Just call me Dave: David Cameron’s perilous populist status

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to show how male politicians can draw on performances of masculinity to appeal to voters. The paper is interested in former UK Prime Minister David Cameron as an example of how performances of masculinity interact with the opportunistic use of populist forms of rhetoric. It argues that while Cameron’s performances of populism are often situated in compatible policy initiatives such as the “big society” (Higgins, 2013; Alexandre-Collier, 2016), we can identify a more sustained use of masculine performance in producing what Moffitt (2016) describes as a “performance” of alignment with the people. Building on work carried out in relation to the mediatisation and personalisation of politics in the last 50 years, this paper shows how gendered performances of political leaders can be seen to mirror changes in society, whilst at the same time exploring how this is can be hazardous. Whilst the ‘new man’ who is a hands-on father might be seen to appeal to Western voters, this paper will show how David Cameron attempted to draw on this performance of masculinity in his first term as UK prime minister, but soon realised that there are limits to such appeal in age of austerity.

**Key words**: masculinities, political leaders, David Cameron, media representation, austerity, populism

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**Introduction**

In recent years, much research has looked at the various ways in which politicians try to win and sustain a popular link with the electorate, particularly in the context of the rise of populism as a political style and set of policy priorities (see Moffitt, 2016). In an illustration of the spread of populism, and of the often complex relationship between populist style and political substance, some have used the example of former UK-Prime Minister David Cameron to show how particular policy innovations can be articulated with temporary “populist” performances (Higgins, 2013; Alexandre-Collier, 2016). While offering a convincing account of the opportunism inherent in much populist discourse, these leave further questions on the spread of populist style across political performance more broadly, including in the case of Cameron.

Other, related strands of research have looked at the association between populism and projections of masculinity. Mendoza-Denton (2017), for example, looks both at the aggressive masculinity of US President Donald Trump, but also at the use of hyper-masculine discourses in responding to and competing with Trump. In this paper, I go beyond the isolated “populist-friendly” policy initiatives of Cameron, with the election mantra ‘we’re all in this together’, to look at his own sustained form of performance around masculinity as he sought to prove he was just like any other youthful family man. I conclude by assessing the place of masculinity in the mutation and spread of populist discourse, and argue that Cameron is useful in showing not just how populist style can be deployed across diverse political standpoints, but also how masculinity’s development alongside social discourses of progress and liberalisation – most notably the expression of contemporary, liberal forms of manhood – can help us understand the potential influence of populist style in the future, as well as some its pitfalls.

**Personalisation and Masculinity**

The increased mediatisation and personalisation of politics in the last 50 years has led us to a point where, across the globe, it can be argued that the personality of a political leader is often as important as the policies they advocate. Whilst King (2002) contends that in the twentieth century the overall outcome of elections was unlikely to have been affected by the personality of a political leader, van Zoonan points out that

the personalisation of politics, as expressed most profoundly in popular culture’s treatment of politics, is an irreversible phenomenon that is part of a more general change in political culture, which includes among other things declining party membership and identifications and the loss of binding ideologies. (1998: 50)

As will be argued here, the gendered performances of individual politicians mirror social changes which are linked to this general change in political culture and electorate disengagement that van Zoonan mentions. This is particularly the case in the West, where the longer-term effects of social changes such as Second Wave Feminism can be seen to have produced the “new man” in the early 1990s. In a world where youthful, more dynamic leaders can appeal to voters, political leaders such as Tony Blair, Barak Obama and David Cameron sought to produce a gendered performance that is a “softer” form of masculinity, complete with “hands-on” fatherhood experiences in an attempt to show that they were normal guys, not distant, be-suited politicians. Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, fiercely guarded his private life when in government to the point that no photos were released of his two children until their surprisingly grown-up appearance by his side as he walked out of Downing Street after the 2010 election. However, in the run-up to the election, Brown sought to appeal to women voters by allowing *Grazia* reporter Lauren Lavern to shadow him for two weeks. He explained to her that his decision to talk more about his private life during the campaign, including the death of his daughter, was motivated by a desire to appear less one-dimensional: “You’ve got to explain to people who you are. The public have a right to know and they’ve got a right to see you answering any questions people put to you.” (*Grazia*, 5 April, 2010 p52). The cult of personality in politics is long-standing (see Wead 2003), but the gendered performance has become increasingly relevant in the media age.

