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Michael Higgins, University of Strathclyde  
Fiona M McKay, University of Strathclyde

**Gender and the Development of a Political Persona: The case of Scottish Deputy First Minister  
Nicola Sturgeon**

#### Abstract

Much recent research has focussed on the manner in which women political leaders are portrayed in media (Childs, 2008; Campus, 2013; O'Neill and Savigny, 2014). This article examines the press discourses around Scottish Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, beginning before her participation in the 2004 Scottish National Party (SNP) leadership contest, and continuing through to her appointment as Scottish First Minister in 2014. Starting prior to her deputy leadership, a variety of definitional strategies positioned Sturgeon as aggressive and shrewish. Subsequently, in keeping with the obligations of a more 'intimate' politics, we find a softening and domestication of Sturgeon's media image, alongside discourses of political competence and professionalism. Yet, the article shows how these shifts took place in a manner that continued to call upon established gendered discourses, often with newspapers using tactics of distancing. We suggest this illustrates the competing pulls of media logic, where the mediatization of Sturgeon's image produces a marketable political persona, but accompanied by those residual gendered discourses long associated with the political press.

Key words: gender, political persona, Scottish politics, political communications, Scottish press,  
media logic, mediatization

#### Introduction

The 2015 UK General Election produced a substantial increase in parliamentary representation for the Scottish National Party, amid an unprecedented level of UK-wide media coverage. Much of the

attention was directed towards SNP party leader Nicola Sturgeon, who appeared as the party's representative in the election's televised leaders' debates, after which she enjoyed enviable UK-wide approval ratings (Settle, 2015). Press coverage, on the other hand, dealt with Sturgeon less sympathetically (Deacon *et al*, 2015; Higgins, 2015). Even within the same news organisations, while the English and Welsh edition of the *Sun* newspaper published a mocked-up image of a tartan bikinied-Sturgeon astride a wrecking ball in the style of pop singer Miley Cyrus, the same paper's Scottish edition was to show her in contrastingly obliging terms as the *Star Wars* heroine Princess Leia. We also saw differences between Sturgeon and male colleagues, such when a Conservative Party poster of then Labour leader Ed Miliband, in the pocket of the SNP's Alex Salmond, was subsequently adapted by the *Daily Mail* to relocate Miliband to Nicola Sturgeon's cleavage.

Which of the possible readings of Sturgeon dominate at any given time may depend upon national or political affiliation. They may also be subject to cultural norms around gender and political status, and may even be expressed using the ready currency of popular culture. Nevertheless, in her development as a political persona, Sturgeon has already been the subject of a considerable period of exposure in the Scottish press over several stages of her political career. It is in this context that this article offers a gendered analysis of Sturgeon's developing media image as a political leader. In our endeavours we hope to show how those gendered discourses to gather around Sturgeon have evolved and adapted along with Sturgeon's political development, partly in keeping with the demands of mediation. These, we suggest, can help us understand the complex interpretations of Sturgeon's personality and standing, as well as the forms of 'bi-lingualism' across male and female gendered virtues that Campus (2013) has described as necessary to the woman politician.

As Deputy Leader of the SNP from 2004, then Deputy First Minister since 2007, and First Minister since 2014, Sturgeon occupies the most senior level reached by any woman in the Holyrood parliament. In this regard, she has emerged as part of a long-term shift in that parliament towards gender balance (Mackay and Kenny, 2007). With political seniority has come public visibility and an intensification of personalised media coverage (Stanyer, 2007: 72), casting into relief the importance of successful image-making and representation across politicians of all genders (Street, 2011, Wheeler, 2013). As evidence of a broader shift towards personalisation, Langer (2007) highlights the content of the UK *Times* newspaper, which, since the 1980s, has intensified its focus on the individual qualities of senior politicians. Suggesting this is part of a broader trend, Strömbäck and Esser (2014) argue that political leaders internalise the demands of personalised coverage by performing their role according to the demands of mediation. In this assessment, both news organisations and politicians collude in a 'media logic', defined by Altheide (2004: 294) as 'the assumptions and processes' that guide the structuring of messages, according to factors including technical capacity and, important, an understanding of 'format'. Within formats are to be found 'codes for defining, selecting, organising, presenting and recognising information as one thing rather than another'; that is, there are conventions for influencing credibility, likability and other factors. Therefore, even though signs and technologies remain in constant flux, their requirements at any given time can determine political success in a media context. Discussing the case of former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for instance, Smith (2008) suggests that even when there is a marked reluctance to do so, the norm is for politicians to reconfigure their performances of self in order to project what is agreed to be an obliging public face.

