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Mute Force and Ignorance: Incivility and Gender in Scotland

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Abstract

This article considers the complex relationship between civility and gender in Scottish politics. It addresses two themes that have dominated discussion of Scotland's political tone. The first has been the seeming rise in intemperate political discourse, amplified by social media and the divisiveness of Scottish independence. The second has been those developments in the representation of gender in Scottish politics, both in the composition of the Scottish Parliament and in discourses around First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon. We also focus in on discourses surrounding a recent breach of civility by male Liberal Democrat MSP, Alex Cole-Hamilton, in which Cole-Hamilton is recorded mouthing an expletive towards a female Scottish government minister during a Zoom meeting of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee on 11 February 2021. Analysis of this includes political responses to the 'outburst' and its subsequent media coverage, and examines, in particular, associations with masculinity and the relevance of the mitigating pleas of exasperated spontaneity. The article makes broader associations between the representation of this example of political incivility and those asymmetrical gender power relations given prominence by the #MeToo movement. Drawing on literature about angry populism, the article draws lessons about how mainstream politicians weaponise the language of incivility.

Keywords: emotions, conflict, Zoom, media and politics, affective politics

Scottish politics: the graveyard of political civility

OVER THE LAST two decades, scholars have identified an increased emotional tenor in the communication of politics, leading to a predominant form of public discourse that relies more on the display of affect than reasoned discussion. As the contents of this special issue demonstrate, this increased emphasis of emotionality in public discourse has a negative component. One that we identify in the book *Belligerent Broadcasting* is the fetishisation of aggressive rudeness across various sectors of contemporary cultural and political life.¹ On the international stage, much blame for this rests with the normalising influence of populist political leaders, such as Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. Wahl-Jorgensen describes

their predilection for an 'angry populism' in which distinctiveness is asserted by displays of overt rancour.² Some decades ago, Shils labelled this an 'alienative' politics, bent on rejecting the 'prudent exercise of authority'.³ In setting out the necessary oppositions, so-minded political actors collaborate in producing a repulsive force between honest expression and norms of political orderliness and civility. Thus, where civility is associated with the mannered restraint of political reason and negotiation, incivility may be deployed as the medium for a contrary practice of unvarnished truth telling.

This foregrounding of incivility has conspicuous parallels with the Scottish political culture of the last decade. The first explanation

¹M. Higgins and A. Smith, *Belligerent Broadcasting: Synthetic Argument in Broadcast Talk*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 2.

²K. Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media and Politics*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018.

³E. Shils, 'Ideology and civility: on the politics of the intellectual', *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 66, no. 3, 1958, p. 470.

for this is that Scottish political debate has clustered around issues more readily associable with the oppositional dynamic that Mouffe describes as ‘agonistic’.⁴ First, there are the raised prospects of Scottish independence, which the continued political success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) has sustained beyond a fractious referendum in 2015. Then, there are the constitutional divisions rent by the 2016 UK-wide referendum on leaving the European Union, a broad Scottish opposition to which has provided an additional rationale for independence. Combined, these polarising political questions have provided the Scottish political field with limited space for compromise and nuance.

The second factor has been the role of social media as a platform for political spite and bickering in Scotland. Adding to the more universally anonymising and acrimonious potentials that social media provide, the great majority of main newspapers and all the broadcasters in Scotland hold a united front in opposition to independence. What supporters of Scottish self-determination claim as the uneven treatment of independence in conventional media informs and fuels much of the disaffected toxicity in Scottish constitutional debate. The result is that the bulk of pro-independence content is concentrated in the anonymous, unregulated, consciously anti-elite, alternative forums of social media, rehearsing grievances of marginalisation and generating periodic moral panics around antagonistic ‘cybernat’ activists.

