of rhetoric, emotion, and

performance afford us one angle from which the case can be made for re-examining politicians' stories, then long-standing theories of narrative afford us with another. For decades now, scholars of narrative have speculated that there is something fundamental about the relationship between humans and stories. MacIntyre (1981, p.201) has argued that humans are "essentially a story-telling animal"; Fisher (1985, p.74) has labelled humans "*homo-narrans*"; Frank (2010, p.3) has suggested that "human life depends on the stories we tell"; while Bruner (1990, p.45) has gone as far to speculate that there may even be an innate basis for this relationship, a "human readiness for narrative", or "predisposition to organise experience into narrative form". Underlying all these accounts is one key proposition: stories are the principal medium through which humans attribute meaning to, and make sense of, the social world. In Polkinghorne's (1988, p.11) words, it is "the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful".

It is important to note here that, for conceptual clarity, I use the terms "narrative" and "story" interchangeably (e.g. Polletta, 2006; Riessman, 2008). The focus of this study is personalised storytelling in British political speech and debate, and so concerns the spoken use of personal stories and anecdotes by politicians and political leaders. Here, I understand anecdotes and personal stories to be "stories in the more everyday sense of the term, commonly drawing on core structural features like plot and character", but also playing "a critical role in helping people to make sense of their world and their place in it" (Boswell, 2013, p.263). They should be distinguished from other forms of personal narrative that are written or that are not used in the quotidian sense of anecdotes and stories, like memoir or autobiography (e.g. Smith, 2010), and they should be distinguished from narrative used in the wider interpretive sense to refer to processes of selection, key messaging, and framing (e.g. Smith, 1989; Hay, 1996). They could even be distinguished from each other, with anecdotes traditionally understood to be a shorter type or subset of personalised story.

I am therefore primarily interested in storytelling understood in the traditional Labovian sense of the word: the oral, everyday recounting of personal experience (Labov, 1972). This form is arguably the most fundamental of all when it comes to human communication. Langellier and Peterson (2004, p.1) argue that everyday storytelling is the primary way people “make sense of their experiences”, “claim identities”, and “get a life”, where Norrick (2007, p.127) holds that “conversation is the natural home of narrative, and the most familiar context of storytelling for most of us”.

It is through narrative that we attempt to make sense of the events unfolding around us, granting them meaning and interpretation. We engage in the two-step process of ‘taking’ lived experience and ‘making’ it for ourselves and others, organising complex situations into coherent and familiar plots (Langellier and Peterson, 2004). By selecting and weaving together aspects of otherwise disparate events, and by giving them temporal and causal meaning, we tell stories to make our experiences intelligible and relatable. Through *emplotment*, stories impose chronological and causal order on the events – both grand and mundane – that punctuate our day-to-day life. As Frank (2010, pp.136-7) puts it, in the “act of making a coherent sequence out of what was simply succession”, our stories “make sense of the ongoing flow of life by endowing what happens with direction, boundaries, and general rules about what leads to what else”.

These stories do not simply represent or reflect reality, but they also shape it. Stories, as Frank (2010, p.42-3) reminds us, are “material semiotic companions”, which is to say that they are comprised of signs but that they also “do things” in the social and political world, “inciting love affairs and wars”, and taking on material forms through bodies and objects. This performative quality challenges the conventional view of stories as something that merely *describe* or *reflect* preceding experiences or events. Instead, these experiences or events are said only to be possible because of stories. As Mattingly (1998, p.33) puts it, “because we have stories, we believe we are having experiences.” Experience, in this way,

can be understood as “an enactment of pre-given stories”, and as such, “rather than action preceding stories, stories precede and help us to make action coherent”. Chadwick (2018, p.19) offers a practical example of how this plays out, referring to women who go into birth events “carrying an assorted collection of stories and story fragments which impact on and contributes to shaping their birth experiences”. True to a dialogical understanding of narrative, these stories can never be finalised; are pluralistic and cross-cutting; and are always being reworked, representing sites of multiple voices and interpretive openness (Bakhtin, 1981).

This process is what makes narrative such an important tool of cultural and moral mediation. Through the stories we are told, we come to expect that life will “unfold according to certain plots” (Frank, 2010, p.10). When these expectations are not met, and there is a “breach” in the “canonical script” (Bruner, 1991, p.11), we are challenged to tell new stories, recasting, integrating, and explaining unfamiliar happenings through already existing, often contradictory interpretive repertoires and cultural knowledge. Narrative, here, mediates between the extraordinary and the ordinary, as it “renders the exceptional comprehensible and keeps the uncanny at bay” (Bruner, 1990, p.52). Here, storytellers are forced to “go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way” (Bruner, 1991, p.12). Sometimes affirming values, sometimes challenging them, this tendency to negotiate culture and formulate a moral understanding through narrative begins at a young age. In particular, personal narrative has been said to play a central role in how children come to comprehend the moral discourse of their culture, not only as tellers are encouraged to establish a moral voice by recognising the non-canonical and culturally unexpected, but also as they must make use of common sense understandings and take moral and evaluative stances in the telling (Walton et al., 2002a; Walton et al., 2002b).

This indispensable role that narrative plays as a human sense-making and meaning creating device is what makes it of central importance in politics. And, while few attempts

have been made to apply this understanding to the stories that politicians tell, two studies in particular have highlighted how important narrative is to the way citizens make sense of their political environments. Coleman (2013), for example, has investigated the narratives of voting that pervade a political culture. These narratives, he suggests, “serve as civic heuristics, containing popular memories and shaping public expectations, allowing people to engage as voters as if they were reproducing a natural act” (2013, p.35). He identifies four themes that occur across a variety of anecdotal, literary, and historical texts, and that would often recur in subsequent interviews with citizens: voting as an ideal, a ritual, a routine, and as pathological. This repertoire of voting narratives serves to signify and shape the act as one of social performance, “normalising what should be an incomplete drama” and “turning indeterminacy into cliché” (2013, p.35).

In a similar way, Hochschild (2016) has drawn on narrative theory to explain how citizens formulate understandings about the political world. According to Hochschild (2016), we all have a “deep story”. This is “a story that *feels as if* it were true”, helping people to make sense of their political environments and guiding their interpretations of political phenomena. Rather than necessarily being rational or factual, it is better seen as a particular emotional or affective alignment with the political world, which shapes beliefs, choices, and attitudes: a deep story is “the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel” (Hochschild, 2016, p.135).

Hochschild (2016) uses the concept of the deep story to explain support for modern US conservatism, focusing specifically on Donald Trump’s electoral victory in 2016. In various interviews with Tea Party supporters stretching over a five-year period, Hochschild identified their deep story: waiting in line for the American dream, hard-working white Christians were said to be finding it increasingly harder to succeed. Tea Party supporters felt like they were losing jobs to immigrants and refugees, while being forced to pay higher taxes, all thanks to a federal government that seemed to be on the side of those who were

unfairly jumping the queue. Dismissed as ‘crazy rednecks’, ‘white trash’, and ‘ignorant Southern bible-thumpers’, a common feeling among the American right was that they had become “strangers in their own land”. Trump appeared to share this deep story, vowing to take a hard stance against immigrants, refugees, and the federal government as he tried to “Make America Great Again”.

What had made this narrative compelling to so many, in her opinion, was that it was rooted in lived experience: “a response to a real squeeze” (Hochschild, 2016, p.140). The possibility that conservatives had been ‘duped’ by narratives shared by Fox News and other media was to be rejected, with the “presumption of gullibility [...] too simple an idea”. It is indeed too simple to suggest that deep stories can simply be chalked off to naivety and gullibility in the face of media narratives, but it is also important not to go too far the other way, and to see deep stories as something necessarily manifested in direct experience. As Polletta and Callahan (2017, pp.403-4) have reminded us in their response to Hochschild’s (2016) comments, there are:

connections between what people assume to be true about the way the world works, what they learn from TV, radio, and the blogosphere, what they hear in conversations with friends, and what they directly experience [...] We miss these connections when we see the options only as people being duped by Fox News or speaking from their lived experience.

How citizens make sense of competing accounts of the political world is therefore complex, and our deep stories are formulated through the various political narratives we derive from our daily experiences, our interactions with friends and family, and the media we consume.

What matters in this process is not whether these narratives can be empirically verified. Narrative, at best, has a sketchy relationship to truth. Truth, in narrative terms, has

a lot more to do with verisimilitude or felicity, and whether an account of the social and the political world *seems* plausible. In the same way that deep stories are *feels-as-if* stories, truth in narrative accounts is pragmatic, depending on how well a story might match up with our own assessments relating to “history, biography, culture, and character” (Fisher, 1984, pp.7-8). For Bruner (1986), narrative is one of two key modes of thoughts that humans possess to understand the world. Contrasted to the paradigmatic mode of thought, which is geared towards the logical categorisation of observable phenomena and the establishment of universal truths, the narrative mode of thought refers to the more interpretive and ambiguous ways we try to make sense of experience through stories.

This open and non-finalisable nature of narrative truth is what makes it so crucial to the mediation of political reality, with different political stories bringing with them competing interpretations of political reality that enable the contestation of political meaning. As Bennett and Edelman (1985, p.160) put it, “there are always conflicting stories – sometimes two, sometimes more – competing for acceptance in politics”, and each “creates its own social world while it holds a group’s attention”. Whether that world is “a world of individual choice and individual responsibility”, or a markedly different world “in which the individual is a reflection of the material conditions, constraints, and opportunities into which she or he is thrust”, such narratives call people to engage in the essentially political task of deciding which world seems most true to them.

Underlying this process are the unique ways in which narrative can persuade individuals to accept certain accounts of political reality ahead of others. “Transportation” (Gerrig, 1993; Green and Brock, 2000), “engrossment” (Noddings, 1984), “absorption” (Slater and Rouner, 2002, p.178), and “identification” (De Graaf et al., 2012) are just some of the terms put forward in an attempt to capture the immersive qualities of narrative persuasion. While all these terms have slight conceptual differences, they all suggest that convincing stories invoke some degree of vicarious experience, encouraging us to fill in the

gaps and ask “what happens next?” as narrative events unfold, and engendering emotional connections with characters whom we come to care about and identify with as we put ourselves in their shoes and imagine what it would feel like if the same events were happening to us.

One reason why such a process might be persuasive, according to Green and Bock (2000, p.701), is that “transported” readers or listeners – those experiencing an “integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” with regard to a narrative world – are less likely to counter-argue. Their engagement with the narrative world is such that they are less likely to critically analyse and judge the propositions contained therein, making them amenable to otherwise unlikely attitudinal changes. Another related suggestion is that stories influence opinion by the powerful way they encourage individuals to identify with certain characters (De Graaf et al., 2012). When those hearing a story relate to a character, usually the protagonist, they are more likely to adopt their beliefs once the story has finished. This, as De Graaf et al. (2012) have argued, is because they are better able to understand and identify with the protagonist’s emotions and experiences, and to imagine themselves in the same situation. As will be explored further in Chapter 5, this is what can make stories particularly effective at generating empathy and compassion in political debate. It is also, as Polletta (2015, p.35) has explored, why “politically, it is characters, rather than the events in which they appear, who win us over”:

We imagine who we are, who we want to be, and who we are not in and through our response to narrative characters. When we hear stories, we zero in on the characters involved, judging the believability of the story based on whether characters act in ways that make sense to us and judging the moral of the story based on the characters’ fate (Polletta, 2015, p.39).

While this highlights that individual characters play a central part in how we may assess the meaning and relevance of a story, it also suggests that this meaning and relevance cannot be located in any story, event, or character alone. The question of how we judge “the believability” of story or character, or whether it might “make sense” to us, is dependent on the events, stories, and characters we have seen or heard before, and that make up our deep story (Hochschild, 2016) or the moral discourse of our culture (Walton and Brewer, 2002a). In particular, Frank (2010, p.53) uses the notion *narrative habitus*, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1998) notion of *habitus*, to describe the way we become liable to tell, engage with, and relate to particular stories instead of others:

Narrative habitus is a disposition to hear some stories as those that one ought to listen to, ought to repeat on appropriate occasions, and ought to be guided by.

Narrative habitus describes the embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or repulsion people feel in response to stories; the intuitive, usually tacit sense that some story is *for us* or not for us; that it expresses possibilities of which we are or can be part, or that it represents a world in which we have no stake.

A narrative habitus, therefore, can be understood as “the collection of stories in which a life is formed and that continue to shape lives”. It is comprised of four key elements: a *repertoire* of stories that a person or group recognise, a *competence* to use this repertoire in seemingly instinctive ways, a *taste*, or an interest in and openness towards particular stories, and finally, an intuitive *understanding* of how a story should develop or progress, which creates an “everyday common sense of which actions lead to which consequences” (Frank, 2010, p.54).

The notion of narrative habitus helps to explain why, in politics, the meaning of some stories may resonate with one group of people while others fall flat. It also partly explains why some of the most effective stories in political communication have meanings and

messages that are self-evident, and that seldom need to be made explicit. They are “allusive” (Polletta, 2015; Polletta and Callahan, 2017), which is to say that their accompanying political and social meanings are interpretable and intuitively understandable without the need for in-depth explanation. Whatever the point of an allusive story may be, we are able to grasp it implicitly through our narrative habitus: “events and their denouement seem themselves to provide the moral” as we “glean a story’s point by reference to the stories we have heard before” (Polletta and Callahan, 2017, p.394).

This allusive quality of storytelling means that some of the most influential political stories do not even need to be recounted for their meanings to be understood. Instead, as Polletta and Callahan (2017, p.395) suggest, “they can simply be referred to, often by way of their protagonist”. One illustrative example they cite is the phrase “welfare queen” in America, which invokes stories of hedonistic and fraudulent women abusing welfare payment systems and showing little desire to work. A related phrase that has functioned allusively in British politics is the “strivers and shirkers” slogan that featured heavily in the rhetoric of David Cameron, telling a story of hard-working yet struggling British people who watched on while people out of work enjoy government handouts. Like any allusive story, the moral was simple: there are those who strive and those who shirk, and when it comes to government support, these are the deserving and the undeserving.

There are many such allusive stories in British politics. And each, to return to Bennett and Edelman (1985), carries its own construction and interpretation of the social world. Their allusions may be large in scope, leveraged in an attempt to capture the moral fabric of a whole country: ‘the many, not the few’, ‘the people versus the elite’, ‘one nation’, ‘the national interest’. Or they may be much smaller, deployed to capture the minutiae of political groups, experiences, or issues: ‘a constituent of mine’, ‘hard-working families’, ‘a 40-year-old black man from Plymouth’. As has already been discussed, the anecdotal character of contemporary politics means that they are often the latter, with local, experiential, and

personal modes of storytelling coming to encapsulate, via *synecdoche*, wider political issues, values, and ideas (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Oldenburg, 2015).

Critics of politicians' personal stories conflate this shift, seeing in politics a displacement of a more rational mode of communication with one that is narrative based. While politicians are now narrating politics in more personalised ways, this does not mean that politics is any less 'narrative' than it has been in the past. Rather than representing a turn away from rationalism to storytelling, or paradigmatic ways of knowing to narrative ways of knowing, the increasing significance of personalised storytelling in politics is better seen as supplanting an older form of narrative communication that was rooted in larger, more collective, and grander historical narratives of social and political change (Fernandes, 2017). Though it would be wrong to suggest that these grand narratives have completely lost their significance in contemporary politics, what has perhaps been observed is a shift broadly in line with Lyotard's (1984) theory of postmodernity: one in which an increasing scepticism towards the totalising and all-encompassing 'metanarratives' of religious doctrine and political ideology – those that attempt to offer more universalised and comprehensive accounts of social and political progress, history, and truth – has paved the way for more fragmented, localised, and experiential modes of narrative knowing.

Because humans are storytelling animals, who come to experience and understand the world through narrative, politics always has been in some sense a narrative endeavour. Is it a problem that the stories politicians share as part of this endeavour have become more personalised than before? Whatever mode of narrative account giving predominates in contemporary political rhetoric, much of the narrative theory discussed above suggests that many of the key affordances and functions of narrative remain present: its central role in political sense-making and cognition; its importance as a tool cultural and moral evaluation; and its vital capacity to mediate political meaning by conjuring different social and political worlds, with different moral and ideological bends, through which we can create, work out,

and state our positions. And, like all political narratives, they have a unique persuasive capacity to stir our emotions, with the potential to create strong emotional connections between politicians and citizens, or to inspire the kinds of affective bonds between people that many scholars now suggest makes storytelling a central motivator of political action (Polletta, 2006; Mayer, 2014).

There is no doubt that politicians telling personal stories has significant consequences for how processes of political speech, debate, and representation are being practised, and many of these will be discussed in the following chapters. However, most of the suspicion directed towards politicians and their stories, as discussed in this chapter, does not tend to rest on any specific shortcoming or contextualised usage of personal narrative *per se*. Instead, it is often directed towards the key elements and functions of narrative, as a genre, that were discussed above, like its tendency to promote a more emotional mode of knowing or persuasion, and to make sense of phenomena in more abstract, experiential, and interpretive ways. Yet these, crucially, are the same functions and elements that many scholars have suggested make narrative an inescapable and indispensable part of human life as we know it. Why, then, should our politics – and politicians – be any different? Where those critical of stories tend to imagine a politics free of personal stories and anecdotes, narrative theory gives us reason to doubt that such a reality would even be possible. As long as personal experiences are relevant and important in politics, politicians need stories and anecdotes to express them.

2.4. Conclusion: Towards a New Understanding of Political Storytelling?

Where traditional approaches to politicians' personal stories tend to treat them as impoverishing or endangering democratic communication, my aim in this chapter has been to challenge the determinism present in such a view. Must the genre of personalised storytelling always doom politicians' speeches to emotional manipulation, argument-by-

anecdote, and performative triviality? The answer to such a question is, in my view, no. While it may at times be complicit in all those things, attempts to conceptualise precisely what politicians do with stories have so far been held back by a belief that this must always be the case. Key features of the genre, such as experiential argument, emotional persuasion, and personal emphasis, are all said to work against serious and meaningful political practice. As a result, any significant cultural or political functions of stories are overlooked, and their potential normative value in debate and speech is understood to be nil.

There is good reason to believe that such a view is misplaced. For one, it lacks empirical grounding: most, if not all criticisms of political storytelling focus on selected individual examples, where it has been at its most spurious, and from which wider generalisations about the whole genre have been made. Moreover, most research has tended to focus on stories and anecdotes as they are told in the context of political leaders' high-profile campaign speeches, with scant attention paid to other democratic contexts. Yet, as the Frank Field story at the start of this essay illustrates, many of the stories that politicians tell are delivered outside of leaders' speeches, particularly in the context of parliamentary debates, where recent media articles have brought attention to the stories told in debates on baby loss, mental health, and welfare benefits (e.g. Elgot, 2016). This reflects wider issues with the study of personalised storytelling in political speech and debate, which remains a relatively underexplored area of scholarship, with its significance largely downplayed or ignored.

Yet, the primary issue with the suspicion directed towards politicians' stories is not an empirical one, but rather a theoretical one. Placed under the lens of the emergent theory discussed in this chapter, the common criticisms levelled against politicians' stories appeared suspect. Theories of emotion demonstrate why the emotions generated through stories may be of political value; theories of rhetoric highlight why experientially motivated modes of political discourse and argumentation should not be discouraged; and theories of

political style and performance illustrate why personal demonstrations matter in politics, with significant consequences for how representatives are perceived. The framework established in this chapter is suggestive of a need to rethink why politicians tell stories, what they achieve by doing so, and what value, if any, we believe they might have in political communication.

Moreover, theories of narrative show why – as a fundamental human device for sense-making, understanding, and moral evaluation – storytelling is an inescapable aspect of how any society must navigate the political. The personal narratives that politicians share are only one part of this process, but they have become a prominent symbolic resource in the rhetorical, performative, and emotional negotiation of contemporary political meaning. Rather than simply overlooking or rejecting their significance, new questions abound, with normatively important consequences for democratic communication. What political functions are realised when politicians perform personalised stories? What happens to the representative relationship when these performances succeed, and what happens when they fail? What are the merits and shortcomings of an increasing emotional and personal expressivity in democratic debate? It is to these questions that this thesis now turns.

Chapter 3 – Studying Politicians’ Stories

3.1. Introduction

If personalised storytelling is an important symbolic resource through which politicians negotiate contemporary political meaning, then how can one go about studying it as such? In this chapter, I offer an answer to this question by outlining the methodology adopted in this thesis. My primary aim throughout this process has been to develop an innovative approach to politicians’ personal stories, one that could overcome some of the common shortcomings present in existing approaches. To this end, I engaged in a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and multimethod approach, where I applied elements of performance, discourse, and rhetorical analysis to narratives drawn from both elite interviews and textual data. This process was guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

I begin by discussing how I adopted a textual method of data collection to *gather the stories that politicians tell*. Where most analyses tend to prioritise these stories as they are told by mainstream politicians in high-profile media events, I argue that by collecting this data from two different contexts – conference speeches and parliamentary debates – I could offer a broader understanding of the relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic practice. I then turn to the elite interviews, where I describe the process of *gathering the stories that politicians tell about their stories*. I reflect on the challenges of arranging and conducting interviews with politicians, particularly given the context of political change, crisis, and uncertainty in which they took place. Despite this, I argue that the interview method afforded me a unique standpoint from which I could explore political storytelling, particularly given that very few studies seek to ask politicians themselves to explain their communicative practices.

I move on to data analysis, where I outline the three approaches used to *make sense of these stories*, before describing their conceptual underpinnings. I argue that discursive, performative, and rhetorical approaches to politicians' stories enabled a move away from the conventional focus on quantifying their occurrences and measuring their persuasive effects (e.g. Sheaffer et al., 2010; Weber and Wirth, 2014; Gooch, 2018), and towards a focus on how they symbolise and give meaning to different political identities, relationships, and beliefs (Finlayson, 2007; Alexander, 2013; Ekström and Firmstone, 2017). This, I suggest, left me well positioned to explore their culturally situated and mutually constitutive relationship with the democratic practices of debate and representation, as well as the implications that might stem from it.

The last section explains how I used constructivist grounded theory to build theory and *tell my own story* about the data (Charmaz, 2006). I explain how the iterative process of moving back-and-forth between data collection, analysis, and theory building, along with the related techniques of coding, theoretical sampling, and memo-writing, allowed me to generate interpretive and normative insights in a reflexive, critical, and detailed manner. Moving beyond the suspicion of stories, in this way, is more than just a theoretical task. It also requires a fresh set of methodological principles from which a different vantage point of politicians' personal stories can be gained.

3.2. Texts: Gathering Stories

The first part of data collection involved gathering a number of personal stories and anecdotes that had been told by British politicians, which could become the basis of the study's textual analysis. I opted to focus on British politics for a couple of reasons. As discussed, research had established a clear increase in the use of anecdotes by British political leaders since the middle of the 1990s (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013). Coupled with the public attention that had followed the anecdotes shared in previous televised leaders'

debates – and several parliamentary debates on issues like mental health, welfare reform, and baby loss – there was a sense that British politics could be a particularly fertile ground for an exploration of the debates and questions that have emerged around personalised storytelling in political speech and debate. Practical considerations also fed into this rationale. The British context was the most familiar and local to me, and this made the process of securing and conducting face-to-face elite interviews more feasible. While one limitation of the study is that it does not make comparisons across different national contexts or political cultures, the trade-off for this was that I was able to offer a thicker and more detailed description of personalised storytelling as it pertains to British politics.

I built two corpora: one consisting of stories and anecdotes told by politicians in parliamentary debates, and the other consisting of stories and anecdotes told by political leaders in conference speeches. I chose to draw my stories from these two contexts because most research so far has tended to focus on stories and anecdotes as they are told in the context of leaders' media and campaign speeches (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2014; Oldenburg, 2015; Gooch, 2018). This has led to a limited picture of how politicians tell personal stories, with attention mainly paid to their usage by high-profile party leaders in important media events.

However, as already discussed, there seem to be many interesting personal stories being told by other politicians, as part of their more routine, day-to-day communicative responsibilities, like delivering speeches in parliamentary debates. Indeed, the vast majority of stories that politicians tell, and many of the stories that have received recent media attention in debates on baby loss, mental health, and welfare benefits, tend to be delivered by backbench MPs on such occasions (e.g. Elgot, 2016). By drawing data from these debates, as well as conference speeches, I attended to storytelling as it took place across different contexts. In this way, I was able to establish a more comprehensive interpretive and

normative understanding of personalised storytelling's role in contemporary democratic practice.

The timeframe I selected for data collection was 2010-2018. 2010 seemed like a particularly important year to begin my corpus. As mentioned in the introduction, it was the year Britain's first-ever televised general election debates took place, and the salient use of anecdotes throughout these debates appeared to represent an important historical and cultural moment for personalised storytelling in British politics, even though, as discussed, the increasing use of anecdotes among British political leaders can be traced back to the middle of the 1990s (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013). This was in part reflected by the attention directed towards such anecdotes in media commentaries, with journalists seeking not only to appraise how personalised storytelling had fed into leaders' wider public performances, but also to scrutinise the truthfulness and relevancy of the real-life stories that they had related (e.g. Alderson et al., 2010; Burkeman, 2010; Sparrow, 2010). More generally, this range of dates allowed me to establish a contemporary snapshot of political storytelling, while also ensuring that my dataset was comprehensive.

The corpus of stories from conference speeches was relatively easy to build. To gain a wide range of data, I searched through those delivered by party leaders from six major British parties within this period. Speeches from Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green, SNP, and UKIP leaders were all explored, and any personal stories and anecdotes originating from these speeches were transcribed and built into the corpora. These were collected from readily available sources online: video footage, press releases, and transcripts. In total, this yielded roughly 250 stories from 46 different speeches (see Appendix 1 for a fully referenced list of all the speeches included in the corpus).

Stories and anecdotes were identified and incorporated into the dataset when they could be considered an oral recounting of personal experience. When politicians made

reference to a personal experience, or the personal experience of a member of the public that they had interacted with, this signalled the likelihood that a relevant personal narrative was being shared. Such instances would then be examined further to check for the key structural features that might typically constitute an anecdote or personal story. I looked closely for those described in Labov's (1972) classic account of narrative: an *abstract* (a brief summary of the story), an *orientation* (an identification of the key characters and places), a *complicating action* (a description of the events of the narrative that motivate the story), an *evaluation* (an assessment of the significance of an event), and a *coda* (a conclusion of the story that moves dialogue back to the present communicative situation).

These structural features aided the identification of stories and anecdotes, but since they are not all necessarily present in oral narratives of personal experience, they were not treated as a prerequisite for inclusion in the corpora. Instead, a simpler criteria was used for this. That is, when a politician made a reference to a personal experience involving a plot (the organisation and connection of a sequence of events), as well as characters (people who were in some way involved and affected by these events), then such a reference would be considered relevant for the two different corpora.

Using the same time period, the corpus of stories from parliamentary debates was collated using Hansard, an online database consisting of edited verbatim reports from parliamentary debates. These reports are "substantially verbatim", which is to say that they reflect contributions to debates that have been recorded, and then edited to eliminate "obvious" mistakes and repetitions. While this means that some of the stories analysed from parliamentary debates are not completely verbatim, it is not clear how the removal of "obvious" mistakes and repetitions would significantly alter their implications, especially since, as Hansard (2020) note, these minor edits are made "without taking away from the meaning of what is said".

Due to the sheer number of debates that took place during this period, and the volume of data on the website, it was necessary to select individual debates from which to draw these stories and anecdotes. To avoid spending hours trawling through debates in which little to no stories were told, I decided to direct my search to the debates where I believed storytelling was most likely to occur. The guiding premise of this decision was that certain debates lent themselves to personal storytelling in ways that others did not – whether because they dealt with issues that produced profoundly emotional or personal consequences, or because they were explicitly about emotional or personal phenomena – and it would be more manageable and efficient to collect data directly from those debates.

Then, to cast my net wider, I used Hansard’s search function with terms like “personal experience”, or “a constituent of mine”, which allowed me to establish more debates in which anecdotes and stories had been shared. In total, I collected around 400 stories from 21 debates on issues such as mental health, assisted dying, dementia, food banks, psychological therapies, welfare reform, cancer, violence against women, family law courts, baby loss, and parental bereavement (see Appendix 2 for a fully referenced list of all the debates included in this corpus).

Given that the goal of this data was not to create descriptive or quantitative insights on which more generalisable and socially scientific claims could be supported, the corpora were not intended to be all-inclusive or representative. Instead, they were supposed to provide an organised and systematic basis for qualitative inquiry. The key requirement of the corpora, in this regard, was to provide “rich textual data from which to generate qualitative descriptions of interpretations”, and from which I could offer “a detailed, in-depth account of the phenomenon under study” (Kirkevold and Bergland, 2007, p.69). In my case, this was establishing a deeper and more precise understanding of the meanings and functions of politicians’ stories, and thereby developing a better normative and interpretive understanding of the genre’s role in speech and debate. While there would certainly have been merits to a

mixed methods approach, that would have sought to triangulate these qualitative insights with quantitative insights into wider patterns and frequencies, it was decided that the more abstract, meaning-oriented research questions guiding this thesis lent themselves better to further qualitative inquiry. It is for this reason that elite interviews became the second method of data collection adopted.

3.3. Interviews: Gathering Stories about the Stories

In the interview phase of data collection, my focus was on the stories that politicians told about their stories. In other words, I was concerned with the narratives that they drew upon to signify, construct, and make sense of their own practices of personalised storytelling in political speech and debate. My key aim here was to pull together several different thoughts, justifications, and experiences from politicians that had previously shared personal stories in speeches or debates, which would then allow me to analyse what it is that they *think* they are doing when they share personal stories. Given that nobody has asked politicians to make sense of their storytelling, and that very few studies attempt to ask politicians why they communicate in particular ways, an interview approach became an important means by which I could generate fresh insights into these phenomena. Crucially, I could begin to explore how they situate personalised storytelling as part of their wider communicative practices and democratic roles, particularly relating to political representation and argumentation.

Once ethical approval was secured (see Appendix 3), my first task was to identify potential interview participants. I decided to target a number of former and current politicians who had shared personal stories or anecdotes in parliamentary debates or speeches since 2010. This was not only to address the study's wider aims of providing a contemporary insight into how politicians understand their practices of personalised storytelling, but also to ensure that their memories of storytelling were clear enough to ensure rich and detailed

reflections on their experiences. I created a list of around forty prospective interviewees, which I was able to generate using my textual dataset, Hansard searches, and news searches for stories that had gained media attention. My aim was to recruit politicians from a wide range of political parties, who had shared stories either about themselves or their constituents, and whose stories had gained varying degrees of public attention. In this way, the thoughts, opinions, and experiences gleaned would be as varied as possible.

My focus then turned to how I would approach and recruit my participants. I decided to approach them through two publicly available channels: email and social media. Using either their parliamentary email addresses or their public social media profile, politicians were sent a message detailing the scope of my research, the data I was collecting, and what would be asked of them. I knew that it would be challenging to gain access to these politicians, particularly given the busy nature of their roles. As Marland and Esselment (2018, p.686) note, “the challenges of elite interviewing are pronounced with politicians, in particular the ability to acquire the interview”, and this is largely because politicians and their assistants must deal “with a torrent of communication and demands for their time”. This became clear when, from the first batch of fifteen emails that I sent out to prospective interviewees, I received only five replies, all of which were rejections.

Those that declined my invitation tended to be apologetic, passing on their well wishes and a belief in the importance of the study. Common reasons for rejection involved time constraints, with MPs citing parliamentary business, prior commitments, and senior responsibilities: “time is not my friend”, suggested one MP. Some spoke of the large number of research requests they receive on a regular basis, and how they either prioritised those of their constituents or decided against participating in individual projects. For those that did not reply, I would send a follow-up email around one month after my initial email. In some cases, this was effective, with a small number of politicians eventually showing an interest in taking part.

I was faced with the challenge of conducting these interviews during a particularly volatile and unpredictable moment for British politics. When I began this process, the uncertainty surrounding Brexit was reaching a critical point. This moment was perhaps best encapsulated by my first face-to-face interview on the 24th September 2019, the day of the Supreme Court's judgement on Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue parliament. When my interviewee's assistant informed her, midway through the interview, that Johnson's five-week suspension of parliament had been found to be unlawful, the interview was inevitably disrupted: "Illegal! Flippin' heck [...] Oh God get the tele on, there'll be loads of things!". This, however, was a minor disruption compared to the events that would follow.

The recalling of parliament was the first of many political developments that would lead to delays and cancellations to future interviews. Many politicians were unable to commit to specific dates and times given the uncertainty surrounding future parliamentary business, and crucial prospective votes on a potential General Election, Boris Johnson's new withdrawal agreement, and a Brexit delay. Given this context, some politicians suggested that telephone interviews would be more convenient for them, while eliminating any risks to me in terms of wasted money and time in the event of travelling to London only to experience late cancellations. During this time, I was therefore able to conduct a couple of telephone interviews, with other face-to-face interviews being pushed back to early November.

After the new withdrawal agreement was rejected and a Brexit extension granted, the dust appeared to momentarily settle. I was able to conduct a couple more interviews in the following week, while arranging two others. I had begun to hope that, with the rearranged interviews in early November, I would nearly have enough data to complete this final phase of data collection. It became clear that this was not going to be the case when, on the 28th October, parliament agreed to a general election that would take place on the 12th December. With politicians clearing their appointments ahead of the campaign, the four

interviews that I had scheduled were cancelled, and I was asked to get back in touch after the New Year. Only two of these MPs would be re-elected during the campaign, and I was unable to rearrange with the two that lost their seats. The remaining interviews were conducted after the general election.

Despite the challenges presented by this political context, I was eventually able to conduct 8 interviews. These interviews were voice recorded and transcribed, and they varied from thirty minutes to an hour in length, depending on any time constraints that a particular politician might have had. The following politicians agreed to take part in the study and were happy to be identified: Michelle Thomson (former SNP), Chris Law (SNP), Madeleine Moon (former Labour), Chris Bryant (Labour), Carolyn Harris (Labour), Kevin Hollinrake (Conservative), and Jim Shannon (DUP). One other, a Labour MP, preferred to be anonymised. This was a small number of interviews, and so there was not enough data to make widespread and general claims about how all politicians might view personalised storytelling and its role in politics. Indeed, a greater range of opinion would have allowed me to address such an issue, and by only talking to politicians who had shared personal stories about themselves or their constituents, I could not account for politicians who tended not to share stories, and what their reasons might be for not doing so.

Despite this, however, these interviews produced ample data for the specific aims of my empirical chapter, which was less a representative sample of what all politicians think about personalised stories in politics, and more an exploratory look at the way some of those that share them make sense of their experiences. I was primarily concerned with depth over breadth, in which case only a small number of interviews can be sufficient (Mears, 2009, p.87). Indeed, these interviews often produced more data than necessary, and it became clear towards my final interviews that the same themes and ideas were continually emerging in my participant's responses. This suggested a significant degree of data saturation, where the interviewer "begins to hear the same comments again and again", and knows that "it is then time to stop collecting information and to start analysing what has been collected"

(Grady, 1998, p.26). In the end, this saturation and repetition led to some difficult analytical and presentational decisions on what quotes to include and cut from the interview chapter.

The interviews were approached qualitatively, and understood primarily as “conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.4). The aim here was not to treat them as a scientific means of establishing facts or truth, but rather as a vehicle through which interpretations of phenomena could be produced, thereby offering a window into how interviewees make sense of their experiences. Far from a “miner”, whose goal as an interviewer is to systematically extract “nuggets of essential meaning” from participants, I was more like a “traveller”, setting out to speak with politicians and to explore the “stories of their lived world” in such a way that I would be able to tell one myself (Kvale, 1996, pp.3-4). In this ‘active’ understanding of interviews, a participant was treated as “neither a repository of opinions and reason, nor essentially a wellspring of emotions” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.14). They were instead viewed as co-constructing this knowledge with me. I saw the interview as “an interpersonal drama with a developing plot”; reality as “an ongoing, interpretive accomplishment”; and interview participants as “practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and designate the recognizable and orderly parameters of experience” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.16).

As such, the interviews were semi-structured. This ensured that interview responses were clustered around a set of relevant themes and questions, but also that interviewees had the opportunity to guide the interview in unplanned and personally meaningful ways. Not only did this allow me, as the interviewer, “to modify the style, pace, and ordering of questions to evoke the fullest responses from the interviewee”, but it also ensured that interviewees could “provide responses in their own terms and in the way that they think and use language” (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p.246). This approach ensured that interviewees had

a significant degree of agency in fleshing out and constructing their own narratives with regard to the themes under discussion (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

I therefore entered the interviews with a list of rough questions, clustered around the key focuses of the interviews: the reasons politicians give for sharing personal stories, their experiences of sharing those stories, and their wider reflections on the role of the genre in speech and debate. To address their *justifications*, I aimed to ask why they shared particular stories about themselves or their constituents, what they hoped their stories might achieve, and why they opted to use a story when they might have adopted another form of argument. To explore their *experiences*, I hoped to find out what it felt like to share their story; what kinds of preparations went into it; what the reaction was like from constituents, media commentators, and other politicians; and what impact there might have been both personally and politically. Finally, to investigate their *reflections* on the wider role of the genre in political communication, I intended to ask about what they thought were the merits and shortcomings of personal storytelling, what they felt about common criticisms of the genre, and what democratic risks and potentialities they thought might accompany it (see Appendix 4 for the full list of questions that I used as a guide).