The environment of mediated politics is particularly demanding on women (Campus, 2013). A number of scholars have used the idea of 'gendered mediation' to examine how political women have been dealt with in media since the 1990s, finding news reports predominantly unfavourable

(Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996; Ross and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997; Ross and Sreberny, 2000; Ross, 2002; Ross *et al*, 2013). Looking at the 1997 UK parliamentary intake, for example, Childs (2004) highlights the destructive coverage of the so-called 'Blair's babes' group of women Labour MPs. A more recent study by O'Neill and Savigny (2014: 21) also finds many media outlets holding fast to an 'outdated gender bias'. This echoes concerns that have been raised in New Zealand politics, where Ross and Comrie (2012) point to a masculine and ageist political culture militating against the progress of women candidates; attitudes said to be reflected amongst many political correspondents worldwide (Lovenduski, 2005: 155). In a study that will be relevant to what we have say below, Gidengil and Everitt (2003: 225), while less sure of the under-representation of women leaders in particular, insist that media are more likely to describe women's activities using frames of hostility and aggression than they would the equivalent male politicians.

Yet, on the positive side, and as Sturgeon demonstrates, more women are taking up a greater proportion of positions of political leadership (Childs and Murray, 2014), and are often seen to ally their willingness to compromise with a heightened capacity for insight. Summarising this, Campus (2013) suggests that women are widely perceived as offering a more 'transformative' type of leadership, drawing upon what are presented as explicitly feminine qualities such as emotional empathy (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). Such preconceptions enable characterisations that can be deployed profitably in the ways women politicians present themselves, and Norris (1997) points to the roles that women are routinely accorded within political narratives, including those of conciliators, establishment outsiders, and agents of change.

Looking at the development of Nicola Sturgeon in the Scottish press, this article hopes to give a nuanced but critical view of gender and representation in a shifting political context. We want to

show how the tone of Sturgeon's public face has developed over key stages in her political career, evolving to rearticulate gendered discourses with those qualities presented as necessary for sustained political leadership. We acknowledge at the outset that any developments may be partly a consequence of increased visibility, with the early image of boldness fading through exposure, and partly the negotiation of Sturgeon's image within the 'media logic' of personalisation. However, while we show how women politicians can develop gendered representations to their partial advantage, we will try to show that these are forms of representation that continue to limit and objectify women that operate in the political realm in significant ways.

### **Longitudinal critical discourse analysis**

In order that we can see how dominant representations such as the significance of gender are subject to change, we adapt the longitudinal approach of Brown and Gardetto (2000), in which they analyse two prominent periods in Hillary Clinton's development as a political figure; initially as First Lady and latterly as aspiring politician. In our case, the focus is on coverage of Sturgeon across the decade she has been a senior politician. In our analysis, we examine the most prominent of those newspapers that constitute the 'Scottish public sphere' (Higgins, 2006), including those popularly designated as Scottish 'national' newspapers, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman* and the *Daily Record*, as well as major Glasgow city paper the *Evening Times*, and also including the Scottish editions of UK-wide papers: the *Scottish Daily Express*, the *Scottish Mirror*, the *Scottish Sun* and *The Times*. As well as checking library archives where available, further checks ensure that all papers are represented equally are made in the database ProQuest:ABI/Inform.

Using the LexisNexis UK database, relevant articles and references are gathered using lexical items associated with Sturgeon – including formal and informal names – and critical analysis is undertaken of those terms that come to prominence. In keeping with her political standing in Scotland, Sturgeon’s name surname appears in a total of 21439 articles across the corpus in the period from 2004 until 2014. Just as studies such as that by Hvenegård-Lassen (2013) have structured their analyses around the use of such key phrasings such as ‘the gender card’, our focus will be on locally pertinent and resilient descriptions, most notably ‘nippy sweetie’. The extracts used for analysis are selected at random.

In our analysis, we propose to adopt the position of ‘critical discourse analysis’ in its claim that language and representation are bound up with power, and the implications of this can be understood by close examination of the lexical choice and its context (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Smith and Higgins, 2013). Our particular concern is with the manner in which language contributes to dominance and authority in gender (West *et al*, 1997). The examination of such linguistic practices as key phrases and descriptions across time is used by Loke *et al* (2011) as means to produce a more context-sensitive insight into the cultivation, development and transformation of gender-based political discourses. The adaptability of critical discourse analysis to the norms and tactics of the text under analysis also enables close discussion of the patterns and significances of lexical choice – the choice of one description over others – as well as the identification of recurring themes and rhetorical strategies, giving a sense of the development and plasticity of political discourses as they relate to gender and power.