This paper, then, will look at how David Cameron drew upon expectations of “new man” masculinity to appeal to voters through his mediated persona. As a relatively unknown prospective political leader when elected to be Conservative party leader in 2006, he sought to promote a ‘new man’ persona to inject a stereotypically middle-aged party image with a youthful vigour. This was seen most visibly at his first Conservative party conference, where he appeared on stage patting the stomach of his then-pregnant wife, Samantha. This highly visible performance of hands-on fatherhood was something that continued through the 2010 general election campaign, when Samantha was again visibly pregnant. As Dylan Jones states, on becoming Conservative party leader in 2006 “Cameron […] made the family one of the cornerstones of his vision” (Cameron and Jones, 2010: 192), central to the party’s policies but also fundamental to his self presentation. Whilst the economic crisis of the period subsequent to Jones’s interview with Cameron shifted the focus to the budget deficit during the 2010 election campaign, Cameron the family man continued to be central to his public image. However, as the new coalition government’s “austerity” policies started to be announced, it became clear that families would be affected most and Cameron’s wealthy middle-class brand of “new man” and “hands-on-father” contrasted sharply with the welfare benefit cuts to less affluent families of young children. Before going into more detail on these different forms of masculinity, it will be useful to first look at the media’s role in the presentation of these charismatic political leaders.

**Mediatised personalisation**

To go some way towards understanding why gendered performances have become such a powerful vote-winning tool, it is useful to begin by looking at how changes in the way “personalisation” has become increasingly important in media reporting of politicians. To begin with, there is a long-standing perception that politicians need to be “one of us”. As Ann Ruth Willner has observed, “in an age of democracy and egalitarian values, political leaders often feel impelled to demonstrate that they are of the people as well as for them” (1984: 174). The Janus-faced nature of political personae involves them being both ordinary and extra-ordinary. John Corner, in his discussion of political celebrity, further explains how more recently politicians are often called upon to reveal aspects of the private self and at other times to maintain an unflappable public authority. A distinctive characteristic of the process of personalisation is that it directs us to the importance not just of leaders and their leadership qualities, but of leaders as individuals, something in which both the media and politicians are co-producers. The media tend to focus not only on leaders and their personalities but also emphasise personal stories and narratives in order to make political coverage more attractive. This is certainly the case with David Cameron, whose severely disabled six-year-old son, Ivan, died in April 2009, a tragedy that was frequently mentioned in media reporting of Samantha’s pregnancy throughout the 2010 election campaign, and continued in reports of the subsequent birth of Florence on 24 August 2010. This pervasive personalisation of British politics has to be set against the wider social context. Other studies of how social context and constructed political personae are related have been conducted internationally, such as those of the political systems in Australia (Deutchman and Ellison 1999), the Netherlands (Van Zoonen 1998), Norway (Johansen 1999) and USA (Savigny 2004; Smith 2016). The importance and pervasiveness of this phenomenon is shown in studies that have explored how certain UK politicians (most notably Blair) have sought to make political use of the personal for strategic publicity and the construction of their public personae (eg, Fairclough 2000; Finlayson 2003; Scammell and Langer 2003; Street 2001; Smith 2008, Smith 2016).

Aligned to this, as Nick Jones (1999) has described, “spin doctors” have emerged to act as political press agents and publicists for individuals as well as for political parties, andnot just in the Western media (Stanyer and Wring 2004: 2). Bob Franklin (2004) argues that politics has been “packaged” for sale like any other consumer product, resulting in an emphasis on the instant acceptability of the politician’s image rather than on the explicit details and wider social consequences of their policies. Elsewhere, he has argued that this can be set against wider shifts in journalistic practices where

entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism, the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities, from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more “newsworthy” than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; “infotainment” is rampant. (Franklin 1987: 4)

Corner and Pels (2003: 16) have suggested more positively that this has led to a more inclusive political culture. Corner has also observed the growing evidence “that the private sphere is now more than ever being used as a resource in the manufacture of political identity” (2003: 394), which he suggests as become a central, perhaps obligatory, aspect of contemporary democracy.

In relation to wider issues of journalism practices with particular reference to gender, Carter et al (1998) have suggested the increasing emphasis on the personal is part of a wider feminisation of the media. This repacking of politics and politicians can be seen against a background of a rise in consumer culture where lifestyle is increasingly prioritised. In politics, whether this is part of a dumbing down in journalism (eg Cohen 1998) or an answer to the need to better inform and engage the public (Temple 2006), it is often regarded as being a result of “the professional advances of women in recent years [which] have feminised and humanised what was hitherto a male-dominated news agenda […] less pompous, less pedagogic, less male, more human, more vivacious, more demotic” (McNair 2003: 51)*.* Langer’s (2007) longitudinal (1945-1999) analysis of different dimensions of personalisation, including the politicisation of private personae in the everyday coverage of the British prime ministers in *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, showedthat the proportion of articles referring to the prime ministers’ private lives and personae saw a substantial increase during the 1990s, reaching a peak during Tony Blair’s premiership. As she reveals, Blair was the first UK Prime Minister to receive more references to his personal life and private qualities than to his leadership qualities.

