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Emotional authority in presenting the later Covid-19 strategy: the speeches and statements of Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon

Keywords: political performance, press conferences, gender, pandemic

Abstract

Recent research on the performance of political leaders during the early stages of Covid-19 measures suggests that women leaders place more emphasis on emotional engagement and address their publics at the individual level. This chapter analyses the discursive management of emotion and authority in the post-lockdown stages of the pandemic, focusing on then-Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. A critical discourse analysis approach reveals elements of conversationalisation and political discourse. These varied across parliamentary speeches and public statements, but were consistently managed in a manner that balanced emotionality with a conventional language of authority. It finds that while Sturgeon displayed the emotional engagement associated with other women leaders, this was alongside a sustained commitment to a lexicon of governmental power and control.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented in its impact. There was the emotional burden of repeated lockdowns, terrifying death rates, and ever-present dangers of infection; all articulated publicly through regular media appearances by world leaders. Such emotionality has been stereotyped as a female trait, making the high profile then-Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon an interesting example to explore. Towards the end of 2021 as the Covid-19 lockdown eased, the management of public behaviour became more nuanced. UK Government messaging shifted from a straightforward imperative to “stay at home” to a re-emphasis on individual judgement. However, at the beginning of November 2021 the implications of Omicron as a more transmissible new variant became apparent. The emergence of this familiar but transformed danger redirected the communicative burden on the competent authorities towards outlining renewed restrictions while providing reassurance.

In this chapter, we explore the political presentation of this later phase of Covid-19 in the Scottish context, through key public statements from Sturgeon. This follows work by Creangă (2023) on Sturgeon's “crisis communication” over the first phase of the pandemic, arguing that the First Minister's empathic style stressed the privations as well as

responsibilities of the individual. This has been part of a broader set of findings that the early part of the pandemic revealed around gender and emotionality in political performance (see Jaworska 2021). Following Creangă (2023), we reflect on the discursive styles produced by Sturgeon as the demands of government and management shifted, particularly in the adjustments of emotionality and authority to new and emerging political conditions.

Campus (2013, p. 58) argues that women politicians are obliged to perform a “balancing act between meeting the gender expectations that ask them to be sensitive and tender-hearted, and to avoid appearing over-emotional”. Over the course of the pandemic, the contrast between the demands on women politicians and male leaders such as UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was stark. According to Jones (2021), even contracting the virus placed Johnson within a masculine frame. Along with Covid-stricken US President Trump, Johnson’s absence and recovery offered a facade of taciturn, manly resolve (Jones 2021), typical of Trump’s established media performance (Smith and Higgins, 2020). Dada *et al*’s (2021) survey of Covid-19 government speeches worldwide found relative gender unity in demanding responsibility, but identified women leaders as placing the greater emphasis on social and individual welfare (Dada *et al* 2021). This accords with Creangă’s (2023) account of Sturgeon’s early-pandemic projection of an “ethics of care”, that she argues contrasts strongly with the absence and detachment of Johnson (Tomkins 2020; Jones 2021).

Method

The chapter concentrates on the later phase of Covid (November-December 2021). The main part of our analysis looks at the FM Statement to the Scottish Parliament addressing the outbreak of a new variant, followed by an FM Speech in which Sturgeon and her Chief Medical Officer updated the public on restrictions. While both are articulated across political, media and public audiences, they differ in form such that Statement to Parliament presents as scripted and the FM Speech as semi-scripted.

Elements of critical discourse analysis are used to examine shifts in tone and orientation within these extended extracts of transcribed political speech. Fairclough’s work has emphasised the imposition of qualities associated with conversation across forms of public discourse previously associated with formalised discourse types, including news broadcasts (Fairclough 1995, p. 142). These shifts establish demands for political language to sustain a pretence of “dialogue” with the overhearing public (Fairclough 2000, p. 124). Characteristic features of such discourse that we use include the use of collective pronouns, as well as conversational markers of sincerity and authenticity such as colloquial language, hesitancy markers, and in-group references.