### **The rehabilitation of ‘Nippy Nicola’**

Over the period of the survey, 2004 stands out as the year of Sturgeon's campaign for the party leadership. SNP leader John Swinney resigned on 22 June of that year, following a poor result in the European elections. Swinney's then-deputy Roseanna Cunningham announced her plans to stand for the leadership, as did fellow MSPs Mike Russell and Nicola Sturgeon, producing a contest that included two women as front runners. However, when SNP Westminster MP Alex Salmond reversed an earlier decision not to stand for a second spell as leader, Sturgeon abandoned her own faltering campaign in order to run as his deputy. On Salmond and Sturgeon's subsequent election to the party leadership, Sturgeon thereby became effective leader of the party in Holyrood until Salmond resigned his Westminster seat, and was elected as an MSP in 2007. From there on until Sturgeon became First Minister in 2014, Salmond served as Scottish First Minister with Sturgeon as Deputy First Minister.

When initially faced with two women candidates, Sturgeon and Cunningham's prospects are expressed using combative headlines such as 'Can a woman be man enough for Scottish politics?' (Luckhurst, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 2004), 'Sturgeon vows tough fight for SNP top job: Women square up for battle' (Hanna, *Scottish Mirror*, 2004) and 'Independent women lead from the front' (Barnes, *Scotland on Sunday*, 2004). Throughout these, politics is positioned as a particular 'semantic field' in which the struggle for power is expressed in terms borrowed from warfare. This 'war as metaphor' approach to the political realm defines it as a place of struggle for dominance and the destruction of enemy forces (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Stenvoll, 2008: 34). This is a definitional realm in which Sturgeon and Cunningham are characterised as women seeking to establish credibility in a space necessarily dominated by the martial and masculine, in which, as the *Scottish Daily Mail* says, women have to be 'man enough' to compete. The terms of this discourse of warfare and contest are used to question the candidate's intrinsic mettle, but against the assumption that men hold the advantage in dealing with such challenges, with Barnes (2004) writing in *Scotland on Sunday* that



'the vipers' nest which is the SNP remains beyond the ability of any man of woman born' while speculating whether 'a woman can do any better'.

Although Sturgeon was to withdraw from this immediate contest with Cunningham, it was she that was to prevail in the election as Salmond's running mate. As we look to the development of Sturgeon's profile and its relationship with media logic, it is useful to think of Gill's (1987: 24) description of the press as having 'a perennial need for stereotyped characters' and routinely creating or seizing upon a nickname for those in the public eye. Street (2003) stresses the importance of such definitional practices, noting how crucial they can be to the public perception of the personality and bearing of the politician involved. On occasion such nicknames eulogise a politician, such as with Ronald Reagan's characterisation as 'the great communicator', or place them within an obliging hinterland, such as Stanley Baldwin's 'Farmer Stan', but more often they are a means of exercising negative definitional power. One occasional nickname the press used in discussion of Sturgeon was 'Gnasher'. In an earlier parallel of later 2015 UK-wide election campaign references to 'Jimmy Krankie' (Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 2015), 'Gnasher', as the ill-tempered and malicious pet dog of Beano character Dennis the Menace, draws upon a character from Scottish popular culture to offer a ready and humorous point of reference for Sturgeon: to trivialise through the very act of naming.

As an item of political shorthand, this furnished headlines such as 'nationalist's Gnasher moves up in the world' (Sunday Times, 2004), expressing Sturgeon's progress through objectification, as well as occasioning humorous skits such as a *Scotsman* (2000) article matching MSPs with characters from the *Beano* comic, with the knowing punch line 'and the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon is Gnasher'. As Sturgeon rose to be deputy leader, the nickname remained as an occasional item for the Scottish

press, with the *Sunday Herald* (2004) asking readers to write in with explanations as to its origin. Other instances of its use included appearances in the political diary of the *Scottish Daily Express* (2005) and in the *Scotcha* opinion column in the *Scottish Sun* (Platt, *Scottish Sun*, 2005). In a retrospective interview, in which she dismissed lurid rumours on the genealogy of the nickname, Sturgeon acknowledged its longevity (McFadyen, *Scottish Mirror*, 2005). In ways we will examine more later (cf. Gidengil and Everitt, 2003), the unpredictable violence implicit in ‘Gnasher’ frames the unreconstructed Sturgeon as a threat to masculine orderliness and proprietary, while at the same time reducing her to a figure of gossip and ridicule.