Building on this, we will see that part of the shift to a focus on personal lives of political leaders can be attributed to gendered performances and has been made possible by wider social changes and the development of new discourses of masculinity.

**Maleness and masculinity**

Research in the area of language study has revealed deep-rooted stereotyping of masculinity and femininity which is common in most cultures. This involves a polarity of features which appear to produce a “two cultures” view of male and female attributes (see Cameron 2006). Simplistically, these can be tabulated, drawing on the work of Jennifer Coates (1995, 1996) and Deborah Tannen (1991, 1995) and offer features which we will come back to shortly.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Female | Male |
| Sympathy  Listening  Rapport  Connection  Supportive  Intimacy  Cooperation  Submissive | Problem-solving  Lecturing  Report  Status  Oppositional  Independence  Competition  Powerful |

From this table, it is clear that the “female” stereotypes are more appropriate to the private and domestic spheres, whilst those associated more with masculinity are more characteristic of the public world of work and politics. Feminist scholars have long argued that these are dangerous stereotypes which disadvantage men as well as women (eg Talbot 1998, Cameron 2006). Whilst there are significant similarities across cultures, when it comes to standard conceptions of what it is to be masculine and feminine, as Mackinnon (2003) points out, gender ideals vary from society to society, culture to culture and with the passage of time. Biological essentialists believe that gender is fixed, such as in the case of men whose levels of testosterone will always make them more aggressive and powerful than women. However, this denies or downplays the learning of masculinity through socialisation and fails to explain, for instance, why some societies have higher levels of football hooliganism than others. Where it is difficult to deny certain aspects of gender (such as physical build) are likely to be biologically determined, it is important to add to this an understanding of the social context which contributes to behaviour and beliefs (Brittan, 1989: 14).

As the above table indicates, masculinity may be partly understood by contrast from what it excludes – the feminine. Femininity is understood to apply to the world of women, but it is also applied to homosexual males, to whom culture habitually attributes effeminacy. For a man to publicly define himself as heterosexual would appear to be a means of achieving male legitimacy. The flamboyant accounts of dozens of female sexual partners and a generally showy verbal appreciation of attractive females can serve to present an image of legitimate masculinity. This in turn feeds back into the wider objectification of women and the stigmatisation of men whose heterosexuality is deemed suspicious. Gordon Brown, for example, who conducted his personal relationships well away from the public eye before his marriage, was subject to widespread discussions about his sexuality, most notably when he appeared on the BBC Radio 4 show Desert Island Discs and was asked by the host if he was gay (at the time, he was conducting a very private relationship with the women who would become his wife).[[1]](#endnote-1)

However, excessive sexual flamboyance in the form of multiple sexual partners can also be potentially damaging politically. In the UK for example, in 2008 the leader of the LibDems, 41-year-old Nick Clegg, agreed to be interviewed by Piers Morgan for the glossy men’s magazine, *GQ*, partly in an attempt to rectify the negative reception to his leadership by the media which had taken to referring to him as “Calamity Clegg”. However, reports which emerged from this interview earned Clegg further mocking nicknames, such as “LibDem Lothario” and “Nick Cleggover” in the British tabloid press after he appeared to suggest he had slept with 30 different women before his marriage. Closer analysis of the interview reveals a somewhat different story. Morgan had provocatively asked Clegg to give numerical details of his sexual conquests, which Clegg initially avoided answering. Morgan pressed on, though, asking “How many are we talking: 10, 20, 30?” at which point Clegg interrupted with “No more than 30. It’s a lot less than that”. From this context, we can see that Clegg is actually attempting to close down the issue without giving more details, but instead the wider media chose to leap onto the first clause of his response “No more than 30” and frame this as evidence of excessive sexual promiscuity. Despite attempts to set the record straight by appearing on tv and radio and giving interviews to other journalists, for a long time after that interview, this apparent sexual excessiveness was regarded as a means of defining Clegg’s qualities in the media (see Pierce 2008), and linked to other media attacks on him. It seems that whilst there is a preferred heterosexuality in our political leaders, there is little merit to be seen in political leaders admitting (or appearing to admit) to “excessive” promiscuity. And, of course, within the moral confines of Western society, fidelity within marriage is generally expected if a politician aspires to high office.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Whilst in the early twenty-first century there are many different discursive constructions of masculinity, such as working-class, “laddish”, black, and gay to name but four, we are going to look at the “new man” discourses of masculinity that is prominent in the political world. This performance of masculinity had first been shown in British politics to appeal to voters in Blair’s 1997 election campaign where his role as a hands-on family man was highlighted in speeches, interviews and media appearances. This continued throughout his time in office. The acceptance of such a performance of masculinity became an expectation when Gordon Brown took over, but as mentioned above, Brown’s intense desire to have a private life for his own young family was at odds with this (see Smith 2008), and resulted in him appearing aloof and disconnected from the public. David Cameron, on the other hand, mirrored Blair’s new man presentation of self in various ways, as we shall see shortly.