The turn to emotions

The endeavour of political communications has added emotional performance to its persuasive armoury (Richards 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), with striking an appropriate balance of empathy and leader-like gravitas becoming a key media skill of political leadership (Higgins 2018, p. 386). These qualities are apparent in this illustrative extract from Nicola Sturgeon’s video message in response to the death of Queen Elizabeth II:

Along with everyone across Scotland (.) the United Kingdom (..) indeed the world	1
(.) I feel (.) a deep sense of sadness on <u>the death of</u> Her Majesty the Queen (...) on	2
behalf of (.) the people of Scotland I offer my (.) sincere and <u>heartfelt</u> condolences	3
(..) to the <u>King</u> (.) the Queen Consort (..) and t:o the enti:re Royal Family	4

(Extract 1, BBC Radio Scotland, 12 September, 2022)

In this opening section of a longer statement, Sturgeon asserts her entitlement to speak on behalf of one the devolved nations of the UK, with both formulations of nation centred on the occupants rather than the state itself (“everyone across Scotland”, “the people of Scotland”). This is gilded by a claim of her own emotional investment (“I feel (.) a deep sense”). Added to the assertion of agency, we can also see the hesitancy markers associated with emotional intensity, before Sturgeon’s commitment is amplified by claiming the descriptive adjective “sincere” and augmented still further by the addition of “heartfelt” (line 3).

Contesting the emotional voice

In a moment, we will go on to show how such elements of emotionality form a part of key political statements in times of crisis. For now, though, we want to emphasise that the expression of emotions as a public figure depends upon certain rights to speak. Significant about the statement on Queen Elizabeth’s death was Sturgeon’s assumed authority to speak on behalf of the Scottish population and ventriloquise their inner feelings. These enunciative rights become most apparent when stewardship of the public voice may be contested, such as when speaking alongside other public figures or arguing with a journalist. The following extract from a BBC Radio Scotland interview with Nicola Sturgeon demonstrates the political and media imperatives of emotionality brought together, in a manner that contests their respective rights to animate the emotional turmoil felt by the concerned listeners. Periods in brackets (.) indicate gaps in speech, and underlined text indicates emphasis:

Journ	Thank you good morning (.) eh you want a tougher approach on	1
	international travel (.) eh (.) ehm (.) what would you say to people that have	2
	maybe booked holidays for December January (.) should they be trying to	3
	cancel those (.) and should anybody be going ahead with (.) making new	4
	bookings at this stage or do you think it would be preferable to to <u>not</u> do	5
	that while things are still fairly uncertain [...]	6
NS	Ehm on the first point I’m not (.) I’m not asking people to <u>cancel plans</u> that	7
	they have if that <u>changes</u> I will <u>say</u> it (.) you know (.) <u>straight</u> (.) to people (..)	8

	but <u>everybody</u> (.) this has been the case all along but we've (.) perhaps (.)	9
	cause things have been (.) <u>better</u> (.) we've all got out of the way of this (.) if	10
	you're <u>making</u> plans (.) you have to be <u>aware</u> of the context <u>we are in</u> just	11
	now (.) and we might be in (.) over the next few weeks (.) and that is <u>not</u>	12
	<u>just</u> about (.) eh the travel (.) the approach to travel that will be taken in the	13
	UK (.) I just in it I'm getting this wrong I just glanced at it before I came	14
	today (.) I think Japan has just (.) closed its (.) borders (.) so <u>other countries</u>	15
	are taking (.) decisions about <u>trying</u> to restrict (.) eh (.) <u>possible</u> entry of this	16
	variant into their <u>own</u> territories (.) so you just <u>have</u> to be aware that (.)	17
	that <u>right now</u> (.) and this has been the case throughout the pandemic (.)	18
	the conditions (.) either here or in the country you might be travelling to (.)	19
	that are in place when you <u>book</u> your trip (.) <u>might not</u> be the same	20
	conditions when you go to travel (.) and you know people just have to be	21
	<u>aware</u> of that and I can't (.) I can't make judgements for everybody (.) in	22
	terms of what that means for decisions that are <u>made</u> (.) but in <u>coming</u> to	23
	those judgements <u>yourself</u> it stands to reason (.) you have to be aware that	24
	(.) again (.) unfortunately we are in an unpredictable phase (.) of this	25
	pandemic where things may be changing (.) a bit more regularly than has	26
	been the case (.) in (.) recent months [...]	27