However, the description to emerge strongly during periods of significant political development from Sturgeon was ‘nippy’. This would appear either as part of the noun phrase ‘nippy sweetie’ or collocated with Sturgeon’s name as ‘nippy Nicola’. In Scottish parlance, a ‘nippy sweetie’ is a term for an item of confectionary with a sour or tart taste, and has come to mean a normally-female individual renowned for being sharp-tongued and abrupt. It thereby encapsulates a departure from conventionally feminine discourses around ideally feminine attributes of soft-spokenness and reserve (Bem, 1981; Prentice and Carranza, 2002), even though these may be qualities ill-suited to a public figure such as a politician. The ‘nippy sweetie’ contradicts the norms of feminine demureness, and betokens an attitude of engagement that stresses effectiveness at the cost of grace. The following chart (illustration 1) outlines the incidence of ‘nippy’ in news items in which Sturgeon is featured:

Year	Items	Year	Items	Year	Items	Year	Items	Year	Items
1998	1	1999	3	2000	2	2001	3	2002	2
2003	3	<b>2004</b>	<b>29</b>	2005	6	2006	8	2007	6

2008	6	2009	4	2010	4	2011	2	2012	9
2013	5	<b>2014</b>	<b>21</b>						

Illustration 1: Print news items collocating 'nippy' with Nicola

It is notable that there are two peaks in the use of nippy for Nicola: in 2004 and then a decade later in 2014, with a modest number of references in the period between. While there were comparatively few instances of the term applied to Sturgeon before 2004, the following two examples from the Scottish national weekly newspaper *Scotland on Sunday* in 1999 and 2000 are telling:

- (1) [S]he has been described as a bit of a 'nippy sweetie' because of her sometimes abrupt manner. She is quietly spoken and rather shy, which probably doesn't give off a great impression either (Scotland on Sunday, 1999).
  
- (2) Now the hero of the people of Govan, for whom she determinedly fought the threatened closure of the Kvaerner Govan shipyard, Sturgeon's shyness and softly-spoken manner conceals a fire which has earned her the mildly patronising label of 'nippy sweetie' (Hill, *Scotland on Sunday*, 2000).

While the figures in illustration 1 show that the term does not occur on a daily or even monthly basis across much of the period, and account for a small proportion of articles overall, the terms of these references suggest that its significance lies in its presumption of common parlance. So it is that

both of these present 'nippy sweetie' not as a new sobriquet for Sturgeon, but as an established item of public discourse: the first extract refers, without ascribing agency to the discussants, to the term's status as a descriptive norm for Sturgeon, while the second confirms the description as 'a mildly patronising label'. In keeping with the press cultures described by Lovenduski (2005: 155), this tale of the back-handed tribute by Govan shipyard shop stewards was in wide circulation across the Scottish press. A 1999 column in the popular tabloid the *Daily Record* reflects upon the propriety of 'nippy sweetie':

- (3) Most women would be offended but the stewards meant it as a compliment to her spirit. However, just to be on the safe side, only apply it to female politicians (Brown, *Daily Record*, 1999).

What begins as a tortuous assessment – leaving possible offence as an abstract possibility with 'would', while ascribing agency to the well-meaning stewards – proceeds to advise care in the use of the term, using markedly-informal idiom 'just to be on the safe side'. Even though a 2002 press interview saw Sturgeon herself claim pride in her status as a 'nippy sweetie', stressing its connotations of quick-wittedness and of 'someone who didn't take any nonsense', the implied menace of the term is expressed in the writer's joking aside that broaching the nickname with Sturgeon might succeed in 'provoking one of those tight-lipped verbal head-butts familiar to TV viewers' (Fraser, *Sunday Herald*, 2002). Thus, in the same way as morally ambiguous words such as 'ruthless' do across all genders, the 'nippy sweetie' demands both respect and wariness, but in a manner that establishes an opposition between feminine traits and the necessary qualities of the politician operator. In Canada too, Gidengil and Everitt (2003: 215-218) suggest that such aggressive terms are deployed to detract from the appeal of women politicians, 'violating deeply rooted

notions of female behaviour', in a context in which antagonistic speech verbs as 'attack' and 'blast' are disproportionately used to convey their words. For Jamieson (1995), this amounts to a 'double-bind' for women in the public sphere, where obliging feminine seemliness is constantly imperilled by straightforwardness.

So far, we are entitled to assume the prevalence of a persona of Sturgeon as abrasive and sharp-tongued, from 'Gnasher' to 'nippy sweetie'. However, coverage in the period of the 2004 SNP leadership contest shows evidence of the conciliation of this image. In this respect, both 'nippy sweetie' and 'Gnasher' can provide reference points for distinguishing the emerging, reconstructed Nicola from the old. The Scottish edition of the *Sunday Times* is explicit in acknowledging that Sturgeon was working to shake off her disobliging image in favour of alternative, aesthetic markers of female strength:

- (4) Nicola Sturgeon, the pint-sized nippie sweetie who for so long gloried in the unfortunate sobriquet 'Gnasher', appears to have blossomed into a power dresser following her elevation to SNP deputy leader. Her smart white trouser suit was the talk of the town last week as she strutted her stuff along Holyrood's corridors of power (*Sunday Times*, 2004).