The aim was not to cover all these questions rigidly or on a step-by-step basis across the interviews. Rather, they were used as push-off points which contextualised and guided wider conversations around the thesis' key themes. Elaborations and detours were welcomed, and a number of probes were used to delve deeper into interesting responses, and to flesh out and expand upon topics that seemed to resonate with interviewees (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Having a set of guiding questions helped to ensure that these detours did not stray too far from the scope of the thesis. In this way, they acted like the kind of checklist recommended by Berg (2007, p.39), allowing "for in-depth probing, while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study".

As already mentioned, I conducted a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews throughout this process. It has been argued elsewhere that telephone interviews are not particularly effective when it comes to qualitative semi-structured interviewing (e.g. Gilham, 2005; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). As Vogl (2013, p.134) puts it, “because the personal aspect in qualitative interviews is particularly important, telephone interviews are often dismissed within this research tradition”. The absence of visual cues, physical co-presence, and personal contact have been said to make them unemotional and impersonal, which can preclude the kinds of sensitive disclosure, detailed responses, and build-up of rapport and trust that can make face-to-face interviews successful (Gilham, 2005; Irvine, 2011).

This dynamic was not always present in my telephone interviews, and at times, there was still a clear emotional rapport that helped to produce rich and sensitive personal disclosures. However, when this dynamic was present, it was not clear that it reduced the quality of the interview so much as it changed its character. On the one hand, responses were indeed shorter, less elaborate, and more detached (e.g. Irvine 2011). This meant that the depth of emotional, therapeutic, and personal discussion was not always as evident as that which often characterised my face-to-face interviews. On the other hand, they had a direct and concise nature which led to more specific and succinct answers to certain questions (Vogl, 2013, p.138).

What was lost in comprehensiveness and detail was often gained in clarity and incisiveness. This meant that telephone interviews were less likely to go off on unproductive tangents, but also that they kept rigidly to themes in such a way that could prevent spontaneous insight. Nevertheless, the key advantage that telephone interviews had over face-to-face interviews, as discussed, was that they were more convenient and accessible (Vogl, 2013). Given the difficulty of arranging and conducting these elite interviews, particularly considering the political context in which they took place, this ensured that I

could secure interviews with participants who were otherwise unwilling to commit to a face-to-face interview.

Ethical issues also had to be navigated throughout this process. It was clear that the interviews could produce sensitive questions about politicians and their relationships to fellow colleagues, the citizens that they represent, and their own personal philosophies on being in public office. It was also clear that the interviews could touch on intimate personal issues and experiences related to the stories that they had told. This may have been personally difficult for the participants, and there was also a small risk that this could affect their reputations and relationships, and how they might be viewed by fellow professionals, academics, and the public. To mitigate against these issues, I ensured that interviewees had the option to remain confidential (see Appendix 5). Prior to seeking their consent, they were also given an information sheet, which ensured that they were well informed about the interview content and procedures, how their data might be used, and how they could withdraw from the project partially or completely up to three months after their interviews (see Appendix 6). I encouraged participants to let me know if they were uncomfortable discussing any particular topic, and I made it clear that they were under no obligation to answer any questions. Moreover, I made a concerted effort to be sensitive, professional, and understanding whenever the interviews strayed into difficult topics.

3.4. Data Analysis: Making Sense of the Stories

The analysis of personal narrative is made tricky by their myriad functions, uses, and outcomes. As Riessmann (2002, p.9) puts it, “personal narratives serve many purposes: to remember, argue, convince, engage, or entertain their audience”, and this means that “investigators have many points of entry” when analysing them. A politician’s story may be approached from any number of angles: a structural interrogation of their key textual features, a more thematic concern with their repeated patterns and ideas, or a performative

focus on how they enact identities and accomplish meanings in interaction (Riessmann, 2008). Riessmann (2002) suggests personal narratives can also be approached textually, conversationally, culturally, politically, or historically, and one might add psychologically, rhetorically, organisationally, discursively, and emotionally to her list. My challenge in the analytical phase of this thesis was to establish which of these many approaches would best allow me to make sense of the personal stories that politicians tell.

Key to this process was adopting the approaches that suited my research focus. On the whole, I am particularly concerned with the performative aspects of politicians' stories: what they 'do' in the social and political world, how they make arguments and constitute social and political meanings, and how they are used to enact particular representations of self and other. The primary focus of Chapter 4, for example, is the role that the performance of political stories plays in contemporary British politics. There are two key ways in which I interpret storytelling as 'performative' throughout this thesis, and it is important here to distinguish between them. The first concerns the way narrative involves *performance* in a theatrical and dramaturgical sense. Here, I am interested in politicians' stories as examples of social performance (see page 47), and one aspect of the multiple embodied, verbal, gestural, textual, and visual communicative repertoires that politicians draw on to display meanings, ideas, and characteristics. To attend to narratives in this way is to attend to the different ways in which they are used – consciously or unconsciously – to present and exhibit actions, with a particular emphasis on how people tell stories to demonstrate certain attributes and to showcase identities (Langellier, 1989; 1999; Langellier and Peterson, 2004).

These narratives "do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred one", which is "selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas that individuals switch among as they go about their lives" (Riessmann, 2002, p.9). A key focus of this kind of dramaturgical analysis, then, is how narratives involve presentations of selves, which vary

according to audience, place, time, and the wider cultural context (Goffman, 1959). When approaching politicians' personal stories from this performance angle, I was guided by a number of questions that Riessmann (2002, p.9) suggests that analysts can ask:

In what kind of story does a narrator place herself? How does she locate herself in relation to the audience, and vice versa? How does she locate characters in relation to one another and in relation to herself? How does she relate to herself, that is, make identity claims about who or what she is?

One of my central concerns by asking these questions, then, was how politicians socially positioned themselves, audiences, and events through their personal narratives.

The second way in which I analyse storytelling as performative concerns the notion of *performativity* (Austin, 1975), which describes the wider sense in which communication and language produce effects and accomplish actions in the social world. In this understanding, the various performances that politicians engage in through storytelling can be interpreted as performative because they generate outcomes and results. They establish identities, create relationships, and validate certain values, ideas, and norms.

These differing understandings of the term performative are distinct, yet they often operate in complementary ways throughout my analysis. As I will explore in the following chapter, they represent a particularly fruitful mode of analysis when investigating the relationship between storytelling and the contemporary act of political representation. As I suggested in the last chapter, this act is constituted through the claims that politicians make about who they are, who their constituents are, and how the two are connected (Saward, 2006). As such, analysing the kinds of narrative displays and positionings that occur in political speech and debate (storytelling as *performance*) became an effective way of

exploring how such claims establish and create the identities and relationships fundamental to the act of political representation (storytelling as *performativity*).

There are a variety of dimensions and techniques that comprise a political performance and its wider background. Amongst the many different elements of performance that one might explore, there are also a number of communicative practices or modes of symbolic production that can be investigated, from the embodied, visual, and gestural, to the textual and the verbal (see Alexander, 2013, pp.83-4 for further discussion). Given that I was interested in a particular genre, and its function as a mode of political performance, I investigated performance primarily in textual terms. This was because the stories themselves were the primary unit of analysis, not the wider performative situation. While this meant that the wider aspects of certain performative situations were often unexplored or downplayed in my analysis (like a storytelling performance's attendant kinaesthetic or visual aspects, or its wider staging or choreography), it allowed me to focus more directly on the specific performative functions of storytelling as a genre. I was also able to attend to a wider number of examples, and to thereby gain a broader understanding of storytelling's symbolic importance as a device of contemporary political performance.

I therefore drew upon elements of discourse and rhetorical analysis to not only explore these questions of performance, but to also answer other questions concerning storytelling's role in political debate and argumentation. Much of this rhetorical enquiry was inspired by Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), an approach to political discourse recently developed by scholars of British political rhetoric (Finlayson, 2007; Atkins et al., 2014; Martin, 2015). RPA offers scholars a means by which they can identify and interpret the rhetorical strategies and proofs used by political actors, connecting them to wider macro processes in politics.

This research effort has been particularly fruitful for the study of British politics, with analysts able to show how these rhetorical arguments intersect with important political phenomena, like ideology (Finlayson, 2012; Atkins, 2015a), strategy (Atkins, 2015b; Martin, 2015), tradition and institutions (Finlayson and Martin, 2008), problem definition (Finlayson, 2006), issue formation (Crines and Heppell, 2017) political culture (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013), performance and self-presentation (Atkins and Finlayson, 2016), emotions (Martin, 2013a; 2016), and disaffection (Finlayson, 2014). The key claim of RPA is that strategies of political rhetoric are both constitutive of and constituted by the political process as a whole (Martin, 2013b). The preponderance of certain rhetorical forms, devices, and proofs both reveals and constructs democratic politics and its rhetorical culture, legitimating particular modes of communicating politics, along with “certain actors and ideas at the ontological level” (Price-Thomas and Turnbull, 2018, p.212).

In adopting this analytical approach, then, my concern was not just with politicians’ stories as techniques of persuasion or as an object of analysis, what Price-Thomas and Turnbull (2018) have called a ‘thin’ approach to rhetoric. Instead, I was also concerned with what the telling of certain personal stories might say about political culture and norms of political expression. This ‘thick’ understanding of rhetoric emphasises the situated nature of political rhetoric, how the form and content of arguments are interlinked, and how certain argumentative practices draw on, but also contribute to, their wider political context (Martin, 2013b; Price-Thomas and Turnbull, 2018). By taking this approach to rhetoric, I could therefore ask not only how stories function as argumentative proofs, but also how they may be both indicative and constitutive of the contemporary character of political speech and debate, as well as democratic practice at large.

I mostly engaged in this rhetorical analysis in Chapter 5, where my main concern is how we situate personalised storytelling as a form of political argument and debate. I approach this task by analysing politicians’ personal stories at both the ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ level

of rhetoric, the former by attending to how they are used to establish arguments, and the latter by exploring how this particular method of establishing and underpinning arguments has wider implications for democratic debate and political culture. This, as will be seen, is what allows me to investigate the more normative question of what it means for political debate, and our wider political culture, if politicians are increasingly making arguments through emotional personal narratives.

At a wider level, my analysis was concerned with how politicians' stories articulate discourses: the "relatively stable uses of language" that are constitutive of political identities, ideas, and meanings (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.6). As Ekström and Firmstone (2017, p.9) argue, a discourse analytical approach understands political communication "as acts and processes of signification", in which "political ideas, identities and relationships are articulated and discursively represented in concrete acts of communication". It is set apart from the dominant approach to political communication – which tends to focus on the content or effects of these acts of communication – because it is fundamentally concerned with political meaning-making. Indeed, this is a different point of entry to conventional analyses of politicians' stories, which have tended to approach them, at a quantitative level, by measuring their persuasive effects and electoral impact (Sheafer et al., 2010; Weber and Wirth, 2014; Gooch, 2018).

This research effort has identified some of the important effects of politicians' stories, as well as highlighting the mechanisms of narrative persuasion in politics. However, it has tended to treat politicians' stories in uniform ways, and to abstract them from their wider social, political, and cultural context. This has often downplayed the dynamic interplay between political storytelling and political reality, and how anecdotes and stories exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with society and politics. By analysing stories as discursive practices, I can address this shortcoming by attending to how politicians' stories – "as

symbolic representations of the political” (Ekström and Firmstone, 2017, p.9) – shape, undercut, and give meaning to particular conceptions of democratic life.

By conceptions, I do not mean of specific political issues or ideologies, which would be the kind of focus typically associated with the more critical variants of discursive analysis, like CDA or CNA. I do not, for example, approach political storytelling with the view that the discourses they articulate necessarily “sustain and reproduce the social status quo” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p.258). Though I do not deny that this can sometimes be the case, or that this kind of analysis can be fruitful (e.g. Mehan, 1997; Brown, 1999), this approach has tended to dominate discursively oriented analyses of political storytelling, occluding a more balanced view of its function in political interaction.

In this sense, my discursive analysis is less concerned with the way stories might circulate particular meanings around different political issues, or whether the stories politicians share might produce, reify, or sustain certain political ideologies. Instead, I am more concerned with how they “shape and negotiate what politics is all about” (Ekström and Firmstone, 2017, p.9). In other words, I am interested in how they are constitutive of democratic practice, particularly with regard to the act of political representation, and processes of democratic debate. In this way, I join a number of scholars who have applied this kind of analysis to politicians, and who have unpicked the discursive character of their roles as they navigate media performance (Washbourne, 2013; Craig, 2014; Coleman and Firmstone, 2017; Ekström and Morton, 2017), engage in political speech-making (Schoor, 2017), and represent the public (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008). In my particular case, discursive analysis became a means by which I could explore how politicians’ roles as representatives, their relationship with the public, and their practices of deliberation are moulded, signified, and comprehended through the personal stories that they share.

Different aspects of this analysis were therefore emphasised at different points in the thesis. In Chapter 4, I focused on the performative aspects of personal narrative. This allowed me to investigate how representation is enacted by the way politicians position themselves, their constituents, and their relationship through personal stories, and how this is conditioned by the cultural and political context in which politicians now operate. In Chapter 5, where my attention turned to debate, I stressed the rhetorical dimensions of personal narrative, focusing on the merits, shortcomings, and wider cultural implications of its influence on contemporary political argument. Chapter 6 emphasised both the performative and discursive aspects of narrative, where I analysed the common themes and topics that emerged when politicians were asked to make sense of their practices of personalised storytelling. The similarities between these analytical approaches meant that they often overlapped and intersected across my empirical analysis. What each approach offered, however, was their own distinctive entry point for analysing the dialectic and mutually constitutive relationship between politicians' practices of narrative account giving, and the wider social, cultural, and political context in which they take place.

3.5. Building Theory: Telling a Story of My Own

While this explains how I intended to make sense of the personal stories that politicians told, and what aspects of these stories I aimed to pay attention to throughout this process, it does not explain how I applied this analysis in such a way that I could generate insights, build theory, and tell a story of my own about the data. This procedure was largely guided by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). This was constructivist in scope, which had certain implications for the way I applied my analysis, generated insights, and developed theory.

First, it meant that the process was, from the outset, influenced by extant theories and a comprehensive grounding in literature. The study began with a series of "guiding

interests, sensitising concepts, and disciplinary perspectives”, which acted as “points of departure” from which I ultimately devised my research problem, approached my data, and started to develop ideas (Charmaz, 2006, p.17). In my particular case, concepts like political rhetoric, emotion, and performance played a large part in the initial design of this study. Indeed, it was the mismatch between these more culturally situated, experiential, and affective approaches to politics, and predominant approaches to politicians’ stories, which ultimately became a key research issue that this thesis sought to further explore in the empirical phase of the project.

Second, it meant that the empirical phase of the project was iterative. Rather than undertaking the analysis *after* collecting my data, I engaged in a constant back and forth between collection, analysis, and conceptualisation (Kennedy, 2018). As I began collecting stories for my project, I undertook an initial coding of the data. This process was guided by the key research interests established at the start of this thesis: what the performance of political stories ‘do’ in democratic terms, their rhetorical function and role in political debate, and the way politicians make sense of telling them. Multiple different themes emerged throughout this process, and during the textual analysis, line-by-line observations and brief labels were made regarding the performative, rhetorical, and discursive aspects of these stories. Interview data was coded at a more thematic level, and involved noting the different categories and sub-categories that emerged as politicians made sense of their storytelling practices. The goal of this initial coding was to “mine early data for analytic ideas to pursue in further data collection and analysis”, and in so doing, to retain an openness to different potential avenues of empirical and theoretical interest (Charmaz, 2006, p.46).

As data collection continued, and I began to amass more stories and interview data, a constant comparison between this initial coding, new data, and extant theory allowed this coding to become focused. In this focused phase of coding, the aim was to make “decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise [...] data incisively and

completely” (Charmaz, 2006, p.58). I therefore refined and condensed the key codes of my analysis according to their relevancy and saliency. This meant that certain codes established at the early stage of analysis became either less important or unexplored as the analysis continued. During the initial coding of the textual analysis, for example, many interesting topics emerged from the data, like the performance of sexual, gender and collective identities, and the rhetoric of social movement, political change, and activism. These all spoke to important processes that could help partly explain what was happening when politicians shared particular stories. Nevertheless, because these codes fell outside the scope of this thesis, or because they did not reflect wider patterns in the data, they were either subsumed within other codes or left out.

When I had established a number of focused codes, memo-writing became an important means by which I could make sense, synthesise, and create theoretical groupings from my data (Glaser, 1978). I continually made notes throughout the analytical process, in which I attempted to draw connections across and between my codes, and their wider theoretical context. The key here, in the process of writing, was to generate new insights, expand upon existing ideas, and to flesh out themes that had become salient throughout data collection and focused coding. In this way, I could “increase the level of abstraction” of my ideas, and allow codes to “stand out and take form as theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p.72).

For example, when analysing my interview data, I began to note similar codes that seemed to reoccur when politicians were asked to justify sharing their stories: “shock factor”, “getting the attention of the government”, “getting across your values”, “illustrating the problem”, “raising it with government ministers”, “helps to convince”. After comparing across these codes, and fleshing them out further in my notes, it became clear that there was a wider theoretical category that connected them. This led to the insight, expressed in Chapter 6, that one of the four narratives that politicians draw on to make sense of political

storytelling is a *strategic* narrative, where they talk about stories as effective communicative devices that help them to attain certain political ends. By combining and comparing codes in this way, I could establish conceptual and theoretical categories that operated at higher levels of abstraction.

These were then used to conduct theoretical sampling, the process of examining and explicating these ideas with new and emerging data collected through additional texts or interviews. As data collection was nearing completion, and I had a good idea of the key theoretical ideas emerging from my data, my aim with theoretical sampling was to collect further “pertinent data” that would allow me to “elaborate and refine” these key categories (Charmaz, 2006, p.96). In my textual analysis, this meant turning to further parliamentary debates to flesh out or test a particular conceptual understanding.

For example, as I was exploring the relationship between storytelling, emotion, and argument, one analytical category that became salient was *storytelling as raising awareness*. From debates on mental health, domestic violence, baby loss, and sexual abuse, it became clear that one aspect of this was establishing public and social recognition over experiences that had perhaps traditionally been excluded from political debate. However, I started to wonder whether this raising awareness function was evident in debates over issues where these experiences were already well understood, or where there were not the same cultural taboos related to the issue under discussion. By collecting stories from debates on cancer strategy, treatment, and prevention, I found that this *awareness raising* function was indeed present, but there was a subtle difference: there was not the same primacy given ‘tackling taboos’. Here, raising awareness also had a more educational bend, promoting public understanding over cancer tests in ways that might enable quicker diagnoses. This new data widened my understanding of this theoretical category, adding more nuance and detail to my conceptual understanding of how politicians use stories to raise awareness.

In my interview data, I engaged in theoretical sampling by adapting and changing the questions that I asked politicians. After my first interviews, some theoretical categories had started to take shape, drawn from common themes and responses that reoccurred across those interviews. I saw the following interviews as an opportunity to test and refine those categories by getting the politicians to do some theorising of their own. In other words, I would add extra questions and prompts to the interview based on these emergent themes, and the responses from politicians would become an opportunity to affirm, elaborate, or critique them.

For example, in my initial interviews, I realised that the politicians that I had spoken to tended to talk about their storytelling in terms of *emotional sacrifice*. They had experienced personal, emotional, and psychological difficulties before, during, and after sharing their story, but they were still glad that they did it because they felt that their stories had helped others. In future interviews, I began to incorporate different prompts and questions that would allow me to further explore this topic. How widespread was this sentiment? Had other politicians experienced something similar? Were they still glad that they had shared their stories? This eventually became a fruitful line of enquiry, and other politicians had gone through something similar, discussing the challenges they faced returning to their past experience, managing their emotions, and the effects that this had had on their family. In contrast, prompts that were less fruitful highlighted areas where shared interpretations were perhaps not as common, and where opinions and experiences diverged. Theoretical sampling, in this case, was not only a means of explicating and refining the significance of certain concepts and themes, but also an important abductive mechanism, helping me to avoid homogenising politicians' experiences, while also challenging me to revise any pre-existing ideas, biases, and assumptions that I may have brought into data collection and analysis.

This leads on to a final tenet of a grounded theory approach: the role of the researcher. Throughout the iterative process of moving between collection, analysis, and theory building, I had an unavoidable influence on my participants, data, and resultant insights. As Charmaz (2006, p.131) puts it “constructivist grounded theorists assume that both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed”. Grounded theory, constructs “an image of a reality, not the reality” (Charmaz, 2000, p.523). As such, to a certain extent, I was telling my own story about the data, which was influenced by my own experiences, values, and interactions with participants. My goal throughout this process was not to engage in the impossible task of eliding such influences, but rather to become reflexive about them so as to diminish their impact on my assumptions, interpretations, and final insights. Whether through memo writing, theoretical sampling, or the constant back and forth between data collection, data analysis, and theory building, my aim was to be engaged in an ongoing critical awareness of my own perspective. In that way, I could be aware of both when it was helping my research, and when it was hindering it.

3.6. Conclusion

The task of moving beyond the suspicion of stories, then, is not just a theoretical one, but also a methodological one. The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate the qualitative, interdisciplinary, and multimethod approach taken in this thesis, and to show how such a set of techniques and principles, with their attendant conceptual underpinnings, offer a valuable standpoint from which to explore politicians’ personal stories. The key merits of such an approach were twofold. On the one hand, they helped me to address the research questions outlined at the start of this thesis. A better interpretive and normative understanding of what it means to construct political meaning through stories could be served by the depth of a qualitative orientation, and an assemblage of analytical methods that enabled me to explore the performative, rhetorical, and discursive negotiation of that meaning, particularly as it pertained to the democratic practices of political representation and debate.

On the other hand, the approach also allowed me to address some of the common gaps that have emerged in existing approaches to political storytelling: an emphasis on quantifying stories and measuring their effects, rather than how they might symbolically represent and construct political meaning; a focus on stories told by significant, mainstream political figures in high-profile speeches, rather than those told by lesser-known politicians as part of the more routine, day-to-day communicative practices; and a concern with the personal stories politicians share, but not what politicians say about sharing them. These gaps do not discount some of the important research that has emerged out of these approaches, so much as they point to the potential for new directions, empirical insights, and theoretical perspectives. In this way, by applying elements of performance, discourse, and rhetorical analysis to narratives drawn from both elite interviews and textual data, my hope in the following empirical chapters is to realise such a potential.

Chapter 4 – Storytelling, Performance, and Political Representation

4.1. Introduction: “The Stories of Our Country”

In his 2013 party conference speech as Labour leader, Ed Miliband told four consecutive stories about the people he had met during a recent local election campaign. Miliband was eager to point out that he had “done something unusual” during the campaign, visiting “town centres, market squares, and high streets” where he had “talked to people about their lives”. The four stories that he chose to focus on were, in his view, just “four of millions of the stories of our country”. The first of these stories described an encounter after a town meeting in Cleverly:

It was just coming to the end of the meeting and this bloke wandered up. He was incredibly angry. It’s a family show so I won’t exactly repeat what he said. He was so angry he wouldn’t give me his name, but he did tell me his story about how he spent the last ten years looking after his disabled wife, and then another four years looking for a job and not finding one. He was angry about immigration and some people in the crowd booed him. But actually he wasn’t prejudiced. He just felt the economy didn’t work for him.

Miliband moved on to a similar tale of disillusionment, this time from citizens at a market stall in Chesterfield:

And then I think about the two market traders I met in Chesterfield, standing by their stalls, out in all weathers, working all hours, and they said, “Look this country just doesn’t seem to be rewarding our hard work and effort. There seem to be some people getting something for nothing. This society is losing touch with our values.”

His attention then turned to the young Mother he met in Lincoln:

And then I think about this beautiful sunny spring day I spent in Lincoln. And the face in the crowd, this young woman who said she was an ambulance controller. So proud to be working for our National Health Service. And so proud too of her young son. Because she was a single parent, nineteen years old, and what she said to me was, “Why does everybody portray me as a burden on the system? I am not a burden on the system, I am going out, I am doing the right thing for the country, why doesn’t anyone listen to my voice?”

His final story focused on a scaffolder who felt similarly disempowered, and who was struggling to “make ends meet”:

And then I think about this scaffolder I met just around the corner from where I live. I was just coming back from a local café I’d been at [...] He told me his story. And what he said to me was “Look, I go out, I do the work, I go all around the country, again out in all weathers, I earn a decent wage, but I still can’t make ends meet”. And he said to me, “Is anyone ever going to do anything about those gas and electric bills that just go up and up, faster than I can earn a living?” He wanted someone to fight for him.

These four stories, Miliband argued, were just a few of the growing number of stories that could capture the current public mood in Britain:

Now if you listen to these stories – four of millions of the stories of our country – and you have your own, and your friends and family, what do you learn? All of these people love Britain. They embody its great spirit. But they all believe that Britain can do better than this. Today I say to them and millions of others you’re right, Britain

can do better than this, Britain must do better than this. Britain will do better than this with a government that fights for you.

What was the former Labour leader achieving by recounting the experiences of these four disaffected citizens? The critics of personalised storytelling discussed in Chapter 2 might provide us with one answer to this question: Miliband was debasing representative politics. He was engaging in misleading anecdotal arguments to justify his claim that “Britain must do better”. He was strategically cultivating emotional connections between himself and the public. And he was engaging in a cynical, personal demonstration about his own willingness to listen and relate to their stories. From this perspective, his stories, like all personal stories in representative politics, were fostering dangerous linkages between representative and represented. These were based not on shared policy positions, informed understanding, and rationality, as such critics believe they should be, but instead on image, sentiment, and personal identification.

There is, however, another answer to this question that I aim to explore in this chapter. That is, it is not necessary to see Miliband’s stories as inherently devaluing or undermining representative politics, nor is it essential to view personalised storytelling as extraneous or antithetical to the proper practice of political representation. When viewed as a symbolic, performative, and aesthetic act, I want to suggest that personalised storytelling is in fact part and parcel of how political representation unfolds in contemporary democratic politics. What Miliband was achieving with his stories, in such a reading, was the performance of representation. His personal stories were enacting representative claims (Saward, 2006; 2010), attempts to speak on behalf of a group of people that had in one sense been constructed and shaped through the stories told about them.

He depicted a collection of citizens – two market traders, one young mother, a scaffolder, and the “bloke” from a meeting – whose lives allegedly spoke to a wider sense of

political and economic injustice. These stories were said to embody public sentiment in Britain: they were just four stories of the “millions” that told of hard-working citizens who loved their country, but who were effectively without representation, in need of “a government that fights for you”. Miliband put himself forward as the true representative of these people, showing empathy with the man angry about immigration because he “felt like the economy didn’t work for him”, the market traders angry at those that “get something for nothing”, and the voiceless young mother being treated “like a burden on the system”. His government would be one that would “do better than this” and “fight” for the British public. In this way, his personal stories displayed and demonstrated meanings fundamental to the act of representation: who the representative is, who the represented are, and how they are connected.

It is from this more dynamic and cultural understanding of political representation that I begin to reconceptualise its relationship to personalised storytelling in this chapter. Miliband, I suggest, is just one of many politicians in recent times who have drawn on personal stories as part of the performance of representation. These stories, I argue, function to perform representation in a style of communication that is more affective, ordinary, and experiential. This increasing tendency to perform representation through stories and anecdotes has both emerged from, while also sustaining, a wider performative context in which citizens are emotionally reflexive in their engagements with political representatives, and in which politicians are expected to demonstrate a variety of personal qualities like ‘resemblance’ (being relatable), ‘ordinariness’ (being like their citizens), ‘authenticity’ (being true to themselves), ‘empathy’ (being able to understand their citizens’ feelings and experiences), and ‘intimacy’ (being personally open and affectionate) (Pels, 2003; Coleman, 2011; Drake and Higgins, 2012; Manning and Holmes, 2013; 2014; Coleman and Firmstone, 2017; Enli, 2017).

I explore two key aspects of this process. The first is the way politicians tell personal stories about themselves to demonstrate that they are relatable, authentic, and ordinary. The second is the way they tell personal stories about the public to demonstrate a more empathetic, personal, and attentive representative relationship, in which they are tuned into their citizens' political concerns and capable of understanding their personal experiences. These are not just performative strategies that politicians use to generate favourability (though they may be used as such). Rather, my contention is that they are part of the way representation is constituted in our current political culture, indicating an important genre through which politicians and citizens make sense of, and shape, the shared feelings, interests, and experiences that underpin their association. From this perspective, I challenge the genre determinism inherent in the suspicion of stories, and instead begin to carve out a valid space for personalised storytelling in political representation. Since its contemporary legitimacy in part depends on the convincing public enactment of the aforementioned emotional traits and personal connections – which signify both resemblance and relationship – I suggest that personalised storytelling can in fact be consistent with the act of democratic representation.

In conceptualising politicians' stories and anecdotes in this way, my aim is not to suggest that all stories are legitimate or desirable expressions of representative politics. That they are an important genre for the cultural performance of representation does not make them exempt from the same kinds of manipulation and insincerity discussed by those suspicious of stories. Crucially, however, I do not reduce them to it. As will be shown, there are moments where the stories and anecdotes delivered by politicians are exposed as nothing more than strategic, insincere attempts to curry popular favour with the voting public. This was most evident in the high-profile conference speech setting, particularly David Cameron's in 2015, where mediated challenges to his attempted performances of a more connected and empathetic style of representation exposed his stories and anecdote usage as dishonest and exploitative. My key contention, however, is that these problems are not

determined by genre, but rather the specific intentions, claims, and relationships that certain stories can engender, and whether their performance can be considered convincing, authentic, and sincere in the demonstration of this more affective, ordinary, and experiential style of representation.

As I will argue, this perspective allows me to account for the moments where politicians' stories and anecdotes seem to achieve their performative effects, fulfilling an "emotional connection of audience with actor and text" that can "create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience" (Alexander, 2013, p.53). In these moments, like the 2012 mental health debate, stories and anecdotes demonstrated their potential to engender a sense amongst citizens and commentators that representation was being practised authentically, honestly, and empathetically. As such, I argue that by acknowledging the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of political representation – in which the emotional, the personal, and the anecdotal have an important and potentially valuable role to play in mediating connections and disconnections between representative and represented – we can become more discerning in our analysis of storytelling's impact on this democratic process. We can move beyond the notion that the genre of storytelling is always necessarily a cynical force in representative politics, and instead begin to interrogate how different stories and anecdotes might function performatively to establish, strengthen, and weaken relationships between politicians and the public, particularly in a political culture where such relationships are increasingly mediated in terms of the ordinary, the personal, and the experiential.

4.2. The Emotional and Experiential Dimensions of Political Performance

In Chapter 2, I proposed that critics of personalised storytelling overlook the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of political representation. I made the argument that representation was a constitutive and culturally situated activity, requiring politicians – like Ed Miliband

above – to make claims about who they are, who the public are, and what their relationship is (and should be) (Saward, 2006; 2010). These claims both draw upon and shape the key meanings that are contextually associated with the act of political representation. This means that a representative relationship is not pre-given, or dependent on the realisation of a fixed set of criteria, but rather that it has to be demonstrated symbolically through these claims, which produce, but are also validated according to, dynamic and situated cultural expectations of what constitutes acceptable or genuine political representation.

This, I suggested, has significant implications for how we understand democratic representation and the manner in which it is communicated. It means that both performance and style are valid and important components of how politicians navigate their roles as representatives. Since, as Saward (2017, p.75-6) puts it, representation is “not simply a product of what is done [...] but importantly of what is demonstrated or shown to be done”, performance makes representation apparent. By performing representative claims, politicians “invoke and render visible and audible the very notions of representative, represented, and a sense of the dynamic or relation which simultaneously distinguishes and unites the two” (Saward, 2017, pp.80-81). In this way, politicians can overcome the impossible challenge of establishing direct, one-to-one relationships with the whole public, with their mediated public performances becoming sites of identification through which parasocial relationships can be established. When these performances are convincing, “the experienced, and often powerful, sense of a real relationship is forged” (Saward, 2017, p.81).

I argued that style, on the other hand – the particular manner in which these meanings are displayed and enacted – ensures that representation remains accessible and engaging for the public. Politicians have to work creatively with the surrounding cultural context to establish their credibility, and this requires them to perform representation in a way that resonates with the expectations, tastes, and experiences of those they seek to

represent. Politicians and the public operate in different spheres of life, distinguished by their varied societal roles, life experiences, and political knowledge. Though these gaps between them can never be elided, they occasionally need to be bridged for there to be a sense of identification, mutuality, and trust in the representative relationship (Pels, 2003). In order to establish parasocial relationships, representatives need to embody the represented in a manner that implies both cultural recognition and a shared world, with failure to do so a recipe for disconnection (Coleman, 2003; 2005).

This, I suggested, is reason to challenge the genre determinism inherent in the suspicion of stories. If political representation is a communicative practice – and its enactment depends on fluctuating styles of performative claims-making that have cultural relevance and popular appeal – then surely the legitimacy of any one genre is situational. That is, it cannot be predetermined by a perceived incompatibility with political representation, because the manner in which the act is negotiated, communicated, and interpreted changes with cultural tastes and expectations. If a genre can function to make representation visible through performance, and if the style in which it does so harmonises with these cultural tastes and expectations in such a way that generates valuable connections in representative politics, then it is plausible that it has a role to play in this important democratic process.

Indeed, the risk of genre determinism is that, by neglecting the aesthetic dimensions of political representation in this way, we may be disregarding forms of communication that are important to the cultural performance of representation, and celebrating those that are not. Rather than a more nuanced analysis of how such forms may be used to facilitate the making and receiving of representative claims that generate or undermine legitimacy in representative politics, we are in danger of holding up an idealised mode of representation that is insensitive and cold in the face of citizens' affective and cultural tastes. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this is happening in the case of personalised storytelling, and that

the present context for political performance means that we should consider the possibility that there are ways in which politicians' stories might actually facilitate and enable democratic representation.

I touched briefly on this context in Chapter 2, where I suggested that the media's restyling of politics – and the three C's of celebrity, cynicism, and consumerism – has made personal performance an important lens through which politicians and citizens engage with each other (Corner and Pels, 2003). Politicians have to demonstrate their credibility in a more experiential style so as to accord with popular values, and this represents a common ground on which they, along with citizens, can come to establish, experience, and work through their relationship. As Pels (2003) has argued, this restyling has put emotional realism, emotional intelligence, and intuitive experience at the centre of political self-display, and at the heart of how the public comes to recognise, identify with, and trust political representatives. I want to develop this argument further in this section by fleshing out these more emotionally reflexive values through which politicians and the public increasingly experience their relationship, and how they might mediate the contemporary enactment of democratic representation.

These values may be performed in premeditated and unspontaneous ways by some politicians more than others, but they emerge from, and impact upon, social, political, and cultural norms that are in one sense out of their control. They are not the only values that constitute the current performative context of political representation. Indeed, many contemporary politicians tend to engage in hybrid performances, combining demonstrations of authority, seniority, and political skilfulness, which signify their leadership credentials, exceptional qualities, and distance from the public, with more experiential demonstrations of authenticity, relatability, and empathy, which signify their representativeness, closeness, and personal relationship to the public. I focus on these latter values because they are especially prominent when representation is being performed through personal stories. They help to

explain not only why politicians might be increasingly performing representative claims through personalised storytelling, but also what is potentially being accomplished when they do so.