However, recent controversies in Scotland have also introduced a gendered component to the judgement of how politicians themselves may be diminishing political culture. Gender equality has occupied a prominent place in the development of the devolved political settlement in Scotland. Since the establishment of the devolved parliament in 1999, most of the main parties have sought equality of representation, and the gender balance across Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) has routinely outperformed its UK counterpart. Moreover, since 2014 when Nicola Sturgeon began serving as First Minister, she has faced a range of female leaders of

opposition parties. Seemingly against the grain of this progress, the 2017 explosion of the #MeToo hashtag increased the newsworthiness of complaints regarding the behaviour of former (male) First Minister, Alex Salmond, raising public awareness of the relationship between gender equality and male power in Scottish politics. Despite the apparent progress of recent decades, retiring MSP, Elaine Smith, warned ‘we have all fought so long and so hard to banish discrimination, inequality, misogyny and still it remains, like a shadow over all we have achieved.’⁵ In a broader context in which the 2019 dissolution of the UK Parliament saw eighteen women MPs stand down from their seats, citing an offence-based political culture as the main cause, Scottish Health Secretary, Jeane Freeman, pointed to ‘toxic online abuse’ in not seeking re-election to the Scottish Parliament in 2021.

‘Hands up, I lost my temper here’: incivility, commitment and gender

Scotland therefore presents a fruitful context in which to explore a number of related contemporary issues around incivility, not only because discussions of incivility have gained prominence in Scotland, but also because these occur in the context of a young and developing political culture in which the pursuit of gender equality has occupied a valued place. The particular exchange we wish to examine is an unremarkable one, and involves mainstream politicians not ordinarily associated with what we have called the ‘weaponisation of incivility’. Nonetheless, it helps reveal the association between that very articulation of incivility and commitment that informs discussion on much contemporary political performance. Our example also draws heavily upon those relationships between gender, power and the judgement of appropriate political behaviour salient in recent Scottish politics.

Centring specifically on the interpretative space between intended offence and emotional overspill, the instance that provides our focus

⁵MSP Elaine Smith’s final speech in the Scottish Parliament for International Women’s Day, 4 March 2021, YouTube; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QM6H3qccWw> (accessed 20 October 2021).

⁴C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, London, Routledge, 2005.

occurs in a Zoom meeting of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic on 11 February 2021. Ruth Maguire MSP (RM) acts as chair and the meeting includes Maree Todd, Minister for Children and Young People in the Scottish Parliament. The episode of interest unfolds near the conclusion of the meeting, where the topic for debate had been on the adoption of a new set of rights for children, and the committee discusses and votes on a procedural amendment, which might delay the enactment of the legislation (bringing into Scots law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Our eventual focus will be on an unplanned response from (male) Liberal Democrat MSP, Alex Cole-Hamilton, that comes after the vote. However, in order that we fully understand the novelty of the language used there, it is worth looking briefly at Cole-Hamilton's (A C-H) contribution immediately before the committee consider the amendment:

Extract 1:

A C-H (starts 11.23.55)	Since 2011 I remind the Committee the majority SNP Government manifesto commitment in 2011 to bring a Rights of Child and Young People Bill. It did that and then withdrew it and conflated it into the much broader Children and Young People Act of 2013 or 2014 rather. That Act had within it duties on public authorities to have regard and raise awareness of the United Nations on the Rights of the Child. We're not teaching people new tricks with this, this is something that they have baked in and done so successfully	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
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Here, we see stretches of conventional political language, giving formal expression to the procedures and forms of judgement built into the committee process. This includes elements of the parliamentary and procedural lexicon, including referring to the listeners by their collective formal role as 'the Committee' and reciting the names of acts. Indeed, the dedication to propriety appropriate to this lexicon

extends to correcting the year of the SNP bill from 2013 to 2014. However, signalled by the inclusive pronoun 'we' set against the 'they' of government, Cole-Hamilton shifts from the formal expression of policy enactment to a colloquial account of institutional intransigence. Cole-Hamilton produces a flourish of colloquial speech in which competence in policy implementation is formulated as 'new tricks' and the adept anticipation of policy enactment expressed in the cookery metaphor 'baked in'. The rhetorical effect of the contrasting styles is initially to display an understanding of, and adherence to, the formal language of politics and policy, but then to summarise this within the terms of everyday speech and understanding, animated from within the expressive field of Cole-Hamilton himself.