(Extract 2, BBC Radio Scotland, 29 November, 2021)

We might expect the journalist to take up and express the emotional distress of those listeners whose holiday plans may be jeopardised. However, instead they occupy the position of representativeness that Clayman (2002) describes as “tribune of the people” and asks Sturgeon to directly address listeners (“what would you say to people” line 2). Surgeon partially agrees to this request by realigning the implications of her remarks to the overhearing audience, followed by a claim to straightforwardness (“I will say it (.) you know (.) straight (.) to people” lines 8-9). This plea of honesty is foregrounded as a personal undertaking when later in the turn Sturgeon concedes the limits of her instrumental authority (lines 22-23) and affirms the agency of individual decision makers, underpinning this reconfiguration of authority with the popular phrasing “stands to reason” (line 24).

What is also noticeable is that Sturgeon speaks as part of an imagined collective experience of the pandemic: “we’ve all got out of the way of this” (line 10) – whilst also addressing the would-be traveller directly: “if you’re making plans” (line 11). This is interpretable as a request to the individual listener (Dada *et al* 2021), exploiting the English language’s lack of distinction between second person single and plural. In this manner, Sturgeon is able to create a sense of shared experience and mutual responsibility with her wider audience.

In terms of her own performance of sincerity, Sturgeon’s response also contains a number of established emotional markers. Moments of hesitancy are consistent with the projection of faltering spontaneity and reflecting upon words as they are delivered (Higgins 2018, p. 387). In this instance, points of hesitation produce a potentially disarming uncertainty over the efficacy of emerging information: in this case Japan’s new border policy (line 15). Alongside this, we see hesitancy project a considered and delicate self-reflexivity on

claiming the right to impose instructions. This performed reflectiveness becomes most notable as Sturgeon disclaims the authority to insist trips are cancelled, before setting out the more nuanced position she proposes to take (line 8).

The management of emotion and government

In his analysis of the idealised politician, Weber (1970) emphasises the obligation to display rational authority, while yet sustaining the support and emotional investment of the people; in large part, secured by the display of individual commitment. The goal of effective political discourse is therefore to balance emotional expression against a command of the technical vocabulary of policy and implementation. In contemplating this balance, the formal statement Sturgeon delivered on 21 December to the Scottish Parliament to outline her response to the new variant is instructive. The extract is from the beginning of the address, where Sturgeon sets out her relationship with the variety of constituencies and publics concerned:

I will again appeal to everyone across the country to reduce contacts and stay at home as much as possible in the run up to Christmas Day, and then again after this	1
Christmas weekend, and also reiterate the steps we can all take to make family	2
celebrations this weekend as safe as possible.	3
I will also confirm Cabinet's decision to propose some additional protections in	4
relation to large scale live events and indoor public places.	5
We judge these to be necessary to further slow the spread of the virus so that we	6
can protect health, the National Health Service, and the economy as we work to	7
complete booster vaccinations.	8
And I will set out further support for the many businesses affected by the advice we	9
feel duty bound to give in the interests of protecting public health.	10
First, though, today's statistics.	11
5,242 positive cases were reported yesterday – 14.9% of all tests carried out.	12
515 people are in hospital with Covid – one fewer than yesterday.	13
37 people are in intensive care, also one fewer than yesterday.	14
Sadly, a further nine deaths have been reported, taking the total number of deaths	15
under the daily definition to 9,790.	16
I want again to send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.	17
[...]	18
The rate of acceleration in an age cohort with, to date, lower levels, relatively	19
speaking, of booster protection underlines the vital importance of everyone getting	20
booster jags as quickly as possible.	21
	22

(Extract 3, First Minister's Statement, 21 December 2021, Scottish Government, 2021b)

In showing the necessarily complex credentials to speak effectively, this opening section of Sturgeon's speech pivots across two enunciative identities (Bakhtin 1986, p. 71). The first of these is the personal voice of the political leader speaking one-on-one to the overhearing public, be they in the public gallery or receiving the live television broadcast ("steps we can

all take” line 3). This temporarily sets aside the instrumental power of state in order to occupy the supplicatory discourse of the plea (“appeal” line 1). In keeping with Weber’s imperative for political obligation, Sturgeon sets this within her own duty to deliver such entreaties (“I will again” line 1), before emphasising her and her public’s commonly-held civic obligations (“the steps we can all take” line 3) and domestic pleasures (“family celebrations this weekend as safe as possible” lines 3-4). Her connection with the audience is also marked in the conspicuous intimacy that this reference to “family celebrations” invokes.