For Manning and Holmes (2014, pp.702-703), one such value is affinity, which refers to a “spontaneous liking” for a politician, and which is usually based on feelings of connection, commonality, and likeness. Affinity speaks to an expectation that those who represent the public, to a certain extent, should share and understand their lives. Yet, since most politicians are drawn from radically different backgrounds to the people that they represent, these connections “must be *performed* rather than based in experience and actual shared social positions”, and they are more likely to be felt when a politician “seems to enact some knowledge and emotional understanding of a person’s situation and priorities”. The performance of affinity is more than just a strategy that politicians can draw on. It captures the changing terms of engagement and disengagement that now characterise the public’s relationship with politicians. Political affinity, Manning and Holmes (2014, p.709) argue, is a “lens through which citizens interpret politics and politicians”, and it works to “form points of connection or departure between citizens and their political leaders”:

Affinity is a concept that draws attention to democratic equality and calls for politicians to share things – or at least perform a connection – with ‘ordinary’ people and everyday life. These may include a location, a way of speaking, comportment, attitude, particular values or experiences. Instead of social class and party identification organising our relationship with politics, affinity highlights emotional connections. A focus on affinity emphasises the experiential component of a politician’s competencies, in contrast to older notions of sovereign authority or the idea that politicians are primarily managers, needing a range of skills and knowledge to make them competent representatives. Some of these factors retain currency, but

the expectation of ordinariness and humility and a connection to everyday life is added. Leaders must have emotional appeal. (Manning and Holmes, 2014, p.709)

Another value that is central to the contemporary performance of political representation is authenticity. Enli (2015, p.121), for example, has gone as far to argue that “nothing is more important for a politician than being regarded as authentic, genuine, and real”. Here, authenticity refers to the need for politicians to *appear* authentic – like they are ‘being themselves’ (Trilling, 1972; Taylor, 1992) – in their interactions with fellow representatives and citizens. As Coleman (2011, p.50) suggests, a growing emphasis on authentic representation means that politicians “are now forced to expose the most intimate details of their personalities so that they may be judged not simply as representatives as the public”, but also “as representatives of themselves”.

This quality is “an interpretive category rather than an ontological state”, which is to say that it is “arrived at, is contingent and results from processes of social construction” (Alexander, 2013, p.13). As such, there are a number of ways in which we might think of a politician as authentic. Montgomery (2001, pp.403-4; see also Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, pp.68-9), for example, has highlighted three related means by which mediated talk might be considered authentic:

First there is talk that is deemed authentic because it does not sound contributed, simulated, or performed but rather sounds natural, “fresh”, spontaneous. Second, there is talk that is deemed authentic because it seems truly to capture or present the experience of the speaker. Third, there is authentic talk that seems truly to project the core self of the speaker – talk that is true to the self of the speaker in an existential fashion.

For Alexander (2013, p.54), authenticity stands above all other qualities when it comes to the success and failure of political performances, because it determines whether such performances are deemed felicitous or not. In his view, authenticity depends on whether a person appears “straightforward, truthful, and sincere” in their displays, and whether they seem:

to act without artifice, without undue self-consciousness, without reference to some laboriously thought-out plan or text, without concern for manipulating the context of her actions, and without worries about that action’s audience or its effects [...] If authenticity marks success, then failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked: the actor seems out of role, merely to be reading from an impersonal script, pushed and pulled by the forces of society, acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience.

Several different traits have been identified as central to the way contemporary politicians perform authenticity, like ordinariness, amateurism, intimacy, consistency, and spontaneity (Enli, 2015; 2016; 2017). In their study of the 2014 European elections, Coleman and Firmstone (2017, pp.269-72) identified three performative frames that mainstream politicians drew upon to signify their authenticity. First, they aimed to showcase their closeness to the public, engaging in visual demonstrations that showcased their awareness of, and interest in listening to, ordinary people’s problems. Second, they “enacted visual performances of empathy by metaphorically putting themselves in the public’s shoes”, such as by entering their workplaces, putting on their uniform, and performing the same tasks as them. Third, some politicians attempted to demonstrate their ordinariness by letting journalists film moments from their private lives, like going to the gym and getting ready for work. Crucially, they highlight how these performances of authenticity were mediated and sometimes undermined by how journalists interpreted, framed, and reported such performances. Indeed, as Enli and Rosenberg (2018, p.3) put it, the public’s evaluation of a

politician's authenticity "is an evaluation not solely of interpersonal trust but also of media trust", since their performances "are framed and produced in accordance with media logics".

Where affinity highlights the heightened role that shared experiences, resemblance, and mutual connection play in the contemporary performance of representation, authenticity helps to address how we come to experience representatives and their performances as trustworthy, real, and sincere. However, the two inform each other, because "now, increasingly, authenticity claims are mediated through the lens of affectivity", making "reputations dependent upon broader and deeper criteria of representation than was hitherto the case" (Coleman, 2011, p.50). In other words, authentic representation – and the notions of integrity and sincerity that it depends upon – is increasingly conditioned by how well politicians can engage in experiential forms of self-display, and establish an emotional and personal connection with the public. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, pp.29-39) has argued, for political representatives, "the ability to show themselves as 'human' and 'authentic' through emotional expression is now seen as a central quality for leadership". She cites Thrift (2008, p.184), who argues that "the performance of emotion" has become "an index of credibility" in politics, meaning that "increasingly, political legitimation arises from this kind of performance".

The growing use of personal stories by politicians is suggestive of these changing cultural expectations regarding how a representative should perform, and how they should relate to the people that they represent. It is easy to see why a genre that elevates the experiential, the anecdotal, and the emotional might have become more prominent in such a performative culture, where connections between representative and represented are increasingly dependent on the cultivation of authenticity and affinity, and demonstrations of relatability, ordinariness, empathy, and intimacy. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p.68) has put it, "central to the performance of authenticity is revelation of the self through emotional self-disclosure", and the experiential quality of personalised stories is particularly well suited to

such revelations. In her view, personalised storytelling, “in whichever form it may take, serves as a guarantor of authenticity” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p.68). She quotes Papacharissi (2015, p.109), who has made similar claims about the relationship between autobiographical statements and authenticity on social media, suggesting that the expression of private thoughts in public can engender powerful levels of intimacy with audiences, who “validate the performance as authentic because the person has shared a truly private thought”.

As I will show in the following analysis, at least in the case of representative politics, there is good reason to stop short of suggesting that politicians’ personal stories can be a guarantor of authenticity. However, it is clear that they would be well suited to the kinds of experiential expression, ordinary language, and interpersonal connection that form such an important part of its contemporary performance, and that represent a style capable of mediating the “relationship of parasocial intimacy-at-a-distance” that Pels (2003, p.51) identifies as central to trust, identification, and accessibility in mediated representative politics. That is not to say that every story will negotiate this relationship in productive or desirable ways, nor is it to suggest that there are no risks of stories undermining this process in ways that might be spurious or manipulative. Rather, it is to suggest that there is reason to believe that politicians’ personal stories are a valid genre through which representation is condensed, performed, and experienced in contemporary democratic life. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to a textual analysis where I explicate this process, identify two key means by which it takes place, and discuss examples that highlight the potentialities and risks of performing representative politics through stories.

4.3. Storytelling Across Contexts: Constraints, Opportunities, and Gatekeeping

Before turning to the textual analysis, it is important to account for the different constraints and opportunities that exist for politicians when they tell their personal stories, as a result of

the differing norms, structures, and conventions of the contexts in which they are being told. The way politicians perform representation through stories is not homogenous, and there are important differences between the two settings analysed here – conference speeches and parliamentary debates – that can have a significant influence on how such a process plays out. I identify three key aspects – *visibility, purpose, and audience* – that can help to account for these contextual differences. While I focus specifically on how they apply to the two contexts studied across this thesis, they could also be used to explore key differences between other contexts in which politicians tell stories.

These differences have a significant impact on the narrative repertoires that politicians possess and draw on in any given context, conditioning both the stories that they might be prepared to tell, and the ways in which they might be prepared to tell them. They provide the impetus to tell particular stories ahead of others, while also dissuading political actors from telling certain stories altogether. They form the foundations for certain gatekeeping activities, that influence how and why certain personal stories are selected and moulded for dissemination by politicians.

4.3.1. Visibility

The kinds of stories that politicians tell, and the manner in which they get told, can differ according to the visibility of both the context and the actors on display. Some events receive significantly more media exposure than others, and so too, do certain politicians court more media attention than their peers. Here, I am referring to the differing degrees of “mediated visibility” that exist across storytelling contexts and that surround different storytellers, bringing about certain constraints and opportunities (Thompson, 1995; 2005). Through contemporary technologies and practices of mediation that heighten their public exposure, politicians have the opportunity to share their stories to audiences at an unprecedented

scale. But as Thompson (2005, p.42) reminds us, this mediated visibility can be a “double-edged sword”, representing “the source of a new and distinctive kind of fragility” for politicians. As a result of being “more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past”, they face the increasing risk that “their actions and utterances, and the actions and utterances of others, may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish to project” (Thompson, 2005, p.42).

The risks of mediated visibility are perhaps most keenly felt by political storytellers in the conference speech setting. Particularly in the case of large, mainstream political parties, the speeches delivered in these events receive a significant degree of broadcast, print, and digital media attention. Journalists are not only eager to deconstruct the content of these speeches, and the policies and ideas that are put forward by the politicians delivering them, but they are also treated as important opportunities to evaluate the skilfulness and authenticity of their political performances and rhetorical abilities.

The status of the storyteller is also important in this regard. The conference speech stories that I analyse are those told by political leaders, and due to the significance of their political role, they face wider risks that come with increased mediated visibility. As Thompson (1995, p.141) notes, such visibility is a “constant source of trouble for political leaders”, who “must be on their guard continuously and employ a high degree of reflexivity to monitor their actions and utterances”, in an attempt to avoid the “disastrous consequences” that follow “an indiscreet act or ill-judged remark”.

On the one hand, then, the increased mediated visibility of the conference speech setting and political leaders affords their storytelling a certain reach and exposure that is not often available in other contexts and to other politicians. It is much more likely that the stories they share will be circulated further by journalists and heard by the public, and they therefore have a bigger chance of gaining traction in public discourse. On the other hand,

the kinds of stories that they can tell is delimited by this very same mediated visibility, and the risks that come with their stories potentially being viewed as misguided, unconvincing, and perhaps even personally embarrassing. Their stories must be carefully selected, scripted, and delivered – a process that will be heavily managed by communication specialists and advisers – so that their desired effects can be controlled and achieved without causing public damage. When it comes to speechwriting, this may leave many stories off-limits, and make others more attractive: certain topics, particular experiences from political leaders' personal lives, and specific interactions with the public may only be conveyed if and when they can accord with what is deemed to be a reliable and risk-averse performance, and they may only be conveyed in a manner which does not stray too far from the performative norms and expectations that exist for political leaders in such a context.

The inverse is true for the other setting analysed in this thesis: parliamentary debates. While the speeches delivered in this setting may still receive a degree of media exposure – through the BBC parliament channel, news reports, and social media accounts – it is clear that they receive significantly less exposure than conference speeches. Many speeches and debates will receive little coverage when compared to the attention that greets conference season, and as such, they will pass unnoticed for many members of the public. Moreover, the politicians who tell stories in these settings are often of a considerably different status to political leaders, with many of them backbench MPs who are not subject to the same opportunities and risks that come with large degrees of mediated visibility. As such, the stories shared in parliamentary debates will not necessarily have the same influence and reach as those shared in conference speeches. Though this does not mean that certain debates and stories cannot generate significant media attention, they are much less likely to do so.

Despite constraining the potential parliamentary stories might have to influence public debate, this reduced level of exposure does bring certain opportunities, lessening the

risks that come with the double-edged sword of mediated visibility (Thompson, 2005, p.42). The stories shared in this setting do not have to be as carefully selected, scripted, and delivered. They will be shared by politicians who are not as constrained by the same performative expectations and challenges that exist for senior political leaders, and who will be much less vulnerable to the public damage that might be caused if they get their stories wrong. In the absence of a large team of communication specialists and advisers, parliamentary storytellers will also have more freedom to decide the stories that they want to tell, and to write them in a way that they feel is more personally meaningful (though this obviously requires additional labour on their part). The repertoire of topics, experiences, and interactions that parliamentary politicians can draw on and discuss in their stories will thus likely be more expansive and flexible than that of political leaders in the conference speech setting.

4.3.2. Purpose and Audience

Certain constraints and opportunities also exist for political storytellers depending on the purpose of their speeches. What politicians are trying to achieve in the conference speech setting is different to what they are trying to achieve in a parliamentary debate, and they are also communicating to distinctive audiences. This can condition the stories that they choose to tell, as well as the way in which they might tell them. In the conference speech setting, political leaders' broad aims are to communicate their ideas, policies, and values both to the party members that are present, and also to the media and the public. They are engaged in the delicate balancing act of unifying the party faithful, while also establishing a broader public and media support for themselves, their principles, and their policy programmes. In contrast, politicians in parliamentary debates are often making some kind of persuasive appeal, or raising a constituent's issue, in the context of the topic under debate. Their primary audience is their fellow politicians, who they may be encouraging to share their

perspective on a certain policy aspect, and their secondary audiences are the media and the public, who may be watching, reporting on, or reading about the debate.

The repertoire of stories that politicians can draw on across these settings will therefore be influenced by the distinctive purposes and audiences that characterise them. While conference speech storytellers may have increased opportunities to tell stories that enhance party reputation, establish popular appeal, and gain media and public support for certain policy ideas and goals, parliamentary storytellers have the opportunity to tell stories that might more specifically influence policy decisions, sway the opinions of fellow politicians and government ministers, and directly address their constituents' problems.

In the conference speech setting, stories can be told across a range of different topics and issues, whereas the stories told in the parliamentary speech setting will most likely be limited to the issue or topic under debate. Specific incidents and experiences may be related purely to establish the popular appeal of the leader or party in the conference speech setting, while in the parliamentary debate setting, this would likely only be the by-product of a story primarily told to underpin an argument about a particular policy. In this way, we might say that the stories told by politicians in conference speech setting are more obviously examples of performing representation, or of having to deliberately and self-consciously exhibit their representativeness and their relationship with the public.

In contrast, the stories told in parliamentary debates still involve such displays of representativeness and relationship, but they are often not their primary purpose. Instead, their primary purpose tends to revolve around the act of representation understood in a more formal and substantive sense, involving the making policy claims and arguments on behalf of, and for the benefit of, their constituents and the wider public. These different purposes can have consequences for the performances of authenticity in which these stories are involved. Indeed, if the effectiveness and success of performing authenticity in part depends

on a perception that such demonstrations are not overly strategic or self-conscious, then it could be argued that the politicians sharing stories in parliamentary debates have a head start. Because their performances have clear purposes beyond attempting to showcase authenticity and relationship, and because they do not have to necessarily engage in such deliberate and calculated authenticity claims, their intentions and motives are more easily readable as sincere and genuine. In contrast, since a key purpose of conference speech storytelling is for leaders to successfully engage in what are ultimately self-conscious and strategic claims to be authentic and relatable, they face a greater risk of their performances coming across as forced and unnatural. In other words, they face a greater challenge in convincing their audiences to suspend their disbelief, since such audiences are more keenly aware of the premeditated, unspontaneous, and intentional nature of the way such attributes are being performed.

4.4. “The Type of Politician Who People Can Relate To” – Stories and the Representative

Emotion isn't something you often see in the Commons but I've always tried to be the type of politician who people can relate to, even if I can barely stand up when I do, and shake like a pneumatic drill.

Vicky Foxcroft MP (2016) – Why I Spoke About Losing My Newborn Daughter

After MPs had gathered to debate baby loss in October 2016, Vicky Foxcroft suggested that one reason why she told a traumatic personal story about her baby loss experience was because she has “always tried to be the type of politician who people can relate to”. Here, she was highlighting one important way in which stories and anecdotes are used by politicians to perform representation. In both parliamentary debates and conference speeches, politicians told numerous stories about their personal experiences as a way of demonstrating their ordinariness and sensitivity to everyday life. Personal stories were a

means by which politicians attempted to display their authenticity, their cultural representativeness, and their closeness to the public, with emotional and private disclosure a basis for representative claims geared towards cultivating affinity and quasi-intimacy.

In the context of parliamentary debates, this was often done through the revelation of a difficult personal experience related to the issue under discussion. Foxcroft's baby loss story exemplified this:

My baby awareness week is every year from 22 to 27 February, my five days of her being alive. She was never able to cry or to smile, but I loved her and I desperately wanted her. I still love her. She is always in my thoughts – all these years afterwards – even if I do not talk about her all the time. I do not not talk about her because I am embarrassed. I am not. It is because it hurts so much to do so. After Veronica was taken from me, my coping mechanism was to chuck myself into college and work. I could not talk about it; my heart was broken. I do not have children now because I have lived with the fear of the same thing happening again, and I just could not go through it twice.

A similar story of personal difficulty was told by Edinburgh MP Michelle Thomson, who, in a December 2016 debate on violence against women, revealed how she was raped at the age of 14. She spoke of how somebody known to her had offered to walk her home from a youth event, later luring her into a wooded area for what she described as a “mercifully quick” attack. She described how the experience “fundamentally, and fatally, undermined [her] self-esteem, [her] confidence and [her] sense of self-worth”, and how she struggled with the “guilt, anger, fear, sadness and bitterness for years”. The taboo and shock that surrounds the public and private discussion of such issues, she argued, could have profound personal and familial consequences for victims. In her case, she disclosed that she had never told her mother about the attack, and despite wanting to before she died early of

cancer, she could not bring herself to do it. She said this was “possibly cowardly”, but also an “act of love”.

Stories like this invite us to experience representatives not only as technical and ideological managers of our government and political interests, but also as fellow human beings who, like us, are susceptible and deeply affected by the different kinds of suffering that can accompany everyday life. The confession of their innermost feelings and experiences becomes a site for the construction of their relatability and authenticity. The therapeutic qualities of these stories, and the way in which Thomson and Foxcroft confide in such visceral emotional detail about their personal difficulties, is suggestive of a more personal relationship between representative and represented founded upon sincerity, openness, and trust.

It is important to appreciate how such performances also function *beyond* language to display meanings and generate effects. Indeed, while I primarily approach performance in textual terms, I will briefly illustrate how other aspects of performance feed into the telling of personalised stories in politics. Vicky Foxcroft’s demonstration of relatability and authenticity, for example, can be said to be informed by other elements of performance. Specifically, I focus on three others drawn from Rai’s (2014) framework for analysing performance: the body, staging, and performative labour.

The first of these concerns the simple truth that “performance is embodied” (Rai, 2014, p.1183), and that bodily movements carry meaning. As Poggi and Vincze (2009, p.73) put it, “by gestures and other body movements we can summon, promise, exhort, incite, approve, express apology or supplication”, as well as “display emotions (regret, anger, indignation, adoration)”, and “depict or point at objects”. The stories that politicians share are delivered by bodies to other bodies, and aspects like appearance, voice, and gesture all combine to play an important part in their delivery.

In Foxcroft's storytelling performance, what is perhaps most obvious from this angle is the way in which, by her own admission, she shakes "like a pneumatic drill" (Foxcroft, 2016). She is in visible discomfort as she delivers her speech. She is trembling as she holds her papers, and there are audible cracks in her voice as she recounts her experience. The sense that her story is sincere and authentic is underpinned by this seemingly involuntary display of emotional difficulty and pain through her voice and body, which contributes to a sense that this is a true, convincing, and sincere confession of personal difficulty and trauma.

Setting and stage is also important, for as Rai (2014, p.1183) notes, "the body on view does not perform in a vacuum; it does so in space/place/time, which are co-constituted as the performance takes form". The staging of Foxcroft's speech has all the hallmarks of a typical speech in a parliamentary debate. She delivers it in the House of Commons as part of a wider debate. That she is an elected representative, circulating her claims in a parliamentary house, confers a degree of legitimacy to her claims to be acting for those suffering as a result of baby loss.

She waits her turn to speak, and accords with the Speaker's stipulation that speeches last no longer than 10 minutes. In this sense, there is nothing outwardly disruptive about her performance, unlike some parliamentary performances that attempt to draw their effectiveness from deliberately undermining the rules and rituals that might otherwise underpin the legitimacy of such a space and setting (Rai, 2014, p.1187). However, like many emotional performances of personal stories, Foxcroft's demonstration of relatability is premised on the way it successfully challenges and diverges from certain long-standing performative norms that have traditionally governed debate in parliament.

This is a space that has tended to preclude such public displays of vulnerability, as well as the experiential discussion of issues like baby loss. As such, these phenomena have

often remained in the “backstage”, in the private sphere beyond the view of democratic audiences (Goffman, 1959). As Foxcroft (2016) herself states, “emotion isn’t something you often see in the Commons”. Her relatability is in part showcased by a willingness to bring these phenomena into the “frontstage”, engaging in a more personal and emotional mode of performance in a space where it has traditionally not been acceptable or commonplace to do so. This has ramifications not only for Foxcroft’s representative claims, but also for the space and setting in which they are circulated, contributing to a sense that the House of Commons can become a space in which more of these emotional and personal modes of performance are acceptable, legitimate, and sometimes even desirable.

One final element of Foxcroft’s performance to consider beyond the language is performative labour, which captures the “‘striving’, ‘effort’, ‘working’, and ‘toil’” that “goes into performance” (Rai, 2014, p.1185). While this concept alludes to differences that might exist between performers in terms of skills, resources, and background, it also refers to the “human costs” involved before, during, or after performance. I have already discussed how, during her performance, Foxcroft is in visible discomfort. In her media follow-up, she discussed how, before the speech, she “battled with the idea of talking openly about Veronica all week”, and faced the “daunting” prospect of “sharing something so personal and painful” (Foxcroft, 2016).

Clearly, she has engaged in a significant degree of performative labour to ensure her speech is delivered smoothly. She appears to be reading from notes, and she describes the speech as “the hardest speech I have ever had to write” (Foxcroft, 2016). There were significant personal and emotional costs that Foxcroft was met with as she engaged in her performance. But, as she argued in her piece, “it was worth it to shine a light on the lack of support for bereaved parents”. Her authenticity, in this sense, is in part constructed through the obvious performative labour that sharing such a story entails, and her willingness to engage in it. That Foxcroft decides to tell her story for a clear political cause – despite these

difficult emotional and personal challenges – suggests altruism and a lack of self-interest, which in turn contributes to its appearance of sincerity and genuineness.

One particular example – a 2012 debate on mental health – showcased the potential positive effects that these relatable and deeply personal stories could have on how representatives are perceived. In the debate, several MPs told intimate personal accounts of mental health issues. Charles Walker told a self-deprecating story about his experiences with obsessive-compulsive disorder, joking about how he has “been a practising fruitcake for 31 years”. He went on to confess how he operates according to “the rule of four”: “I have to wash my hands four times and I have to go in and out of a room four times”. Continuing to poke fun at himself, he laughed about how his wife and children often tell him that he “resembles an extra from ‘Riverdance’” as he “bounces in and out of a room, switching lights off four times”. Walker’s story was followed by three other intimate personal accounts of mental health issues: Dr Sarah Wollaston talked about her severe depression, and what it is like to “feel that your family would be better off without you”; Andrea Leadsom described her post-natal depression, and how “awful you feel when you are sitting with your tiny baby in your arms and your baby cries and so do you”; and Kevan Jones – unsure of whether his admission would “mean that the possibility of any future ministerial career is blighted forever” – talked openly about his past struggle with a “deep depression”.

A month later in a follow-up interview with Guardian journalist Juliette Jowit (2012), the four MPs divulged that they had received more than 1,000 emails, letters, and phone calls since the debate. They had been thanked by fellow colleagues, anti-stigma campaigners, and mental health charities, but perhaps most saliently, they had been thanked by ordinary citizens and constituents, many of whom had come to their constituency surgeries to show their gratitude and to open up about their own experiences. Kevan Jones spoke in particular of a woman who, having suffered from depression for ten years and alcoholism for seven, told him that “what you have said has given me strength”. There was

an outpouring of journalistic praise for the way MPs had conducted the debate, with one political commentator describing the debate as “a shining moment in the Commons” (Jacobs, 2012).

These stories of emotionally difficult personal experience were the primary way in which parliamentarians demonstrated that they were relatable, and numerous examples could be found in a range of debates, like cancer strategy, mental health, baby loss, dementia, assisted dying, parental bereavement, and violence against women. The apparent success of these representative claims in part has to do with the subject-matter of the debates in which they are told, in which relatable stories of difficult personal experience are encouraged as part of wider attempts to understand the kinds of often psychological and therapeutic impacts the issues entail. The stories that these debates encouraged were well suited to the kinds of emotional and private self-disclosure that, as discussed earlier, can be central to success in establishing authenticity (Montgomery, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Indeed, in such cases, the authenticity of the claims stemmed from the way politicians appeared to share “a truly private thought, no matter how uncomfortable and potentially compromising this disclosure may be” (Papacharissi, 2015, p.109). If, as discussed earlier, authentic political performance requires that politicians appear as though their intentions are good, that their displays are “straightforward, truthful, and sincere”, and that they are “acting without artifice, without undue self-consciousness”, then the prospect that they were taking professional and personal risks in sharing their stories seemed to make it less likely that their performances could be judged as the opposite: “insincere and faked” (Alexander, 2013, p.54). In other words, it appeared unlikely that they would be motivated by any reputational gain that may come from exaggerating or faking such stories, because not only were they immensely private, but they were also potentially embarrassing, damaging, and challenging to share. This, in turn, may have contributed to a sense that their

intentions were selfless and genuine, and in so being, that they were behaving authentically as representatives.

In conference speech storytelling, attempts to perform relatability were considerably different. Political leaders spoke less about difficult personal experiences and more about formative childhood and family experiences. Relatability and ordinariness were cultivated less through therapeutic and emotional language, and more through the recounting of ordinary experiences that implied shared cultural frameworks and values. In David Cameron's 2014 Conservative party speech, for example, he spoke briefly about taking one of his children to school for the first time:

There must be a great education for every child. A month ago I had this wonderful moment. Florence is now 4 and just starting school, so for the first time, all three of my children are at the same primary school. It was such a joy to take them to school together, Florence clinging on for dear life until she saw a new friend and rushed off to her classroom. It's hard to describe what a relief it is as a parent to find a decent school for your child. It shouldn't be a lottery.

A similar story was told by Ed Miliband in his 2013 conference speech:

Justine and I had one of the great privileges in any parent's life this year, which was taking our son Daniel to his first day at school. He was nervous at first, but actually pretty soon he started having fun; it's a bit like being leader of the Labour Party really. Well it's not exactly like being leader of the Labour Party. But look, for so many parents in this country the demands of the daily school run, combined with their job are like their very own daily assault course and we've got to understand that. Because we can't win the race to the top with stressed out parents and family life under strain. We've got to change that

The 'first day at school' trope also featured in Nick Clegg's 2012 conference speech, in an anecdote about knowing "how it feels when you leave your child on their first day at school [...] the last look they give you before the door closes behind them". Likewise, in his 2015 conference speech, Tim Farron talked about how time with his children is his "top priority", so even on the evening of the general election count he got home in the early hours of the morning and got his kids up and ready for school. These stories and anecdotes were told in an attempt to connect with audiences over shared experiences of parenthood. Citizens were invited to identify with politicians as ordinary parents, who, like them, care deeply about their children and want the best for them. This is woven into their political ideas and policy commitments, with David Cameron suggesting that finding a good school "shouldn't be a lottery", and Ed Miliband declaring that "we've got to change" the modern stresses of parents and families. In this way, leaders and citizens – as parents – are said to have common cause when it comes to issues like education. Resemblance here is cultivated through the way in which, despite their extraordinary national job roles, politicians claim to still be rooted in the ordinary, the domestic, and the familial, just like members of the public.

Leaders also demonstrated their relatability by talking about their own experiences of childhood and their relationships with their parents. They often delivered these stories and anecdotes in a way that highlighted aspects of their childhood that were ordinary and humble. In his 2015 conference speech, Tim Farron asked "Why am I a liberal?", and then proceeded to tell a story about his modest upbringings in Preston and his admiration for his Mum. He spoke about how he was brought up "in a terraced house on a main road in the shadow of the gasworks". He mentioned his "very young parents, then divorced parents [...] neither of them with much money" and how his family were "on or below the breadline from time to time". Though he "had a great childhood", he mostly "saw how hard my parents had to work". He joked about his Dad, who worked full-time in the building trade, and how he had "inherited all of his passion for music, and none of his talent". The focus of his story was his

Mum, who, after initially working part-time at a department store and then as a secretary at a local newspaper, went to university and eventually got a PhD and became a lecturer.

These stories tend not only to demonstrate the ordinary upbringings and family experiences of leaders, but also that their political values are somehow underscored by them. Farron's story had a moral and political message, that for most people "success only comes from taking responsibility and making your own luck". These kinds of stories were common. In 2010 and 2011, Ed Miliband would tell stories about how his values were shaped by his brave parents, who fled Nazi persecution and started a new life in Britain. In 2012, David Cameron would speak about how he was influenced by the way his Dad dealt with his disability and maintained a hard-working attitude. In 2013, Nick Clegg spoke about being influenced by his Dutch mother's experiences of war, and his father-in-law's experiences as a mayor in Spain. In 2016, Theresa May mentioned how her parents had instilled in her a strong sense of public duty, and Jeremy Corbyn, in 2017, talked about how his socialism was shaped by his parents who were dedicated peace campaigners.

Leaders also tried to show that they were relatable by telling stories about popular culture. In an anecdote about the 2010 World Cup, David Cameron talked about how "being made to watch the England football team lose 4-1 to Germany in the company of the German chancellor" was "a form of punishment I wouldn't wish on anyone". Leaders also made references to television and film in their stories. In a 2014 conference speech, Ed Miliband told a story about being approached by two young girls while out on a walk, who were disappointed to find that he was not actually the actor Benedict Cumberbatch. Similarly, in his 2015 conference speech, Tim Farron told a humorous story about how he spends his Saturday nights:

But I've got a worse confession, on a Saturday night, I watch X Factor with the kids. It's a terrible programme, but strangely compelling. It is a desperately guilty

pleasure. I have to cleanse myself by listening to Radio 6 for 2 solid hours afterwards.

Farron presents himself as someone who has “guilty pleasures”, and who, like a lot of people, enjoys watching popular television. Later in the speech, he also tells a story about watching the film ‘Cathy Come Home’ at the age of 14:

It’s a film about a young woman whose life gets gradually and brutally torn apart for lack of stable housing. Eviction follows eviction until the council eventually take away her kids. All because they couldn’t find a decent home at a rent they could afford. Now that was 50 years ago but not nearly enough has changed. Cathy Come Home lit a spark in me. It made me angry. It energised me. It made me want to get up and get involved. And so I did, and I haven’t stopped.

Through these stories of popular culture, politicians make the claim that their cultural knowledge, tastes, and interests are ordinary, and in doing so, they aim to cultivate feelings of resemblance with the electorate. Farron goes one step further, and far from just merely demonstrating his knowledge of film and popular culture, he credits watching ‘Cathy Come Home’ as an important inspiration for his own political beliefs and motivations. It “lit a spark” in him, and made him “angry”, making him “want to get up and get involved”.

His story was another example of how, by opening up about their interactions with childhood, family, and popular culture, political leaders attempt to show that their political values are not the stuff of esoteric political philosophy or long-standing party ideology, but are in fact rooted in ordinary experiences of their parents, upbringing, and family life. In this way, they attempt to connect their ordinariness to authenticity. That is, such stories and anecdotes indicate attempts to establish a politician as someone who is relatable, normal, and approachable, but this is also supposed to underscore the genuineness and sincerity of

their intentions, beliefs, and actions as representatives. By drawing on their personal experiences to signify the ways in which they might be like the people that they represent, politicians are also engaging in a broader representative claim about a constancy between their ordinary, private selves, and their public selves. In other words, they imply that they are not, as some might argue, 'only out for themselves', but rather that they are, to a certain extent, motivated by a set of honest, relatable, and ordinary principles drawn from their backgrounds, everyday experiences, personal relationships, and popular culture.

In the performance of political representation, then, personal stories are used by politicians to engage in different kinds of self-disclosure, and this contributes to, but has also been a product of, a performative context in which politicians are expected to cultivate authenticity, ordinariness, and affinity through personal demonstrations. In conference speeches, however, the quality of this self-disclosure appears to be markedly different than in parliamentary debates. Politicians appeared to negotiate their distance between themselves and the public more carefully, neglecting to disclose the kinds of immensely private and emotionally difficult stories discussed in the examples above. One obvious explanation for this may be that at different levels of political seniority, and in different speech-making contexts, there are different expectations and risks associated with performing authenticity, displaying ordinariness, and cultivating quasi-intimacy through stories.

Those in the conference speech setting appeared to police the boundaries between their private and public lives cautiously, and this may be because they felt a need to ensure that any performances of ordinariness and relatability made through stories were not so ordinary or emotionally revealing as to undermine their claims to be extraordinary and authoritative enough to be political leaders. This did not necessarily preclude performative success. Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC news political editor, described how in Tim Farron's 2015 conference speech, which was "peppered with anecdotes from his own childhood", he

“tried, and in the most part succeeded, to combine his brand of Northern charm, with the heft of a serious politician”. However, at times, the personal stories told in this setting appeared generic and forced. The formulaic way in which almost all leaders told stories about their children’s ‘first day at school’ experiences and their parents’ values could at times have represented a barrier to their authenticity. For if, as we discussed earlier, authenticity in part depends on a perception that politicians are sharing truly and uniquely private thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and that they are doing so in ways that do not appear too scripted, self-conscious, or calculating, then it is likely that such stories will miss the mark.

4.5. “A Sympathetic Ear” – Stories and the Representative Relationship

During the local election campaign I did something unusual. I went to town centres, market squares and high streets and I stood on a pallet – not a soapbox, but a pallet. And I talked to people about their lives.

Ed Miliband, *2013 Conference Speech*

If performing relatability is one reason why politicians tell stories about themselves, then demonstrating that they are meeting, interacting, and listening to the public is one reason why they tell stories about citizens. Politicians and political leaders tell stories about their meetings and interactions with us in order to perform a more attentive and empathetic representative relationship, and to show, as Jim Shannon put it in a 2012 mental health debate, that they are “someone who can lend a sympathetic ear” to their citizens and constituents (with empathy being the capacity to understand their citizens’ feelings and experiences, and sympathy being the ability to approach citizens’ suffering and experiences with compassion and pity). Parliamentary stories of meetings and interactions were often grounded in a local context. At times, these stories were without a clear substantive representative function, but were instead dedicated towards highlighting this more

sympathetic and personal representative relationship. Take, for example, the aforementioned story from Jim Shannon:

When a constituent of mine died in a car accident on a Sunday night, I went to her house on the Monday night, and her father just wanted to speak and to talk about his daughter. That is the issue. On many occasions, it is just a matter of having someone to talk to, someone who can lend a sympathetic ear when it is needed most.

Shannon is depicted as someone locally grounded and emotionally available for his constituents, establishing a relationship that we might traditionally associate more with a therapist or a close friend, rather than a representative. He is more than just a political functionary who implements their policies and interests, instead showing how he visits his constituents' houses to comfort them over traumatic personal problems.

A particularly common way that parliamentarians performed this more personally connected representative relationship was by telling personal stories and anecdotes about meetings and interactions at their constituency surgeries. Stories about these surgeries – designated local meetings where constituents can raise issues with their representatives – were often a means of making wider representative claims about constituents who had suffered because of certain government policies:

I want to look briefly at personal independence payment assessments. A lady who came into my surgery on Friday has multiple sclerosis but, because of her age, she will not face an assessment until 2017. She tells me that she wakes up every day with a black cloud of terror over her life. She fears that she will lose the money that allows her to live with some form of dignity. How can we justify that in this place? How can we allow people to live with such terror?

Madeleine Moon, Welfare Reform Disability and Sickness 2014

In addition, since I have been a Member of the House, in my surgeries I have met a significant number of constituents who are suffering, including people whose children have been detained under the *Mental Health Act 1983*. There is one gentleman I will never forget who came to my surgery suicidal because he had lost his job and was at risk of losing his home and the ability to support his family.

Gavin Barwell, Mental Health 2012

By reporting these personal stories of constituents' experiences, representatives engaged in a performance of empathetic listening. This was not listening in the sense of being attuned to the political preferences or policy interests of constituents, but rather directly to their emotional states. Madeleine Moon, for example, talks about her constituents' "cloud of terror", "fear", and "dignity", while Gavin Barwell mentions a gentleman who was "suicidal" and "suffering". This display of empathy and understanding reinforced the primary purpose of these storytelling performances, which was to demonstrate, in an emotionally compelling and authentic way, the difficulties that their constituents were undergoing.

Parliamentarians also showed that they were attuned to their constituents' concerns by discussing and reading aloud their letters. Representatives would often directly quote these letters. One particularly salient example could be found in a debate on an assisted dying bill in 2015, where Paul Flynn read out a letter he received from a constituent, whose story he felt could illuminate his support for the motion:

This gentleman writes: "I have had to watch my dear wife, very old, very much in pain, very weak and desperately wanting peace, but she continued to suffer because I couldn't do the one thing she really wanted. I was helpless to assist her to die. Her words were, 'I don't want to leave you my love, but I'm very tired and I want

to go now. I know you understand. Please help me to die.' [...] Such a simple humanitarian act is just not permitted, so I watched my dear wife starve herself to death for three weeks – the only way she could help herself to die. I watched a lovely lady struggle without food until she grew so weak that she was unable to lift her arms, to even squeeze my fingers [...] I held her close in the days when I could no longer understand her mumbled words. [...] And now for the rest of my life, I will remember the poor wracked body and the once so beautiful face, which became a hollow mask.”