This is a stark contrast to the nippy and gnashing Sturgeon of old. Blossoming invokes the emergence of a flower – even though the verb moves uneasily into 'power dresser' – while highlighting her 'white suit' draws upon discourses of both feminine and political purity.

Connotations of strength prevail: 'power dresser' Sturgeon is said to 'strut' around the corridors: a choice of verb to manifest resolve and self-awareness in the thrust of productive politicking (Wodak,

2009: 163). Sturgeon is now set in a professional world in which her gender warrants acknowledgment, but where the aberrant 'Gnasher' slips into the past tense to be replaced by the lexicon of feminine power. All told, this is a woman in a position of legitimate influence, who, it is stressed, remains subject to those symbolic commitments necessary to the maintenance of a required bearing.

As Stanyer (2013) argues, however, there is an increasing expectation that robust political performance will be gilded by the performative features and personal narratives associated with 'intimacy'. Often, and in keeping with the kitchen-themed media events of the 2015 General Election, this intimacy is expressed by utilising the supposed authentic emotionality of the domestic realm (Johnson, 2004). This following extract was published in the *Herald* in November 2004 and sees Sturgeon in her living space. The journalist begins with a third person narrative about Sturgeon's return from a holiday:

(5) She's just back in Glasgow from a weekend away with her boyfriend and her bedroom is a mess. There's a big pile of washing on the double bed and a half-unpacked weekend bag lies in one corner, while a hairdryer and an overflowing sponge bag lurk in another (Devine, *The Herald*, 2004).

What Fairclough (1995: 9) refers to as a 'conversationalised' style predominates, through the use of common domestic tropes ('bedroom is a mess', 'a big pile of washing'). This offers a personal and almost voyeuristic tone, inviting our association with Sturgeon amidst these recognisable household trappings. Also prominent in the piece is the relational aspect of Sturgeon's intimate space: not only is her 'boyfriend' specified as her weekend companion, but 'bed' is accorded the suggestive

expansion of 'double bed'. From the political firebrand of earlier coverage, Sturgeon presents what Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) criticise as an idealised 'model of femininity', laden with cultural expectations around home and appearance. Later in the piece, Sturgeon's love of shoes is revealed in a confession to the journalist, both presenting a common distraction as a guilty pleasure – one of her 'weaknesses' – and confirming the confidential register of the article.

This new turn in Sturgeon's image was reflected across the Scottish newspaper sector. At the outset of her initial leadership campaign, Glasgow-based newspaper the *Evening Times* discussed her unveiling of the SNP manifesto by noting that 'the cover picture and the upbeat public relations showed a much changed image from the 'nippy sweetie' reputation she had earned' (Evening Times, 2004). This is further bolstered by a concentration on her appearance, including her smile: 'She smiles easily and often, belying the hard-faced, no-nonsense image she has earned' (Currie, *Evening Times*, 2004). The connotations of revealing what was hitherto concealed in the verb 'belying' points less to a concession of multi-dimensionality in Sturgeon's character than it signals a directional change towards a more authentic gendered type: from the implied impenetrability of her old 'image' to the real Nicola. Instead of the harder, masculine traits that led to her 'nippy sweetie' nickname, a more deeply-rooted set of feminine qualities are rising to prominence.

Routinely drawing upon Sturgeon's own words, such profiles contribute to a more sympathetic and positive readings, articulable with the cross-gender qualities of the accomplished politician. Towards the end of 2004, Sturgeon's reputation rose to the award the *Herald's* 'Debater of the Year', lauded as 'a feisty performer in debate' (Gordon, *The Herald*, 2004); one who, combining the old Sturgeon with the new, and using a suitably floral metaphor, has 'bloomed since becoming her party's leader in Holyrood ... mixing her nippy sweetie image with a subtle wit'. This mood of approval was later

echoed with Sturgeon's receipt of the same Glasgow-based quality paper the *Herald's* 'Politician of the Year' in 2008 awarded on the basis of her 'strength of performances' as both the Deputy Leader of the SNP and the Cabinet Minister for Health and Wellbeing (Dinwoodie, *The Herald*, 2008). That same journalistic 'culture' (Lovenduski, 2005: 155) moves from its dealings in 'nippy' and 'Gnasher' to validate Sturgeon's transformation.