The contentious episode then comes at the point where the committee is paused to allow that the recorded notes be confirmed, as follows:

Extract 2:⁶

RM	The question is that amendment 46 be agreed to. Are we all agreed? We're not agreed. There'll be a division by roll call. [Roll call takes place] We'll just take a second to have those votes confirmed [5 seconds]	1 2 3 4 5 6
A C-H	[Inaudible] [12 seconds]	7
RM	There were three for the amendment. Four against the amendment. No abstentions. The amendment is not agreed.	8 9

The circumstances of the extract are as follows: Cole-Hamilton has asked for an amendment that hastens the introduction of UN legislation, and a vote has just taken place in which Minister Maree Todd follows her intervention against this amendment by casting her vote as 'no'. The committee chair, Ruth Maguire, asks for a pause to confirm the votes

⁶Scottish Parliament, Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 11 February 2021; <https://www.scottishparliament.tv/meeting/equalities-and-human-rights-committee-february-11-2021> (accessed 20 October 2021).

of the committee members (extract 2, line 2), at which point all participants other than the chair are muted centrally. The key contribution arrives five seconds after Maguire requests a pause as the vote is confirmed. At this point, both Cole-Hamilton and Todd are looking straight at the camera when Cole-Hamilton affects an expression of disgust and mouths a short phrase (extract 2, line 5). These words were widely reported as ‘fuck you, Maree’, with newspapers avoiding the taboo language by employing three modesty asterisks after the first letter, a reading that Cole-Hamilton did not dispute.⁷

Looking to the alleged utterance itself, there is considerable significance in the emphasis that the formulation places on the name of its target. It would not be a challenge to conceive of a variety of constructions around the core outburst of ‘fuck’ that could be uttered in such a leakage of anger. Of these, the mock-question ‘what the fuck?’, exclamation ‘for fuck’s sake’ or directive ‘fuck off’ are perhaps the three most likely. However, it is the second-person singular construction of ‘fuck you, [name of target]’ that we see used. Where a target is implied or even named, this deepens the interpersonal dynamic of the exchange. The first two—‘what the fuck?’ and ‘for fuck’s sake’—would be associated with the undirected expression of exasperation, whereas the directives ‘fuck off’ and ‘fuck you’ are oriented towards an individual interlocutor (even if the reality of the exchange is that they are absent or out of earshot). Of these latter two, the chosen profanity ‘fuck you’ foregrounds the second person pronoun in addressing the target and emphasises the more personal nature of the directive. Moreover, the inclusion of the name of the minister disposes of any possibility that the second-person plural may have been towards the committee or political apparatus at large, thus concentrating the act of linguistic violence on one person in particular. The enactment of male discursive authority and power is thereby the strongest in the chosen utterance.

⁷E. O’Toole, ‘Alex Cole-Hamilton apologises after being caught swearing at minister in meeting’, *The National*, 13 February 2021; <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19089091.alex-cole-hamilton-apologises-caught-swearing-minister-meeting/> (accessed 20 October 2021).

In addition to its significant orientation, the use of ‘fuck’ is assuredly an item of informal speech rather than one associated with the conventions of parliamentary discourse. There are rhetorical advantages to using ordinary speech in politics (as we saw used earlier, by Cole-Hamilton himself), and reputational benefits for being seen to speak plainly rather than hiding behind the equivocating nuances of policy jargon. While we have seen that these practices of unconventionality have come to dominance with the rise of political populism, any success that populist strategies and frames of performance achieve will inevitably influence the repertoire of non-populist politicians seeking rhetorical advantage. In other words, the successful association of uncivil engagement with commitment, if sustained and effective, will produce a tempting communicative tactic for politicians from a variety of perspectives.