The act of directly quoting a constituents' letter goes beyond a mere demonstration that Flynn is a responsive individual, willing to read and communicate his constituent's letter in a public debate. His willingness to defer to his constituent's emotional account of his suffering also symbolises a sincere relationship grounded in affinity and empathy. This deference is an act that signifies Flynn's awareness, understanding, and respect for the profound ways in which his constituent has been affected by an issue on an affective and experiential level.

In his article about parliamentary storytelling, Frank Field highlighted the importance of telling constituents' personal stories. His view is that the process is central to the act of political representative: "This is one of our many roles as MPs – to bring our constituents' lives to the floor of the House". This process has local repercussions, because "local activists see their work being channelled into parliament and made effective", while citizens "can see that their plight can affect what the House does". For Field, it is one way that parliamentarians can "learn to prioritise the manifold injustices we confront in a way with which as many constituents as possible sympathise". As Field suggests, when an MP tells a moving story about a constituent in parliament, local activists and citizens can see that their work and experiences matter, while onlookers can witness politicians debating injustice in a language with which they can identify (Field, 2017). The potential of these storytelling performances in parliament is that, when convincing, they can generate affinity and

authenticity, making the representative relationship look sincere, locally grounded, and experientially guided, while demonstrating the representative as someone who understands, cares, and empathises with what it is like to be the people that they represent.

In the conference speech setting, like in the parliamentary setting, politicians would commonly draw upon their meetings and interactions with citizens. Ed Miliband, as already discussed, tried to highlight his dedication to listening to and learning from the “millions” of citizens’ stories that represent the “stories of our country”, and he was keen to show that he is the kind of person who is unafraid of spontaneous interactions with citizens on the street. On a couple of occasions, he recounted particularly difficult meetings with citizens, where his authenticity as a representative had been challenged. In 2014, he used the story of Josephine – a woman who he met at his local pub – to directly address the contemporary feeling that politics is distant from everyday experience:

By the way, she thinks politics is rubbish. And let’s not pretend we don’t hear that a lot on the doorsteps. What does she see in politics? She sees drift. She doesn’t think we can solve her problems, and we have to prove her wrong. It’s not just like these people who are struggling with the problems of today and millions of other people.

He also mentioned visiting the house of a constituent when he initially set out on becoming an MP. She was bewildered by the possibility that Miliband could be her local representative despite having very little attachment to her area:

Molly was in her seventies, and there I was candidly trying to get her vote, sitting in her front room sipping a mug of tea. And she said to me, “How can you, who weren’t brought up in this area, possibly understand the lives of people here, their hopes and their struggles?”

His answer lay in the “importance of reaching out and listening to people”. Miliband used personal stories to demonstrate that he was sensitive to contemporary anxieties about representative politics, showing a willingness to engage openly with disaffected citizens who see high-profile politicians as out of touch with their own local understandings of the political world.

This was an attempt to cultivate affinity with those who see it as lacking in representative politics, and part of a wider performative strategy used by senior politicians who “want to depict closeness to the public to show that they are aware of their problems and are listening to ordinary people” (Coleman and Firmstone, 2017, p.269). Indeed, Miliband was not the only politician eager to demonstrate a willingness to meet and interact with the public. In 2011, Nick Clegg was keen to demonstrate that he was responsive to those who had suffered as a result of riots across English cities. He shared two anecdotes about victims he had met on visits to London and Manchester:

I'll never forget the woman I met in Tottenham, who told me the clothes she stood in were all the possessions she had left in the world after her home was torched.

But in every city where trouble broke out, most people did the right thing. So many more people went out to clean up the streets than went out to trash them. In Manchester I met a café owner who boarded up her broken windows and started serving tea and coffee straight away to the people who were helping clear up.

In his 2014 conference speech, Clegg also shared a story about a meeting with a group of young people who had suffered from mental health issues:

Earlier this year I visited a group of young mental health service users to talk about their experiences of the care they received. They sat round in a circle, away from the television cameras, these brave, articulate young men and women, and with astonishing honesty and candour they told me – a complete stranger – all about the things they had been through. The despair, the shame, the bullying, the parents and siblings who didn't know how to cope with them. And for some of them, the very darkest thoughts imaginable, including attempts to take their own lives. And I heard about their recoveries too: their resolve, with the right treatment their determination – some of them just teenagers – to deal with their issues and live full and happy lives. If they can speak out to me, I can speak up for them. This morning I announced that next year, for the first time ever, we will introduce national waiting times for patients with mental health conditions.

Clegg here displays his ability to listen compassionately, openly, and sensitively to the complex emotional and psychological problems of ordinary people. In so doing, he echoes the 'sympathetic ear' mentioned by Jim Shannon at the start of this section, similarly attempting to demonstrate a capacity to engage with citizens in the same personal and emotional way that a therapist or close friend might do. Crucially, his demonstration of an authentic relationship is rooted not only in this capacity for emotional and personal understanding, but also in the claim that he was so deeply affected by the experience that he would "speak up for them" and introduce national waiting times for mental health patients.

At times, then, personal stories were used not only to demonstrate that politicians were tuned into the concerns of ordinary people, and to evidence that they were actively making opportunities to visit and listen to them, but also to show that such interactions play a large part in informing their political actions. Like Clegg, Cameron also did this, recounting how a meeting with a cancer campaigner had inspired action on new drugs:

We've been in office two and a half years now, and we've done some big, life-changing things. Just ask Clive Stone, who you saw in a film earlier. I met him years ago, when we were in opposition. He had cancer and he said to me, "The drug I need, it's out there, but they won't give it to me because it's too expensive. Please, if you get in, do something about it." And we have: a new cancer drugs fund that has got the latest drugs to more than 21,000 people and counting.

In a broader argument about the need to increase mental health spending, Miliband also implied that he had been inspired by a citizen's story. He read out a letter in his 2013 conference speech, describing how the "heart-breaking" experience of a young girl showed why it was necessary to challenge and change government mental health policy:

You know I had a letter a couple of months back from a 17-year-old girl. She was suffering from depression and anxiety and she told me a heart-breaking story about how she had ended up in hospital for 10 weeks [...] here's the thing, the 17-year-old said in that letter, look, if someone had actually identified the problem when it started three years earlier I wouldn't have ended up in hospital. I wouldn't have ended up costing the state thousands of pounds and the anguish that I had. So it's about that early identification and talking about this issue.

What politicians are engaging in here – in the process of attempting to display an authentic and empathetic relationship between themselves and the public – is also a performance of efficacy. That is, they are attempting to display that a "communicative relationship" exists between themselves and citizens, in which they "have some purchase upon the system of representative democracy" (Coleman, 2011, pp.51-2). In the same way that Frank Field suggests parliamentary stories can engender a sense among local constituents and activists that their experiences hold some sway in the legislative process, such conference speech stories implied that the personal experiences of ordinary people had motivated political

action, influenced policy development, and underwritten leaders' intentions. In other words, politicians aimed to show that their claims to be approachable, accessible, and empathetic in their relationship to the public were not just empty or strategic, but that they could in fact be evidenced by the way that they had listened to ordinary stories and taken political action.

Contemporary politics is mired by a lack of political efficacy, and it is easy to see why performing representation through stories, in theory, may help to alleviate some of the common feelings said to underpin this problem: disaffection with inauthentic political language, a sense that government is remote and detached from local and personal experience, and a belief that politicians are self-interested (Coleman et al., 2008). In practice, however, given the strength and perseverance of these feelings, especially as they pertain to mainstream political leaders, the question remains: How likely is it that the public view these storytelling performances as authentic and sincere? One risk is that, by using stories about constituents in overly strategic and self-interested ways, political representatives end up looking cynical, reinforcing the very lack of affinity, authenticity, and efficacy that they have the potential to address.

One particularly salient example was David Cameron's 2015 conference speech. Tensions emerged after the event because citizens felt like their stories were not being told on their own terms. In an attempt to demonstrate a more personal and empathetic representative relationship, Cameron was exposed by media outlets as having misappropriated and embellished constituents' views. Trying to highlight his frustration with racial inequality in the British job market, he delivered an anecdote about one particular citizen's experience:

Do you know that in our country today, even if they have exactly the same qualifications, people with white-sounding names are nearly twice as likely to get call-backs for jobs than people with ethnic-sounding names? This is a true story.

One young black girl had to change her name to Elizabeth before she got any calls to interviews.

BuzzFeed News would later publish an article about the person in question, who was eager to have her own say on the anecdote (Dato, 2015). Not only did she feel like Cameron had got the key details wrong (the woman did not have to change her name, instead using her middle name), but she also felt like he did not represent her. She made the point that "when he speaks", she did not "think he's talking to me" and that she thought this was "true for a lot of people my age and people in my community." She pointed out that she was in fact a supporter of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, arguing that "if anyone is going to make a change, it's going to be Jeremy", and eventually accusing Cameron's communications team of being "lazy" for not reaching out to her.

Cameron concluded the same conference speech with a letter from a man called Bernard Harris:

Bernard Harris from Leicester wrote to me before polling day and said this: "Aged 82, this is possibly my last election. In my life I have foolishly voted Labour, believing it served the working class. How wrong I was. Labour is against all I aspire to. I am 100 per cent for a United Kingdom, a sound economy, free enterprise, a trading Europe and a decent standard of living. Only a Conservative Government will achieve this." Bernard, you found the right party, and I want many more to follow in your footsteps.

An interview with Harris in *The Mirror* confirmed that he was indeed a Conservative party supporter (Smith, 2015). Cameron, however, had missed out one key detail: Harris was not a new convert at all. He had been a Conservative supporter for almost thirty years, converted from Labour by Margaret Thatcher, not Cameron as claimed.

Cameron was already well known for one anecdotal *faux pas* in 2010, where he misreported the story of Neil Forde, a so-called “40-year-old black man from Plymouth” who had “served in the Royal Navy for 30 years” and who was said to be unhappy with current “out of control” immigration policy. Cameron had again got the key details of a story wrong – getting Forde’s age wrong by 11 years, and his time served in the marines by 24 – but crucially Forde himself had suggested that he did not feel represented by Cameron, who he believed had let down the country on immigration policy (Gardham, 2010).

The incentives of performing a more connected representative relationship to the public can encourage politicians to exploit, misrepresent, and overuse stories. As these examples show, a sense among citizens that politicians’ stories are inauthentic, untrue, or merely self-serving do little to ameliorate the representative relationship, instead fostering the “combination of resigned familiarity and cynicism” that often accompanies spurious political talk (Corner, 2003, p.80). To these citizens, having their stories re-told by Cameron engendered a sense that their voice was being appropriated, not authentically represented, prompting a determination to represent themselves on their own terms in media follow-ups. The increasing emphasis on anecdotes in political speech has meant that they are regularly met with scrutiny by journalists, who increasingly approach them as an important test of authenticity, and who are therefore eager to probe into their veracity and persuasiveness (e.g. Alderson et al., 2010; Burkeman, 2010). Particularly in the high-profile context of conference speeches, this makes anecdotal account giving fraught with risk, and incompetent or cynical uses are likely to be exposed as just that.

So, while personal stories speak to a desire for politicians to demonstrate and enact a collaborative, efficacious, and more connected relationship with the people that they represent, it is clear that conference speech storytellers, more so than parliamentarians, face a bigger challenge. They are implicated in a media and political culture in which they face regular mediated challenges to their authenticity, and where the public is more

suspicious and sophisticated in their judgements of their attempts to connect with citizens and demonstrate efficacy. As such, even when leaders get the key details, plotlines, and protagonists of their stories correct, their personal narratives still run the risk of feeling forced and over-scripted to democratic audiences who remain doubtful that high-profile politicians really are the empathetic listeners and personally involved representatives that they claim to be.

4.6. Conclusion

The central premise of this chapter has been that, when telling personal stories about themselves and the public, we do not have to view politicians as somehow always debasing or undermining the proper practice of political representation. The notion that their personal narratives are superfluous or antithetical to representative politics overlooks its aesthetic and stylistic dimensions, which entail that politicians establish a relationship with the public through performances that are personally relatable, rhetorically engaging, and culturally accessible. In claiming that the genre of personalised storytelling plays a part in this process, my aim has not been to suggest that this part is always a positive one. Shifting away from genre determinism entails an acknowledgement that different stories impact upon the representative relationship in different ways. We should not ignore the specious and deceptive impact that some personalised stories might have on the representative relationship, but equally we should not foreclose the possibility that other personal stories and anecdotes might help establish, maintain, and even strengthen that same relationship.

This point, I have argued, is particularly significant when we consider the manner in which contemporary representative politics is constituted. Politicians draw on stories to perform representation in a style of communication that is more affective, ordinary, and experiential, and this has emerged in a political context where their relationship to the public is increasingly recognised, experienced, and evaluated through a personal and emotionally

reflexive lens. I have shown how politicians use personal stories about themselves to establish their cultural representativeness, relatability, and authenticity, and stories about the public to demonstrate an empathetic, compassionate, and efficacious relationship. I have discussed examples that highlight some of the promises and pitfalls performing representation in this way, and some of the challenges and tensions that politicians face when doing so.

Crucially, what this means is that personal stories can allow for, and encourage, the demonstration of qualities that are central to contemporary engagements and disengagements between representatives and represented, like affinity, authenticity, and quasi-intimacy. They are therefore an important culturally situated genre through which representative claims are circulated and interpreted, and through which politicians and the public negotiate the shared feelings, beliefs, and experiences on which their contemporary relationship is based. In this way, the genre of personalised storytelling is far from incompatible with the act of political representation, and instead forms a legitimate part of how politicians and the public come to understand and communicate their vital democratic relationship. In terms of representative politics, then, this might give us good reason to move beyond the genre determinism suggested by the suspicion of stories. But another question remains, this time pertaining to concerns about personal narrative and democratic debate: if politicians are increasingly performing representation through personalised storytelling, then how does this impact upon norms of political debate, deliberation, and expression? It is these concerns that this thesis now addresses.

Chapter 5 – Storytelling, Debate, and Emotional Uses of Rhetoric

5.1. Introduction

Writing about the impact of ‘therapy culture’ on democratic life, Frank Furedi (2004, pp.58-60) bemoaned the way politicians had become engaged in a “politics of the confessional”:

Politicians have sought to adopt a therapeutic style in order to connect with the mood of the times. Politicians vent their private feelings and inform their public about their personal problems and their dysfunctions. From the standpoint of the politics of the confessional, what matters most is how you feel rather than what you stand for. Therapeutic politics eschews matters of policy and principle and attempts to establish a point of contact in the domain of the emotion with an otherwise estranged electorate [...] What counts are the public gestures of being down to earth, warm and emotional rather than the quality of ideas, strategic thought or leadership. The ability to forge an emotional bond with the public has become the principal virtue of therapeutic politics.

For Furedi (2004, p.40), “individual emotions and experience have acquired an unprecedented significance in public life”, and this has had a decidedly negative effect on political expression. His criticism provides us with an unsparing but not uncommon view of what former Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2017, p.5) labelled the “touchy-feely era”, a changed political culture in which “leaders speak of public issues in intensely personal ways”. In his memoir, Brown (2017) would cite his struggles to adapt to this culture as a major stumbling block for his political career. Where other politicians would “freely broadcast what they claimed to be their deepest feelings”, he eschewed the emotional and the therapeutic, sharing an outlook more in line with Furedi’s (2004) ideal of a private, reserved, and quietly dedicated politician: “What mattered, I thought, was how others might benefit

from what I did for them as an active politician – not what I claimed to feel” (Brown, 2017, p.5). “My failure was not so much a resistance to letting the public in”, Brown (2017, p.5) suggested, but “it was resisting the pressure to cultivate an image that made the personal constantly public. Reticence was the rule”. This changed when his daughter died just days after her birth, and his “private emotions were thrust front and centre into the public arena” (Brown, 2017, p.5). The experience encouraged him to reflect on how he had been brought up: “to contain, even suppress, my inner feelings in public, and to view the expression of them as self-indulgence”. “That kind of self-restraint”, he argued, “may now be a barrier in politics” (Brown, 2017, p.5).

A major indicator of this more ‘therapeutic’ and ‘touchy-feely’ mode of political expression, as put forward in the last chapter, is the way personalised storytelling has become increasingly prominent in the contemporary performance of political representation. Storytelling is the domain of the confessional and the personal, and it represents one of the primary genres through which this more emotional and experiential style of politics is being conveyed. Whether telling stories about themselves or their constituents, politicians’ narratives give public voice to personal problems and private feelings, persuading “through their appeal to emotion rather than reason, through an affective identification that supersedes logic and evidence” (Polletta, 2006, p.82). It is this displacement of rationality that has long troubled deliberative scholars, and that critics of therapy rhetoric see as dangerous (Rieff, 1966; Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998). Stories take us into Furedi’s (2004, p.60) “domain of emotion”, where “gestures of being down to earth, warm and emotional” are said to eclipse “quality of ideas”, “strategic thought”, and “leadership”.

One rejoinder to such criticisms is the claim, made in the last chapter, that personal stories form an important part of the contemporary aesthetic character of political representation. Yet, many scholars of deliberation and therapy rhetoric express a wider concern, pertaining to more than just the question of how politicians and the public relate to

each other. In their view, the illegitimacy of personalised storytelling emerges less from the danger of spurious and deceptive connections between representative and represented, and more on the problematic status of the personal story as a form of political knowledge, a mode of public debate, and a type of argument. In other words, even if politicians and the public might be establishing, negotiating, and experiencing their relationship through personal stories, there still remains the question of whether this process strengthens or undermines the manner in which political views are exchanged, differences are negotiated, and people become persuaded about political issues.

For such critics, the growth of personalised storytelling is part of a wider process whereby the intelligent discussions of ideas, policies, and facts have been supplanted by a new rhetoric of emotionality, whereby politicians are increasingly likely to discuss issues in personal terms. By appealing to the emotions, stories put *pathos* ahead of *logos*, and in so doing, they are said to undermine the democratic practices of debate and deliberation. Genre determinism is once again invoked, here by the way personalised storytelling, as a therapeutic and emotional use of rhetoric, is said to preclude judicious and insightful collective public debate. But should we really fear the emotional and experiential modes of argument engendered through politicians' personal narratives? In this chapter, I focus on the democratic potential that is overlooked when we answer such a question with a 'yes'.

Those that disparage such affective and experiential modes of argument tend to operate from a limited conception of political rhetoric, and mistakenly assume a heyday of rational and unsentimental debate when politicians would supposedly endeavour to keep feelings and emotions out of political discourse. Such critiques rest on a presumed separation between reason and emotion, one that attempts to cordon off the affective from the political. As discussed in Chapter 2, this distinction is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. While the fields of neuroscience and political psychology have demonstrated the complementary ways in which emotion enables reason (Damasio, 1994; Marcus, 2002), so

too have scholars documented the centrality of emotion to democratic politics (Samuels, 1993; Hoggett, 2009; Coleman, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Unlike proponents of a 'rational' politics, who see emotion and personal experience as extraneous to political life, this research effort has sought to establish the myriad ways in which these phenomena are both constitutive of and constituted by it.

In this chapter, I elaborate on this understanding of emotion. I explore in more detail the common criticisms made of politicians who engage in therapeutic and emotional rhetoric. These criticisms, I argue, hold politicians to an ideal that is both unrealisable and undesirable, one that ignores that emotion and experience are valuable and important dimensions of democratic politics. In so being, I suggest that they warrant genres of expression through which politicians can discuss, mediate, and express them. Personalised storytelling, I argue, can be one such genre. By analysing a variety of examples told in conference speeches and parliamentary debates, I suggest that politicians' stories function as *affective rhetorical strategies* (Martin, 2013; 2016), which establish their arguments on the basis of empathy, compassion, and emotional identification. Stories are used by politicians to access what they would often term 'the human side' of debate. This mode of social description has a local, grounded, and embodied logic that proceeds on the basis that the 'personal is political', offering accounts of political phenomena that could be complementary (not contradictory) to the more systematic, generalisable, and rational logic of quantified and statistical debate.

These stories at times courted "trouble" (Tilley, 1999), humanising, simplifying, and emotionalising issues in ways that meant their ability to engender compassion and intimacy was not always a positive force for democratic debate. Though I argue that personalised storytelling should be considered a legitimate part of contemporary political debate, my point is not to suggest that all uses of personal stories are productive. Such examples show why we might want to heed some of the criticisms that highlight their rhetorical shortcomings.

However, at their most effective, they held out the promise of a more intimate mode of publicness (Berlant, 2008). Empathy and compassion were at times used to encourage public forms of recognition, solidarity, and intimacy, and to generate hitherto unrealised connections between politicians, people, and issues that were rooted in sentimental expression, everyday experiences, and identification. These important rhetorical functions, I suggest, give us reason to rethink how we conceptualise the emotional uses of politicians' personal stories, and more broadly, how we situate their impact on the changing character of contemporary political debate.

5.2. Stories, Emotional Politicians, and “Therapy Rhetoric”

Critics of therapeutic and emotional rhetoric see the growing influence of the private and emotional on politicians' discourse as a danger for the political process (Rieff, 1966; Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2004). These claims often revolve around three commonly articulated fears. First is the claim discussed in Chapter 2, that emotional discourse is said to be *irrational*, overriding the calm and reasoned debate of political issues with the uncontrollable and dangerous influences of affect and emotion. Second, emotional discourse is said to be *individualising*, highlighting personal experiences, individual psychology, and people's agency ahead of the wider, systemic, and structural factors that may underlie a political issue. Third, emotional discourse is said to be *irresponsible*, with politicians expected to model reticence and civility when enacting their roles as political leaders, strategic thinkers, and official representatives.

These critiques allude to a supposed former zenith of political conduct, in which politicians respected the qualities of formality, reticence, and social distance. They were reserved, rational, and civil, and in so being were able to govern effectively, focusing primarily on their political programmes and leadership qualities. The guiding principle, as Sennett (1972, p.270) put it, was that “you need to know nothing about my private life; all

you need to know is what I believe and the programs I'll enact". Now the value placed on these qualities by politicians and society more broadly has changed. Formality, reticence, and social distance have paved way to informality (Wouters, 2007), emotionalism, and confessionalism (Illouz, 2003). With this increased emphasis placed on the personal and the emotional, critics point to the rise in a "so-called emotivist ethic that privileges felt experience above reasoned analysis" and "subjectivist epistemologies that prioritize meaning and the contextual and relativist framing of such meaning" (Hoggett, 2009, p.48).

This, they argue, has fundamentally altered the nature of Western political discourse. In this changed rhetorical culture, Nolan (1998, p.279) argues that "the source of legitimation to which politicians appeal is the therapeutic ethos". Politicians are now said to be increasingly preoccupied with a "rhetoric of therapy" (Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998), a mode of persuasion in which socio-political issues are discussed predominantly through psychotherapeutic discourses of personal suffering, development, coping, and healing. What makes this rhetoric particularly pernicious, in Cloud's (1992, p.1) eyes, is "its focus on the personal life of the individual as locus of both problem and responsibility for change". For Cloud (1992, p.3), the rhetoric of therapy functions to preserve the status quo and already existing power relations by turning social and political problems inward and away from their systemic causes:

The most important rhetorical feature of the therapeutic is its tendency to encourage citizens to perceive political issues, conflict, and inequalities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration. Therapy offers consolation rather than compensation, individual adaptation rather than social change, and an experience of politics that is impoverished in its isolation from structural critique and collective action.

Therapeutic rhetoric, therefore, becomes a form of social and political control, stunting political change and reifying existing power structures. Personalised storytelling is said to be one of the primary vehicles for this process, and Nolan's (1998, p.274) analysis of US presidential rhetoric highlights several examples where important political figures engaged in therapeutic claims-making through narratives of personal experience, by "looking within, rather than by appealing to some external authority". Bill Clinton, for example, features heavily, with Nolan (1998, pp.274-5) outlining cases when he discussed drug addiction in terms of his own brother's experiences as a recovering addict, or when he talked about adoption in terms of the woman he met "that was holding the AIDs baby she adopted in Cedar Rapids" and "who asked him to do more on adoption".

Fernandes (2017) has similarly emphasised how stories are complicit in this process. Her primary concern is that the "contemporary boom of storytelling in legislative campaigns, cultural diplomacy, and advocacy" has led to "a shift in emphasis away from the collective and political modes of narration towards the personal mode" (Fernandes, 2017, p.6). Because personal stories deal primarily with the relating of authentic human experience, and therefore tend to describe problems as they affect people on an individual level, Fernandes' (2017, pp.36-7) belief is that "disembedded from their contexts and as the relating of isolated personal experiences", stories have "facilitated an individualizing of collective struggles" and "valorized experience above structure, falling prey to a relativist dogma that each person's truth is as valid as another".

Instead of encouraging critiques of broader power structures, Fernandes (2017, p.17) suggests that personal storytelling prompts people to view issues in terms of the individual. Identifying and solving problems is said to become less about developing a collective or class-based opposition that can address an underlying set of economic, social, or political circumstances, and more about attaining personal catharsis, healing, or restitution through the voicing and acknowledgement of personal testimony. Emotional discourses prioritising

authenticity, therapy, and self-development are therefore seen as unwelcome distractions from a more ideological discussion of wider systemic issues and their collective political consequences.

5.3. The Importance of Letting Emotions In

Such criticisms imply that emotional politicians should refrain from discussions of experience and emotion when discussing political issues, but is it really this problematic when they do so? Given that emotions and experience exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with socio-political life, surely it would be *more* problematic for politicians to ignore this reality, and to treat emotions as superfluous to political argument. Warner (2015, p.90) has argued that talking about emotions is essential to the role of political representative, using the term “emotional-interest representation” to describe how politicians, “as well as generating emotions”, also “act as envoys for feelings that are already circulating within their local constituencies”. Part of what politicians do, in her eyes, is seek redress for emotional experiences – be it anger, injustice, stress, anxiety, and so forth – on behalf of their local constituents. Telling stories about constituents’ personal experiences and emotions can be considered a part of this process, with the genre lending itself particularly well to the discussion of how political phenomena might be making constituents feel.

Moreover, given that successful and effective political communication is increasingly dependent on politicians who “can attach credible symbols to pervasive feelings” (Coleman, 2015b, p.185), there is reason to believe that emotional and experiential discourse is in fact what citizens are most engaged by. If this is the case, politicians who overlook these qualities in their rhetoric may well alienate, not ameliorate, the public. The argument here is that politics suffers not when it involves the therapeutic, the experiential, and the emotional, but actually when it fails to acknowledge it and to incorporate it into discourse. Richards

(2004, p.340), for example, has used the term “emotionalization” to describe cultural changes which have significantly altered the context for political communication, and which now mean that citizens “seek certain kinds of emotionalized experience from politics that we have not done in the past”. Though he argues that this has always been the case, what is distinctive about the current kinds of emotionalised experiences that citizens now seek is that they are therapeutic in nature. These experiences are less about a “carnavalesque festival of pure expression or catharsis”, and more about a reflective and open acknowledgement, management, and contemplation of feelings (Richards, 2004, p.342).

Richards (2004, p.343) sees evidence for this in the growth of the counselling and the therapeutic professions; the increased focus in the media and society on self-help, lifestyle change, and personal development; and in popular culture, particularly broadcast television, where there has been a swelling in popularity for “emotion-led programming with an emphasis on personal, affective experience, on identity and relationships”, like soaps, reality TV, and chat shows.

As Yates (2019, p.346) has argued, this emotionalisation also has a clear gendered dimension, in which the “‘feminisation’ of political culture” has led to a “breakdown of the old cultural binaries of gender that traditionally shape the representation of politicians and their policies”. Though there remain considerable gendered divisions concerning what emotions are acceptable for politicians to exhibit and discuss, and how they are expected to do so, this process has allowed for “a greater plurality of expression” in political communication, “allowing new voices to emerge and foregrounding emotional concerns hitherto associated with the private, feminised sphere of emotional expression” (Yates, 2019, p.346).

Where a longer tradition of feminist research has uncovered the myriad ways in which the personal *is* political, claims about the feminisation of political culture – and its attendant opportunities and constraints – are part of a more recent effort to explain the

changing ways in which politics *is* personal (Ahmed, 2004; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2016; Yates, 2019). The emotional personal stories that politicians share can be said to have emerged from, but also contributed to, these gendered developments in political culture, and it is therefore unsurprising that such stories often concern events and issues that may have traditionally been associated with the private and feminised sphere of emotional discussion that Yates (2019) describes, such as violence against women, baby loss, and mental health.

Despite these changes, for Richards (2004), where therapeutic discourse is perhaps most lacking or least sophisticated is politics. One can discern in politics “a growing disinterest in or distaste for politics” which is “in part a function of an emotional deficit in political communications” and the “failure of these communications to satisfy the contemporary taste for certain kinds of affective experience” (Richards, 2004, p.340). Here, the threat to democracy and the public sphere is not the intrusion of the therapeutic on public discourse, but the lack thereof. While emotional appeals are commonplace and “crafted to ‘pull the heart strings’”, what is missing in politics is a “sophisticated discourse of emotionality”, a sufficiently reflexive, authentic, and directed “understanding of emotion or affect and its place in everyday life” (Richards, 2004, pp.345-6).

Similarly, as Coleman (2015b, p.184) puts it, there is damage done to the public sphere when “the animating force of affect is regarded as a distraction” and “when there is a conscious effort to create a disjuncture between the diffuse energies and porous spaces of popular culture and the instrumental work of making decisions that affect the public”. Democracy “can only flourish when decision-makers breathe the same air and speak the same language as the people that they claim to represent” (Coleman, 2015b, p.184). Yet, when the public sphere is “governed by an ethos of instrumental rationality that celebrates the analytical and eschews the pre-cognitive”, it becomes “increasingly at odds with

quotidian sociability” (Coleman, 2015b, pp.185-6). In this way, it moves further away from its normative conception as a sphere of popular inclusion.

This has political consequences. Those that decry the irresponsibility of emotional and therapeutic rhetoric often invoke the exclusionary standards of deliberative argument famously critiqued by Young (1996; 2000). These standards privilege speech “which is dispassionate and disembodied”, presupposing “an opposition between reason and emotion”, and wrongly equating “objectivity with calm and the absence of emotional expression” (Young, 2000, pp.39-40). In her view, the “privileging of allegedly dispassionate speech styles” can exclude a speech culture that is “more excited and embodied”, and which “values more the expression of emotion, uses figurative language, modulates tones of voice, and gestures widely” (Young, 2000, pp.39-40). Those who do not have the expertise or cultural repertoire to access the public sphere through such a privileged speech style end up excluded.

This standard of discourse leaves little room for the kinds of emotional and personal claims made through politicians’ stories. As Martin (2013b, p.111) has argued, most deliberative theorists:

explicitly reject rhetoric. By ‘rhetoric’ they tend to mean direct appeals to emotion or personal authority; what classical rhetoricians termed *pathos* and *ethos* respectively. Efforts to change the preferences of others in the process of deliberation must appeal solely to reason, or *logos*.

Given, as discussed, stories and anecdotes primarily make their arguments on the basis of *ethos* and *pathos*, they eschew the more systematic and scientific evidence favoured by such theorists, instead engendering claims based on emotional identifications with individual characters.

A number of concerns have therefore been raised about the evidentiary status of storytelling in political deliberation (Dryzek, 2000; Miller, 2002; see also Polletta and Lee, 2006, p.702). There are concerns that stories cannot tell us how representative or generalisable a particular experience is, and that their relationship to political policy is often vague and difficult to discern. There are also concerns that the individual and personal nature of stories can sometimes occlude the universal standards, principles, and reasons that scholars see as central to moving deliberation forward. Dryzek (2000, p.69) has gone as far to suggest that powerfully emotional stories, which move people not by appealing to a universal standard, but “precisely because they involve gross violation of more general standards of human dignity”, are “likely only to perpetuate cycles of revenge”.

In such accounts, stories have a very limited role to play in political debate, and should be excluded when they cannot adequately connect the particular to the general, when their emotional force renders them compelling, and when they cannot appeal to more general categories and principles. In contrast, Young (1996, p.132) has argued that storytelling, although traditionally seen as beyond the bounds of formal deliberation, can help foster more understanding and inclusion in the public sphere: “everyone has stories to tell, with different styles and meaning, and because each can tell her history with equal authority”. The legitimacy of storytelling, in such a reading, stems not from its ability to appeal to universal standards, but to show precisely how those supposedly general and principles might be problematic and exclusive (Young, 2000). Disadvantaged groups can “gain an empathetic hearing for experiences and values that are unlike those of the majority”, and this is done “by showing how particular experiences elude categories that are supposed to be universal” (Polletta and Lee, 2006, p.702).

At a wider level, these restrictive standards of rational and dispassionate political rhetoric are “rather unrealistic, perhaps even utopian” when applied to discussions about

“‘real-world’ situations”, contextualised as they are by “sectoral interests, partisan loyalties, ‘situated’ knowledge and local forms of expression, compromises and intense disagreement” (Martin, 2013b, p.113). Rather than seek to eliminate and downplay these aspects from political discourse, proponents of a rhetorical approach encourage us to acknowledge them as necessary and important aspects of democratic communication. Emotional and personal involvement, contestation, and strategies of persuasion do not work against democratic debate, but are in fact inevitable dimensions of a politicised public sphere. To stress anything otherwise, like proponents of rationalist political public argument do, is to:

remove communication from the world of controversy, passionate disagreement, intense attachments to principle and the weight of personal experience – all dimensions that contribute to regular kinds of argument and strategies of persuasion (Martin, 2013b, p.113).

Martin (2016, p.472) offers us an important means by which we can conceptualise more emotive and affective styles of political argument, coining the term “affective rhetorical strategies”:

Far from being a pernicious force that blocks or interrupts the flow of transparent communication, emotions are productive of subjectivity, inciting citizens’ attention and allegiance to particular issues and ideals and, in so doing, shaping the spaces of democratic engagement [...] emotions help situate subjects in relation to their world, orienting them towards its objects with degrees of proximity and urgency, sympathy and concern, aversion or hostility. These orientations are never fixed or complete but part of ongoing practices of contestation and negotiation whose point of mediation is often rhetorical dispute.

Instead of downplaying these strategies, Martin (2013b, p.118) suggests that a democracy concerned with public argument should endorse them: “a rhetorical democracy – that is, a democracy inclined to endorse rhetorical engagement – is one that recognises and enhances the prospects for affective strategies to unfold”. So long as we desire an inclusive, vibrant, and popular public sphere – one that acknowledges the important place of emotion and experience in everyday political life – we must carve out a space for the therapeutic and personal uses of storytelling in political rhetoric.

5.4. Politicians’ Stories as Affective Rhetorical Strategies

What, then, is particularly distinctive about personalised storytelling as an affective rhetorical strategy, and how do politicians seek to persuade audiences via stories in their conference speeches and parliamentary debates? The rest of this chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the particular rhetorical affordances of this more experiential, therapeutic, and emotional mode of claims-making. If the purpose of an affective rhetorical strategy is to generate emotion and affect as the primary means of positioning an audience vis-à-vis a particular political phenomenon, then what is unique about the way politicians use personal stories and anecdotes to do this?

Many of the stories that politicians told involved citizens who had endured negative experiences as a result of particular policies and systems. A particularly instructive example of this came in a 2010 conference speech delivered by Caroline Lucas:

They invest in the NHS, but then waste so much on bureaucracy and form-filling and targets and above all on discredited PFI projects. And all these things have a very immediate and direct impact on people's lives. Take Jack Watson, a retired postman who has had 2 heart attacks, one of which nearly killed him. He has severe arthritis, has to lie down in pain most of the day and suffers from Meniere's Disease.

Nonetheless, doctors working for the privatised agency that carries out medical assessments on ESA claimants declared that he was fit for work. After a massive campaign Jack's case went to Tribunal and he won hands down, but should he really have had to go through all that?

Here, we are invited to identify with Jack Watson's experiences with an outsourced work capability assessment. That he was found fit to work, despite having severe arthritis and Meniere's Disease, is used to exemplify Lucas' concerns about a target-oriented and overly bureaucratic health system. But instead of appealing directly to political values, principles, or quantifiable evidence, she asks us to consider one example of the "very immediate and direct impact on people's lives" that such a system can have. Watson's pain and suffering, and the subsequent difficulties of his tribunal process, thus become the focal point of Lucas' claims.

This kind of argument was also common in the parliamentary setting, with a similar example evident in a story told by Barbara Keeley in a 2016 social care debate:

The Richmond Group of Charities published the story of Susan. She cares for her husband Bruce, who has been diagnosed with both Parkinson's and dementia. The struggle that Susan underwent to find quality care is one about which I have been hearing from carers for some time. She was provided with respite care from a care home which was of such low quality that her husband was unrecognisable when she returned for him: "He hadn't been shaved, he couldn't walk, and his eyes were crusted with blepharitis." When Susan managed to get home care for her husband, it was also poor quality. She said, "They didn't know what they were doing. It seemed like they'd never cared before. They turned up at five o'clock in the afternoon to put my husband to bed. Or they turned up at ten, once I'd already helped him to bed. Absolutely awful." It is also telling how carers like Susan feel when dealing with the

challenges of negotiating complex and fragmented care systems. She “felt small” and she said, “you go in there, and you’ve got no idea about anything, about care. It’s like going in on the first day at school.”