The comparatively small numbers of instances are in keeping with Childs' (2008: 145) findings that the explicit gendering of politicians, while rarely systematic, nevertheless comes to prominence in the transgression of 'gender norms'. Even if limited in scale, the patterns of recurrence are therefore telling. While descriptions such as 'nippy', and to a lesser extent 'Gnasher', were established prior to 2004, their peak around Sturgeon's rise to political prominence has tended to be used to emphasise a transition from the unreconstructed Nicola – to whom 'nippy' may be readily applied – to her developed and more complete political comportment. Drawing upon this opposition, 'nippy' and 'Gnasher' remain as items of some currency, but tend to appear subject to various forms of rhetorical distancing. In this way, we can see the competing demands of media logic in making sense of political performance and representation: in one moment, reflecting the feminisation of politics; in another, pandering to a residual sexism. Coverage of the contemporary face of Sturgeon combines a wider set of descriptions, and calls upon her own interview-based disclosures to construct a gentler image of femininity. Yet, amidst this, Sturgeon remains answerable to gender stereotypes: as the *Scottish Daily Mirror* later remarks, 'she's just like every other independent Scotswoman – she lives to shop' (McFadyen, *Scottish Daily Mirror*, 2005).

### **The non-rise of Naughty Nicola**



We have so far noted that the continued gendering of Sturgeon's media image is complex, and that former images of female aggressiveness have been joined by gentler discourses around traditional feminine domesticity, as well as the power-laden discourses of political performance. Nonetheless, the continued gendering of Sturgeon makes possible the intervention of other forms of sexualisation. One worth highlighting – from February 2009 – offers a more determinedly sexualised narrative around a portrait entitled *Naughty Nicola* that was exhibited in a Glasgow gallery (see Illustration 2).



Illustration 2: *Naughty Nicola*, Laetitia Guilbaud, 2009 (reproduced by permission of the artist)

The painting is by French-born, Glasgow-based artist Laetitia Guilbaud, and is rich in sexual and political symbolism. A cartoonish Sturgeon is depicted in a bar room, with the clothes and bearing of a dominatrix. The painted figure is adorned in a revealing red skirt; her buttoned blouse leaves part of the midriff exposed; she wears stockings and suspenders and is portrayed holding a whip. Her heavily-made up face turns away from the viewer, bearing a menacing scowl. The theme of female

dominance also references her political role, where her whip-hand carries two piles of documents and a rolled parchment.

In discussion of the painting, Guilbaud was reported as expressing pride in showing that ‘under the austerity of a politician, there is a woman of great sexual attraction’ (Daily Record, 2009b). On a similar theme, the *Scottish Sun* quoted the artist as saying that ‘I have seen Nicola many times on television. Many people may say she is a bit of a mouse with no sex appeal - but I see a wildness’ (McAlpine, *Scottish Sun*, 2009). The *Daily Record’s* surrounding commentary describes Sturgeon looking ‘wholly-rude’—a homonymic pun on ‘Holyrood’ – as she ‘shows who’s boss by cracking a whip’ (Daily Record, 2009b). A determinedly light-hearted editorial in the same issue says: ‘But Nicola’s not unhappy. Never mind boring manifestos, her new image is a real vote winner’ (Daily Record, 2009c). Here, the paper engages directly with the lexicon of the political field in an altogether contrary manner. The central idea of ‘image’ – Sturgeon’s former area of weakness – is offered as essential to the hackneyed political item ‘vote winner’, but only after the the formal political discourse has been punctured with the mock-dismissal of manifestos as ‘boring’. The painting of Sturgeon is thereby discussed in a sexualised discourse, but in a manner in which the ironising humour insulates from the terms of political judgement.

Yet, other than news of its eventual purchase by Sturgeon’s partner, subsequent newspaper references to the painting were limited to reporting further works by the same artist, particularly where they produce images of other well-known women (Daily Record, 1999a; The Scotsman, 2010). To understand the transience of the *Naughty Nicola* trope, and by implication the longevity of other discourses, it is useful to look at Marshall’s (1997: 204) suggestion that political leaders are obliged to perform an ‘affective function’ in which trust and affiliation is won by embodying the emotions,

needs and wishes of their followers. In alliance with such qualities as gender, elements that contribute to the affective performance of politicians are gathered as what Street (2003: 95) calls the 'political capital' won through the development of a policy record, along with what Kroon Lundell and Ekström (2008: 905-906) refer to as the 'contextual factor' of 'previous relations with the media'. Just as political caricature's 'grotesque or ludicrous representation' remains obliged to the most 'recognisable features' of the subject (Streicher, 1967: 431), so the dominant discourses of femininity and professionalism around Sturgeon, layered upon an unreconstructed past of irritability and shrewishness, predominate over an explicitly fantasy reading such as *Naughty Nicola* through their expression within fabric of political coverage and performance.