**Campaigning from the kitchen**

In order to engage with the wider population, Cameron’s director of strategy, Steve Hilton, suggested that the party make use of YouTube to by-pass traditional media. The idea of short broadcasts in the form of WebCameron came from Rishi Shah, who had been engaged by the party to enhance their digital presence. Anthony Ridge-Newman reports that daily visitor traffic for WebCameron stood at 150,000 in the initial phase of the project, before falling to 5,000–6,000 during its latter years (2014, pp19-36). When WebCameron was launched in January 2007, the first broadcast showed Cameron engaged in a direct address to camera, but also physically engaged in the domestic chore of “washing the porridge dishes”. The slick production of these videos was to make them appear informal and behind-the-scenes, typified by this first broadcast with Cameron talking about his work on his Conservative party conference speech, but also breaking off to engage with an unseen child:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Cam  Child  Cam  Child  Cam | Em right welcome to Webcameron well watch out BBC  Can I wash my hands daddy?  I’ll do it in a minute (.) [*laughing*] well watch out BBC and ITV we’re coming after you (.) this is I think a really good way of communicating directly with people about what the Conservative party is doing  Daddy wash my hands  What we believe in (.) what do you want to do wash you hands (.) in a minute (\*\*\*) now where was I (.) we wanna communicate directly I want to tell you what the Conservative party are doing what we’re up to give you behind the scenes access so you can actually see what er. policies we’re developing what that we’re doing and have that direct link because I’m really keen that we communicate [looking down at sink] with people properly (.) so this is Webcam (.) this is the oh (.) Webcameron sorry (.) [*brandishing washing up liquid bottle*] this is the opening of the piece [Child shouting in background] (1) Today I’m going to be talking about green politics and em telling you about the announcement I’m going to be making later today [Child shouting in background] (1) We’re going to have some great interviews on this em service (.) John McCaine coming exclusively to you on our web site and lots of behind-the-scenes footage of em the conference [*distracted by banging in the background*] but today we’ve still got a couple of days before the conference got to do a lot of work on speeches and (.) policies and (.) preparation but right now (.) I’m going to wash up the porridge | 1  5  10  15  20 |

Here, Cameron is enacting the “new man” persona of someone who is engaging in domestic duties such as washing up, his apparent off-the-cuff remarks enhanced by his self-correction on line 14, and the frequent voiced hesitation markers (lines 1, 17, and 19, for example), and vocalised reorentiation (line 9). In line 7, we see an unseen child interrupt Cameron, where he shifts from talking in the collective voice of the Conservatives (“what we believe in”) to directing his attention and interaction to the child (“what do you want to do”). He also brandishes a washing-up liquid bottle (clearly identifiable as a well-known eco-friendly brand) to make his point in line 15, thus neatly encompassing both the political and the domestic.

Several other early WebCameron broadcasts came from the family kitchen, with occasional shots of Samantha in the background and usually the sound of young children indistinctly heard. The frequency of videos posted to the WebCameron link decreased over the years, but this was revisited during the 2010 general election campaign when WebSamCameron broadcasts showed Samantha taking centre stage. At this point, Samantha was five months pregnant with their fourth child, so was visually reinforcing the image of Cameron as a youthful leader and family man. The cameras followed Samantha on the campaign trail, often starting in the family kitchen (but this time, with no children in the background). In the first broadcast, she appears in supportive wife role, taking a cup of tea to her husband who fondly patted her pregnant stomach and quipped that “the bump” was enjoying more press coverage than he was.