Like Lucas, Keeley also uses a story of a citizen’s experience to make claims about a problematic political system. In this example, Susan’s story is put forward as an indicator of a social care system that is facing challenges. We are encouraged to empathise with her distressing experience – of having a husband who looked “unrecognisable” after low quality care, and of having “felt small” in her encounters with care services – and to see it as a wider exemplar of how people “feel when dealing with the challenges of negotiating complex and fragmented care systems”.

What distinguishes these stories as affective rhetorical strategies is that they represent attempts to elicit empathy and compassion. Rather than encouraging an audience to accept arguments about political policies and systems on the basis of ideological principles or generalisable evidence, they instead do so by encouraging audiences to imagine what it would be like to experience them. Personal storytelling is unique for its ability to make otherwise disparate everyday encounters shareable and emotionally relatable, encouraging us to identify with the actions, feelings, and experiences of other people. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p.77) has argued, this is what makes it particularly effective at generating compassion:

Tales of personal experience have the capacity to generate compassion because they dramatize the large and small events that unfold around us by linking them to tales of emotions that others can understand, whether they be ones of pain, fear, happiness or love. [...] [Personalised storytelling] allows us to enlarge our worldviews, looking beyond our own narrow self-interest and towards the experience of others, even if they may be very different from us.

In these cases, we can begin to problematise the notion that emotional personal stories necessarily lead to the depoliticisation of phenomena. Both Lucas and Keely's stories, beyond evoking emotion for emotion's sake, had clear rhetorical and political functions: they represented public attempts to generate compassion and empathy that sought "to harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world" (Berlant, 2008, p.12).

5.5. The 'Trouble' with Stories

Stories were also told in order to defend and preserve existing political structures. In his 2013 conference speech, David Cameron presented a good example of how stories and anecdotes can be mobilised in defence of policies and programmes. He told a story about meeting a young couple:

Well for most young people today, their home is their landlord's. Generation Y is starting to become Generation 'Why Do We Bother?', millions of them stuck renting when they're desperate to buy. I met a couple on Sunday, Emily and James. They'd both had decent jobs, but because they didn't have rich parents, they couldn't get a big enough deposit to buy a house. And let me tell you where I met them. In their new home, bought with our Help to Buy mortgage scheme. It was still half built, but they showed me where the kitchen would be. Outside there was rubble all over the ground, but they'd already bought a lawnmower. And they talked about how excited they were to be spending a first Christmas in a home of their own.

Acting as an exemplar for the success of the Help to Buy mortgage scheme introduced by his party, the story is supposed to embody the economic justice effected by the policy. Now, the story goes, you do not have to "have rich parents" to "get a big enough deposit to buy a house". The argument rests on an emotional identification with Emily and James: their early

preparations for their half-built and hard-earned first home, their excitement over their first Christmas in it, and the sense that this all would not have been possible without the government's scheme.

A story like this provides an insight into the positive emotional and personal experience of benefitting from the government's Help to Buy scheme, but alone it cannot establish whether that experience is particularly common or widespread. Is there not a danger that Emily and James are the exception, not the rule? Here we encounter one of the common criticisms of therapeutic rhetoric and personalised storytelling, regarding the way issues can become individualised and relativised in ways that obstruct our ability to systematically understand and address their more general and complex political causes and effects.

A 2014 debate on welfare reform for the sick and disabled provided an important insight into this problem. Competing stories and anecdotes were delivered by those who both supported and opposed the government's record. The Labour MP Ian Lavery was critical of the government's reform, drawing on a conversation with a lady he had met on the morning of the debate:

Over the past couple of years or so, my surgeries, like those of most Members present, have been visited by lots and lots of disabled people who want to discuss the benefits system. The reality is that many disabled people have given up. A lady said to me this morning, "Mr Lavery, do you understand what it's like to be treated like an animal?" That rocked me. Why are disabled people being made to feel as if they are being herded into a corner and treated like animals?

Conservative MP George Hollingbery delivered a rather different set of stories and anecdotes, presenting a more optimistic view of the government's reforms. He told four

stories about his local constituents, who had particularly benefitted from their interactions with companies involved in the reforms. One example looked like this:

Alex, aged 20, was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and found it almost impossible to settle down to any kind of work. Alex's relationship with Harsco, a large building services company, was crucial in enabling Alex to train for a certificate under the construction skills certification scheme, and to become a scaffolder. Alex said: "I felt like nobody would ever employ me. I didn't even know what I was doing wrong. It is the kind of job that sets you up for life and I love it. If I look at how my life has changed in the last year I can't believe it."

For Hollingbery, these success stories highlighted that the government's welfare reforms were working: "the evidence that I see on my visits suggests that many of our fellow citizens are being given a new lease of life by the Government's approach to welfare". As affective rhetorical strategies, these stories attempt to engender a strong identification with people for whom welfare reform has been both beneficial and detrimental. On the one hand, we are invited to empathise with the disabled woman who feels like she has been "treated like an animal" by the government, and to see this as an extension of problematic policies. On the other hand, we are then invited to share Alex's positive experiences of finding rewarding work despite his difficulties with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and to view this as an extension of effective government welfare reform.

These empathetic stories thus have the potential to leave one oriented towards this issue in conflicting, almost irreconcilable emotional and affective ways, with the difficult task of establishing whose personal experience is most important politically. In this way, we encounter some of the "contradictions that are deliberately or inevitably animated by politically motivated deployments of sentimental rhetoric" (Berlant, 2008, p.80). There is thus a sense that these stories can only take us so far, and that other forms of knowledge are needed to further explore this question. Both stories invoke important moral and ideological

dimensions of the policy, allowing audiences to identify with how private, outsourced work assessment processes might affect welfare claimants on an experiential level. Yet, the trade-off for this is a rather simplistic picture of what exactly underlies these experiences, or how common they might be. How many people are like Alex, and how many people are like the woman in Ian Lavery's story? Was there such a clear and direct link between the policy and their experiences? What were the complex aspects of the policy that made their experiences so, and how do these experiences compare to others?

This explains why we might want to heed some of the criticisms made of personalised storytelling by scholars of deliberation and therapy rhetoric. The sometimes vague, simplistic, and contradictory relationship between stories and policy related claims can mean that they would be better supplemented by other forms of argument, that would help to provide more evaluative, technical, and critical insights into the issue at hand. That is not to suggest that *logos* could settle these contradictions definitively, but rather that it might help to negotiate the kinds of emotional relativism evoked through personal stories, and offer an alternative means of weighing up and assessing conflicting testimonies like Hollingbery and Lavery's. However, these contradictions are, to a certain extent, an inevitable part of political debate, and rather than signalling anything necessarily deceptive or manipulative on the part of these tellers, they are indicative of the subjective, contestable, and non-finalisable nature of political argument that was explored in Chapter 2. That emotional stories mobilise these contradictions more readily should not be a reason to evacuate them from the public sphere, but rather to ask how this might be to the benefit and detriment of political debate.

This means being sensitive to how, as Charles Tilly (1999; 2006) has argued, when it comes to social description, there can be a certain 'trouble' with stories. Social and political issues are laden with complex systemic cause and effect relations, which transpire across multiple different contexts, simultaneously influencing and enacted by multiple different social and political actors. Stories can oversimplify these issues, for the way in which they

“single out a small number of actors, actions, causes, and effects for easy understanding” (Tilly, 2006, p.65).

Such trouble may be exacerbated by sheer accident or incompetence, but the most pernicious uses of personal stories emerge when this trouble is deliberately exploited. When Nigel Farage arrived late for a ‘meet the leader’ UKIP event in 2014, he clarified his late arrival was due to traffic. Explaining that it took him 6 hours to arrive, rather than 4, he described how:

That has nothing to do with professionalism. What it does have to do with is a country in which the population is going through the roof, chiefly because of open-door immigration, and the fact the M4 is not as navigable as it used to be.

Similarly on the topic of immigration, in her 2011 conference speech as Home Secretary, Theresa May was accused of plagiarising an anecdote from Farage. Claiming that “we all know the stories about the Human Rights Act”, she related an anecdote about an “illegal immigrant who cannot be deported because, and I am not making this up, he had a pet cat”. It did not take long for the Judicial Office at the Royal Courts of Justice to confirm, unsurprisingly, that the cat in fact had had nothing to do with its decision.

In both cases, stories were being used not to promote insight or understanding, but rather to oversimplify and deceive on the complex issues of immigration and human rights. Far from seeking to mitigate the trouble with stories, here were examples of how it could be deliberately brought into play to circulate dubious and misleading claims. The prospect that this trouble can be exacerbated, however, does not mean that it regularly is. And, where critics of therapy and emotional rhetoric see it as reason to dismiss personalised stories from public argument, Tilly (2008, p.21) argues that it should be seen as an intrinsic part of

storytelling's explanatory power for moral evaluation. Simplification is a necessary trade-off that makes "processes become available for the telling" in persuasive and empathetic ways.

5.6. Stories and Statistics: The 'Human Side' of Politics

While this suggests that we certainly do not want politicians to tell personal stories all the time, it also implies that they have an important place in public argument. In many parliamentary debates, MPs referred to the need to supplement more rationalistic modes of debate – like statistical and critical argumentation – with a 'human side'. In a debate on cancer strategy, for example, Karen Lee introduced her speech by making this very point: "most of the speakers today will talk about the facts, figures and statistics, but I will talk about the impact of cancer on people behind the statistics". At times, MPs would even be criticised for overlooking the personal. In a debate on welfare reform, Ian Murray criticised George Hollingbery for "giving a very technical analysis", referring him to a Facebook page of human stories where he could "get some of the human side, because it is not just about a technical analysis of how these things work". In a 2013 debate on food banks, Jessica Morden prefaced a story about two young boys with a similar critique:

However raucous the debate and however characteristically chippy the Minister's response, it is worth reminding ourselves about the people behind the figures. Two young boys came into a Newport food bank recently with their social worker and asked whether they could have one packet of cereal and one packet of drinking chocolate as a treat. Sad stories, real lives.

By alluding to the importance of "the human side", "sad stories", "real lives", and "the people behind the statistics", MPs indicated the importance of a different kind of logic in political debate, one that was more personal, affective, and embodied when compared to the technical and disembodied logic of legal, critical, and statistical argument. Though there was

an understanding that both logics were important, there was a sense that a political issue could not be fully appreciated or understood without stories that imparted the subjective, experiential, and emotional consequences of the political phenomena under debate.

A particularly instructive example of how this logic worked in practice came in a debate on domestic violence, where Seema Malhotra was making an argument about the impact of domestic abuse on children. She first drew on statistics released by a charity:

The impact of domestic abuse is borne not just by female victims, but by children. SafeLives estimates that 130,000 children live in homes in which a parent faces serious harm or death at the hands of their partner or ex-partner. Those children can go on to replicate the behaviour that they have seen.

Then, to illustrate this point further, Malhotra told the story of a mother who was concerned about the effect domestic violence had had on her teenage son:

One mother told me of her experience. She said that her teenage son was starting to behave in the way that he had seen his father behave. He was lucky enough to respond to her challenging him, but she knows that the story is not over for him, and is now seeking support for him as the trauma that he experienced plays out in his life as he reaches adulthood.

Likewise, in the aforementioned 2018 debate on cancer strategy, in which Karen Lee talked about the importance of the “people behind the statistics”, she would also demonstrate this complementary logic of quantifiable and experiential argument. She introduced a story about her daughter, and then delivered some general statistics about breast cancer:

My daughter died at just 35 of breast cancer, and I will talk about cancer from a patient’s perspective. One in eight women develop breast cancer in their lifetime,

and 80% survive for five years or more. About 95% of women will survive for one year, and my daughter survived for 13 months. Recent data show that 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still die from breast cancer every year.

These statistics were then followed by a more detailed exposition of her daughter's experiences:

My Lynsey was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer in April 2010, and she died just 13 months later. She was a very bright girl, with a degree in politics and a degree in social work, and she worked with underprivileged children. She had a husband and three small children, who were two, four, and seven when she died. She was treated at Nottingham City Hospital under Dr Steve Chan. She had chemotherapy, radiotherapy and a mastectomy, and her treatment was just amazing. The staff just could not have been better. She came home for the final three weeks of her life to die, and the unqualified team that came in to support me and her husband, Mike, were just amazing as well. I can never thank them enough.

Lee continued to move between her daughter's experiences and quantifiable information contained in a report delivered by the charity Breast Cancer Now:

My Lynsey's cancer was advanced. It was stage 3 when diagnosed, so screening probably would not have helped her. The Breast Cancer Now report states: "Breast screening is a key initiative to ensure the early detection and diagnosis of breast cancer. Although controversy still exists around over-diagnosis, its benefits are recognised to outweigh its risks in the Cancer Strategy, in detecting 30% of breast cancers and saving 1,300 lives a year from breast cancer." The report also talks about a shortage of staff. 32% of radiologists are expected to retire between 2015 and 2025.

She then expanded on what this shortage of staff might mean in more qualitative and experiential terms:

My daughter developed a brain tumour – a common secondary effect of breast cancer – and she had to go for radiotherapy. It is truly traumatic. She used to see flashing blue and white lights. She had to wear a mask. The really upsetting thing was that because of staff shortages, she often had to lie around on a trolley waiting for things. Imagine what it is like laying on a hospital trolley with cancer in your bone and metastasis. It is just so distressing. That is the effect on patients of short staffing. It is just a phrase in a report, but that is what it really means.

Lee refers to the limits of a “phrase in a report” to capture “what it really means” to be affected by staffing issues, with her daughter’s experience providing an insight into the “distressing” impact of such a situation.

As discussed, critics of experiential and emotional rhetoric tend to argue that it exists in a contradictory relationship with quantifiable information, with *ethos* and *pathos* disabling and undermining *logos*. Statistics, on the one hand, are held up as more reliable, sensible, and generalisable modes of political information, where stories are seen to prioritise information that is unscientific, ‘anecdotal’, and potentially erroneous. The examples given above, however, are suggestive of a potentially complementary relationship between stories and statistics in political debate. Statistics were a means by which MPs could establish the typicality or frequency of the issues under discussion. Yet, they also acknowledged the limits of quantifiable proofs, which could not access the more embodied, affective, and personal questions of how these issues affect individuals on a personal level.

While there was a sense that stories were not enough to grasp the breadth of a political issue (i.e. how widespread are staffing problems when it comes to cancer treatment?), they were particularly good at grasping their depth (i.e. what does it feel like to be suffering from cancer, waiting on a hospital trolley for treatment?). In this sense, MPs could combine quantitative arguments with qualitative arguments in such a way as to establish both: a sense of *breadth* and *depth*. Both modes of social description seem integral to political debate. In a debate free of statistics, we cannot establish whether the experiences under debate are broadly common or typical. Yet, in a debate free of stories, we cannot discuss, on an individual level, the moral, personal, and affective consequences of the issues under debate, or account for experiences that are different or atypical.

As Peters (2001, p.447) argues, stories and statistics are opposite poles of social description which speak to the “doubleness” of democracy: statistics speak to the collective, and the need to be counted as a group, whereas stories speak to individual human experience, and the right to be counted as an individual. Quantification, as Porter has pointed out (1995, p.ix), is a ‘technology of distance’, which allows us to move beyond the individual and the local. But as Peters (2001, p.435) notes:

Numbers can model a serene indifference to the world of human things. There is something inhuman, even cruel about their indifference to our projects. Numbers have a rigor and logic that is fully independent of the human will: Anyone who’s wrestled with a calculation that won’t add up knows exactly the frustration of the serene indifference of numbers. Although they may model ideals of democratic citizenship, especially impartiality and self-sacrifice, they also evoke the fears of a mass society where no one has a name, only a number.

“Numbers take us beyond the mere human; stories send us there in its folly and detail”, argues Peters (2001, p.440), but “the real lesson perhaps is that we cannot finally choose:

We need numbers and stories, tools for understanding what is both foreign and familiar to us”.

5.7. Where Stories Thrive: ‘Raising Awareness’ and ‘Tackling Taboos’

The importance of using stories became clear when politicians were discussing issues that were particularly private and emotional. Accessing the ‘human side’ of these issues was often essential to debate, due to their profound personal consequences. In debates on political issues like mental health, cancer strategy and baby loss, these stories were distinguished by their traumatic and deeply intimate content. Storytelling here became a means by which politicians could attempt to redress a sense that the private and emotional consequences of an issue had either been overlooked, misunderstood, or excluded in political debate, and had not yet been sufficiently explored or talked about in public. As affective rhetorical strategies, these stories leveraged empathy and compassion to ‘raise awareness’ and ‘tackle taboos’, promoting public understanding and recognition over what it means and feels like to be affected by otherwise private political phenomena.

These attempts to generate empathy in the service of better public understanding and awareness at times had a clear educational benefit for the audience listening to the stories. This was evident in a cancer strategy debate in 2018, where Michelle Donelan told two stories. The first was about a constituent who had been diagnosed with cancer:

That would have benefited my constituent, whose symptoms were initially dismissed as irritable bowel syndrome. She then waited a long time for testing. She is now terminally ill with bowel cancer, but inspiringly, she is trying to work hard every day to raise awareness and help others to get diagnosed quickly.

The second story was about her own experience with cervical screening tests:

I must admit that I was one of these women: I put off my screening for years. I left it at the bottom of my to-do list until I could fit it in around my job, and it just kept slipping year on year. I must admit, if I am honest, that I really did not realise that cervical cancer is most common in women under the age of 35. When I did have my screening, I had to go through the processes necessary after abnormal cells show up. As my results showed high grade abnormalities, I am extremely thankful that I went when I did.

Both stories illustrate the kinds of complications involved with cancer testing, including the kinds of suffering and trauma involved when testing is done too late, and the kinds of relief involved when testing is undertaken early, successfully, and where prevention is possible. Empathy here engenders a very tangible and real sense that 'this could happen to me', and in so doing promotes a public understanding of the necessity and importance of these tests.

However, more than just educating listeners in ways that may be of benefit to them, stories were often told in an attempt to increase public understanding in ways that are of benefit to certain subjects of stories who needed their experiences to be better heard and understood. These stories tended to invoke suffering, distress, and grief in a way that did not necessarily engender the feeling that 'this could happen to me', rather imparting a very clear idea that 'this is what it feels like to be me'. Stories here engender empathy and compassion in order to garner some sort of public and social recognition of what it feels like to experience an issue, be it mental health, cancer, assisted dying, domestic violence, baby loss, sexual abuse, and many others.

Stories are particularly effective in these kinds of political situations, where there seems to be a perceived lack of understanding, awareness, or recognition regarding certain individual experiences and needs. Narratives of personal experience communicate

dramatised, embodied, and personalised tales of people in different social locations to our own, with the potential to “foster understanding across [...] difference without making those who are different symmetrical” (Young, 1996, p.131). Personal narrative can be integral to individuals or groups who need their experiences to be understood if they are to attain political recognition and justice. Young (1996, p.131), for example, argues that a university student who uses a wheelchair and who needs to argue for better university resources or treatment would have to primarily make their claim “through telling stories of their physical, temporal, social, and emotional obstacles”. It is for this reason that many social movements have found an ally in the genre of personal storytelling, with concerted attempts on issues like AIDs, abortion, domestic abuse, and sexuality to tell stories about how these affect individuals on a personal and emotional level (Plummer, 1995; Davis, 2002; Polletta 2006).

In a 2016 baby loss debate, Byron Davies told a story about his own experiences that illustrated the importance of doing this:

My wife and I have a wonderful son, but we also lost a child in the 1980s, when there was certainly a stigma around the issue. You just could not talk about it; it was taboo. It was almost an embarrassment to bring it up in public. We could not discuss the grief and sadness that we felt, and we did not have help to deal with what was one of the most traumatic experiences of our lives. It is a devastating experience. I am pleased to say that my son, who is now 34, and his lovely wife Natalie have presented us with a grandchild.

That politics, society, and culture were such that it felt embarrassing to publicly discuss baby loss meant that Davies and his wife endured “one of the most traumatic experiences” of their lives, unable to discuss their “grief and sadness” because of the taboo nature of the subject.

Here, we get to the crux of how MPs' stories can generate empathy and compassion to the betterment of public awareness and understanding. By telling stories about previously taboo issues, MPs engage in performative attempts to establish the very social reality that they are arguing should exist: one in which political representatives – and society more broadly – can openly engage in personal discussions about traumatic and deeply intimate issues, and discuss what it *means* and *feels like* to experience said trauma. In a 2015 debate on mental health, Jeff Smith told a story that both illustrated and justified this function of storytelling in public debate, first beginning by describing his own experiences with depression:

I have my own personal experience of mental ill health. Like other Members of the House – I think that there are probably a number of us – I have suffered from depression. As a result of these depressive episodes, I know how it feels to be unable to function normally, or to perform even the most basic everyday tasks, because the weight of the depression is so overwhelming. I know how debilitating depression and other mental ill health can be. It is quite difficult to explain to people who have not experienced that just how debilitating it can be.

Smith's story elucidates what it is like to experience depression, and how "the weight of the depression" can impact upon one's ability to "function normally" and "to perform even the most basic everyday tasks". He acknowledges the difficulties involved in getting people to understand such issues, arguing that "is quite difficult to explain to people who have not experienced that just how debilitating it can be". He then goes on to describe the importance of talking about such experiences:

I am really heartened that mental health is increasingly being not only recognised, but acknowledged and spoken about. People increasingly accept that it is an illness that should be without stigma or taboo. The more that mental health is discussed,

the clearer it becomes that it is something that affects people in huge numbers from all walks of life, all backgrounds, and all ages. More and more I think my experience is not unusual.

As Smith describes, the open discussion of mental health issues is an important part of the process whereby society increasingly accepts that it is something that “should be without stigma or taboo”. This greater public willingness to share stories about mental health experiences – in the process of a better social and political understanding and acceptance of the illness – can also provide some sort of personal comfort for those who suffer: “more and more I think my experience is not unusual”.

In this way, Smith alludes to another important function of personalised storytelling in public debate: the way empathy and compassion evoked through storytelling can be geared towards offering some sort of *personal restitution* for those who had communicated their experiences, or for those who had experienced something similar to those who had communicated their experiences. In this way, emotive displays through stories had offered tellers and listeners some sort of personal catharsis. Stories were in part told in order to engender intimate connections between politicians and citizens who could be united by shared experiences, and who could feel recognised, understood, and acknowledged through hearing empathetic and compassionate stories that they could relate to.

When MPs told stories about their own personal experiences, they often alluded to their desire to make people feel like they are ‘not alone’. When Vicky Foxcroft outlined why she had told her baby loss story in a 2016 debate, she alluded to this:

I want my experience to be heard by young women in my constituency and across the country who have been through this, or who may go through it in the future, and to just say to them, “You’re not alone.”

Similarly, in a 2015 mental health debate, Jeremy Hunt summarised the importance of MPs “speaking out”:

Hon. Members have sent a strong message to the public: when it comes to mental health conditions, you are not alone. One in four adults experiences mental health problems every year. They affect everyone, including our elected representatives. By speaking out, hon. Members send a message to other parliamentarians who may be suffering in silence. Despite the incredible privilege of working in this place, public life can be incredibly stressful. It can destroy not just people’s hopes but their marriages, relationships and families. Being an MP does not make us immune to the pressures that affect everyone.

As well as ensuring the public “you are not alone”, MPs stories would also “send a message to other parliamentarians who may be suffering in silence”. These stories demonstrate to audiences that tellers, like them, share a broadly similar experience of suffering or pain, and in so doing they can provide a source of comfort.

The stories that MPs told about their constituents were also geared towards a sort of *personal catharsis* for the subjects of the stories. In a debate on domestic abuse victims and family law courts, Jess Phillips explained why “heartfelt and heart-breaking accounts of what is happening to victims of domestic violence in the family courts” were important, in order “to send out a rallying cry to all the victims in this country and their children that, down here, in this bubble, we can hear them”. By sharing constituents’ stories in the public arena, politicians demonstrate that they acknowledge and recognise the experiences of those constituents, which becomes a means by which those suffering can feel ‘heard’.

The feeling that their stories are being channelled into debate and potential political change is also another means by which constituents may attain some sort of *personal*

restitution. In the 2017 baby loss debate, Lilian Greenwood told a story about two of her constituents, Jack and Sarah, whose baby was born dead at Nottingham City Hospital:

Jack and Sarah were convinced that Harriet's death was the result of a mismanaged labour, but their concerns were not listened to by hospital staff; they were told that a post-mortem had found that Harriet's death was caused by an infection and "to try to move on".

As health professionals, they knew that there was no evidence of an infection, instead believing "that their healthy, full-term baby had died due to mistakes in Sarah's care". By law, a stillborn child was not classed as a deceased person, and as such, this meant that the coroner could not investigate the circumstances surrounding the death, despite the parents' wishes. As Lilian Greenwood argued, the "loss of their much-wanted daughter, and the circumstances surrounding it" had had "an absolutely devastating effect on every aspect of their lives". The story was been told in an attempt to change this law, and it provided a good example of how empathy and compassion were being mobilised in service of political change. However, Greenwood also alluded to a hope that this process would provide some sort of catharsis for Jack and Sarah:

There is nothing that I can do to take away the pain of Harriet's death for Jack and Sarah, as much as I wish I could, but I think that they would gain some comfort if their experience helped to prevent other parents from suffering in the same way.

In this way, by having a story told by politicians in an attempt to redress whatever systemic problems may have befallen them, particular citizens can attain a sense of "comfort" for having "helped to prevent" others "from suffering in the same way". Thus, when politicians' personal stories told of "raising awareness" and "tackling taboos" – and of reminding people that "you're not alone" – they demonstrated the potential of Berlant's

(2008, p.3) intimate public. At its most promising, political storytelling “legitimizes qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded”, creating “situations where those qualities can appear as luminous”.

5.8. Conclusion

At the heart of this chapter has been a concern with how we situate the therapeutic, the experiential, and the emotional in processes of political rhetoric, and how we might come to re-evaluate the role and legitimacy of personalised storytelling in democratic debate. One possible approach is to share the view of those critical of ‘therapy rhetoric’. Here, a ‘touchy-feely’ style of politics – one that is more oriented towards private, emotional, and confessional expression – is said to strain against a more desirable standard of rational public argument. Stories, in this paradigm, should be kept out of political debate for the way they individualise, depoliticise, and relativise important political phenomena.

Yet, in this chapter, I have suggested that such an approach is beset by two key problems. On the one hand, it risks exclusionary standards of public debate at odds with contemporary social and political culture. Rejecting therapeutic discourse would make political engagement less palpable for citizens already pushed away by an ‘emotional deficit’ in political communication (Richards, 2004). On the other hand, it idealises an impossible separation between the emotional and the reasonable, and the affective and the political, despite growing research documenting their mutually constitutive relationship. As such, I have argued that we need politicians who tell stories, and who talk in experiential, personal, and emotive ways. That way, public argument can acknowledge the intersections between the personal and the political, and be more in tune with the ways we become emotionally oriented to issues, debates, and politicians (Coleman, 2015b; Martin 2016).

I have therefore sought to show how politicians' stories function as *affective rhetorical strategies*. Storied arguments are distinctive for the way they position audiences in relation to experiences, people, and policies primarily through fluctuating degrees of empathy, compassion, and emotional identification. There were situations where this mode of argument threatened to oversimplify, relativise, and depoliticise issues in ways that critics of therapy rhetoric fear. The 'trouble' with stories reminds us why they alone are often not enough to sustain a holistic and wide-ranging democratic debate, but it does not mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. Stories allowed politicians to access the 'human side' of debate, a more embodied, affective, and experiential logic of argument through which they made political claims on the basis of how issues and policies had made people feel.

In this way, stories spoke to a need to recognise and incorporate individual and emotional experience into discussions of politics, so that the personal could become political. This complemented the general, systematic, and more numerical logic of statistical debate, but it was also particularly effective in discussions of issues where there was a pervading sense that the private and emotional consequences of an issue needed to be understood, acknowledged, and brought into public discourse. Despite what critics of therapeutic and emotional rhetoric say, the 'touchy-feely' era calls for political representatives who can give voice to particular feelings and experiences through their persuasive personal stories.

Chapter 6 – From the Strategic to the Subconscious: What It Means to Share Political Stories

6.1. Introduction

When I spoke to Michelle Thomson, the former SNP MP for Edinburgh, it had been roughly three years since she had shared her personal story. “At that point I was very much under a cloud”, she explained, “I was certainly under a great deal of stress”. In a parliamentary debate on violence against women in 2016, she had described how, at the age of 14, she was raped by someone she knew. In a speech that would later be the subject of significant media attention, and that was said to have left an “indelible mark” by a teary-eyed Speaker, Thomson recounted her experience: the “fear and horror” as she realised she “simply couldn’t escape”, how she felt “ashamed” that she had “allowed this to happen”, and the way she had “bottled it all up inside”.

As I sat across from Michelle in a busy art gallery café, I was eager to ascertain her reasons for sharing such a personally difficult story. Why, in such a high-profile political setting, had she decided to open up about the incident, one that she revealed was so traumatic that she had never been able to share it with her now late mother?:

I always planned to speak in the debate, but ironically – I think it was a Thursday as I recall – on the Saturday night, during the night, I had a dream that I was going to speak about it, seriously. Now this is not, you know, I’m 54. I’m not a kind of young teenager imagining things. I had a dream that I should speak about it and when I woke up in the morning, my husband said, “How did you sleep?”. I said, “Well I had this dream that I should speak about rape during this debate”. Now he was aware of what had happened to me, but only in the manner of me blurting it out before we got married because I felt it was something that he should know. And at that point I was

unable to say the word without crying. So for me then to say “I’ve had this dream. I should be speaking about it” was odd.

Her husband’s response to the dream, she told me, made clear why she had to share her story:

And his reaction, I think you can imagine it was, “You’re having a laugh”. And I said, “No, honestly”. And then the next thing he said, which really turned it for me, he said, “But then everyone will know”. And I looked at him and said, “You mean everyone in your world”, which is a comfortable, middle class, you know, he’s got lots of male friends, and I looked at him and I said, “That is a taboo, therefore I must do it”.

She then turned to another reason for sharing her story, one which perhaps aligned more obviously with her role as a political representative:

I knew in terms of the data that there were many, many thousands of women who had been through something similar, and it was important that their voices could be heard.

While ‘challenging taboos’ and ‘making voices heard’ perhaps represented some of the more conscious and strategic reasons why Michelle shared her story, it was only until after the event that she became more open to the possibility that there were other, *subconscious* reasons at play. She recounted a conversation she had with the police during the investigation that followed her speech:

Their response to why I did that speech was very helpful to me. What they said was that when somebody is under a huge amount of stress and pressure, and it could be

in another area, nothing to do with the matter at hand, that often becomes a time where people speak out. It's almost as though they're driven to subconsciously.

It was at that point that she returned to the "cloud" and "the great deal of stress" that she was said to be under at that time. She explained that "there'd been a lot of media speculation" surrounding allegations of mortgage fraud that had been made against her. These had led to her withdrawing from the party whip, and having her party membership suspended, pending an investigation. Though the allegations would later be dropped due to a lack of evidence:

I now look back and think maybe, under that stress, my need to be heard was so strong that actually, it was almost inevitable. And I have some sympathy for that now looking back. I didn't know it at the time but I know it now.

For Michelle, the reasons for telling her personal story were not straightforward. They could neither be situated purely in the realm of conscious decision-making, nor could they be simply located in the sphere of subconscious activity. There were motivations and thought processes that she was aware of and could account for, but she was also eager to point out that there were those that she could not. Her account sat somewhere between a more strategic narrative of making a political point, giving voice to others, and tackling a taboo, and a more experiential and intuitive narrative of personal stress, dreams, and working through trauma. The separation between these two narratives was unclear, with her decision to share representing a complex intermingling of personal and political considerations, and of influences standing both inside and outside of her conscious awareness.

Such complicated and intersecting narratives are a recurring theme in this third and final empirical chapter, where I expand upon the findings of the previous chapters by considering the thoughts, experiences, and justifications of politicians who engage in

personalised storytelling. I examine some of the key reasons why they share personal stories, what it feels like to share those stories, and how they situate stories in relation to normative concerns about the genre and the communicative context in which politicians operate. The central concern of this chapter, then, is the stories that politicians tell about their stories: the narratives that shape, signify, and regulate their practices of narrative account giving in political speech and debate.

Michelle was just one of several politicians that I interviewed as part of this chapter, but her account exemplified the intricate reasons underlying why politicians might share their stories. Where those suspicious of stories have painted a rather simplistic picture of cold, calculating politicians – who use their personal narratives for manipulative, deceptive, or purely strategic reasons – I discuss in this chapter the much more diverse terms in which a number of politicians attribute meaning to their storytelling. In the first section of the chapter, I engage with the justifications and motives that they offer for sharing personal stories. In the second section, I turn to how they characterise and interpret their experiences of storytelling. I then turn in the third section to their wider reflections on the genre and its role in contemporary democratic communication. I conclude by drawing these findings together, identifying four distinct yet overlapping narratives that politicians draw on to make sense of their personalised storytelling. These narratives frame storytelling as *strategic*, *emotional*, *dutiful*, and *humanising*.

When drawing on a *strategic* narrative, politicians demonstrated an awareness of how personalised storytelling was an effective communicative tool that could help them to achieve certain political goals. In contrast, when drawing on an *emotional* narrative, politicians discussed their storytelling motives and experiences in personal and affective terms. The *dutiful* narrative framed personalised storytelling as entangled with their roles and responsibilities as political representatives. Finally, in the *humanising* narrative, politicians expressed anti-elitist sentiment, discussing the importance of sharing stories to demonstrate

that they were human, authentic, and capable of relating to and understanding the people that they represent.

The delineation between these four narratives of narrative account giving was unclear, with politicians often drawing on all of them to make sense of their storytelling practices. I suggest that while narratives of *strategy* sit more neatly with conventional accounts of how and why politicians share personal stories (e.g. Mayer, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2014; Fernandes, 2017), their narratives of *emotion*, *duty*, and *humanisation* do not. Instead, they highlight the significant degrees of emotionality that can govern politicians' experiences of storytelling (and their communicative practices more broadly), as well as the important ways in which they are often intertwined with their practices as political representatives. This not only emphasises the importance of diversifying our understanding of personalised storytelling in political speech, but it also adds weight to some of the claims made in the preceding empirical chapters about its relationship to political representation and debate.

6.2. Why Share Stories?

6.2.1. "It's the shock factor that really gets the attention of the government"

When articulating why they had shared personal stories, every politician spoke of the potential *political change* that they could help to bring about. Chris Bryant had shared a number of stories about a recent melanoma diagnosis, and described how politicians can make effective use of their personal experiences to communicate their beliefs:

One of the tools that you have as a politician is your personal experience. And you choose to deploy that sometimes very carefully because you don't want to open the barn doors as it were for your family and for the whole of your private life to be

trawled over by journalists. But sometimes you do choose to expose elements of your private life because they are a means of getting across your values and the things you believe in.

He illustrated this by discussing the significant impact his story had had on other people, and how it had become a platform for policy discussions with government ministers:

What was really nice – and this was the reason for doing it really – was the number of people who said they'd been to have their dodgy moles checked by the doctor. One person came back and said she's got a stage 3 melanoma and another person stage 4 melanoma that she hadn't spotted. Who knows, just by doing that it may have saved her life. But also I think it's been an opportunity to raise it with government ministers and others to maybe try and get better policies to protect more people.

A recurring theme was the way, in their attempts to bring about political change, politicians suggested that their personal stories gave them a degree of credibility and significance that other rhetorical forms could not. Michelle Thomson explained why she had decided to personalise her speech, instead of drawing on "facts and figures":

It would be entirely reasonable for me to have had spoken in that debate and to cite facts and figures [...] That is a typical way of doing it, but thinking about power and resonance, it struck me that it would have more power and resonance if I actually personalised it.

Madeleine Moon had shared stories about her husband's struggles with motor neurone disease, describing the "mental and emotional chaos of dealing with a terminal condition" in

a speech on terminal illness. Sharing the story, in her view, gave her a significant degree of authenticity because it was a concrete example of lived experience:

It gave me huge credibility, that I wasn't just talking about an abstract concept. This was something that I had lived.

Both Kevin Hollinrake and Jim Shannon, who share regular stories about their constituents, made similar points about the value of using real-life examples. Jim emphasised their explanatory potential:

You can always illustrate or reinforce a topic better if you've got a story that would perhaps maybe show just how that has carried out in real life.