#### **2014: Still nippy after all these years?**

So where *Naughty Nicola* offers a reminder that gendered discourses are obliged to offer some correspondence with established political capital, what was to become of the more prevalent narrative to attach to Sturgeon, that of the 'nippy sweetie'? As illustration 1 shows, the majority of references to 'nippy sweetie' clustered around 2004 and 2014; the former coinciding with the election of Sturgeon to the SNP's deputy leadership with the latter corresponding with the year of her election to party leader and Scottish First Minister, as well as Scotland's independence referendum. We suggest above that the dominant portrayal of Sturgeon that took shape in 2004 was that of a more polished political performer, with an appealing domestic hinterland; the dominant narrative being that the feistiness of the early Sturgeon has been tempered by political expediency.

In spite of this, it is clear that nippiness remains within the descriptive toolbox available to journalists in discussing Sturgeon. These following extracts show the continuing usefulness of the relationship

between the new Sturgeon and the ‘nippy sweetie’ of old, in the rehearsal of established and familiar tropes:

(6) Not long after she landed the job of deputy leader, Sturgeon went on a *Sex and the City* style shopping spree with a tabloid reporter to soften her chilly ‘nippy sweetie’ image (Bowditch, *Sunday Times*, 2014b).

(7) Burns Nicht, in time for which Tommy Reckless, the brains behind the Daily Reckless, an irreverent website, has released Songs for Independence. It contains 15 tracks by a variety of bands, including the Sensational Alex Salmond Gastric band, the Crystal Methodists and the Dish-Faced Camerons, none of whom, I am afraid to say, appears to be performing at Keltic Konnections. I have had the privilege of a preview of one of the number, Ziggy Sturgeon by the Nippy Sweeties (Taylor, *Sunday Herald*, 2014).

While making light of a discreditable sobriquet, these extracts play with a tangible item of local political currency and shared memory. The first of the two extracts deploys an internationally-available cultural reference, referring to Sturgeon’s transformation period of 2004 in the terms of a US television series, *Sex in the City*, based on urban-life, aspiration and consumerism, and echoing the *Scottish Daily Mirror’s* affectionate remark, discussed above, that Sturgeon ‘lives to shop’ (McFadyen, *Scottish Daily Mirror*, 2005). The second extract refers to a parody CD by the Scottish musician Tommy Mackay – here given his stage name of ‘Tommy Reckless’ – and extends its use of shared cultural currency to several spheres, including a local reference to Glasgow music festival ‘Celtic Connections’, the David Cameron nickname of choice amongst internet trolls ‘dish face’, and ‘Gastric Band’s’ pun on Alex Salmond’s body weight.

In common with the 2004 extracts examined above, there is a shared exercise in discharging the overt sexism of ‘nippy sweetie’ by consigning it to a less-enlightened past:

(8) Momentum was seized at once, and retained, by Perth MSP Miss Cunningham and Mr Salmond himself, sensationally, entered the race at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour once it was evident that Miss Sturgeon’s campaign was going nowhere. He and the ‘nippy sweetie’ – as everyone called her then – manoeuvred anew not just to defeat Miss Cunningham but to depose her as deputy leader of the SNP too (MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 2014)

(9) One of her trickiest tasks will be managing the relationship with her former mentor. Paying tribute to him, she said he had believed in her before she had believed in herself. Now in a relationship of equals, she is perfectly capable of lapsing into ‘nippy sweetie’ mode and giving him a piece of her mind (Bowditch, *Sunday Times*, 2014a).

The first extract is from an article critical of Sturgeon and her party and is from a passage that is conspicuously reflective, not only in its focus on the contest of 2004, but also through the hedging clause ‘as everybody called her then’ that immediately follows the reference to Sturgeon’s discarded nickname. We see again the use of ‘nippy sweetie’ situated in a retrospective frame in extract’s description of Sturgeon’s relationship with Salmond, where the verb ‘lapsing’ produces the negative connotations of slipping into old and bad habits. On the other hand, at least in part, this second extract enlists ‘nippy sweetie’ to that lexicon on political resolve we discussed earlier, in which

regard it continues the tradition of the ‘back handed compliments’ of the Govan shop stewards of 1999 (Brown, *Daily Record*, 1999).

The obsolescence of the name is again celebrated in the act of recounting, but in still more explicit terms, in these following extracts from *The Herald*:

(10) Whatever Ms Sturgeon’s might be dubbed, one can rest assured it will not be the Nippy Sweetie Tour. The days of such cheap, sexist insults are now surely behind her (The Herald, 2014a).

(11) Her time as Health Secretary drew open admiration from some foes, while the wide infrastructure and investment portfolio she carried into the referendum campaign as ‘Yes Minister’ showed her to be a formidable operator for whom the sexist dismissal as a ‘nippy sweetie’ has now deservedly vanished on the wind (The Herald, 2014b).