Swearing and sincerity

It is worth saying more about this relationship between ‘bad language’ in political discourse and commitment. A claim implicit in our example, and common across much aggressive language in politics, is that such mistakes are unrehearsed expressions of the speaker’s emotional investment in the moment. Goffman categorises similar occurrences of inadvertent swearing in live radio broadcasting, in order to draw a distinction between gaffes (expressive errors based on contextual ineptitude) and what he calls ‘slips’. In Goffman’s terms, slips are ‘knows better’ linguistic transgressions, including: ‘confused production, accident, carelessness, and one-time muffings—not as ignorance of official standards or underlying incompetence.’⁸ Be they from a loss of deportment or an overestimation of the concealing powers of the mute function, such ‘slips’ are a temporary lapse in standards from someone expected to be at ease with the applicable language conventions. In this regard, these can be distinguished from the ‘doesn’t know better’ transgressions that constitute the ‘gaffe’, which stem from an obliviousness of the practices and restraint necessary to ‘conduct oneself with moral sensibility’.⁹ Foregrounding any lapse as a ‘slip’ potentially

⁸E. Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, Philadelphia PA, University of Philadelphia Press, 1981, p. 209.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 219–221.

underwrites any claims of provocation—losing oneself in justified indignation—and sets the conditions for a double-orientation of non-political language: in one orientation, insulting or provoking the target, and another orientation, displaying a temporary and justified break from convention to impress the extent of one’s frustration on the overseeing audience. While, of course, an insight into individual intentionality would have advantages in determining responsibility for lapses in civility, it is understanding the performative implications of that spectrum between the unintentional gaffe and the knowing slip that reveals the artful expressive mischief of the political renegade.

Outside politics, we see the use of taboo and swearing being a feature of a particular sort of popular entertainment programme, where (almost always) male participants are shown to swear as a demonstration of their spontaneity and edginess. The Jeremy Clarkson-era *Top Gear*, for example, both called attention to, and foregrounded, the ‘taboo’ nature of on-camera swearing by ‘beeping’ over rather than editing out supposedly transgressive slips.¹⁰ More recently, ostentatiously belligerent chef Gordon Ramsay was repackaged as a game show host for *Gordon Ramsay’s Bank Balance* on the BBC, the trailer for which featured his commitment to maintain a standard of conduct appropriate to host with ‘I promise not to swear’, immediately followed by a knowingly ironic clip of a beeped-over Ramsay in full flow. As part of an emerging conflict culture, we can see that particular male celebrities market themselves as anti-authoritarian for the imperatives of entertainment, displaying a dedication to profanity rarely permissible in women in mainstream broadcasting. As we will return to later, this hints at an entrenched cultural division in terms of gendered expectations of power and strength that defies half a century of gender equality legislation.

Incivility and claims to commitment

To what extent does this conventional and marketed relationship between incivility and earthy straightforwardness inform the aftermath of the Cole-Hamilton incident? While unnoticed at the time, Cole-Hamilton’s

intervention was ‘spotted’ by members of the viewing audience and, as the apparent target, Todd copied into discussion of the outburst and its propriety. The following illustration shows Todd’s subsequent tweet on the incident, as it is quoted/retweeted by Cole-Hamilton: Image 1:



In tweeting that the outburst had been brought to her attention (image 1), Todd acknowledges her agreement with the interpretation that she was the likely target. In producing her account, Todd emphasises the hostile demeanour as well as the words. The profanity presents a breach of the expectations associated with the professional context and is condemned as ‘appalling’. However, the main thrust of Todd’s objection is that the incivility of the words is amplified by an accompanying emotional performance, manifest in the Cole-Hamilton’s revealing facial expression.

Subsequently, as can be seen from the inclusion of Todd’s statement as an embedded tweet, Cole-Hamilton offers an explanation directly to Todd. This tweet echoes Cole-Hamilton’s more widely quoted admission that ‘I muttered something under my breath that I shouldn’t have’, but claims the mitigation of political commitment: ‘Hands up, I lost my temper here. I was frustrated by your government backsliding on children’s rights once again’.¹¹ This amounts to an attempt at sharing any blame with Todd herself, but is also a provocative assertion of governmental bad faith (explicitly associated with Todd through the determiner ‘your’), presented as mitigation for a temporary loss of deportment. Further, in setting out supposed wrongs of Todd and her party, Cole-Hamilton’s tweet again draws on language from outside of the

¹¹BBC News, ‘Lib Dems MSP Alex Cole-Hamilton ‘sorry’ for swearing at female minister’, 16 February 2021; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-56091794> (accessed 20 October 2021).