For Kevin, stories had a unique ability to engender understanding and empathy:

Well it makes it real doesn't it? That's what you're trying to do is you're trying to illustrate the problem. If we're talking in just general terms or in hypothetical terms, people don't naturally understand it. But if you talk about somebody's life, or you talk about somebody's experiences, there's a basic empathy people have with each other I think. Suddenly people totally get it.

Politicians alluded to the power of stories to inhibit a tendency to counter-argue in their interactions with other senior political figures (e.g. Green and Bock, 2000). Some suggested that, by conveying real-life exemplars of lived political experience, they could be particularly effective at challenging prevailing government narratives. Carolyn Harris shared a personal story about losing her young son, as well as a number of the public's stories on the issues of problem gambling, modern slavery, and prostitution. She talked about the emotional force with which they can receive government consideration:

It's the shock factor and it's the shock factor that really gets the attention of the government because you can then, if I needed to, I can go and get that woman and bring them and say "No, here, listen to her story". You can do that because it's real.

For Madeleine Moon and Jim Shannon, this emotional force was a means to an end, providing exceptional and convincing examples of where a government minister may misapprehend an issue. As Madeleine explained:

It makes it very difficult for ministers to dismiss you. So having to one-to-one with a minister who says, "oh, that doesn't happen" and you're saying, "oh yes it does, this is what happened to me" [...] It makes them think, "oh shit, it must be a lot worse". So it's a crack that you can widen in a minister's understanding and in particular to a minister's advisor's understanding, that what they've been fed, that everything is fine and that there isn't a problem here, is not accurate. So it's lived experience of where systems don't work and why they don't work and the impact on individuals at a time of great distress.

Jim likewise stressed the importance of using stories to highlight the "grey areas" of legislation, debate, and government understanding:

That helps to explain to a minister on the floor of the house or someone else if you seek an intervention to say "Look, my constituent, despite all the rules, despite all the protections the government say they have, and the legislation, here's an example which doesn't fit into that." It does help to convince, hopefully, the government and others of the merit of the debate and also to show that life isn't just straight black and white. There are many, many grey areas, and we meet them every day in life.

6.2.2. “It was important that their voices could be heard”

Beyond these obvious strategic motives, MPs would also speak in more dutiful terms about the stories that they shared. For many respondents, telling stories was about giving voice to other people, and fulfilling their obligations as political representatives. As Madeleine Moon put it: “sometimes you have to bring real life into politics in terms of its impact on the people that we’re there to serve”. Jim Shannon, discussing a story he had shared about his constituent’s experience of baby loss, mentioned the importance of speaking for others and carrying their stories forward:

At that stage, the words of my constituent were very, very real in my mind, and very, very real in the voice so at that time I was very aware that I wasn’t just speaking for me. I was speaking for everybody else. [...] On many occasions when constituents come to see you, sometimes they just need someone to listen to their voice and someone who can take their story forward and speak for them.

Michelle Thomson discussed her decision to share her story in terms of the “responsibility” and “altruistic sentiment” she felt was necessary to being a representative:

The House of Commons, Brexit excepted, it’s not really giving a fantastic reputation at the moment. But much of what it does, it’s an incredibly powerful place to give resonance to things that hold appeal, and that have happened to other people. It’s incredibly powerful. For me that is an honour and a privilege, but it’s also responsibility [...] I think there must always be a reason or a driver to give voice to other people who cannot make their voices heard. If you’re not doing that, why are you there? There has to be some altruistic sentiment attached to the role. There has to be. Because you are there as a public servant to represent not just your

constituents, but to try and make things better for other people and that's something I feel and felt very seriously. I still feel the same way.

For Madeleine Moon, the decision to tell her story about her husband's struggle with motor neurone disease was triggered by witnessing the unjust way in which a member of the public had been treated:

The trigger, the absolute final straw for me, was a young man who came to give evidence to the all-party group for motor neurone. And he was a young man in his early thirties. He had been diagnosed with motor neurone about the same time as the birth of his first child. They'd just bought their first home and they had their life ahead of them and suddenly, *whap*, he'd got a death sentence.

The man had been told to undertake a work assessment, which would determine whether he could receive benefit payments during his final months:

And he told his story and basically he was given zero points. A few days later he went to see the consultant and the consultant gave him a DS1500 which is the form that says you've got this short period before you're going to die. And a matter of weeks before he'd been told, not by a consultant but by an assessor, that he was as fit as you and I: zero points. So yeah. And we were outside and the questioning that was coming, we came out of the meeting. It was a very emotional session and we came out and they were talking to this man in the corridor. Now one of the things that goes in motor neurone is your capacity to stand and walk, and they were keeping him outside standing and talking at him. And I was so angry. I stormed off into our whip's office and said, "Right, that's it, I'm going to do a ten-minute rule bill and I'm not leaving this office until I get one".

Politicians like Madeleine are not only motivated by their own stories, but also the stories of others. The impulse to act as a representative was in part rooted in emotional responses to the stories of people that they are supposed to represent:

So, the personal is very present in politics. It's what drives you in politics, and it's those personal stories that can drive your passion to move certain issues forward.

As such, telling stories allowed politicians to construct emotionally compelling impressions of people and groups that called other politicians to act on their behalf. This, as Kevin Hollinrake put it, could push back against a representative politics that could often be “uncaring” and “unfeeling”:

One thing I've been shocked by since my short time in politics over the last four and a half years is some of the times when people have been very uncaring and unfeeling [...] So what you're trying to do is make people feel that they've got a responsibility and a connection with this person, and then you're much more likely to elicit a positive response.

6.2.3. “Politicians are human at the end of the day”

A number of politicians alluded to a desire to demonstrate that they were human beings by sharing stories:

MPs can appear to be the consummate detached individuals with no life experience and nothing can be further from the truth [...] I wanted really to demonstrate that MPs have – even while they're working as MPs – difficult personal life experiences that they're having to work their way through.

Madeleine Moon

I think it's important for politicians to be human beings. And by that I mean that they don't get carried away by the trappings of power in that place.

Michelle Thomson

I think it shows you're human. If you're listening to a story which is really awful, then you can't switch off from it. Politicians are human at the end of the day.

Carolyn Harris

I think it's important for the public to realise you're a real person who's also suffered at times in your own life, or the people you know have.

Kevin Hollinrake

Madeleine Moon used a metaphor of robots to describe how stories could help combat a perception that politicians were unemotional, indistinguishable, and out of touch:

I thought we need to use that to show that we're not this sort of robotic group, and that we share many of the difficulties and the frustrations that ordinary people who are having to cope with life and carry on working and carrying on battling a system that doesn't recognise the difficulties, the tensions, and the impossible hurdles that the system puts in place of you when you're trying to juggle something that is also at the same time deeply distressing.

For Chris Law, who had shared stories about growing up in care, demonstrating this human side was an important part of the role of political representative. The interpersonal nature of the role, and the emotional quality of interactions with constituents, meant that politicians needed to show that they could be approachable and understanding:

And I think at the end of the day, if you're not personable, you shouldn't be in politics, because you're meeting people every single day in the job that you do, particularly when you're in your constituency. They come to you usually because they're at the end of their tether trying everything else, and you're the last option. So you take on the extremities of people's emotions when they come to see you. So if you're not that person that people can relate to, then you've got a tough gig.

One politician thought it ridiculous to suggest that politicians were not, in some sense, human, with relatable stories to tell:

I think it is utterly absurd to think that – 650 MPs, 60 assembly members in Wales, thousands of councillors, members of the assembly in Stormont, MSPs, and obviously until recently MEPs, any politician – isn't human, and doesn't come with some sort of emotional baggage.

Carolyn Harris was more sceptical about this, suggesting that certain politicians lacked the requisite ordinary experience to tell easily relatable stories. She drew on similar metaphors, of robots and clones, to discuss politicians who lacked the ordinary life experiences that people like her did:

A lot of politicians have been preparing to be politicians for a very long time so they're programmed I would say. And it's mostly the Tories I've got to say. But there are a lot of clones that walk around this building [...] their entire adult life has been preparing to be a candidate to be a Member of Parliament. And then there are other people like me who – never in a month of Sundays – I was a barmaid and a dinner lady, to think that I was going to be an MP. I would have loved to think that I could be an MP because I've always been political but never ever, ever did I think I'd be

an MP. So I've not been preparing. So what you see is what you get. We've got the stories. If you've been preparing, you've put a little wall around yourself.

In this way, she created a distinction between politicians who *are* human, and who have the stories to back it up, and those who are not. In other words, some politicians are simply more relatable than others. The potential benefits of appearing ordinary and relatable, however, meant that these politicians still had to be *made* human, and in her view, this explained why those in leadership positions were also attempting to demonstrate that they were human through stories:

It's about humanising people. That's what that's about. It's about, you know, the voters out there in people land actually hearing this is a human being. That's the point I'm making I think is that a lot of politicians feel that maybe some of us who are humans have gained a bit of an advantage.

6.2.4. "You don't really have much of a choice"

While politicians articulated these very clear political motives for sharing their stories, they were also open to more abstract explanations for doing what they did. More than just giving voice to others, and bringing about a political impact, some politicians also explained their decisions in terms of the psychological and the personal. Chris Bryant talked about how a melanoma operation had left a big scar on the back of his head. This, he felt, had left him compelled to explain the scar by telling his story, or to otherwise stay at home away from the public eye:

But when you have a great big sort of plaster on the back of your head and you look as if you're auditioning to play the monster in Frankenstein you don't really have much of a choice but to explain it to everybody other than just sitting at home for six

months which I obviously wasn't going to do and anyway, even at the end of that, there'd still be the scar. So I decided that it was just better to come out there and talk about it as soon as possible so that people could see the kind of rawness of it all.

When discussions turned to these more complex psychological and personal explanations, politicians seemed much less confident when narrativising their reasons for storytelling. Like Michelle Thomson, who was open to the possibility that she never fully understood why she shared her story, Carolyn Harris, who had chosen to share a story about the death of her son, could not explain why she had decided that the time was suddenly right to do so:

With the children's funeral fund that was such a private thing for me to do that took me a long time to get strong enough, I suppose, and I don't even know why I decided to do it when I did. Usually I can't keep my gob shut but it was something that was up there [*points to head*] and I'm like I want to do something and I don't know what I want to do.

6.3. Experiences of Sharing

I also asked politicians to reflect on their experiences of sharing personalised stories. How had it felt to share their stories? What had happened before, during, and after? What impact, if any, had their stories had?

6.3.1. "The story's not just about me"

Politicians alluded to significant preparations undertaken before they told their stories. The emotional nature of some stories meant that they were rarely, if ever, told spontaneously.

Michelle Thomson detailed the kinds of planning and practice that goes into speeches of this nature. She began by discussing the protocols she had to observe, and then the need to inform her family of what she was going to speak about:

I wrote to the speaker's office to give them notification. Westminster is very protocol-based and that was the appropriate thing to do. I didn't tell anybody else until the night before. The night before I phoned both of my children, who at that time must have been about 23 and 21, and said "I'm going to make a speech" just so that they knew. Both them knew about the circumstances but not any detail. And so my son said, "Are you sure?", quite a similar reaction to my husband. My daughter said, "You go girl".

Chris Bryant also alluded to the particularly challenging nature of family considerations when stories are shared:

My mother is an alcoholic. Well, was an alcoholic, she died many years ago. Sometimes I've talked about that in public. Members of my family don't like it very much because the story's not just about me it's about them as well. And that, I think, is more complicated.

Chris Law touched on the same topic, recounting his wife's response to his story about growing up in care. Despite her objections, he felt like he had to speak about his experiences:

Interestingly my partner wasn't happy that I spoke about it like that. She said to me last week, "Why did you say it like that? It's so personal. Why did you say it?". I said, "I think it needed to be said, quite frankly". She's just being protective. I get that. But I'm like, well, if I don't say it, then I'm keeping up a wall. I'm keeping a veneer. By

keeping a veneer or defence, I'm actually hindering those who are really championing for change. So by being quite personal at times, it's quite important.

Politicians alluded to the significant degrees of emotional management that are sometimes involved in personalised storytelling, as they attempted to control, produce, and display certain emotions that they thought appropriate to their situation (Hochschild, 1979). Michelle spoke of a desire to carefully plan and rehearse her speech so as to protect her delivery from an emotional outburst:

I then went to my office in Westminster and thought, "Right, well what are we gonna write?". I decided that I should write and read it in case there was any emotion that I wasn't able to control. So that was a conscious choice again. And I phoned my good colleague and friend in Westminster, another MP, and said, "Can you come to my office?". And in Westminster people often keep very odd hours. They'll be in the building and on-site until like ten o'clock at night routinely. And so he was in his office and he came over to mine and I said, "I want to read you something, but you have to sit with your back to me". And he of course thought this was slightly odd, as you would. And so I read him what I was going to say, and said, "I'm going to give this speech tomorrow". And I also phoned my husband and read it to him so that he knew, but I didn't tell anybody else.

One politician was unsure about whether he would actually share his story, and how much of it he would actually be able to divulge. Not only were the experiences still emotionally difficult, but he also knew that sharing them would provoke a significant response from his colleagues:

I thought, oh you know, "Can I do it? Can't I do it?". Because you have that sort of emotional thing – I've spoken about it very many times with friends [...] This is still

very much a reality in my own mind of coping with it [...] What I wasn't sure I would be able to deal with is how much of it I could say. I've spoken twice on it: once in the Chamber and once in Westminster Hall, and then spoken in the press about it, but it's harder speaking about in the Chamber or Westminster Hall because you've got a confined audience so you know other colleagues will be shocked and will want to offer comfort or whatever it might be. So those sorts of things make you think "Oh gosh, can I do this?"

Indeed, like the colleague who helped Michelle rehearse her speech, politicians would talk about the support that their fellow politicians had given them both before and after the speech. Michelle pointed out how this would often cut across party lines:

Now, in fairness, I got wonderful feedback from across the house. I really did. Somebody asked me, "Was I surprised that somebody from the Labour benches gave me a hug?". Of course I wasn't surprised! They're a human being.

Those who delivered a deeply personal account of something difficult spoke of the emotional challenges they encountered when delivering their stories. Chris Bryant had cried while telling his story:

Well, I think if I did it now, now that I'm like six months seven months after the event, it would be much easier. But doing it the best part of five months ago now that was really tough because all the emotions about whether I was going to die or not, and whether I was going to die quite soon, were very, very raw, and that was quite difficult.

Madeleine Moon had also cried while telling her story, and said she felt ashamed about it:

I have to admit, and I'll be quite frank, I wish I could do it without, 4 years on, still showing distress when I have to talk about it. And I hate it, and I'm embarrassed by it. And I feel weakened by it. Others tell me that isn't how they see it. But for me, it's still devastating. I hate the fact as a woman I cry. It just makes you feel as if somehow you've left your argument.

6.3.2. "I really did have to open up old wounds"

Politicians also reported that they faced significant emotional challenges *after* sharing their stories. Those that shared particularly traumatic personal experiences would speak of the difficulties involved in reliving them, and revisiting the challenging feelings that they had evoked. Carolyn Harris described the difficulty of returning to her son's death:

It was really traumatic because I had a breakdown in 2010 and I knew that by doing that I was going to risk my mental health and I did it just before bloody Christmas. So I went into Christmas re-grieving. So I really did have to open up old wounds. And I think it did it again when we got it [the policy].

Madeleine Moon made similar remarks about returning to her husband's motor neurone disease and subsequent death:

It's always emotionally devastating, because it brings back not just my husband's death but also the horrific five years, in many respects, as you watch someone die day-by-day.

For Michelle Thomson, telling her story had brought up feelings that she had never processed, and this had important consequences for her personal and familial relationships:

It absolutely opened stuff up for me that I never processed at all. I hadn't told my father. The first my father knew of it was when his best man phoned him up and said, "Have you heard Michelle?". That was my father's first knowledge. I couldn't tell my father and I never told my mother [...] But things like my personal relationships, at that point I had been married for like 26 years. My husband and I talked about it over a year or so afterwards, and I disclosed more and more to him about stuff in my life and there was one point where he said to me, "You know, I've known you thirty-odd years and I've never known you", which made us both sad and laugh at the same time, because he was telling the truth.

Particularly challenging for some respondents was the public attention that their stories had received. Many expressed their surprise at the media exposure that their speeches had garnered, and the challenges that this had entailed. One politician, who preferred to remain anonymous, described the difficulty of fielding journalists' questions that would evoke memories he had previously buried:

If I'm honest, it was harder after I'd done it. Because at the minute Stella came to give me a hug, and then I got calls from the press: "Will you come and do this? Will you come and do that?". And then sort of constantly having to replay it because I would never normally do it that intensively. Particularly because it all came to the fore then, there'd be things – because you do, I've had counselling for this – in that you block certain elements of things out. So a journalist would ask, "Is there a particular incident that really comes to mind?" and there's this, and then there's this, and all of a sudden the boxes open and you're like, oh right, I've now got fifteen things inside my head and there's another twenty-five sitting somewhere that I know are going to come out if I don't get this back under some kind of control [...] And so you begin to open Pandora's Box, which is not always the best thing to do, but it's a consequence of it.

Carolyn Harris discussed the challenges of her late son becoming “public property” after her story:

The speaker gave it to me on a Monday night. We just didn't know what was going to happen and we didn't expect the fuss we got from it. And then the next thing the following morning I'm on breakfast TV in Manchester and then everybody knew. And I think that the hardest thing for me has been having to share Martin, because Martin's become public property now. So if anybody is ever talking about that situation or if ever there's a story done about it or when it was eventually brought in this year they don't ask me now for Martin's photo because they've got loads of photos of him. So sometimes I see my son's photograph in the press and I didn't know it was going to be there [...] I've been in a situation where I've opened a paper in the tearoom and I didn't know they were covering the story.

This media exposure also left Carolyn worried that she might become 'defined' by her trauma:

So I had to revisit all that and I became at that time I became the woman who'd lost her son. So people didn't know my name, but they knew I was the woman who'd lost her son. I'd get on the bus for about a year and even now sometimes occasionally you know people will say, “Oh yeah you lost your son didn't you?” So they didn't know me but they knew my story and I've had to revisit all that and that's stayed a little bit now: I'm the MP who's lost a son.

Michelle Thomson expressed similar concerns, taking specific steps to ensure that her media exposure was not prolonged:

I was a bit shellshocked. And I had multiple approaches from media outlets. Channel 4 was one of them. Scotland Tonight. BBC. Sky, I think. And I did quite a few interviews, which I anticipated could have been possible but I hadn't actively planned for. But I made clear to them that I would only do interviews in the 24-hour news cycle and that I wouldn't do anymore. Because again it was about, I don't want to be defined by the person who this happened to: "Oh, we have to be careful and cautious with her because she's a victim". I wanted to say my piece, talk about it, and then move on.

However, those that spoke of 'opening up old wounds' and facing such challenges would often speak in sacrificial terms about their experiences. When asked whether there was an element of regret about sharing their story, they would often reply by talking in terms of trade-off. Any political impact, in their eyes, outweighed the difficulties that they had personally faced. As Michelle Thomson put it: "I knew it would open up a whole load of stuff. And I'm still glad I did it". Madeleine Moon described how "the fight" is more important than her emotional fatigue:

But that is what people are experiencing. Not just with motor neurone but with lots of conditions. And you don't come to Westminster for an easy life. So if it gets the result that we're all fighting for [...] then I'll fight that fight. And yes, I have to tell you, it leaves me exhausted emotionally. Often I feel embarrassed and I need to retreat and take some personal time to centre myself again. [...] But then, the fight is more important. So you go back to it.

Carolyn Harris had used her story to campaign for the introduction of a children's funeral fund, recounting how she struggled to pay for her son's funeral. This fund was introduced prior to the interview, and so despite the process hurting her, she was pleased that she had helped to bring about the change:

I'm glad I shared it because it's happened and it's something that no other parent will have to worry about. I think that probably it's hurt me more than anyone.

6.3.3. "You'd have to look at my inbox"

Many politicians spoke of the way their stories were received by their constituents and the general public. In most cases, the heartfelt nature of their personal stories had led to a great deal of correspondence from citizens, who would send supportive messages, but who would also open up about their own experiences of the issues under discussion:

Afterwards, I mean it's not exaggerating to say I must have had thousands of Facebook messages, emails, cards sent to my offices, personal letters, and I had to set aside a lot of time with my team. *Michelle Thomson*

I did have a lot of people send me emails about their terrible, horrible experiences of losing family members or suffering much worse experiences than melanoma than myself or catching it later [...] I must have had hundreds of emails and Facebook messages and so on about it. *Chris Bryant*

Everybody's comments were very, very positive. Comments from fellow MPs in the Chamber on the day were enormous, and very heart-warming and very sincere. The emails came from all political persuasions, possibly from people who have not got an interest in politics but happened to watch that debate because it was personal to them. They'd obviously lost a baby, miscarried, maybe more than multiple times as many seem to have. So that issue became a real issue for people because they could relate to that in a way, and they could also relate to, I think, the emotion of the

occasion as well. Because for them it was very emotional, and the loss of their child was one that they'll never forget. *Jim Shannon*

Carolyn Harris suggested that the personal and intimate nature of the stories she shared in parliament had made her the “person to go to on certain subjects”, even for people who were not part of her constituency:

Well I think it's the human aspect. You'd have to look at my inbox to see how people with a certain issue, who have nothing to do with me politically or geographically, but they see me as the person to go to on certain subjects.

I asked her if she felt like this would have been possible without her stories, but she was sceptical that anything else would have achieved the same resonance: “No. Because why would they know me?”. She then went on to discuss the intimate nature of the correspondence she has over these issues, and the sense of privilege she felt over this:

Some of the stuff that people tell me about their own personal lives [...] some of the things they tell me they probably haven't told their partners. I know they haven't told their partners. So I'm very privileged that they share their stories with me. People will come into this building to see me who have really serious jobs but have got a problem. And they've chosen me to tell that story to. That's a huge privilege for me because that means that they trust me. I'm a politician and people don't trust politicians. The fact that they trust me means that I'm doing something right.

As Kevin Hollinrake argued, demonstrating a more understanding and efficacious representative relationship was one primary reason why telling constituents' stories was important:

It's vital for people to feel that you're on their side. You know, your constituents. And we have so much feedback on that basis, and I'm sure some other MPs do as well, about our willingness to A) listen to their stories and B) then try and do something about it. If you couldn't illustrate their stories, they wouldn't necessarily feel that you're doing your best to try and solve the issue generally.

This sense of privilege was echoed by Michelle Thomson and Chris Bryant, who both referred to a "duty" to individually communicate with those who had opened up to them about their personal experiences.

The ones that were general congratulatory ones, they could go back and respond to, but I also made a personal decision to respond individually and personally to those that gave any sense of their own story to me, because I got a lot like that that said "I was heartened by what you said" or "I realised it was my own voice I was listening to, the same thing happened to me". And all of those I felt it was appropriate that I responded to myself, and so that took me all of the weekend. But I just felt it was important and as much as possible everybody who got in touch with me got a response. But it's interesting to note that I still get requests and comments today.

Michelle Thomson

In the normal course of things, I don't correspond at length with people who aren't my own constituents but I felt I had a duty having gone on a TV programme to talk about it to reply to anybody. *Chris Bryant*

6.4. Situating Stories in Contemporary Political Speech and Debate

I also asked politicians to offer some wider reflections on the role of storytelling in political speech and debate. Here, the intention was to encourage politicians to move beyond their

own practices of personalised storytelling, and to get them to discuss, in broader terms, how they might be both used and misused by politicians in general. In what ways are stories important to the political process, and in what ways might they be a hindrance? How do they see other practices of personalised storytelling in other political contexts? What does it mean for politicians to tell stories?

6.4.1. “There is definitely a danger”

Despite the positive impact that their own stories had had, there were politicians who were also alert to the potential dangers of political storytelling. Echoing one of the common criticisms of personalised storytelling, Michelle Thomson expressed concerns about the “embellishment” of stories by certain political actors:

Now you can see, to be honest, the bit of cynicism in me having seen some of the way politics works, I could see a time where some politicians would actually embellish stories to try and cut through the noise of everybody else’s. Now needless to say I thoroughly disapprove of that from an ethical basis.

However, despite this concern, she felt that many people were savvy enough to know when politicians were lying. She alluded to a sort of emotional and experiential intuitiveness that people had, which made them effective at spotting when stories were authentic and when they were not:

All I felt was that all I had to do was simply recite what had happened to me [...] People have an issue with politicians about they know when they’re lying. They know that. They almost expect it, and I’m not sure it will serve any of us equally well. I had no doubt whatsoever that people would know that I was telling the truth. I just could feel that. Because I was telling the truth. But people see it. They feel it.

Chris Bryant was concerned about its relationship to argument: “Well there is definitely a danger of anecdote driving political decision making”. His particular concern was that certain issues could be oversimplified in the process of generalising from emotive personal experience, using the NHS as an example:

Let me give you an instance of why sometimes I think this may be wrong. I think it’s quite easy to tell a story of an individual who might have not got the best treatment from the NHS for a series of different reasons. And then you could be arguing from that anecdote, as it were, or that specific instance that therefore you should never close an accident and emergency and you should keep every accident and emergency unit open across the whole of the country. However, there is very, very clear evidence that having fewer accident and emergencies that are much more specialised means that you save more lives. So it is true that it’s difficult to abstract from the specific to the general and sometimes the emotive force of a particular experience may shift people off theme.

For Chris, the difficulties involved in abstracting “from the specific to the general” meant that, in certain cases, a more technical and critical argument is better suited to the discussion of an issue. However, he suggested that this was context-dependent, and that emotional discourse was still an important part of expressing the experiential dimension of politics:

But I don’t think that in my case that really applies. I was just trying to use a personal experience to highlight a political issue for a wider population. I think emotion is part of human experience and it probably affects every element of politics anyway.

Kevin Hollinrake expressed similar concerns about storytelling’s relationship to argument, arguing that “I don’t think it can just be about the story”. Again alluding to the challenges moving from the specific to the general, he suggested that “you’ve got to take the micro into

the macro”, and that a personal story had to have some generalisability to be relevant politically. He argued that “hard cases make bad laws”, a legal adage that implies exceptional or extreme cases represent a poor basis for legislation: “So you can’t just be about hard cases. It’s got to sequence through to a national injustice. It can’t just be about ‘my constituent faced this problem’”.

Indeed, despite these concerns about the possibility that stories could be stretched too far when making certain claims, politicians would often acknowledge that they enabled a logic of argument that was still a necessary complement to more technical, statistical, and critical arguments. Madeleine Moon drew this distinction, suggesting that stories were more concerned with illustrating real-life “impact” than “intellectual argument”:

It’s then not an intellectual argument. It’s a “Do you want this sort of impact?”, and hopefully your story is going to be powerful enough for people to think “Oh God that wouldn’t be a good idea would it?” or “Oh God that would be a good idea wouldn’t it?”.

As Chris Law put it:

Policy touches every part of life. So you can use stories in order to get behind the statistics and get behind the raw data: “This is how this affected me, being in care”.

Kevin Hollinrake shared such a position, and suggested that the explanatory power of personalised storytelling was still necessary to understanding an issue beyond “remote concepts”:

It’s the illustration of the case you’re trying to make. If you just talk in remote concepts, people don’t really understand it. They might think they understand it. It’s

only really when you get down to the basic level of “This person suffered this injustice and this is how it affected their life”, and then you extrapolate that out. That’s when you get something builds that compelling case.

From this perspective, the value of narrative argument was partly down to its use of *synecdoche* (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Oldenburg, 2015), and the power that individual cases of political experience had to illustrate a wider, more general problem. It was also down to, as Chris Bryant acknowledged, the engrossing nature of this logic of debate when compared to the “dry” logic of “facts and statistics”:

However if there is a debate on something to which your personal experience will speak volumes – whereas a dry speech about facts and statistics will not have anybody listening – then I think that’s perfectly legitimate. But I draw that distinction.

Chris Law made a similar distinction, arguing that if a story can:

advance something that needs to happen in your constituency, then do it, because I think numbers and statistics, while they’re important, don’t necessarily drive human motion quick enough.

6.4.2. “The worst thing is when there’s far too much of it”

Many politicians discussed the performative challenges that they face when telling stories, particularly when it came to establishing their authenticity. Chris Bryant described how stories invoke the challenges of maintaining a consistent public and private self:

Well I think the most important thing is to be authentic, and that is terribly complicated. I mean it sounds simple, doesn’t it? Just be authentic and be yourself.

And that's actually very complicated because all of us have our private version of ourselves and our public version of ourselves, and one is always terrified of being a hypocrite or being completely inconsistent with a view you held two years previously and so on. It's not a simple matter bringing personal experiences into the public domain, as a politician anyway.

Chris stressed the importance of stories being truthful and natural, and he suggested that using them in overly strategic and self-conscious ways was a barrier to their success. He highlighted the very deliberate ways in which they are sometimes deployed to give the appearance of humanity and ordinariness, and the ways in which they can often seem artificial:

I think stories like this have to come organically than be forced. If you're trying to force this so as to make yourself sound like a human being then you will actually look like a very cynical politician.

He also highlighted the importance of consent when telling the stories of constituents and members of the public:

I think Ed Miliband did one that was really kind of contrived and if it sounds fake then it's really counterproductive at that point. It's got to be real. It's got to be genuine. And it's got to feel like actually you are in a privileged position to share someone's story with their consent. So if it was contrived then it would be the wrong thing to do.

Chris Law made a similar point about these ethical considerations, suggesting that "you've got to be careful that you're not just using them for political ends", because such stories concern "human beings who've got real issues going on". Part of the problem, Chris

Bryant argued, was that personal stories are often used too frequently, and at unsuitable times. He referred to the recent Autumn budget statement as an example:

The worst thing is when there's far too much of it. For instance, in the Autumn budget statement, Sajid Javid bunged in something about his personal experience every second sentence and it was just inappropriate and it made him look a bit daft.

Kevin Hollinrake suggested that although he felt it appropriate for politicians to get deeply personal, stories can be problematic when they are particularly self-serving:

It is appropriate within reason but it's not about you. The issue's not about you. It's got to be about the bigger issue. So tying your experience to people's wider issues can be helpful, but as long as it doesn't sound like it's then about you.

He then went on to describe how politicians can often make miscalculations with personal stories, detailing one of his own:

We all make mistakes. Sometimes what you do falls flat, and you may have the best intentions. Sometimes things will be contrived, like we said earlier. It doesn't always go right. I did one. I spoke in the debate about Passchendaele where my Great Uncle had fought and I thought afterwards it was a bit too indulgent the story that I told, because it was about my family. And probably with hindsight it was probably too much about my family, not enough about the wider context. So, you make mistakes. Of course you do.

Michelle Thomson suggested that senior and high-profile politicians would find it difficult to tell authentic stories, not least because of the risks involved in exposing their personal lives, and the considerable degree to which their communications are managed:

They need to give the illusion of humanity, without actually taking a risk. So any risk in terms of personal disclosure has to be one that focus groups have already tried and tested. The top-level politicians are managed within an inch of their life. Some of them, for example, Theresa May was an example of that, did not say a word that hadn't been scripted for her by her advisers. If not the exact words, then themes that she should adopt and follow. I think people can hear that [...] So the extent to which politicians are managed, the more they are, the more they start to have a disconnect from sounding real or authentic.

However, she was still aware of the performative and theatrical decisions that governed her own storytelling performance. In her view, a strategic understanding of how her story might achieve their effects did not render it inauthentic. Rather, what mattered more was the degree to which her story was sincere, truthful, and interesting:

I did actively consider what would give the best outcome from a dramatic piece, if you like. And some people I'm sure opponents would say, "Oh you set out to do that". No, it wasn't as conscious as that. I'm merely noting that because of my background I was aware of what I needed to do to present it in the best way that I could for maximum impact. I mean the special advisers fawning around politicians will try and do that, but again it goes back to this authenticity, because they never really pull it off. I think the fact that what I was saying was true, understanding dramatically how you could enhance it only enhanced it. The fact is, if it's a pile of pants in the first place, it's going to be a pile of pants.

6.4.3. “Why on Earth would it not have a place?”

Many politicians were sceptical about the possibility of a politics free of personal stories. As Madeleine Moon argued, this has practical dimensions, highlighting the importance of personal experience in the proper implementation of legislation:

The other thing is you have to build a case, and as part of building the case, if we're not looking at the impact of the legislation that we're doing on ordinary people then it's dangerous legislation. [...] And I have seen legislation – I have sat on bill committees – where the lawyers have argued it from the legal perspective and I've said, “No, no, you have to look at what's this going to do in people's lives and what are the implications for people who are going to have to implement this?”. I have seen legislation go through this house that will make lawyers a lot of money, because its practical implementation is so flawed. And you have to use that reality of implementation of legislation and the impact on ordinary lives of those who have to implement the legislation – be they police, be they social workers, be they environmental health officials, whatever – you have to also bring that.

This practical point, however, highlighted a wider reality about the role of personalised storytelling in politics. For Carolyn Harris, a division between the experiential and the political was impossible. She suggested that personal stories were the locus of political problems:

They are what is the problem in this country. They are the problems. The stories reflect the reality. So unless you are able to relate a real-life incident, which is the consequence of that problem, those problems will never be solved. So unless you are able to share, you want to share, or you can share, then you will never really be able to demonstrate the true impact of something which is a problem-causer.

Likewise, Jim Shannon suggested that storytelling was crucial to the role of political representative, and being able to speak out on behalf of others:

Storytelling should be, must be, and probably is an integral part of the make-up of an MP. Being a constituency MP, as everyone is, then they get those stories every day and those stories will enable them to speak out on their behalf in Westminster, to enable them to seek the changes that are needed, and to ultimately try and make lives better.

A representative, he argued, must “become a voice for the people, for their stories in the chamber”. One politician expanded on this point, outlining how stories were crucial to generating empathy for constituents and their cases among ministers and fellow politicians:

Inevitably, when you’re giving examples of something happening to somebody, that is storytelling of a constituent’s particular problem. If you want to raise things with ministers, the best way of doing it is by having empathy and humanity with the people that you’re representing and relaying it to a minister. The times when the House of Commons will fall silent, even with five hundred people in the rooms, is when you’re talking about death, extreme poverty, a particular problem for a constituent whose disabled or sick or whatever it might be. That’s because most MPs will have empathy with the individual case, or may have a similar case, or may understand it from personal experience.

Michelle Thomson went even further, suggesting that the fundamental relationship between humans and storytelling made it an indispensable part of politics:

If telling stories has no place, arguably politics has no place and Westminster has no place. Storytelling has been the way that humanity has learnt since the beginning of time, or rather since the beginning since we can measure it. We know that storytelling is so important in cultures and societies that didn't even have books. You know it's a fundamental, so why on Earth would it not have a place?

6.4.4. "It's how you come to your politics"

In their wider reflections, politicians commonly returned to the importance of talking about issues in 'human' terms. For Michelle Thomson, the fundamental relationship between humans and storytelling meant that there was a certain humility and accessibility in sharing experiences. This, she believed, ensured politics did not become unmoored from society:

I think there is beauty in something that is simple and honest [...] Because stories are fundamentally the way people learn. We recognise when stories are authentic, and they shape us in ways that we can barely begin to fathom [...] So to my mind storytelling is essential if we are to keep electing people who are human beings and keep allowing them to be human beings so we can keep this important connection between society and politics.

There was a decidedly anti-elitist sentiment in the way some politicians spoke about their storytelling. Madeleine Moon contrasted storytelling to backgrounds and speaking styles that are traditionally considered elite or of a typical "rhetorician":

I have a son who is a senior lecturer in politics with a particular focus on rhetoric. He often tells me where I'm wrong with my rhetoric and the difference is I'm not a rhetorician. It's how you come to your politics and the way you speak. So I don't come from a university debating society perspective when I speak. Bizarrely, I think I

probably come from a mix of schoolteacher and giving evidence in a court of law perspective. Because that's the two things that you have to explain something in real terms. [...] And your language will often reflect that background, so sometimes for those who are brought up in debating societies, the language is uncomfortable and doesn't follow necessarily the very powerful and very successful rules of rhetoric, but that isn't where your training and your background is [...] it's important to have as wider variety of prepolitics experience that you can possibly get.

For Madeleine, storytelling was a crucial means by which politicians could combat perceptions of elitism, demonstrating to the public that many MPs do not lead easy lives, and that they exist outside the "Westminster bubble":

Sometimes I think it's easier when your personal experience has been the law or business. Because you can speak of that dispassionately. It's where your experience has been of trauma. That is harder. And I think it's where people are shocked because they think MPs have featherbedded lives, if only. They think that we live in the Westminster bubble, and you do a bit. But the Westminster bubble is not full of feathers. It's full of people who outside that bubble have real lives and real things going on, things that have been traumatic to them and their families, that have had huge emotional cost to them and their families. And that makes them actually extremely valuable in this place, because of their lived experiences.