Although WebCameron had ceased to broadcast, the behind-the-scenes ethos it promoted continued during the election campaign and in the early months of the government with photos released to the media. These were often surprisingly intimate, such as one photo showing Cameron on the party bus during the election campaign, reading over some papers with Samantha apparently lying asleep on his lap. These images helped promote Cameron as a hands-on father, caring husband, and generally “normal guy”.

How successful a vote-winning tactic this proved to be is debatable as the 2010 election failed to give any one party an outright majority and the Conservatives were forced into Coalition with the LibDebs under Nick Clegg. The Coalition inherited an economy that was still reeling from the 2008 global banking crisis. The first few weeks of government were marked by swingeing cuts in government spending as the Coalition passed an emergency budget that sought to tackle the national debt by cutting public spending (although as Higgins (2013) and others have pointed out, this came to be articulated through the establishment of welfare claimants as an enemy of the populist common good). In the face of such unpopular spending cuts, Cameron himself became the focus of a “good news” story with his impending new fatherhood taking centre stage through carefully managed press releases and media photo opportunities.

**Family guy**

The family, who had been on holiday in Cornwall in late August 2010 when Florence arrived a few weeks early, chose to remain in Cornwall for a few more days after her birth. Whilst Samantha was not seen by the cameras after the birth (hardly surprisingly, given the emergency Caesarean operation she had undergone), Cameron made appearances initially at the hospital doors. Samantha and Florence returned to their holiday cottage after three days, and the media concentrated on discussing the child’s names. With frequent mention of Samantha “taking things easy” after the birth, we were left to assume that David was taking on the role of hands-on father to the new-born and to their two other children. However, alongside discussions of Florence’s names, many newspapers carried shots of the “proud father” enjoying surfing and diving – not a child in sight. The paternal pride of Cameron was represented in the dynamic shots of him as an active sportsman rather than building sandcastles or otherwise being seen as engaging in hands-on child care.

The first official photographs of Florence with Cameron are a series of intimate shots of Cameron in an open-necked dark shirt holding the tiny baby to his face. Released on 28th August, the photos were widely reproduced across the British national newspapers. The *Daily Mail* reproduced the full series of six, whilst other newspapers settled on just one. Even the anti-Tory newspaper, *The Guardian*, offered a highly sympathetic accompanying report:

While politicians are often reviled for their baby-kissing antics to garner popular approval, David Cameron can probably be forgiven for sharing a tender moment with his own daughter.

Florence joins siblings Nancy and Arthur at No 10, along with their mother, Samantha, who is reportedly recovering extremely well after the delivery.

Weighing 6lb 1oz, Florence was delivered by Caesarean section at the Royal Cornwall hospital in Treliske on Tuesday.

She had been due in seven or eight weeks, but took the couple by surprise while they were on a family holiday in Cornwall.

When Samantha Cameron announced her pregnancy before the election, many thought it was just the “bump” (sorry) the Tory leader needed to win the election. Matters took a slightly different course of events, as I'm sure the PM himself could attest.

In anticipation of their readers’ objections to a positive story about Cameron, the short article begins with the acknowledgement of the clichéd appeal of politicians kissing babies for voter approval, but then suggests here Cameron “can probably be forgiven for sharing a tender moment”. This hesitant approval is emphasised with the adjective “tender” to refer to the pose in the accompanying photograph. The report moves on to contextualising this in the light of the bitterly fought general election earlier in the year, with an anonymous “many” who were allegedly cynical of Samantha Cameron’s pregnancy as a popular vote-winning strategy where the youth and virility of the politician could be exploited. As mentioned above, this pregnancy did feature quite prominently on the campaign trail and in materials released by the Camerons themselves. However, as the report implies, this vote-winning strategy was less than successful as in the election the Conservative party failed to win an outright majority. In contrast, the *Daily Mail’s* report, accompanied by the six released photographs, makes little reference to politics beyond naming Cameron as the Prime Minister, and ending with a reassurance that Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, would be covering for him. Instead, the article seeks to connect with the newspaper’s readers by discussing the merits and risks of Caesarean deliveries in general, before speculating on the way the new baby would be received by her two siblings. There is also brief mention of the Camerons’ eldest son, Ivan, who had died the previous year, along with a photograph of the Camerons with Ivan and their other two children, captioned “Family time”. In this way, the *Daily Mail* seeks to connect Cameron to its readership through the personal life of the Prime Minister, not through his political beliefs.