The second subject position that Sturgeon takes is that of the government spokesperson, which is characterised by two tactics of disalignment from politician as person and attachment to politician as leader. In part, this is signalled by the shift into an inclusive governmental “we” when Sturgeon discusses the rationale for the difficult measures announced in the speech (“We judge these to be necessary to further slow the spread” line 7). Every bit as profound is the shift into a less personable lexical choice, and in particular the use of bureaucratic language in describing First Minister actions (“I will set out”, line 10; “I will also confirm Cabinet’s decision” line 5) with the quasi-official language of formal commitment deployed in expressing motive (“we feel duty bound” line 11). This subject position is more naturally in keeping with Sturgeon’s performative idiolect (see illustration 1), where her serious demeanour and conventionally-tailored clothing style has seen her characterised negatively as “Nippy Nicola” (Higgins and McKay 2016). Yet, even this position is bound up in a relationship of identification with the use of in-group Scots dialect “jags” (line 22) rather than the alternative colloquial English “jabs” favoured by the UK Government.



Illustration 1 (Scottish Government 2021c)

It is also clear that the shifts between these subject positions are managed in order to offer emotional sustenance. After the dutiful recital of the numbers of deaths, the official

capacity emphasised by the use of the formal lexicon of “been reported” in contextualising the figures, Sturgeon switches immediately to the first person in order to express personal sorrow (“I want again to send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one” line 18). Importantly, however, some degree of emotional pitch is maintained even in the official component of the speech, in the opening adverbial clause “Sadly” (line 16).

“The action we must take”: mitigating instruction

Having provided updates on recent deaths, this later section of the statement communicates the steps the listening public are now to take:

It is important that with just a few days to go, there is certainty about family gatherings on Christmas Day and Boxing Day.	1
I am not asking anyone to change these.	2
However - and I can't stress this enough - please do follow advice to keep family celebrations as safe as possible.	3
Keep gatherings as small as your family circumstances allow.	4
Make sure everyone does a test shortly before getting together. Anyone who tests positive should not mix with others. And given how infectious Omicron is, you should assume that if one member of a household is positive, the others are likely to be so too.	5
Follow hygiene advice and keep windows open.	6
And, crucially, between now and Christmas Day, cut your contacts with people in other households as much as possible. Minimise socialising with others, either at home or in indoor public places. Indeed, stay at home as much as is feasible.	7
This is the best way of avoiding getting Covid and having to isolate over Christmas, or inadvertently spreading infection when you do meet up with others.	8
I am really grateful to everyone who has followed this advice over the last week.	9
It will be making a difference, and I want to stress this point, the steep increase in cases over the past week would have been steeper still but for people complying with this advice. So I hope we may already be collectively slowing the spread.	10
It is important that we stick with it.	11
So my first new request of everyone today is this.	12
From 27 December - as we come out of the Christmas weekend - and at least until the end of the first week in January when we will review this advice again, please go back to limiting your contacts as much as you possibly can.	13
Please stay at home as much as is feasible. When you do go out, please maintain physical distancing from people not in your group.	14
And difficult though it is, please follow this advice over New Year - minimise Hogmanay socialising as much as you can.	15
If we all follow the advice to minimise the contact we have outside our own households, we will help limit the spread of infections.	16
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(Extract 4, First Minister's Statement, 21 December 2021, Scottish Government, 2021b)

We can identify a range of pronominal markers in use here, to manage responsibility and inclusivity. First, “you” individualises responsibility to act. This demonstrates the double

articulation of the address, beyond the fellow Members of Parliament to whom the Statement is gestured to the overhearing public for whom the content is intended. “You” instructs appropriate public practices (“when you do meet up with others” line 17, “When you do go out” line 27), and requests the redoubling of efforts to conform (“as much as you possibly can” line 26, “as much as you can” line 30).