This was echoed by another politician, who saw stories as something that could "humanise" politicians, and reduce the perception that they were "remote" and "aloof":

And you kind of hope that people then think "Oh, they're not quite as aloof or as remote from what's going on around them as maybe I first thought". And if that does something to humanise politics, then that's no bad thing.

Kevin Hollinrake took this point one step further, suggesting that personalised storytelling could help to alleviate public frustration with the seemingly adversarial nature of contemporary politics:

The Punch and Judy show we have over certain things – PMQs and some Brexit stuff – is not the normal position in parliament. The default position is that we work cross-party on lots of issues, be it select committees or debates about baby loss or contaminated blood, where we want to work cross party, very constructively, and you can see the comments on Twitter and the emails you get from constituents when that happens. They're very appreciative of that kind of approach [...] It can help our reputation, from this adversarial approach that most of the time people see, that we take a much more constructive approach.

Chris Law took a similar line, emphasising the importance of using personal stories to cultivate trust and “reach out” to disaffected citizens:

If you do not tell your life stories, if you do not tell the things of who you are, then it's difficult for people to feel they can trust you frankly [...] The point is there's such a level of distrust in modern British politics that if you're not reaching out, then what are you doing?

6.5. Interpreting Politicians' Narratives of Narrative Account Giving

When articulating their justifications, experiences, and wider opinions of personalised storytelling, the politicians I spoke to tended to draw on four overarching narratives to make sense of their behaviour, to attribute meaning to their experiences, and to situate storytelling's role in politics: a *strategic* narrative, a *dutiful* narrative, an *emotional* narrative,

and a *humanising* narrative. The separation between these four narratives was not always obvious, with many of them overlapping and intersecting in mutually constitutive ways.

6.5.1. *Storytelling as Strategy*

Every politician spoke, at some point, about the strategic benefits of sharing personal narratives. Whether it was getting the attention of the government, putting legislation on the agenda, or challenging social and cultural taboos, politicians knew that personal narrative was a powerful way that they could build cases and put forward their arguments. For many, this came down to its persuasive power. Personalised storytelling was said to have an emotional resonance that other forms of political rhetoric did not, increasing the potential that politicians could advance their campaigns, achieve political change, and get otherwise unconvinced government officials onside.

As such, when politicians appraised their storytelling experiences, they would often do so in terms of whether they had achieved their desired goals. Indeed, even when politicians spoke of the huge personal cost of sharing their intimate experiences, what mattered more was that they had achieved their aims. Moreover, many were sceptical about the possibility of achieving their aims without stories. As Kevin Hollinrake put it to me, “If you didn’t do those things, if you talked just in remote concepts, you would not have got the change we have”. Crucially, strategy here seemed to be less about personal visibility, and more about campaign success, social movement, and political change.

Unlike the more suspicious understanding of how politicians may use stories strategically, those that I spoke to emphasised the importance of sharing stories in ethical and truthful ways. They not only articulated an awareness of the cynical ways in which stories could be embellished or overused by some politicians, but they were also keen to reject such an approach. Whether it satisfied their strategic motives or not, they claimed they

would only use personalised stories if they illustrated a particular point in an appropriate and insightful way. The possibility that they would “stretch” a story to support a misleading generalisation was out of the question. Nevertheless, despite their personal willingness to guard against such motives, narratives of strategy clearly expressed the potentially misleading or deceptive way in which personalised stories are used by some politicians.

6.5.2. *Storytelling as Duty*

A related theme that politicians drew on to frame their storytelling experiences was that of duty. When discussing their reasons for sharing personal stories, politicians would articulate the importance of making voices heard, and articulating the real-life impact that certain policies and systems were having on the people that they represent. In this way, storytelling was entangled with their duties and role as political representatives. The act of sharing personal stories, in such interpretations, at times seemed more in line with a traditional conception of political representation as substantive. Representatives spoke of *acting for* other people, bringing their experiences to bear on the political process in a hope that they could enact some sort of change for them.

So too did they speak in the same terms about their experiences of storytelling. Many politicians spoke about the significant correspondence that they had received after sharing their stories, and how they had become viewed by many citizens as an important voice for those who had experienced something similar. They spoke in dutiful and altruistic terms about the importance of replying to this correspondence empathetically, due to its very intimate and personal nature. Stories here generated emotional connections in the representative relationship that, in traditional accounts of political representation, have been viewed as outside its scope. Here, the emotional resonance of politicians’ stories created moments of connection between representatives and the people that they represented. In these moments, the representative relationship was rooted in shared experiences, intimate

communication, and trust. These moments, however fleeting, seemed to speak to what has elsewhere been termed *direct representation* (Coleman, 2005). That is, they occasioned a representative relationship that was embedded in more than just the official process of translating interests into policy, instead proceeding on the basis of shared understanding, sincerity, and empathy.

6.5.3. *Storytelling as Humanising*

There was also a clear desire amongst storytelling politicians to demonstrate their humanity, and for the public to see that they were not, as Madeleine Moon put it, “consummate detached individuals with no life experience”. The central premise of the humanising narrative was that personal stories were an important way that politicians could show that, like the public, they too had complex personal life experiences, with the corollary of this being that they could also identify with and understand the experiences of ordinary citizens. Politicians were keen to show that they too encountered difficult and sometimes distressing experiences that were the product of certain political systems and ideologies, and their personal stories were an effective means by which they could express this.

Why did politicians feel the need to do this? There was a clear anti-elitist sentiment running through their justifications. Whether it was demonstrating that they could step outside of the ‘Westminster bubble’, or that they were not unfeeling “robots” or “clones”, most politicians wanted to combat perceptions that they were out of touch and unrelatable. This process was not always easy, and many politicians highlighted the challenges that politicians faced when trying to do this. At the centre of these challenges was the establishment of authenticity. Some felt that politicians often engaged in overly strategic and self-conscious attempts to showcase their authenticity through stories, which was said to be a barrier to success. Senior politicians who were “managed within an inch of their life” were said to be particularly problematic in this regard, not least because participants felt that

citizens could easily see through calculated and disingenuous attempts to demonstrate authenticity and ordinariness. Stories, then, needed to be organic to be authentic, otherwise a politician could easily come across as cynical.

6.5.4. *Storytelling as Emotional*

In this fourth and final narrative, politicians framed their personalised storytelling in emotional and psychological terms. They were open to more subconscious and affective reasons for sharing their stories. These explanations at times veered off into the terrain of dreams and the unknowable. Whether it was personal stress, catharsis, or a deeply felt response to a constituents' experience, some politicians articulated motives for sharing personal stories that stood well beyond traditional understandings of why politicians share personal stories. These motives suggested that the way representatives communicate cannot always be so easily divorced from experiential, emotional, and biographical influences, and nor did they fit particularly well the traditional view of the politicians as someone whose communications are the product of conscious strategising and rational decision-making. Though "parliamentarians are postulated to be beings of reason who make decisions on behalf of the 'common good'", this more emotional narrative demonstrated why they can never be "devoid of emotions" (Tremblay, 2019, p.128).

Moreover, when politicians discussed their experiences of personalised storytelling, they often did so through the prism of their personal and emotional impact. Many discussed the difficulties of returning to their traumatic personal experiences, and the lasting impact of 'opening up old wounds'. They spoke of their attempts at emotional management when telling their stories, and the personal and familial challenges that accompanied their decisions to share. Emotional sacrifice was a common interpretation of their experience, with many articulating a trade-off between personal difficulty and political impact.

Then, when asked to offer some wider reflections on the emotional nature of personalised storytelling, there were suggestions that it was impossible to divorce the emotional and the political. While politicians were aware of the ethical complications of stories, which they acknowledged could at times draw on emotions in ways that might be problematic for debate, they also highlighted the importance of discussing the emotional consequences of political structures and phenomena. As such, separations between the emotional, the personal, and the political were, to these political storytellers, not only unconvincing, but also undesirable.

6.6. Conclusion

In the study of personalised storytelling, little attention has been paid to what politicians *think* they are doing when they share their stories. In this chapter, I have set about addressing this gap by engaging with several storytelling politicians and their narratives of narrative account giving. Guiding these narrative accounts have been three central concerns: the justifications that they give for sharing personal stories, their experiences as they did so, and their wider reflections on the role that storytelling plays in contemporary political speech and debate. The result is four overlapping but conceptually distinct narratives that help to explain how a number of politicians make sense of their practices of personalised storytelling.

When interpreting why politicians share personal stories, conventional accounts have tended to emphasise their *strategic* aspects. As many politicians would confirm, such considerations were indeed present in their justifications, appraisals, and reflections. Personalised storytelling was said to be an emotionally resonant, persuasive, and ultimately effective tool of political campaigning, with a unique ability to gain the attention of government ministers and to promote political change. These strategic considerations, however, were not the calculating and deceptive motives that those suspicious of stories believe underlie political storytelling. Indeed, many of the politicians I spoke to were wary of

potentially unethical and disingenuous political stories, and were keen to guard against and critique their misuse. Instead, it was more an acknowledgement of storytelling's strategic efficacy as a tool of argumentation and campaigning, which has been widely acknowledged by the literature on collective action, social movements, and political campaigning (e.g. Plummer, 1995; Davis, 2002; Polletta 2006; Mayer, 2014; Fernandes, 2017).

What was perhaps most clear, however, was that these strategic considerations were only one part of a much more complex picture. While these narratives of *strategy* accord with more conventional accounts of how and why politicians share personal stories, and more broadly, why representatives have been said to turn towards a more personal style of communication, there were three other narratives that diverged from them considerably. Narratives of *duty*, through which politicians emphasised the importance of telling stories on behalf of others and making voices heard, suggested that their personalised storytelling was entangled with their roles as political representatives, lending further credence to the suggestion in Chapter 4 that storytelling *is* important to the contemporary practice of political representation. Narratives of *humanisation* and *emotion* also outlined the significant degrees anti-elitist sentiment and emotionality that motivate political storytelling. While the former emerged from a sense that storytelling could help encourage a politics that was more experiential, ordinary, and relatable, the latter showed how storytelling could not easily be divorced from the deep-seated emotional, psychological, and subconscious experiences of political representatives.

Such findings represent yet another challenge to the suspicion of stories. For the politicians discussed in this chapter, personal storytelling was not a means by which they could engage in cynical and manipulative attempts to appear human, disguise ideology, play upon emotions, and stretch bad arguments. In many cases, it was instead part of a wider effort to bring about a more direct, intimate, and experiential form of representation, one that was rooted in the shared emotional and personal experiences of representative and

represented. This effort proceeded on the basis that any separation between the personal and the political was questionable, and that Westminster politics was at its best when its speeches and debates acknowledged this. Personalised storytelling was a way that representatives could demonstrate that they too had private lives that were subject to the pressures and challenges of prevailing political systems and ideologies, and that they recognised and understood how such difficulties often played out for the general public. In times of serious emotional disconnection for the representative relationship (Coleman, 2005; Manning and Holmes, 2013; 2014), this fact alone gives us cause to reconsider the automatic condemnation that can often follow a storytelling politician.

That is not to say that all politicians see it this way, nor is it to pretend that cynical motives do not still inform instances of personalised storytelling. Indeed, one cause for concern emerging throughout the interviews was that many interviewees were aware of, and could identify, potential misuses of political storytelling, particularly for politicians in senior positions. Whether it was embellishing arguments, inauthentic overuse, or simply relating untruthful happenings, there was a strong belief that stories were susceptible to manipulation in ways that might strain against the democratic process. Yet, interviewees put this largely down to motives and intentions, with many suggesting that a desire to sincerely tell stories could guard against any potential exploitation of certain genre features, like emotional persuasion or anecdotal simplification. As such, when we dismiss personal stories simply because they *are* personal stories, we risk overlooking the “altruistic sentiment” that Michelle Thomson told me can often inform the way politicians tell them. What, then, might such a sentiment look like in normative terms, and how might we begin to set out a criteria for political storytelling that works in the interests of democratic communication? In the next and final chapter, I conclude by addressing these topics, and by returning to this thesis’ central research questions.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: How Can Storytelling Benefit Democracy?

7.1. Introduction

This thesis began with a problem for political theory. Traditional attempts to explain why politicians were increasingly sharing personalised stories and anecdotes – and the wider normative implications that this might have for political speech and debate – were dominated by a sense of suspicion (Mehan, 1997; Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014). The experiential, emotional, and anecdotal characteristics of personal narrative were said to be antithetical, by definition, to democratic communication, which was instead supposed to be premised on rational procedure, ‘objective’ argument, and the absence of theatre, persona, and style (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Schedler, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004). Such a suspicion, at first glance, may have seemed justified. Whether it is David Cameron’s infamous tale about meeting a “40-year-old black man from Plymouth”, Nigel Farage’s story about “feeling awkward” hearing foreign languages on a train, or Theresa May’s clumsy anecdote about running through fields of wheat, moments of spurious storytelling can give us reason to doubt the democratic value of politicians’ personal narratives.

The problem with such a viewpoint was that it seemed to locate the problems of spurious storytelling in the wrong place. Not only did it clash with long-standing claims about the centrality of narrative to human interaction (e.g. MacIntyre, 1981; Fisher, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Frank, 2010), but it also presented a hyperrational, overly scientific, and at times, cynical understanding of political communication. This looked increasingly problematic when set against an emergent body of work highlighting the value and cultural importance of experiential and affective styles of political argumentation (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Martin, 2016), the important place of emotions in democratic life (Marcus, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), and the way style, personality, and performance underpin important political processes (Alexander, 2013; Craig, 2016), particularly in cultural

and aesthetic accounts of political representation (Ankersmit, 1997; 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004; Seward, 2006; 2010; Peetz, 2019). These issues were laid bare by other examples of political storytelling, like those from emotionally charged debates on issues like baby loss, mental health, and welfare reform, that had been met with significant journalistic and public praise. If stories were always told towards some dubious end, then how could we explain Frank Field's (2017) belief in their power "to change MPs' hearts"?

As such, while pointing us towards important ways in which politicians' stories could be specious and misleading, critics of political storytelling mistakenly attributed this to inherent features of the genre of personal storytelling. Though these features made storytelling amenable to certain kinds of deception, they were also features that theories of rhetoric, emotion, and performance suggested had an increasingly important role to play in contemporary political culture (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Atkins and Finlayson, 2013), and that had long since made stories an important symbolic resource for the enactment and interpretation of political meaning (Bennett and Edelman, 1985; Mayer, 2014; Coleman, 2015a; Hochschild, 2016). The suspicion of stories amounted to a form of genre determinism that was impossible to square with the moments, however fleeting, where storytelling appeared to produce something valuable for representative politics and democratic debate. A better explanation, I suggested, was that misuses of stories had more to do with dubious intentions and practices than anything intrinsically problematic about the genre.

Far from something that should have no place in political life, this new perspective opened up the possibility that politicians' stories have a democratic purpose, and perhaps even normative value. This suggested the need for a critical reappraisal of political storytelling, prompting questions that I set about answering in the empirical part of this thesis. If style, personality, and performance are important mediators of political culture and democratic processes, then what role does the performance of political stories play in

contemporary British politics? If emotional, experiential, and affective arguments are of political and rhetorical importance, then how do we begin to situate those engendered through politicians' personal narratives in political speech and debate? If stories do not necessarily strain against ideals of political argument, or corrupt the terms of political representation, then can they strengthen these vital democratic practices? If so, how, and under what conditions?

In this final and concluding chapter, I summarise the key findings that arose in answer to these questions, before turning to their wider implications for the study of personalised storytelling in political communication. I will discuss these implications in the context of one of the above questions that still requires some attention. That is, the question of how, and under what conditions, we might think of personalised storytelling as benefitting democracy. Indeed, while much of this thesis has been concerned with the reasons why traditional understandings of politicians' personal stories needed reassessment, a comprehensive normative analysis involves more than simply dispensing with old criteria. It also requires that we develop a new one, which can help us to properly evaluate the potential value of personalised storytelling in political speech and debate. In this way, the interpretive insights generated in this thesis – about personalised storytelling and its relationship to practices of political representation and debate – can feed into a better normative understanding of how it might actually benefit or weaken such practices. How can the findings of this thesis help us to establish some benchmarks that enable us to better understand when and how politicians' stories work in the interests of democratic communication?

To answer this question, I return to the three key themes underpinning the theoretical framework established at the start of this thesis: argument, performance, and emotion. I recap the key findings of the thesis in the context of these concepts, before discussing how they each offer us a standpoint from which we can evaluate the merits and shortcomings of

different practices of personalised storytelling. I suggest that Chambers' (2009) notions of deliberative and plebiscitary rhetoric help us to ascertain when politicians' stories are facilitating, rather than impeding, democratic argument. I then turn to emotion, arguing that the democratic value of stories should be measured not by the types of emotions they produce, but by whether, and how well, they might help to introduce a sophisticated discourse of emotionality into contemporary politics (Samuels, 1993; Richards, 2004). After that, I consider the performance of personal stories, arguing that a crucial normative yardstick is how they might help or hinder attempts to generate feelings of affinity, mutual understanding, and authenticity in representative politics (Coleman, 2003; 2011; Manning and Holmes, 2014)

In the following sections, then, my aim is not to engage in naïve celebration about the potential stories have to better political speech. Stories are not some panacea for the myriad challenges that face democratic communication today (e.g. Finlayson, 2019). Extolling their virtues, and asking politicians to simply tell more of them at the expense of other rhetorical forms, is much too simplistic. To do so would be to lapse into the same kinds of prescriptive genre determinism that form the heart of this thesis' critique, and that push us further away from the important principles of rhetorical diversity and interpretive openness. Instead, I intend to conclude this thesis with a more modest way of conceiving of personalised storytelling's democratic potential. This is by no means exhaustive, but it does represent an important step away from suspicion, instead amounting to cautious optimism about what politicians' stories, under the right circumstances, might do for democracy.

7.2. Stories and Argument: Deliberative or Plebiscitary?

One of the earliest claims made in this thesis was that our understanding of the relationship between personalised storytelling and political argumentation was in serious need of revision. Claims of "legislation-by-anecdote" (Hyman, 1998) epitomised a prevailing view

among those suspicious of stories that stories had little value rhetorically, proceeding as they did on the basis of subjective knowledge that could not easily be generalised from (Hall-Jamieson, 1988; Souto-Manning, 2014). Here, I argued that such criticisms of personalised storytelling were founded upon an “epistemological hegemony of quantification” (Coleman, 2018, p.160), which saw qualitative, anecdotal, and situated knowledge as debasing the quest for an objective political truth based on technical, generalisable, and aggregated statistical information.

I suggested that a more flexible and interpretive understanding of political truth, which celebrated the democratic importance of its contestation through inclusive, diverse, and contextually situated rhetorical forms, encouraged us to think about stories differently, with a potentially valuable and important role to play in contemporary political argumentation. Approaches to political rhetoric that had started to emphasise the cultural significance and political function of affective and experiential argument (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; 2016; Martin, 2016) prompted an important research question: *how should we conceptualise the emotional and experiential arguments that these stories engender, and the rhetorical functions that they serve in contemporary political speech and debate?*

This question was mainly addressed in Chapter 5, where I suggested that politicians’ personal stories could be considered affective rhetorical strategies (Martin, 2013a; 2016). Such strategies enable the expression, recognition, and contestation of emotional experience in politics, and in the case of politicians’ personal stories, these strategies were founded upon empathy, compassion, and emotional identification. The value of this mode of argument, as politicians described, was the way it could access ‘the human side’ of debate, introducing a local, experiential, and embodied logic into debate that encouraged interlocutors to see political issues in personal terms. Contrary to those who see this logic as fundamentally incompatible with the more systematic, generalisable, and rational logic of quantified debate, I suggested that this situated knowledge was, in many cases,

complementary to statistical knowledge, contextualising quantitative claims with qualitative insights (Peters, 2001). *Pathos*, in other words, complemented *logos*. The idea that we could dispense with such insights, as one interviewee put it in Chapter 6, could only lead to “dangerous legislation” that failed to account for the relationship between political phenomena and lived experience. Indeed, in their interviews, many politicians would describe the powerful ways in which stories had underpinned their campaigns and illustrated their points, convincing otherwise unconvinced government ministers of the importance of their case.

Stories, however, were sometimes “troublesome” (Tilley, 1999), relativising and simplifying issues in ways that called for a more technical and critical analysis of their causes and effects. Whether it was the question of how typical a lived experience was, what complex structural, ideological, and legal factors may have underpinned it, or whose personal experience matters most, it was important to consider that stories alone only helped us get so far in debate. There was a need for other rhetorical forms that could explicate the complex causes, circumstances, and effects that may surround certain lived experiences, and how or why (and even if) they may be connected to the issue under discussion. The risk, as some interviewees would point out, was that some politicians would overlook such troubles in favour of “embellishing” their arguments or “cutting through the noise”, and that “the emotive force of a particular experience” would then “shift people off theme”.

On the one hand, then, stories can be said to perform an important democratic function. They widen the rhetorical engagement with political issues by orienting people towards them through feelings of empathy, compassion, and emotional identification. By enabling this more local, experiential, and embodied logic of debate, and by casting political issues in personal terms, they provide affective and qualitative illustrations of political phenomena that can encourage interlocutors to see them in a new light. In a contemporary

political debate that can often be, as one interviewee put it, “cold and unfeeling”, they ensure that the technical, analytical, and quantitative discussion of an issue does not preclude one that is also more personal, embodied, and qualitative, invoking *pathos* in a public sphere that can often become overly preoccupied with *logos*. On the other hand, this comes with certain risks: the temptation to harness emotion in order to exaggerate claims; the danger of relativising and oversimplifying complex issues; and the possibility that misleading experiences distort attempts to draw up accurate pictures.

With such implications in mind, we can confidently dispense with the suspicious perspective that politicians’ personal stories are of no benefit to democratic argument. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that this sometimes can be the case, and any potential normative value of personalised storytelling depends heavily on the intentions and outcomes that accompany the way they are brought to bear on debate. What I want to suggest here is that a beneficial relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic argument rests on the extent to which that relationship is a *deliberative* one, in the sense best captured by Simone Chambers’ (2009) distinction between *deliberative rhetoric* and *plebiscitary rhetoric*. Deliberative, here, is not meant in the traditionally exclusionary sense of a dispassionate and logic-oriented mode of reason-giving. It is concerned less with the style, genre, or delivery of an argument, and more with its outcomes, and the strategic intentions of the speaker in relation to their audience. Whether founded on a dispassionate appeal to *logos*, or an impassioned appeal to *pathos*, deliberative rhetoric “makes people think, it makes people see things in new ways, it conveys information and knowledge, and it makes people more reflective” (Chambers, 2009, p.336).

It can be defined in opposition to plebiscitary rhetoric, a type of rhetoric that Chambers (2009) believes is endemic in contemporary mass democracy. Such rhetoric is “concerned first and foremost with gaining support for a proposition and only secondarily

with the merits of the arguments or persuasion for that matter” (Chambers, 2009, p.337). A deliberative speaker intends to approximate truth and to thoughtfully illustrate their points, creating a dynamic relationship between themselves and their audience that encourages active and reflective contemplation. A plebiscitary speaker, on the other hand, deploys “speech strategically for the purposes of winning”, and rather than treating their audience as “autonomous deliberators deserving of respect”, they treat them as “a means to power” (Chambers, 2009, p.337). From this perspective, the threat to deliberative ideals is not that which has been proposed by those suspicious of stories – that “passion and artifice will replace reason and argument” – but rather that political speech and debate will be “dominated by plebiscitary tendencies” (Chambers, 2009, p.345): an inclination towards power over truth, pandering over persuasion, and winning over understanding.

This does not mean that a desire to win, or a strategic approach to rhetoric, necessarily precludes deliberation. Deliberative rhetoric can be both strategic and insightful, geared towards both winning and promoting understanding. What it does mean, however, is that when the latter is increasingly being sacrificed in aid of the former, rhetoric is moving further away from the deliberative goals of engaging, sincere, and thoughtful debate. As a normative standard that we can apply to the relationship between practices of personalised storytelling and political argumentation, this distinction captures the notion that spurious stories do not emerge primarily because of genre or style, but rather due to the plebiscitary intentions that can govern their misuse. It does not ignore that certain aspects of stories might make the genre more amenable to the kinds of deception discussed above, but its premise is that what matters most from a normative perspective is whether the telling of a political story is underwritten by an ethical commitment to promoting deliberation.

What would this look like in practice? Deliberative stories would provide insight, encourage mutual understanding, and meaningfully illustrate political problems. They would draw on *synecdoche*, not to make misleading generalisations from ambiguous situations, but

to provide examples of lived experiences with the goal of widening our understanding of a political issue. They may combine this with *ethotic* argument, providing plausible insights into the character and attributes of a politician or person. When the discussion of political phenomena is beset by an overly technical, legal, and rational language, failing to recognise its subjective, personal and experiential dimensions, deliberative stories would redress the balance and open the space for affective engagement. They would invoke empathy, compassion, and emotional identification not simply because it is persuasive, but because it provides new ways of relating to a political issue, prompting deeply felt responses towards phenomena that may have been hitherto treated unfeelingly.

Unlike plebiscitary storytellers, deliberative storytellers are not simply concerned with winning the argument, defending a government record, or enacting a political change. While they may want to do all those things, they would also be concerned with promoting intersubjective judgement (Coleman, 2018). They would intend to promote *social curiosity* with stories that encourage audiences to “embrace an array of remote experiences” (Coleman, 2018, p.163). They would be mindful of the *principle of collective interpretation*, keen to offer a culturally resonant, inclusive, and perceptive account of political experience that “opens up access to a sharable sense of reality” (Coleman, 2018, p.164). So too, would they be committed to *working through disagreement*, telling stories that recognise the voices of others, that help make sense of conflicting truth claims, and that encourage interpretive openness (Coleman, 2018, p.165). Practices of storytelling dominated by plebiscitary tendencies instead sacrifice such principles, concerned only with the strategic imperatives of winning arguments and preserving power: emotions are invoked when they may not be productive; generalisations are made to mislead rather than illustrate; and simplifications deliberately conceal complex technical realities.

Many of the examples discussed in this thesis have demonstrated the merits of approaching politicians’ personal stories from such a normative standpoint. Take, for

instance, the politicians interviewed in Chapter 6. Most of these had made important and valuable contributions to debates through their personal stories. Their narratives had illuminated lived experiences of political problems, encouraged politicians and the public to view issues through a more experiential and empathetic lens, and ensured that such issues were not being solely explored in procedural, technical, and legal terms. As some of these politicians would note, their narratives were sometimes so emotionally resonant that they got through to previously unconvinced government ministers, who, when encouraged to look at an issue beyond programmatic goals and legal technicalities, had seen it in a new way. Here, 'raising awareness' about what it might feel like to be affected by certain political phenomena was a crucial deliberative function of their stories, encouraging interlocutors to contemplate otherwise remote experiences in their rhetorical exchanges.

One key factor in this was that these politicians seemed to approach storytelling in deliberative terms. They demonstrated a keen awareness of the ethical implications surrounding narrative arguments, and were eager to guard against a tendency that they noted among some politicians to overuse, embellish, and exaggerate their stories. They exhibited an awareness of the emotive force and explanatory potential of stories, yet they were also aware that these aspects of the genre, in the wrong circumstances, could oversimplify issues in the process of moving from the particular to the general. From a normative perspective, they showed how a seemingly effective relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic argument was possible, providing it was accompanied by an ethical responsibility to tell stories in deliberative, not plebiscitary ways.

In normative terms, then, this shifts us away from the notion that politicians' personal stories must always corrupt the terms of democratic argument, while still allowing us to account for the moments in which they do. Indeed, if the politicians discussed in Chapter 6 showed how an efficacious relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic argument can be mediated by a commitment to deliberative intentions, so too were there

examples that demonstrated the way a harmful one can arise due to motives that are plebiscitary: where, in favour of simply making a political point, orators overlooked the deliberative shortcomings of their stories. When Nigel Farage seeks to argue against “open-door immigration” through stories about hearing foreign languages on trains and being stuck in traffic on the M4; when David Cameron seeks to justify his opposition to an “out-of-control” immigration system by referring to a “40-year-old black man” in Plymouth; and when Nigel Farage and Theresa May both claim that an illegal immigrant could not be deported because of his pet cat, the proposition that stories should foster critical judgement, thoughtful insight, and active contemplation is not being taken seriously.

As Chambers (2009, p.343) reminds us, “politicians in mass democracies want to win”, and the “incentives to treat speech” as a means of winning “are immense”. This point has become increasingly pertinent with the growing visibility of populist political actors, whose plebiscitary motives represent a significant threat to deliberative storytelling in politics. One would need to look no further than Donald Trump’s “conspiracy stories” to see evidence of how narratives can be shared by such actors with little regard for their veracity, like his claims that he “saw” thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrating the 9/11 attacks, or that “somebody told” him that Barack Obama’s birth certificate listed him as Muslim (Polletta and Callahan, 2017).

The danger is that stories are too willingly co-opted by such leaders to misinform the public, systematically distort events, and engender verifiably false claims, with rumours and hearsay becoming a tool by which populists can destabilise authoritative, reliable, and accurate narratives of political reality that might otherwise be important to intersubjective understanding and deliberative exchange. The distinction between deliberative or plebiscitary rhetoric, however, reminds us why this is primarily a product of intentions, offering us a normative standard from which we can acknowledge both these promises and pitfalls of storytelling in contemporary democratic argument: both its capacity to engender

claims that are specious, misleading, and deceptive, as well as those that promote insight, reflection, and intersubjective understanding.

7.3. Stories and Emotion: Sophisticated or Unsophisticated?

Another central theme of this thesis has been the relationship between storytelling and emotions. I began by suggesting that one of the common criticisms levelled at political storytellers – that they endangered political communication by stirring our emotions and disabling rationality – was problematic. For those suspicious of stories, the fear was that personal narratives promoted powerful emotional and automatic reactions to political issues (Souto-Manning, 2014), precluding reasoned examination by “bewitching” (Salmon, 2010) and “compelling” (Mehan, 1997) audiences. This was challenged by both neuroscientific and psychosocial understandings, which had problematised the separation between emotion and reason inherent in these criticisms, and showcased the complementary ways in which emotions enabled reason (Samuels, 1993; Damasio, 1994; Marcus, 2002).

Moreover, recent political theory had begun to highlight the crucial role that emotions played in contemporary democratic life. Rather than seeing emotion as antithetical to democratic ideals, this theoretical effort had begun to conceptualise it as a vital mediator of politics, and a crucial means by which politicians, the media, and the public all engaged with, communicated about, and made sense of the political process (Coleman, 2013; Martin, 2013a; Martin, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This suggested a new way of thinking about politicians’ stories, implying that the emotional attachments that they generated could be of normative importance. That politicians were increasingly engaging in emotive and therapeutic expression through personal stories had significant implications for political culture, and this was another important consideration when conceptualising the emotional and experiential arguments that such stories engender, and the rhetorical functions that they serve in contemporary political speech and debate.

This was a central focus of Chapter 5, where I suggested that one answer to this question had been provided by those critical of therapy culture's impact on contemporary politics (e.g. Rieff, 1966; Cloud, 1992; Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2004). According to such critics, personalised storytelling was part of a wider process whereby politicians were increasingly behaving according to a more irrational, depoliticised, and sentimentalist mode of leadership. Politicians, the argument went, had become increasingly preoccupied with a language of personal suffering, emotional reflexivity, and confessionalism. This, in turn, was said to be damaging the public sphere: affect and emotion were overriding reasoned debate; a focus on individual experience and agency was depoliticising issues; and politicians were failing to model reticence and civility in their roles.

I argued, however, that such a viewpoint held politicians to a normative standard that was both unrealisable and undesirable. Not only did it ignore the crucial part that affect and experience had been said to play in political life, but it also ignored the "emotionalized" political culture which now coloured people's interactions with politics (Richards, 2004, p.340). A key component of this political culture was that emotional expression, far from aberrant or undesirable, was in fact expected by the public, satisfying a desire for politics to in part resemble and acknowledge the kinds of reflective, open, and authentic emotional experiences that they encountered in popular culture and everyday life (Corner and Pels, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2005). Richards' (2004, p.340) notion of an emotional deficit in political communication explained this standpoint, highlighting how indifference and alienation from contemporary politics could partly be attributed to communicative practices which had failed "to satisfy the contemporary taste for certain kinds of affective experience".

With this in mind, I argued that what was problematic from a normative perspective was not the spread of therapeutic and experiential discourse, but rather a lack of it. There was a "two-way street" between the psychotherapeutic and the political, which meant that the way politicians communicated in part had to acknowledge the psychological and

emotional dimensions of political phenomena (Samuels, 1998). The value of personalised storytelling was that it injected emotional reflexivity into political speech and debate, providing a means by which this two-way street could be acknowledged, and by extension, a means by which political communication could seem more in touch with an emotionalised popular culture.

Many of the examples discussed in Chapter 5 demonstrated this process, particularly in cases where the emotional dimensions of an issue had either been disregarded, misunderstood, or excluded in political debate, and had not yet been sufficiently explored or talked about in public. Deeply intimate personal narratives enabled politicians to 'raise awareness' and 'tackle taboos' surrounding social issues, engendering political recognition and public understanding over what it meant and felt like to be affected by otherwise private political phenomena. These stories addressed the emotional deficit and established the two-way street by holding out the possibility of an intimate publicness, with the potential that political communication could be connected to popular culture, and rooted in the psychological, through shared cultural scripts and emotional attachments that were rooted in everyday, personal, and ordinary experience (Berlant, 2008).

Though these potential benefits give us a strong normative reason to discount the suspicious notion that emotional expression through stories is always problematic, it was clear that such benefits were not always forthcoming. There have been examples in this thesis where personal stories were shared in such a way that appeared suspect. At times, there was a sense that emotions were being mobilised for disingenuous reasons, or treated in simplistic ways. A new normative standard for stories and emotions would need to account for the moments where they bring us *both* closer to *and* further away from the democratic goals of alleviating the emotional deficit in political communication, and producing a more effective two-way street between the psyche and politics.

In establishing this normative standard, it would be too simplistic to suggest that we want stories to evoke certain 'good' emotions ahead of certain 'bad' ones. We should certainly attend to the way stories might leverage emotions in the service of hateful causes, like in the case of Brown's (1999) racialised anecdote, but we should be wary that such causes often involve the manipulation of emotions that we might conventionally consider to be positive (in this case, a nativist form of empathy and emotional identification). What is at stake here is a less a question of the kinds of emotions being produced, and more a question of the quality of emotional and therapeutic discussion that stories might bring about, and the intentions that govern their usage. In this way, a better question we can ask of a story is how well it might satisfy what Richards (2004, pp.345-6) has termed a "sophisticated discourse of emotionality". For a story to satisfy this discourse, it would have to be geared towards more than just the avoidance of intolerance in political communication. Rather, it would have to represent, satisfy, and indeed develop a sufficiently reflexive, authentic, and directed "understanding of emotion or affect and its place in everyday life" (Richards, 2004, p.345).

This sophisticated discourse of emotionality is characterised by four key features. First, it acknowledges that emotion is "an intrinsic and continuous dimension of human functioning, not an optional or episodic response". Second, it recognises that emotion is "complex and multi-layered", "at times contradictory and obscure", and "not always easily observed or understood". Third, it demonstrates that emotion is "not just expressive or cathartic but also reflexive", where "there is an effort toward the containment and working through of difficulties, rather than their suppression or expression through acting out". Finally, it understands emotion "as the ground of self-identity", a process underpinned by "emotional narratives about feelings and relationships" that provide "the material for contemporary narratives of oneself". These narratives are "psychologically realistic", and in so being "include the anxieties, doubts, conflicts, and dilemmas which are to be found in our everyday emotional lives" (Richards, 2004, p.346).

To use stories in this way would also be to tap into the “political energy” that lies dormant in a culture where the political level of the psyche is often kept at arm’s length. As Samuels (1993, p.59) has argued, individuals experience a “repression of political potential” when they cannot “engage with a political theme that, consciously or unconsciously, is exercising that individual”. When there is a disconnect between forms of psychological, private, and emotional suffering, and the political conditions that emerge from and impact upon them, then both individuals and the political system are devitalised:

If a culture does not allow a flowering of political potential to occur and express itself, then that culture loses one of the most productive avenues for personal growth [...] the individual loses out as well as the prospects for transformation and healing of psychopathology within the political system (Samuels, 1993, p.58).

When this political potential is developed, individuals gain a greater understanding of how their political identity is shaped by their emotional and psychological experiences, and encounter new opportunities for personal growth and political expression, while society benefits from an enhanced understanding, recognition, and transformation of the way political systems are constitutive of and constituted by said experiences. Stories would help this process by expressing themes and experiences traditionally deemed off-limits, by increasing dialogue between psychological suffering and political systems, and by helping both politicians and citizens understand how their personal histories and political identities intersect.