On the family’s return to London, pictures of the proud parents showing Florence to the cameras in front of No. 10 Downing Street on 3 September were widely reported across national media once more. Reports featured fashion notes on Mrs Cameron’s orange tunic (approving) and the white shawl Florence was wrapped in (a gift from a party member who was reported to be a “grandmother of ten”). Whilst Cameron made a very brief official statement of thanks for the public’s good wishes, they both also responded to the shouted questions of reporters. As reported, these questions appear to have focused on the cliché of nappy-changing activities of male politicians that Jane Sunderland has suggested is the prototypical activity of the hands-on father (2004).

The Prime Minister, asked how many nappies he had changed, said: “Hundreds.”

Another journalist asked: “Has Nick Clegg changed any nappies yet?”, to which he joked: “That’s next.” (*Daily Mail*, 3 September)

This exchange was repeated across all the national newspapers, with the variation coming in the verb choice for Cameron’s response to the first question. The *Daily Express*, the *Sun* and the *Mirror* used “joked”. This links with the sense of light-hearted joy of the photocall, with most reports referring to the Camerons “joking and laughing”. However, the prototype new father act of nappy changing, as identified by Sunderland (2004), is one that here has been extended to the Deputy Prime Minister. The *Guardia’*s article comments on the wider context of other media reports, choosing to seemingly follow the fawning headlines with: “David and Samantha Cameron presented baby Florence”, before the smaller subheading: “…as *OK!* magazine would put it”. This sets the tone of the short *Guardian* article which is sympathetic to the innocent Florence whose first public appearance, they point out, was “exclusively focused on one subject – her nappies”. The exchange mentioned above is rearticulated to suggest a surreal encounter:

“Changed any nappies?” one reporter yelled at the prime minister.

“Hundreds,” he eventually replied.

“Has Nick Clegg changed any nappies yet?” asked another journalist (why, I don’t know).

“That’s next,” replied Cameron, equally bizarrely.

Thus the *Guardian* seeks to resume its distancing from aligning itself with Cameron the man by instead focusing on the infant Florence, and creating a sense of surreal encounter, as with the presupposition of a long gap between the journalist’s first question (triggered by *eventually*), and then using the adjective *bizarrely* to describe what other journalists tended to refer to as a joke. Cameron is associated with the rather more surreal elements of British press reporting, whilst his infant daughter is blameless, and so the *Guardian* is able to retain a tongue-in-cheek approach to reporting that distances itself from aligning with the politician himself.

In addition to the explicit mention of nappy changing as shown here, the reports also mention the Press Association news agency reporting of the delay in the start of the photocall: “The appearance was delayed by more than 10 minutes and a Downing Street press officer said that this as for ’operational reasons’. It was not clear if there was nappy changing involved”. This statement, in formal English associated with official press releases, is couched in the linguistic choices of official messages, triggered by the use of scare quotes to refer to “operational reasons”. The use of the cleft sentence to follow this up is intended to add humour to the statement, but the humour again focuses on nappies as the prototypical act of parenting.

Stories relating to the Camerons largely faded away as the parliamentary calendar ticked over at the end of the summer and the new baby settled into 10 Downing Street. Where stories did appear, they were more or less repeating the story of Florence’s birth but were accompanied by less prominent photos of Cameron out running with a “personal trainer”, with captions along the line of the proud father “getting back in shape” after the birth of his fourth child. In this way, the media appears complicit in the positive “loving father” persona that so appeals to voters to the point of unironically referring to his post-baby figure.

**Child care for the few, not the many**

Florence’s next appearance came in early October when the annual Conservative Party conference was held in Birmingham. This conference started on 6th October, but just the day before this a slew of “emergency” budget cuts had been announced that came to herald the “age of austerity” under the Coalition government. One of the most high profile budget cuts was in relation to child benefit payments. The *Daily Mail* sought to distance Cameron from this policy in their headline, where the Camerons had attempted to play up the “family man” image by staging a photo opportunity to apparently show Cameron greeting Samantha and the baby at a Birmingham railway station. In the improbably empty station, and with no discernible luggage, the photos show the two parents walking down a platform holding hands and smiling as Cameron holds a sleeping Florence. The *Mail*’s headline, “Caring face of the Tory Party as David Cameron takes time out from conference to meet wife and baby at train station” positions Cameron as the face of the party, his new man credentials on display as he is represented as the active agent in the headline who is prioritising family over work. However, the article opens with a hint of disquiet that leads to the implicature that the Tory party is not caring in the headline.