As “you” directs and individualises responsibility, the collective noun “we” positions this as a joint endeavour. The instances of “we” cluster after line 21, developing the revitalising theme signalled by the First Minister’s expression of “hope”. Almost all of the tokens of “we” express collaborative effort including the First Minister and the public at large (“we stick with it” line 22, “we all follow” line 31), with other examples reflecting the necessity of sustaining a collective ethos (“as we come out of the Christmas weekend” line 24, “we will help limit the spread of infections” line 32), with one invoking our shared experience of the domestic space (“the contact we have outside our own households” line 31). However, amidst these inclusive projections, there is a single exclusive “we” expressing the exercise of government power (“when we will review this advice again” line 25), with the agency emphasised by its juxtaposition with the determiner “your” in “please go back to limiting your contacts” (line 26). Even at this point, we see Sturgeon drawing on a particular Scots dialect in her use of “Hogmanay” (line 30), to specifically address her Scottish audience in a shared lexicon of celebration in an intimate space.

Most importantly in the context of a First Minister’s Statement, the first person singular pronoun “I” is used by Sturgeon to emphasise her own agency, and balance the relationship between power, persuasive intent and dependency that this involves. “I am not asking anyone” (line 3) both stresses power and pleads reasonableness, and related formulations “I can’t stress this enough” (line 5) “I want to stress this point” (line 19) emphasise communicative resolve, whereas “I hope we may be already...” (line 21) and “I am really grateful to everyone” (line 18) emphasise reliance on the goodwill and obedience of the collective “we”.

Joint Speech: Standing Before the Nation

Having looked at the distribution of agency and care in a First Minister’s Statement, we turn our analysis now to how emotionality functions in an outwardly more discursive and less scripted arrangement, that of the regular update provided by Sturgeon, her senior colleagues and medical advisers. Rather than speaking to the population through parliament, the double articulation in this case is towards the public through the assembled journalists. On this particular day, Sturgeon and the Chief Medical Officer were announcing the reintroduction of a number of lockdown-associated measures in response to the new variant.

There are a number of ways in which this presents as a less scripted event than the First Minister’s Statement we looked at above (extracts 3 and 4). First is the staging of the event as a “speech” rather than “statement”. Whereas “statement” assumes the recitation of pre-

prepared words – although our analysis showed elements of a more personable and conversational style – the embodied connotations of “speech” allow the possibility of spontaneity and scope to adapt the contents to the needs of those present. Secondly, Sturgeon is co-present with a colleague, who enjoys the nominal power to respond to and clarify content, and the statement itself is addressing an audience of reporters each able to assert contesting claims to speak for and represent the public (extract 2; Clayman 2002).

The status of the occasion is established in Sturgeon’s introductory words:

I am joined here today as you can see by the Chief Medical Officer.	1
Now today’s full Covid statistics will be published later on today, so I’m not going to	2
provide all of the detail of those right now.	3

(Extract 5, First Minister’s Speech, 29 November 2021, Scottish Government, 2021a)

The speech starts by foregrounding the presence of an expert colleague – referred to in this first instance by their job title (“the Chief Medical Officer”) – as well as including a clause (“as you can see”) that recognises the presence of the journalists and the absent audience of television viewers. This opening extract also includes some commentary on the content of the speech to come, where the informal phrasing “right now” (line 3) is used to stress the “liveness” of the speech, claiming the temporal as well as spatial parameters of those watching (Marriott 2007).