¹⁰Higgins and Smith, *Belligerent Broadcasting*, p. 121.

political lexicon. As well as ‘backsliding’, with its associations with the language of apostasy, and we also see a similar contrastive play with popular language to that in Extract 1 in the sporting metaphor ‘long-grassing’, again staking a discursive place outside formal politics and asserting a tactical detachment from the norms of political civility.

Rude boys

The inadequacy of the Cole-Hamilton’s tweet of apology, allied with the dominance of this gendered element in its critical reception, is perhaps best characterised by the following tweet from journalist Kirsty Strickland:

Image 2:

Definition



On the one hand, Strickland’s tweet (image 2) questions whether sincerity offers any excuse, while at the same time challenging the implicit assumptions on how a frustrated man is entitled to react to a woman and the gender relations that this implies. In what Hall-Jamieson describes as the ‘double bind’ between decorousness and political commitment, the dominant culture of politics places the performative repertoire associated with femininity at a disadvantage.¹² Cameron and Shaw describe the linguistic obstacles women encounter on entering this public sphere.¹³ Perhaps most famously, former UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, confronted the dilemma of this double bind by offsetting a combative parliamentary style against a hyper-feminine dress style, rarely being seen in trousers and always immaculately coiffured with a characteristic blonde bouffant. Yet, more than forty years after Thatcher became

¹²K. Hall-Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹³D. Cameron and S. Shaw, *Gender, Power and Political Speech*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2016.

PM, that feminine style she felt obliged to foreground remains alien to much of the political sphere. These practices of exclusion are more pronounced when confronted with incivility and non-political discourse, where women are conventionally discouraged from responding in kind, lest the ‘authentic’ ‘slip’ of the man be cast as the angry ‘gaffe’ of the deranged woman.

This dominance of male political style includes an increased access to the language and practices of incivility. As with any public convention, the accepted and recognisable practices of civility produce opportunities for dissent, and men have a far greater latitude for this than women. The very idea of civil language sits at the heart of mannerly political debate and is by its nature associated with the finest manifestations of the public sphere. In terms of the range of targets for dissent and misbehaviour, these extend beyond the expectations of mannerly discussion and are routinely formalised by establishing institutions of ‘parliamentary language’, debating conventions and similar constructions, producing rules that may be transgressed for political profit.

We have already referred to masculinity alongside artful transgression at several points, including across the genres of popular culture, and particularly in terms of its associations with the display of straightforwardness and unconventionality. De Klerk characterises swearing as a display of masculine strength, noting that ‘because expletives contravene social taboos and are often used to shock people, they have become associated with power and masculinity in Western cultures’, embodied in our example in the animation of individualised fury allied with the directed aggression of the muttered expletive.¹⁴ In order to understand where they sit within a broader sociopolitical context, we should therefore think of such displays as motivated at least as much by gendered performative norms as by the demands of the moment. Indeed, claims that our own example offers to spontaneity may be said to diminish considerably over the five seconds of inaction after the chair finishes speaking and before Cole-Hamilton responds on mute. However, perhaps

¹⁴V. De Klerk, ‘The role of expletives in the construction of masculinity’, in S. Johnson and U. H. Meinhof, eds., *Language and Masculinity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 147.

as much as a frustrated gesture at political inaction—a claimed slip—it is more fruitful to analyse how such incidents manifest as a ‘performances’ of commitment, confected to strike at the civil norms of political conduct: the recasting of masculine rage at seeming indifference, disdain, and disempowerment.