1. Just a day after announcing dramatic cuts to child benefit, the Tories desperately needed to restore their family-friendly image.
2. And what better opportunity to do that than a photo of the Prime Minister on daddy-duty with baby Florence.
3. A relaxed-looking David Cameron today took time out of his busy Conference schedule to pick his wife and daughter up personally from the train station and deliver them to their hotel.
4. And Mr Cameron, who took paternity leave after Florence's birth in August, admitted earlier today he couldn't wait to see his new daughter again - adding that he had been 'miserable' without her.

The initial acknowledgement of the controversial cuts in child benefit are dealt with in the first line, described as “dramatic” rather than the more widely perceived divisive nature of them. The alignment of the family man figure in David Cameron as being symbolic of the whole Tory party is implied by the use of “restore” rather than develop. Sentence two is also pointing to the medium of this message being delivered, with the implicit acknowledgement of this being a staged photo opportunity, before the rest of the article focuses on the happy family unit. Cameron’s dominant hands-on caring role is emphasised as he is described as picking up “his wife and daughter”, and this is “personally” rather than by proxy (sentence 3). This is juxtaposed with his “busy” life as prime minister, something that is emphasised by reference to his taking paternity leave (as brought into law by the first Labour government of Tony Blair, although Blair himself did not take advantage of it when Leo was born in 2001). His mental state is described with the emotive “miserable” to describe his separation from Florence, once again highlighting his new man status as he is not only the “doting father” as noted earlier, but is not afraid to talk about his emotions.

The next photos of Florence appeared on 10th October, where a series of behind-the-scenes photos were released. These were used most extensively, as usual, by the *Daily Mail*. A photo of Cameron, without his jacket, holding a pint of beer, standing beside Samantha who is playing with Florence, gives the headline: “The Prime Minister and his pint: David relaxes with Sam Cam and Florence after speech at Tory party conference”. Here, there is a juxtaposition of the official title, Prime Minister, with the more familiar first name David, with the former alliterating with “pint”. Samantha is given the colloquial, media nickname ‘Sam Cam’. He is described as “relaxing” with his family, emphasising his status as the family man. There is also a photo of Cameron cradling his daughter and feeding her from a bottle, which is captioned as being taken “shortly before going on stage to give his key-note speech”. This carries the implicature that he has prioritised feeding his daughter over the more official obligations of his office. In fact, this photo shows Cameron in a casual jumper rather than suit, so is unlikely to be taken immediately before he went on stage, and in fact there is nothing at all to show when the photo was taken. Beyond picture captions, the article itself is interesting as, rather than offer the usual discussion of Cameron as a father and Samantha as an impossibly glamorous mum, it picks up on a theme that first appeared in the report of 6th October where the photos themselves are discussed as media objects.

1. He'd just given the biggest speech of his life.
2. So David Cameron had more than earned a little liquid refreshment as he relaxed backstage with a pint of Guinness at the Tory party conference.
3. The Prime Minister is shown standing beside his wife Samantha, who is playing with the couple's six-week-old daughter Florence.
4. Immaculately dressed in a £749 Paul Smith gown, Mrs Cameron laughs as she holds her romper-suited daughter aloft.
5. The photographs were shot by the PM's personal photographer Andrew Parsons.
6. They give a unique insight into the life of the new premier at his first party conference since becoming leader of the country.
7. Rather than stress the public side of his role, Mr Parsons is keen to show Mr Cameron in several apparently unguarded moments.
8. One image shows him cradling his daughter gazing adoringly up at him as he feeds her from a bottle.
9. Another shot, taken from the wings of the stage in Birmingham as Mr Cameron delivered his address, shows the PM waving emphatically to illustrate a point.
10. However, the pictures are hardly spontaneous. Mr Parsons was specifically hired from Press Association news agency to boost Mr Cameron's profile in the run up to the election.

The article begins conventionally enough, with Cameron positioned as both powerful leader and as family man whose act of drinking Guinness is relatable to the wider readership. However, on line 5 we see a shift in focus as the photographer is named as Andrew Parsons, Cameron’s personal photographer. Parsons is grammatically responsible for the staging of the shots (line 7), however this is hedged with the use of “apparently” which casts doubt on the authenticity of the “unguarded moments”. After two more examples of such behind-the-scenes shots, the article continues on line 10 with implied inauthentic nature of the photographs, described as “hardly spontaneous”. Parsons himself is then revealed to be a professional photographer who has engaged to “boost” Cameron’s profile, thus exposing the contrived and thus potentially insincere manipulation of the image to fit a populist notion of the political leader as one of the people.