In order to formulate the response to the new variant, part of the speech is directed towards conveying instructions for action. This demands a predominance of pandemic-specific official language:

And I will turn now to the actions we have taken.	1
We have already reintroduced some travel restrictions – even with evidence of	2
community transmission locally, these travel measures are important and I will say	3
more about them shortly - but given that Omicron is already present in Scotland, we	4
also need to consider carefully what steps are necessary and proportionate to	5
reduce transmission here.	6
Some protections that the UK Government has announced in recent days in relation	7
to England - for example the requirement to wear face coverings in some settings –	8
are of course already in place, and in fact more extensive already, here in Scotland.	9
So at this stage, we are asking people, everyone across the country, to significantly	10
step up and increase compliance with all existing precautions - face coverings,	11
hygiene like washing hands and surfaces, getting vaccinated and of course testing	12
yourself regularly with lateral flow devices and, from now on, testing yourself	13
before mixing socially with people from other households.	14
We are also reminding people to work from home if possible. As of today, I’m asking	15
employers to make sure they are maximising the potential of home working.	16
However, this may be, and is likely to be, a fast-moving situation - so our response	17
will be kept under close review as we learn more about the risk Omicron poses, and	18
the nature of transmission here in Scotland.	19

A key part of our initial response will be to continue to identify cases as quickly as we can and, where possible after that, break the chains of transmission.	20
To that end, additional testing will be undertaken in areas where cases have been identified.	21
Now, our local response will complement the UK-wide travel restrictions that aim to avoid importing new cases while we are trying to curb community transmission.	22
Even with cases already here, it is really important to do what we can to prevent new seeding of the variant from elsewhere.	23
So in line with the rest of the UK, we have reinstated the red list of countries, and to date 10 countries from southern Africa have been added to that red list.	24
Anybody travelling back to Scotland from those 10 countries must enter managed quarantine for 10 days on their arrival.	25
In addition, anyone arriving in Scotland from anywhere outside the common travel area, will be asked to take a PCR test on the second day after arrival, and self-isolate until they get the result of that test.	26
We know, however, that the incubation period for this virus is very often more than 2 days.	27
So our view is that it would be sensible on a precautionary basis for these travel rules to be tightened further.	28
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(Extract 6, First Minister's Speech, 29 November 2021, Scottish Government, 2021a)

Through all of this are telling elements of a conversational register used to vitalise conformity, such as “step up and increase compliance” (line 11) and “really important to do what we can” (line 27). We also see a repetitive emphasis on community, based around nation, in phrases such as “asking people, everyone across the country” (line 10) and “here in Scotland” (line 9). However, it is significant how the presentation discharges its obligation to update and reinforce agreed pandemic restrictions. An emphasis here is placed on that distinctive lexicon of restriction and hygienic practice to arise through the developing management of the pandemic: “face coverings” in place of the former usage of “masks”, “incubation period”, “lateral flow devices”, “PCR test” and “home working”, with some such as “travel restrictions” reinforced through repetition. These pandemic-associated terms are also collocated with other items from a more established expressive field around legality and control (“with evidence of community transmission locally, these travel measures are important” (lines 2-3)). Even when the opportunity to foreground a less formal and more empathetic mode arises, the speech retains the more formal linguistic strategies that show organisation and leadership rather than unscripted markers such as hesitation, compromise fluency and the expression of authority.

Towards the conclusion of the speech, we can see a heightened attentiveness to the emotional obligations of the politician to offer a way forward:

Now, given the serious tone and content of my statement today, I want to stress this.	1
	2
	3

It is always important – and we’ve learned this over these past two years - in the face of new developments in this virus to prepare for the worst, to act on a precautionary basis.	4
	5
	6
But that does not mean that we are not hoping – because we are hoping – for something considerably short of the worst. We are still hoping for the best, and hoping that our developing understanding of this variant will reduce rather than increase our concern.	7
	8
	9
	10
I very much hope that additional protections can be avoided. And while we will act on a precautionary basis we will also seek to act at all times in a proportionate manner.	11
	12
	13
I want to end by stressing what we can all do. Vaccination remains our most important line of defence.	14
	15
We had already outlined last week that the Scottish Government was working to accelerate even further the booster vaccine programme. We will now step up those efforts more.	16
	17
	18
We are expecting a statement later today from the JCVI conforming its updated advice on vaccination.	19
	20
The Scottish Government is getting ready to operationalise any new recommendations from the JCVI – for example in relation to the interval between second doses and boosters, or the range of people who can now receive booster jags and we will do that as quickly as is possible.	21
	22
	23
	24
[...]	25
But the point I want to end on, and indeed stress at this stage, is that the same measures that have worked against previous strains of this virus, will also help us curb any transmission of this new variant.	26
	27
	28
So if in recent weeks you’ve been sticking a bit less rigorously to all of the public health advice, which I think is entirely understandable and I am sure we are all in that position to a greater or lesser extent, now is the time to start following all of that advice rigorously again.	29
	30
	31
	32
Every one of us can make a difference in protecting ourselves and each other.	33