From this normative perspective, a desirable relationship between storytelling and emotion requires that the cultivation of emotions like empathy and compassion are grounded in a more complex and psychologically realistic understanding of their meanings. The stories that seemed to attain this relationship were those that sensitively engaged with the affective dimensions of a political issue. They arose as a challenge to the possibility that emotion

could be treated as something optional, episodic, or separable from political structures and instrumental decision-making. There was a sense that politicians were engaging in reflexive attempts to work through the personal difficulties that had arisen from theirs and their constituents' experiences, using stories to negotiate complicated emotions and their challenging meanings. These narratives communicated the complex ways in which emotion relates to self-identity, and how the people under discussion were shaped by their affective experiences. Crucially, in many cases, they were psychologically realistic, exploring emotions in a way that had fidelity with the vagaries, challenges, and unpredictability of everyday human experience.

In contrast, those that failed to attain this relationship treated emotion in primarily goal-oriented terms, as something that can be stirred, manipulated, or set in motion at will to achieve certain political aims. Stories, here, were viewed less as a way of acknowledging emotions as a continuous aspect of human life, and more as an instrument used to evoke particular emotional responses. Emotions were treated simplistically, and far from something complex to be worked through, negotiated, and considered, they were something to be nodded to or drawn upon strategically. They alluded to the important relationship between emotion and self-identity, but given that this was often being done in unsophisticated ways, it lacked the psychological realism of a thorough, honest, and sincere interrogation of how one's emotional experience might relate to their identity. The normative question of whether a story contributes to a sophisticated discourse of emotionality therefore encourages us to recognise how stories can both engender *and* impair a richer connection between politics and affect: amounting to either a serious interrogation of the links between our political and emotional lives, or one that is ultimately contrived.

7.4. Stories, Style, and Performance: Connecting or Disconnecting Representation?

A key issue in this thesis has been the relationship between storytelling, performance, and the act of political representation. I began by suggesting that this relationship had so far been conceptualised as a resoundingly negative one. For those suspicious of stories, the intrusion of personalised storytelling into the communications of political representatives was said to corrupt the terms on which political representation, and the wider political process, was taking place (Salmon, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2014). It was seen as part of a wider development whereby the democratic process was becoming emptied of its content by an emphasis on personality, style, and performance, with a focus on image and theatre displacing the serious discussion of policy programmes and ideology (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Schedler, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Franklin, 2004). In a more procedural understanding of representation, this meant that the important process of developing political opinions, translating interests into policymaking, and holding representatives to account was becoming obscured. Personalised storytelling was said to be complicit in this process, disguising ideology, emphasising persona, and connecting representatives and the people that they represent on the supposedly illegitimate basis of image, style, and emotion, rather than mutual political positions and policy goals.

I challenged such an interpretation by highlighting how representation is an aesthetic and creative act, mediated by phenomena like style, culture, and the personal (Ankersmit, 1997; 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004; Saward, 2006; 2010; Peetz, 2019). More than simply a procedural act, I argued that representation is a constitutive process, characterised by a process of performative claims-making through which the key categories of representation are dynamically constructed: who politicians are, who the public is, and what their relationship may be (Saward, 2006; 2010). This is entangled with questions of style, personalisation, and culture not to the detriment of representative politics, but to ensure it remains culturally accessible and popularly relevant, offering a sort of common ground on

which politicians and citizens can enter into each other's worlds (Ankersmit, 2002; Pels, 2003; Street, 2004).

Rather than undermining the legitimacy of political representation, I argued that the legitimacy of contemporary representation therefore partly depends on the convincing performance of representative claims, which, when successful, can result in emotional connections between the public, politicians, and their performances (Pels, 2003; Saward, 2006; 2010; Alexander, 2013; Peetz, 2019). By reconsidering personalised storytelling along these lines, I suggested that we could gain an important insight into its democratic function, and provide an answer to one of the key research questions of this thesis: *what role does the performance of political stories play in contemporary British politics?*

As such, rather than something that trivialised or the debased the political process, I explored in Chapter 4 how personalised storytelling is entangled with the contemporary act of political representation. In a political culture where representative legitimacy in part depends upon realising personal feelings of affinity, shared identity, and mutual understanding (Coleman, 2005; Manning and Holmes, 2013; 2014), I suggested that politicians tell stories to perform representation in a style of communication that is more affective, experiential, and ordinary. Expected to demonstrate varying degrees of affinity, ordinariness, authenticity, empathy, and intimacy as part of their representative claims (e.g. Coleman, 2011; Drake and Higgins, 2012; Manning and Holmes, 2013; 2014; Coleman and Firmstone, 2017; Enli, 2017), I argued that their stories aim to do this in two primary ways. By telling stories about themselves, politicians attempt to highlight how they are relatable, authentic, and ordinary individuals. By sharing personal stories about the public, politicians endeavour to enact a more connected representative relationship, in which they are empathetic, attentive, and effective listeners, knowledgeable about their citizens' political concerns and understanding of their personal experiences.

Stories and anecdotes were instead said to possess an important performative function in a political context where politicians and the public increasingly engage with the representative relationship through the lens of the authentic and the experiential. This was echoed by the politicians interviewed in Chapter 6. On the one hand, their narratives of humanisation highlight the important anti-elitist function of personalised storytelling, which they believe could demonstrate their representativeness, emphasising that they are humans and not socially distant ‘robots’. On the other hand, their narratives of duty highlight that these performances have a clear substantive function, becoming a means by which they can represent their constituents by bringing their stories into the political domain in order to effect change.

Across both these chapters, there was a sense that there were both merits and shortcomings to this relationship between personalised storytelling and performative representation. I discussed instances where these stories and anecdotes appeared to realise their performative effects, such as the 2012 mental health debate, producing a sense that representation was being conducted in a more efficacious, authentic, and empathetic way. I also discussed moments where they failed, like David Cameron’s 2015 conference speech, where his attempts to demonstrate a more connected and empathetic style of representation were exposed as dishonest and exploitative. Likewise, interviewees spoke of moments where their resonant personal stories had occasioned connections in the representative relationship that were founded upon shared experiences, intimate correspondence, and mutual understanding. Yet, some of them were also concerned that the potential benefits of appearing human and attempting to generate these authentic connections had given rise, in some cases, to an overly strategic and self-conscious approach to storytelling that was ultimately spurious and disingenuous.

A key normative claim arising from these findings, then, was that the genre of storytelling is not always doomed to be a cynical force in representative politics. Stories have

the potential to generate normatively valuable connections between representatives and represented. Crucially, this can underscore representative legitimacy in a time where disengagements from politics are increasingly punctuated by a lack of affinity, mutual identity, and a sense of elitism. What these findings also mean, however, is that personalised storytelling can *still* be used in cynical and manipulative ways. The allure of storytelling is that it can be used to engender powerful yet ultimately spurious attempts to appear human, ordinary, and empathetic. When these performances are exposed, there is every possibility that they can reinforce the very disengagements that they have the power to assuage.

In addition to approaching stories as either deliberative or plebiscitary, or emotionally sophisticated or unsophisticated, we can also evaluate them by asking how well they connect or disconnect representatives with the people that they represent. To what extent do they engender a sense that representation is being practised honestly, sincerely, and empathetically? To what extent do they cultivate emotional connections between representatives and represented, inducing a sense of affinity, intimacy, and a shared world? To what extent do they lead to an efficacious relationship in which the public's stories influence how they come to be represented? Such questions proceed on the basis that a legitimate and desirable representative relationship in part requires that it has a cultural sensibility, an emotional reflexivity, and an experiential grounding in the lifeworld of the public, with a belief that the performance of personal stories has a role to play in mediating such a relationship.

A key component of such an approach is to ask – when politicians tell stories to perform representation in a more affective, empathetic, and ordinary style of communication – whether they are being authentic. As discussed in Chapter 4, the close relationship between affinity and authenticity means that politicians will struggle to showcase their commonality and relationship with the public if they cannot also convince them that their

attempts to do so are genuine, and motivated by sincere intentions. One obvious mediating factor here is whether a story is true or not, and whether it looks like a politician's intentions are more than just self-serving or premeditated. However, there is also the trickier question of whether a politician appears like they are 'being themselves' in the telling of a story. Do their previous patterns of behaviour, along with the things they have said previously, match up with what they are demonstrating now? In other words, do we have reason to believe that they are the kind of ordinary, empathetic, and open representatives that their stories might imply? In Chapter 4, the stories that seemed to best connect representation were those that evoked the common traits typically associated with authenticity, like sincerity, trustworthiness, originality, and emotional integrity (Enli, 2015; Karen Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p.74). Politicians appeared to be genuine, and their stories carried a uniqueness and fidelity that seemed to capture the intricacies of real human experience.

In contrast, those that led to disconnections did the opposite. The issue with David Cameron's stories in 2015 primarily arose because they were inauthentic. They were inaccurate, and shared without the consent of those involved, calling into question his motives and intentions. This generated a sense that voices were being appropriated rather than heard. Citizens felt that they were being represented not on their terms, with a need to rectify this in media follow-ups where they sought to distance themselves from certain representative claims. Such media follow-ups, in turn, undermined Cameron's attempts to demonstrate an empathetic and connected the representative relationship, instead contributing to an impression that his stories were just self-serving rhetorical strategies.

The generic and carefully scripted nature of conference speech storytelling also seemed to represent a barrier to authenticity. Lacking the kinds of spontaneity, sincerity, and emotional complexity present in everyday examples of authentic storytelling, some politicians' personal narratives seem unnatural. As Chris Bryant put it to me in his interview, "if you're trying to force this so as to make yourself sound like a human being, then you will

actually look like a very cynical politician”. To citizens who have become accustomed to hearing stories like this many times before, they can come to seem like carefully orchestrated attempt to appear human rather than anything like authentic self-expression, thus undermining their capacity to generate trust, cultivate interest, and speak to experiential truths.

Such issues should be read as part of a wider struggle that mainstream political leaders face in their attempts to cultivate authenticity. As Coleman and Firmstone (2017, p.284) have suggested in their study of the 2014 European elections, the performances of mainstream leaders – those established politicians who attempt to show that they are both ordinary enough to be representative of the people *and* extraordinary enough to be statesmanlike and civil - “tend to be generic”. It is a genre of political performance that has become “fundamentally discredited”, yet through fear of appearing too ordinary to be extraordinary, or vice-versa, “there is a sense in which mainstream politicians ‘can’t live without it and can’t live with it’”.

Unlike many of the storytellers discussed in parliamentary debates, who were backbench MPs less constrained by such pressures of mainstream performance, many political leaders seemed to be caught in the “performative bind” of demonstrating both their extraordinariness and ordinariness through their stories (Coleman and Firmstone, 2017, p.261). Knowing that they can appeal to their ordinariness through stories that reveal emotional past experiences and intimate aspects of their private lives, so too do they know that by revealing too much, they risk appearing so ordinary that their credentials as authoritative and legitimate political leaders become undermined. Here, they encountered the dilemma that many high-profile politicians struggle to navigate in their performances of authenticity, of having to come across as “both captains and team members at the same time” (Coleman, 2011, p.51).

From this perspective, deeply personal and confessional narratives could perhaps seem like risky admissions of emotional and psychological vulnerability, viewed by some as ill befitting of political seniority. This is perhaps one reason why, as previously discussed, Kevan Jones suggested that sharing his story about depression in the 2012 mental health debate could “mean that the possibility of any future ministerial career is blighted forever”. Interviewees also alluded to this dynamic, highlighting difficulties that high-profile politicians – those who were “managed within an inch of their life” – would have when trying to tell stories that were truthful, relatable, and natural enough to resonate on the same experiential levels with the public. The result is a contrived, generic, and thematically limited approach to political storytelling that can often lack the kinds of sincerity, originality, and emotional integrity important to the contemporary performance of authentic representation. Rather than communicating a sense that representation is more authentic and connected, this can end up further fuelling the ‘distrust’ and ‘discredit’ that often accompanies mainstream political performances (Coleman and Firmstone, 2017; Peetz, 2019).

There is a wider point to be made here about the relationship between storytelling, performance, and political representation. In highlighting the notions of authenticity and affinity, my aim has not been to suggest that the practice of representation can be ameliorated simply through token gestures, or perfunctory demonstrations of a shared world and mutual relationship. Politicians can open up about their ordinary personal experiences, or talk about their interactions with the public, but if this is not followed by a genuine commitment to the maintenance of such a relationship, then it is unlikely to alleviate the widespread sense that politicians are motivated by self-interest, or that they are detached from the local and personal experiences of much of the public.

Connecting representation requires an approach to political storytelling that is also fundamentally concerned with efficacy, as well as authenticity and affinity, and the negotiation of a “communicative relationship” in which people can feel like their stories and

their personal experiences actually influence what representatives say and do (Coleman, 2011, pp.51). This was the kind of approach expressed by Frank Field in Chapter 4, and a number of politicians in Chapter 6, where there seemed to be an acknowledgement that sharing, responding, and engaging empathetically with constituent stories was an important part of being a representative, and that it was important that their experiences were recognised and could hold some sway in the legislative process. It was also the kind of approach that was eschewed when stories, especially about constituents, were used in strategic, deceptive, and non-consensual ways, and where it became clear that, far from being used to cultivate a mutual relationship, the public's stories were purely a means to a politician's ends. By focusing on these notions of authenticity, affinity, and efficacy, the normative standard proposed here captures how personal narrative has the potential to both improve and diminish connections in contemporary representative politics. As such, we can begin to think not only about the way personal narrative mediates the act of political representation, but also about the way it might enhance it.

7.5. Conclusion

The indispensable relationship between humans and narrative means that storytelling is a fundamental dimension of politics. Democratic life, just like human life, "depends on the stories we tell" (Frank, 2010, p.3). One of the guiding premises of this thesis has been that – as a central mode of human interpretation and moral evaluation – storytelling is central to the way politicians, citizens, and the media all make sense of and produce the political, a vital symbolic resource for the performance of political meaning, and a central device for the evaluation, explanation, and enactment of political behaviour. My aim has been to show how and why this has significant implications for our understanding of personalised storytelling's role in political speech and debate.

In exploring such a topic, I have explored both the stories that politicians tell, and the justifications and explanations that they offer after telling them. There remains, however, a number of avenues for further research that were outside the scope of this thesis. For example, much of this thesis has been dedicated to a top-down exploration of the relationship between personalised storytelling and the act of representation, focusing particularly on how stories facilitate the making of representative claims by various politicians. While I have been able to consider some of the potential performative effects of these claims on the citizens receiving them, a rich area of further inquiry could be to explore this relationship from the bottom-up, asking citizens themselves how they feel about such claims. A deeper understanding of how stories might work for or against the representative relationship could be served by establishing how and why people interpret stories in particular ways. In this way, we can better apprehend which personal narratives tend towards authenticity and emotional identification in the eyes of different citizens, and which personal narratives do not, uncovering the complex factors that might underlie their performative success and failure.

There is also a great deal to explore from this bottom-up perspective, at a wider level, regarding the relationship between personalised storytelling and democratic life. How do citizens talk about, and make sense of, their political identities, beliefs, and acts through personal narrative? As discussed, this research effort is already well underway, with the personal stories of citizens used as a wider platform for the investigation of different phenomena like political worldviews (Hochschild, 2016), the act of voting (Coleman, 2013), and disengagement (Manning and Holmes, 2013). Nevertheless, the suspicion of stories has meant that such enquiries have, for too long, been seen as outside the scope of political science and theory, leaving many avenues still yet to be explored and fleshed out.

This does not mean that there have been exhaustive answers to such a question from a top-down perspective either. As discussed in Chapter 6, little attention has been paid

to the way politicians also make sense of their roles as political representatives. Aesthetic and symbolic accounts have taken us beyond a merely procedural understanding of the act of political representation, highlighting its creative foundations, its important relationship to popular culture, and its reliance on joint feelings of psychological identification. Yet, we know very little about how politicians navigate such an act, and how they experience these increasingly important sensibilities of democratic representation. The interviews in Chapter 6 demonstrated the complex interplay between strategic considerations, performative imperatives, and emotional attachments that mediate the way representatives make sense of their roles and communicative practices. A further enquiry into such questions might ask a larger number of representatives what they think they are doing when they act, how it feels to be a representative, and what it might mean to represent others.

Another area for further investigation could be the media's role in political storytelling. Throughout this thesis, I have briefly touched on some of the ways in which politicians' personal stories are mediated. On the one hand, there is the significant role that the media play in conveying, evaluating, and sometimes even challenging the storytelling performances that politicians engage in. Many of the public's engagements with politicians' stories will often be filtered through news articles, in which journalists offer their own narratives and interpretations about their meanings and consequences.

As discussed, these evaluations can range from the way one Guardian journalist described the 2012 mental health debate as a "shining moment in the Commons", to the way in which another Guardian journalist "picked apart" the anecdotes shared by David Cameron in the first televised leader's debate (Burkeman, 2010; Jacobs, 2012). It is fair to assume that these journalistic interpretations play an important role not only in the way politicians' stories are received (how do different journalistic interpretations interact with the way the public come to understand and evaluate the stories politicians share?), but also in the

question of whether politicians' stories are received at all (which stories get reported by journalists, which do not, and why might this be?).

On the other hand, there are the many ways in which politicians engage with the media before, during, and after sharing their personal stories. Politicians are aware of the fact that their stories will be broadcast live and potentially featured on television and social media channels, and they must prepare their performances accordingly. They are also aware of the media attention that can proceed their stories, and this can bring opportunities to discuss their performances further in media follow-ups like televised interviews and newspaper articles.

These follow-ups can provide important insights into the motives, intentions, and preparations that go into politicians' personal stories, but they also represent opportunities for them to further influence how their stories might be received by the public. This is also suggestive of a wider question that might be investigated, concerning how politicians use different media channels to share their personal stories. Social media platforms, for example, may represent another important context in which politicians share personal stories, and analysing the stories that are shared across these platforms would certainly deepen our understanding of the mediated aspects of personalised storytelling in politics.

These questions of reception and mediation were mooted as potential inclusions in the thesis, but they were ultimately deemed to be outside its scope. The inclusion of these topics would have only been possible in a much larger project, and to be included within this one, they would have required a significant change in emphasis away from the questions of how personalised stories are used in speech and debate, and what intentions and motives politicians have when they share them, towards questions of how they are shared in specific mediated contexts, and how they may be received by citizens. Such a focus would still have offered an interesting entry-point into some of the important normative questions discussed

in the thesis, namely regarding the genre of personalised storytelling and how it might be used by politicians negotiate their roles and relationships with the public. Nevertheless, by conducting qualitative interviews with politicians, and by undertaking a textual analysis of the stories that they shared in parliamentary debates and conference speeches, I was better placed in this thesis to address the long-standing concerns about the normative status of personalised storytelling in the specific contexts of political speech and debate, and to explore the reasons and justifications that guide why politicians might engage in it.

As such, there remain many stories yet to be told about the relationship between narrative and politics. The story told in this thesis has, in many respects, entailed the revisal of an older story. In this older story, the way politicians were increasingly turning towards personal narrative was said to represent a serious threat to democratic politics. It was a story that called our attention to some of the important aspects of the relationship between personal narrative and contemporary political speech and debate. It encouraged us to critically evaluate politicians' personal stories, demonstrating some of the important ways in which they might be problematic and deceptive. Its key contribution was to demonstrate how the uniquely emotional, personal, and engrossing dimensions of personalised storytelling meant that they could be used by politicians in such a way that undermined democratic norms.

The problem with the story, however, was that it presented politicians as always somehow misusing personal narrative. The suspicion of stories represented a form of genre determinism. That is, issues were said to emerge not from the questionable motives and intentions that might govern particular misuses of personal stories, but rather from inherent problems with the genre itself, which was said to be fundamentally incompatible with democratic communication. The revisal offered in this thesis concerned the possibility that the stories politicians tell do not always have to strain against the political process, and that specious and misleading examples of their misuse do not amount to grounds for a complete

rejection of the genre. Instead, it suggested that in a different normative conception of politics – one that acknowledged the centrality of emotions, personal experience, and style in contemporary political culture – politicians' stories could be seen as something both important and potentially valuable to democratic practice. In this revised story, rather than corrupting the terms of representative politics, personal narratives were said to be an important medium through which it was now being performed. Rather than debasing political argument, personal narratives were said to perform important rhetorical functions. And, rather than something that made politics irrational, personal narratives were a means by which the emotional and affective dimensions of democratic life could be enacted and explored.

One of the key differences between this new story, and our older story, is that its ending is rather more open. At the heart of it has been a belief that the democratic potential of personalised storytelling cannot, and should not be foreclosed. In this way, it allows for a situation in which politicians' stories might indeed represent a threat to democratic communication: one where they are used to put power before insight, to manipulate rather than comprehend feelings, and to promote representative claims rooted more in disingenuity than anything else. Yet, it also allows for the possibility that politicians' stories, when told in the right ways and with the right intentions, can bring us closer to a more normatively desirable democratic politics: one where they are shared to make democratic debate more deliberative rather than plebiscitary, to close rather than widen the emotional deficit in political communication, and to cultivate, rather than inhibit, feelings of affinity, shared understanding, and mutual connection in the representative relationship. For those concerned with democratic communication, this alone makes personalised storytelling worthy of consideration.

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Appendix 1: List of Speeches Included in Initial Corpus

- Bennett, N. 2012. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 7 September, Council House, Bristol.
- Bennett, N. 2013. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 13 September, Metropole Hotel, Brighton.
- Bennett, N. 2014. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 5 September, Aston University, Birmingham.
- Bennett, N. 2015. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 25 September, Bournemouth International Centre, Bournemouth.
- Cameron, D. 2010. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 6 October, International Convention Centre, Birmingham.
- Cameron, D. 2011. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 5 October, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.
- Cameron, D. 2012. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 10 October, International Convention Centre, Birmingham.
- Cameron, D. 2013. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 2 October, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.
- Cameron, D. 2014. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 1 October, International Convention Centre, Birmingham.
- Cameron, D. 2015. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 7 October, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.
- Clegg, N. 2010. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 20 September, ACC Liverpool, Liverpool.
- Clegg, N. 2011. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 21 September, International Convention Centre, Birmingham.
- Clegg, N. 2012. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 22 September, Brighton Centre, Brighton.
- Clegg, N. 2013. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 18 September, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow.
- Clegg, N. 2014. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 8 October, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow.

Corbyn, J. 2015. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 29 September, Brighton Centre, Brighton.

Corbyn, J. 2016. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 28 September, ACC Liverpool, ACC.

Corbyn, J. 2017. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 27 September, Brighton Centre, Brighton.

Farage, N. 2011. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 9 September, Eastbourne.

Farage, N. 2012. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 19 September, Birmingham Town Hall, Birmingham.

Farage, N. 2013. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 20 September, London.

Farage, N. 2014. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 26 September, Doncaster Racecourse, Doncaster.

Farage, N. 2015. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 25 September, Doncaster Racecourse, Doncaster.

Farage, N. 2016. *UKIP Party Conference Speech*. 16 September, Bournemouth International Centre, Bournemouth.

Farron, T. 2015. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 23 September, Bournemouth International Centre, Bournemouth.

Farron, T. 2016. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 20 September, Brighton Centre, Brighton.

Farron, T. 2017. *Liberal Democrats Party Conference Speech*. 18 September, Bournemouth International Centre, Bournemouth.

Lucas, C and Bartley, J. 2016. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 2 September, University of Birmingham, Birmingham.

Lucas, C and Bartley, J. 2017. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 9 October, Harrogate Convention Centre, Harrogate.

Lucas, C. 2010. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 19 February, Arts Depot, London.

Lucas, C. 2011. *Green Party Conference Speech*. 25 February, Angel Hotel, Cardiff.

May, T. 2016. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 5 October, International Convention Centre, Birmingham.

May, T. 2017. *Conservative Party Conference Speech*. 4 October, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.

Miliband, E. 2010. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 28 September, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.

Miliband, E. 2011. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 27 September, ACC Liverpool, Liverpool.

Miliband, E. 2012. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 2 October, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.

Miliband, E. 2013. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 24 September, Brighton Centre, Brighton.

Miliband, E. 2014. *Labour Party Conference Speech*. 23 September, Manchester Central Convention Complex, Manchester.

Salmond, A. 2010. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 17 October, Perth Concert Hall, Perth.

Salmond, A. 2011. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 22 October, Eden Court, Inverness.

Salmond, A. 2012. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 20 October, Perth Concert Hall, Perth.

Salmond, A. 2013. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 20 October, Perth Concert Hall, Perth.

Sturgeon, N. 2014. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 15 November, Perth Concert Hall, Perth.

Sturgeon, N. 2015. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 15 October, Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre, Aberdeen.

Sturgeon, N. 2016. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 15 October, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow.

Sturgeon, N. 2017. *SNP Party Conference Speech*. 10 October, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow.

Appendix 2: List of Debates Included in Initial Corpus

Mental Health Debate 2012

Hansard HC Deb. vol.546. cols.504-77, 14 June 2012. [Online]. [Accessed 18 January 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2012-06-14/debates/12061445000002/MentalHealth>

Assisted Suicide Debate 2012

Hansard HC Deb. vol.542. cols.1363-73, 27 March 2012. [Online]. [Accessed 12 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2012-03-27/debates/12032752000001/AssistedSuicide>

Dementia Debate 2013

Hansard HC Deb. vol.556. cols.515-71, 10 January 2013. [Online]. [Accessed 13 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2013-01-10/debates/13011036000001/Dementia>

Food Banks Debate 2013

Hansard HC Deb. vol.572. cols.806-60, 18 December 2013. [Online]. [Accessed 14 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2013-12-18/debates/13121855000003/FoodBanks>

Psychological Therapies Debate 2013

Hansard HC Deb. vol.568. cols.241WH-264WH, 16 October 2013. [Online]. [Accessed 5 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2013-10-16/debates/13101663000001/PsychologicalTherapies>

Welfare Reform (Sick and Disabled People) 2014

Hansard HC Deb. vol.576. cols.423-75, 27 February 2014. [Online]. [Accessed 5 June 2018]. Available from: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2014-02-27/debates/14022773000001/WelfareReform\(SickAndDisabledPeople\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2014-02-27/debates/14022773000001/WelfareReform(SickAndDisabledPeople))

Cancer Treatment and Prevention 2014

Hansard HC Deb. vol.577. cols.37WH-60WH, 11 March 2014. [Online]. [Accessed 6 July 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2014-03-11/debates/14031150000001/CancerTreatmentAndPrevention>

Assisted Dying Debate 2015

Hansard HC Deb. vol.599. cols.656-727, 11 September 2015. [Online]. [Accessed 12 June 2018]. Available from: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-09-11/debates/15091126000003/AssistedDying\(No2\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-09-11/debates/15091126000003/AssistedDying(No2)Bill)

Benefit Sanctions 2015

Hansard HC Deb. vol.603. cols.562WH-588WH, 16 December 2015. [Online]. [Accessed 12 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-12-16/debates/1512163400001/BenefitSanctions>

Mental Health Debate 2015

Hansard HC Deb. vol.603. cols.997-1056, 9 December 2015. [Online]. [Accessed 4 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-12-09/debates/1512094500001/MentalHealth>

Baby Loss 2016

Hansard HC Deb. vol.615. cols.467-520, 13 October 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 8 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-10-13/debates/721CDF48-A721-4408-AA94-BE694FA1E7FC/BabyLoss>

Contaminated Blood and Blood Products 2016

Hansard HC Deb. vol.617. cols.1046-1083, 24 November 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 12 September 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-11-24/debates/9369C591-D01B-4479-B78A-E74243142B88/ContaminatedBloodAndBloodProducts>

Domestic Abuse Victims in Family Law Courts Debate 2016

Hansard HC Deb. vol.614. cols.1081-1120, 15 September 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 15 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-09-15/debates/34FB8AA3-6931-4A38-B1E2-2D5AE13B1F84/DomesticAbuseVictimsInFamilyLawCourts>

Social Care Debate 2016

Hansard HC Deb. vol.617. cols.304-355, 16 November 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 12 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-11-16/debates/DFB284D3-A7C7-477E-A7E3-95E8C0244A82/SocialCare>

UN International Day: Violence against Women Debate 2016

Hansard HC Deb. vol.618. cols.398-440, 8 December 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 13 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-12-08/debates/E44C950D-B3DF-4C11-924E-B1C62D565709/UNInternationalDayViolenceAgainstWomen>

Alcoholic Harm Debate 2017

Hansard HC Deb. vol.620. cols.407WH-450WH, 2 February 2017. [Online]. [Accessed 14 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-02-02/debates/FB8D6CA5-A644-438D-B776-71480C54E7A5/AlcoholHarm>

Baby Loss Awareness Week 2017

Hansard HC Deb. vol.629. cols.267-300, 10 October 2017. [Online]. [Accessed 7 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-10-10/debates/FF772C31-1540-436B-BF50-8E4DD352458A/BabyLossAwarenessWeek>

Male Suicide Debate 2017

Hansard HC Deb. vol.633. cols.189WH-196WH, 13 December 2017. [Online]. [Accessed 4 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-12-13/debates/261B5C8D-21BE-4F02-AF65-09D73DEFDD9B/MaleSuicide>

Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Debate 2017

Hansard HC Deb. vol.629. cols.1158-80, 20 October 2017. [Online]. [Accessed 15 June 2018]. Available from: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2017-10-20/debates/3DED3C9D-E118-43C1-861A-8B5593114E79/ParentalBereavement\(LeaveAndPay\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2017-10-20/debates/3DED3C9D-E118-43C1-861A-8B5593114E79/ParentalBereavement(LeaveAndPay)Bill)

Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews 2017

Hansard HC Deb. vol.632. cols.930-1003, 5 December 2017. [Online]. [Accessed 4 June 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-12-05/debates/07B953FE-5E97-46E4-9A2C-68F4FC91D739/UniversalCreditProjectAssessmentReviews>

Cancer Strategy 2018

Hansard HC Deb. vol.636. cols.399-435, 22 February 2018. [Online]. [Accessed 6 July 2018]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-02-22/debates/3BDD7D0E-1B8E-462A-81FD-A0E53A9C617F/CancerStrategy>

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval

The Secretariat
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT
Tel: 0113 343 4873
Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Matthew Lovatt
Media and Communication
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee University of Leeds

27 January 2021

Dear Matthew

Title of study **Personal Storytelling in British Political Rhetoric: Performance, Representation, and Emotions**
Ethics reference **FAHC 18-085**

I am pleased to inform you that the above research application has been reviewed by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee and following receipt of your response to the Committee's initial comments, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
FAHC 18-085 Ethical Review Form - MLovatt.v1.doc	1	28/05/2019
FAHC 18-085 Participant Information Sheet - MLovatt.v1.doc	1	28/05/2019
FAHC 18-085 Participant Consent Form - MLovatt.v1.doc	1	28/05/2019
FAHC 18-085 Sample Interview Questions - MLovatt.v1.docx	1	28/05/2019
FAHC 18-085 Fieldwork Assessment Form - MLovatt.v1.docx	1	28/05/2019

Committee members made the following comments about your application:

- This is a very well thought through application which is grounded in a strong consideration of the ethical issues concerned. The researcher has taken care to ensure appropriate and adequate procedures for consent from interviewees. The plan for recording and storing data is appropriate and clear. Attention has been paid to the implications for lone working arising from conducting one to one interviews and a considered response designed.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment>.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation and other documents relating to the study, including any risk assessments. This should be kept in your

study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited. There is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits>.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Blaikie
Senior Research Ethics Administrator, the Secretariat
On behalf of Prof Robert Jones, Chair, [AHC FREC](#)

CC: Student's supervisor(s)

Appendix 4: Sample Interview Questions for 'Checklist'

1. Some academics suggest that personal stories should have no place in political debate because they are 'anecdotal', 'emotional', or 'personality politics'. Do you think those criticisms are relevant?
2. Are there any politicians that share this view, and who frown upon or are reluctant to engage in the telling of personal stories?
3. In a debate or speech, why might you tell a story instead of using a statistic?
4. You told story [x] in a debate on [x], why did you decide to do so? What did you hope the story would achieve?
5. What was the reaction like from your constituents, media commentators, and fellow politicians?
6. Are you asked by constituents and charities to tell personal stories?
7. Do you think stories are suited to certain situations and issues instead of others? What might they be?
8. Often politicians will tell personal stories about their constituents' experiences. Do you do this, and if so, why?
9. Do you think it is important that politicians talk intimately and personally about their own experiences of issues? Why?
10. Is there a danger that stories can sometimes be used strategically and deceptively by politicians?
11. What stories do you think might harm citizens' perceptions of politicians, and what stories might improve them?
12. What kinds of stories do you think citizens relate to most?
13. Do you think it is important that politicians talk about issues in relatable, authentic, and ordinary ways?
14. Is it important for politicians to show an emotional side?
15. How might the stories told in conference speeches differ from those told in parliamentary debates?

Appendix 5: Consent Form



School of Media and Communication

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Consent to take part in “Personalised Storytelling in British Political Rhetoric: Performance, Representation, and Emotions”

	Add your initials next to the statements you agree with
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 22/05/2019 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research, I would like to be anonymous/identified (<i>delete as appropriate</i>)	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by auditors from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Matthew Lovatt
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet

School of Media and Communication



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Participant Information Sheet

Personalised Storytelling in British Political Rhetoric: Performance, Representation and Emotions

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part

The purpose of the project

Politicians are telling more personal stories and anecdotes in their speeches and debates, and my research project aims to investigate how and why these stories are being told. These stories are often dismissed as personality politics, overly emotional, or as 'merely anecdotal' arguments, yet my hunch is that storytelling has an important and valuable part to play in democratic debate. My project, which I am completing as part of my three-year-long PhD, aims to establish what this important and valuable part might be. By analysing various stories and anecdotes, and by speaking to politicians who choose to tell them, I hope to offer a better understanding of their role in political discourse.

Why have I been chosen?

In order to establish why more personal stories are being told in politics, I am conducting interviews with the politicians who tell them. You have been asked to participate in the project because you have told a personal story in a political debate or speech, and I want to speak to you about the value and purpose of storytelling when it comes to talking about politics. I hope to speak to around 10 other politicians, like yourself, who have delivered stories and anecdotes either about their own personal experiences, or their personal experiences of their constituents.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw any time up until three months after the interview has been conducted.

What am I being asked to do?

You are being asked to conduct a single interview, at a location convenient to you, of around one-hour in length (though this can be shorter depending on any time constraints you might have). The interview will be semi-structured, which means that I will come with some prepared questions, but that I'll also be flexible about where the discussion goes. I want to talk about some of the personal stories you've told, and some that have been told by other politicians. I'll ask some questions about why you told those personal stories, and I'll also be interested in some of your broader ideas about storytelling in political debate, and this might fit in with your own philosophies on what it means to be a political representative.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio from the interview will be recorded via my phone, but only a transcript of this audio will be used as part of the study. The transcript will only be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of it without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are no immediate disadvantages and risks to taking part, but we may discuss private and personal issues, regarding the stories that you've told, that you may not want to be made public. It is important to note that interviews will remain focused on your communicative practices as a political representative. However, if any sensitive issues come up in the interview, particularly regarding your role, you are free to stop the interview at any time, and to refrain from discussing any issues that you are not comfortable discussing. You do not have to answer questions, disclose information, or continue discussing anything that you do not want to, and you can ask to withdraw data from the study for three months after the interview.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no immediate benefits of taking part in this study, but you will be able to offer justifications and motivations for telling personal stories in debates and speeches, which might help academics and other citizens to understand why you do so. It is hoped that this work will contribute to a better understanding of when storytelling works and when storytelling doesn't. This, in turn, will allow me to establish how storytelling might improve democratic communication, and how it might lead to better connections between citizens and representatives.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Quotes from your interview data will be used as part of my PhD thesis, and it may eventually be disseminated in a publication (a journal article or book) resulting from the thesis. It will be stored securely in a password protected file on a university hard drive, and kept for three years after the study is complete. As mentioned, there will be a three-month period after the interview from which you will be able to withdraw your participation and resulting data.

What will happen to my personal information?

When you give your consent to participate in this study, you will be given the option for your identity and information to remain anonymous. Though this means any identifying characteristics like your name and initials will be absent when your data is used, it is important to note that there may be elements of the interview – such as a discussion of a particular story that you've told – that could give your identity away. If this presents a problem, you can ask for such information to be excluded from your interview transcript. Of course, any contact information we collect about you during the course of the research will

be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. If you agree to be identified in the consent form, you will be giving permission to be identified in conference presentations, the thesis, and any resulting publications.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The result of the project will be documented in my PhD thesis, which will be available by e-mailing me directly or by request from a thesis depository: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk>

The data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research, which will be stated on the participant consent form.

Who is funding the research?

The research is being funded by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities.

Contact me

For further information, you can contact me on my university e-mail address: en11ml@leeds.ac.uk

If you feel the need to contact my supervisor, Professor Stephen Coleman, he can be contacted at S.Coleman@leeds.ac.uk

You will be given copy of this information sheet along with a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information.