It is therefore useful to think about these dynamics between masculinity and incivility as a performative symptom of what Adler calls ‘masculine protest’ which, in a political context, involves an exaggerated and performative claim to qualities of will and agency through which westernised cultures judge manliness.¹⁵ As Connell comments in discussion of wider crises of hegemonic masculinity, the default use of aggressiveness as a marker of rebellion is a ‘response to powerlessness, a claim to the gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration (bashing gays, wild riding) of masculine convention’.¹⁶ There are parallels between this wider crisis of masculinity and the perceived shifts in political power. Traditional male domains, such as parliament, the law courts, finance, are falling under the increasing influence of women, with the result that women are seen to recast and civilise the overwhelmingly masculine form of power associated with formal political institutions.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we suggested that while our focus was a single incident, that instance and the immediate exchanges that followed it revealed much in terms of broader issues around incivility. The critical discussion of the Cole-Hamilton incident was that the offensive utterance was worsened by its targeting of a woman committee colleague. We have explained this in terms of a deeper association between incivility, masculinity and contemporary political culture, which reproduces a particular power dynamic rooted in recent political and cultural practice. However, the salience of this on the news agenda is also a consequence of particular global and local political conditions. Worldwide, the #MeToo movement, while formed in protest against sexual

aggression against women by powerful men, has increased the newsworthiness of various types of male abuse directed against women. Within the particular politics/news ecosystem of Scotland, former First Minister, Alex Salmond, has been subject to media scrutiny over admitted behaviour towards women.¹⁷ In this context, it is worth noting that less than two weeks after the Zoom call discussed here, Cole-Hamilton challenged Salmond at a Scottish parliamentary inquiry to make an apology: ‘of the behaviours that you have admitted to, some of which are appalling, are you sorry?’¹⁸ While at the one level interpretable as an exercise in reputational repair, this also shows that interventions with gendered significances are at least as explicable within the rituals, norms and practices of agonistic political culture as they are as the outcomes of individual motivations, ideologies and judgements. In broad terms, critical discussions of incivility and masculinity can and should alight upon even the most everyday of political exchanges, amongst even the most gender-aware of participants.

This highlights the importance of the deeper inequalities in gender relations that such exchanges invoke. In keeping with the frequently cited examples of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, the production of political discourse that challenges the norms of civility has a sustained articulation with the assertion of male political dominance. Indeed, it is through these emphatic performances of masculinity that many politicians have come to assert their distinctiveness from the political field, often manifest in routine acts of symbolic violence towards women.

As we seek to make progress, we need to be critically aware and able to challenge the ways in which such examples of incivility contribute

¹⁷A. Rea, ‘Alex Salmond was described by his own defence as “a creep”. Now he’s back with a new party’, *New Statesman*, 26 March, 2021; <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/the-staggers/2021/03/alex-salmond-was-described-his-own-defence-witness-creep-now-he-s-back-new> (accessed 20 October 2021).

¹⁸T. Crichton, ‘Alex Salmond asked at Holyrood Inquiry if he is sorry over “behaviours” towards women’, *Daily Record*, 26 February, 2021; <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/alex-salmond-asked-holyrood-inquiry-23571863> (accessed 20 October 2021).

¹⁵A. Alder, *Understanding Human Nature*, trans. C. Brett, Oxford, Oneworld, 1992.

¹⁶R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p. 111.

to an established and growing performative frame associating the appearance of anger with individual sincerity and commitment. Claims of sincerity are implicit in the apologies offered by our offending MSP: a 'loss of control' provoked by the alleged political inertia of (female) colleagues. While a brief and materially inconsequential exchange for which an apology was demanded and received with conditions attached, the salience of the incident in public discussion shows how deeply held are concerns around aggressive performance in political discourse. The apology, allied to other activities, shows the obligation for reputational repair and the re-establishment of the channels of civil

exchange, and offers a ritual mitigation rarely expected or required of populist politicians. Yet, this single moment offers a glimpse of the dangerous spread of that belligerence beloved of those seeking to undermine political civility to inside the system itself, and shows how the mutations of commitment within political discourse are subject to deeper and more sustained conventions of power and entitlement.

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