(Extract 7, First Minister’s Speech, 29 November 2021, Scottish Government 2021a)

This is the closing section of the speech and bears the weighty responsibility of avoiding a despondent end. References to “hope” therefore dominates the first part of the section, an item associated with Barack Obama and, van Hooft (2011) argues, holding universal political appeal. Rendered as an active verb, “hoping”, appears as a contrast (“that does not mean that we are not hoping – because we are hoping”, line 6), before reassurance arrives in a two-part structure (“we are still hoping for the best, and hoping that our developing understanding of this variant will reduce rather than increase our concern” lines 8-9). The use of hope uses the emotional comfort of informality – including frequent references to the first person combined with rhetorical amplification (such as “I very much hope” (line 10), “a bit less rigorously” (line 28)), and key points in minor sentences (such as line 32). This extends a connection with her audience that is emphasised in Sturgeon’s use again of the Scots dialect item “jags” (line 23). Crucially, however, this counsel of optimism is situated within a reconfigured “we”, that sees the pronoun accentuate the agency of government. Specifically, the “we” that exercises hope, as revealed in “we act on a precautionary basis”

(lines 10-11) are those empowered to determine policy. This is emphasised still further by anchoring this “we” to the authorship of a previous statement (“we had already outlined last week that the Scottish Government was working to accelerate even further the booster vaccine programme” lines 15-16) and a determination to governmental exertions (“we will now step up those efforts more” lines 16-17).

What is produced is a reassurance of government endeavour, personified in Sturgeon. Imposed is the reassuring wisdom and energy of government as a collective, and in Foucault’s (2008, p. 27) more critical assessment, an authority of oversight, vigilance and responsibility. Emphasising government’s claim to mutual care, the speech concludes by reverting to that former iteration of “we” we saw traces of in extract 3, that includes both the governing and the governed: “So if in recent weeks you’ve been sticking a bit less rigorously to all of the public health advice, which I think is entirely understandable and I am sure we are all in that position to a greater or lesser extent, now is the time to start following all of that advice rigorously again” (lines 28-31). The conjecture of shared failings is immediately offset, as Sturgeon engages in a semi-confessional mode and joins herself, the government and the listeners in a covenant of personal improvement and reciprocal support.

Conclusion

There has been a considerable amount of research on the representation of women in political leadership portraying a “double bind” between the “standards” of conventional femininity and the masculinised customs of political power (Campus 2016). This offers a context for recent Covid-19-related findings that indicate women leaders place the relatively greater concentration on welfare and domestic concerns (Dada *et al* 2021). While we found strains of this in Sturgeon’s empathetic projection towards the individual, in Sturgeon we see a contrasting commitment to the formal language of authority and governmental control. From a cynical perspective, critical commentators go so far as to claim that such an articulation between political interests and the art of reassurance exposes Sturgeon’s political opportunism, directing the emotive potential of the crisis towards such longer-term policy objectives as the pursuit of Scottish independence (see Harris 2022). In the emotional and bureaucratic components working in tandem, Sturgeon offers an oppositional stress on the Scottish component, at once emphasising community and shared responsibility, while asserting a distance from the policy and culture of the UK, occasionally assisted by the strategic use of Scots dialect. In these regards, there are similarities between Sturgeon and Jaworska’s (2021) study of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Covid-19 communications, with both producing a commitment to an information-driven bureaucratic discourse that foregrounds verisimilitude and authority, while managing the personal sacrifices made necessary by Covid-19 by producing measured performative claims to sincerity and emotional regard. While exploring the development of emotionality as a rhetorical resource in politics remains a priority, particularly with regard to gender, we need to consider the performative repertoire of the leader and the political conditions of the moment.

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