Given the *Daily Mail* and most other news media outlets had previously published the very intimate, private photos of the Camerons and their family during the election campaign and into the first few months of the Coalition government, what could have led to this raising of the curtain? If we go back to the news reports of the 5th and 6th October, these focused on budget cuts that featured damaging reductions in child benefit payments. As we saw in the article from 6th October discussed above, this sat awkwardly with the comfortable upper-middle-class family lifestyle that the Camerons embodied. Ever since the first of the WebCameron videos, Cameron had placed himself in the role of hands-on father, sharing parenting with Samantha, and embodying the new man persona along the way. Where Blair had been seen to promote policies of gender equality to include paternity leave and enhanced child welfare benefits alongside his own family man status, Cameron’s attempts at such populism in his own persona ran up against the austerity measures his Coalition government imposed that were perceived as directly targeting child welfare.

As a final point, in November 2010, it was discovered that Andy Parsons was not only working as Cameron’s personal photographer through the Conservative party, but since taking office, had been employed through the Civil Service. At a time when there were massive public spending cuts, the employment of a “vanity project” photographer didn’t sit well with the wider public. In fact, in an interview with the BBC journalist Nick Robinson in early November 2010, on raising this problematic employment, Cameron initially responded that Parsons was actually employed to work across government departments. A week later, however, Parsons lost his Civil Service job and was re-employed by the Conservative party. This story just added to the growing sense of dissatisfaction with “austerity policies” that the new coalition government sought to instigate in the early months.

When Cameron next appeared with Florence, it was on the occasion of her first birthday when they re-visited the hospital where she had been born. This time, the report focused not on the tenderness of a father/child relationship, but on Cameron’s physical appearance. The headline in the *Daily Mail* reads:

Relaxed Cameron returns to hospital where baby Florence was born (sporting deep oompa loompa tan)

*Daily Mail*, 25 August 2011.

In poking fun at Cameron’s tan by drawing on the humorous popular culture image of the orange characters in the film Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, we are not meant to think positively about Cameron. This is highlighted too by the use of parenthesis, which give the impression of a confidential aside: we are laughing with the journalist, not with Cameron. Very few images of Cameron and his children appeared in the media until the time of the 2014 general election, by which time his fatherhood media image had long since been abandoned. The backlash against the Coalition’s austerity measures, which disproportionately affected working class families, was initially hinted at in the article discussed from October 2010. Whilst Cameron’s decision to protect the privacy of his family may be partly responsible for this change, it is also to be suggested that the backlash against the perception that he was out of touch is also one to be considered.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, many male politicians draw on their family man credentials to enhance populist credentials. In Cameron’s case, he produced a negotiated form of masculine performance, which incorporates elements of social progression seen in Tony Blair (although in post-2010 austerity measures, such progressive policies were largely halted). While the focus so far has been on the exclusively aggressive form of masculine political performance and its relationship with populism, Cameron might alert us to a more subtle manner in which elements of populist style exercise an influence over the political mainstream. The seemingly insatiable desire for intimate details of the private lives of our politicians is seen here to have been carefully managed. However, this has to be viewed against the actions that affect the wider population, and in the case study here, we can get an indication of just how perilous it can be to perform “being in this together”.

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1. Brown’s response to Sue Lawley’s question “People want to know whether you’re gay or whether there’s some flaw in your personality that you haven’t made a relationship?” was: “People have a right to know about politicians’ arrangements’. This failure to give a satisfactory answer led Lawley to ask whether he was irritated by questions about why he had never married. To this, Brown responded: “It just hasn’t happened, and it’s one of the things that I suppose I’m surprised hasn’t happened, but it hasn’t. I’ve always assumed I would be married”. This reply, which came without a pause and with some traces of laughter, implies he believes himself to be heterosexual, but did not completely end speculation about his sexuality. This was only ended when he married in August 2000. (Desert Island Discs, BBC Radio 4, 13 March, 1996.)

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. And interesting comparison, though, could come between the French press’s complicity in declining to report President Mitteraund’s numerous affairs (something tolerated in French society) and the recurring stories of President Clinton’s infidelity that dogged his presidency, culminating in the Lewinsky affair. More recently, Donald Trump’s sexual history is being debated and, whilst this didn’t preclude him from achieving high office, it may yet prove more significant if re-election is sought. In the UK, more recently, the sexual history of Boris Johnson has been the subject of much media attention. Whilst at the time of writing, Johnson has not yet faced a general election, it is not clear whether his Trumpian brand of populism is one that will enable him to win over the voters’ historical distrust of men with a well-known history of infidelity. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)