The first extract produces a further collocation for ‘nippy sweetie’, offering it as a potential name of Sturgeon’s political tour, before turning to the optimistic reading that ‘cheap, sexist insults’ are activities of the past. The structure of the second extract sets a number of items from the formal political and business fields, structures and portfolios, and uses BBC political comedy *Yes Minister* as a metaphor – in contrast to the dismissal of the now obsolete nickname with the lyrical phrasing ‘vanished on the wind’. It seems that ‘nippy sweetie’, while subject to resurrection for the purposes of lament that it should ever have held purchase, has, in rhetorical terms, undergone a continued shift beyond the liberal sensibilities of contemporary political expression.

## Conclusion

In their discussion of 'celebrity reputation' more broadly conceived, Han and Ki (2010: 200) score 'personality' as the most dominant factor, followed by appearance and then 'professional ability'. We have examined how Sturgeon's political persona has been portrayed in the Scottish press, from the shrewishness 'nippy sweetie' to her image as a more rounded inhabitant of both the domestic and political realms, enjoying typically feminine preoccupations such as clothes shopping. This can be thought of in terms that Stanyer (2013: 19) describes as the maximisation of 'intimacy' between the politician and the electorate, where effortful familiarity has become integral to political performance. It is crucial that we distinguish between the performance of gender as exposed by Butler (2006), and the performance of 'the politician' as described by Corner (2003), van Zoonen (2005) and Wodak (2009). In the main, gendered performance in political actors pretends to an intrinsic condition of humanness, albeit one that is open to queering, while political performances foregrounds the practiced gloss of professional decorum directed towards possible public scrutiny. By making her intimate space available, in a negotiation between public and private space, Sturgeon presents what Campus (2013: 116) describes as a 'bilingualism' in her persona; strategically adapting activities of image-making that gather reputational capital associated with the political realm. Through this article, we have been careful to show the extent to which this involves concession to established gender discourses that make particular demands of women in politics.

Any image management on the part of political actors such as Sturgeon can be thought of in the terms we describe above as 'mediatisation'. This is the outcome of a developed relationship between media and the political realm, where the norms and priorities of 'media logic' become

internalised by political actors. In keeping with attendant demands for an intimate politics, in opening to view the domestic realm displaces the 'sacerdotal' attitude that the press ought to accept Sturgeon on her abilities with the 'pragmatic approach' that defines and utilises established templates of media popularity (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2013: 343). Of course, to the extent that such demands characterise political media, these are themselves a reflection of deeper cultural shifts towards linking emotionality with sincerity and authenticity (Richards, 2007). While as the ephemeral glimpse of *Naughty Nicola* illustrates, interventions are also subject to established political capital of the politician themselves, the likelihood of Sturgeon and similarly positioned politicians bending to the demands of mediatisation accords with Elmelund-Præstekær *et al's* (2011) findings on Danish MPs' compliance with the demands of media organisations and journalists.

We reflected above on the competing demands of 'media logic' – setting discourses of productive politics against lapses into gender stereotyping – but it is also necessary to consider that these terms of representation are neither stable nor determined. For example, the crafted separation between the domestic hinterland and political resolve we see in the 'bi-lingualism' of Sturgeon at least partially contrasts with the tactical use of domestic finance and private morality said to underpin the public rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher (Busby, 2009: 71), and differs even more starkly with the hyper-professionalised 'academic' and purposively 'two-dimensional' public persona of Condoleezza Rice (Stevens, 2007: 124; Mabry, 2008: xxvii). While there is merit in Elmelund-Præstekær *et al's* position that politicians are able to negotiate their image and performance to meet the developing requirements of mediatisation, our understanding of how gender restrains or empowers these processes should be informed familiarity with individualised narratives and discursive associations.



Although in its broader context, it may be said that the softening of Sturgeon's image hints towards a desire for more consensual and feminised political and media fields, we see how resilient gendered discourses can be. Even through practices of distancing, women politicians remain answerable to descriptions that can problematize the development of their political standing. In the case of Sturgeon, often in the act of situating the sustaining lexicon within a rhetorical past, early perceptions of her shrewishness are rehearsed at times of significant political development. What should be of concern to contemporary scholars is the extent to which such gendered discourses sustain as a new group of political women come to prominence on a UK-wide stage. While research into this could usefully take fuller account of the perspectives and agency of journalists themselves (Hall, 2010), it is every bit as important that scholars are sensitive not only to the ongoing deployment of gendered language, but that this can be best understood by examining the pressures and contradictions of media logic in the political development of the individual.

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