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Political Masculinities and Brexit: Men of War

Michael Higgins

University of Strathclyde

Abstract

This article examines the discourses of masculinity to pervade debates on the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. The article outlines an association between excessive forms of masculinity and popular cultural discourses around conflict and war, constructing and reproducing a popular lexicon on the British experience of World War II in ways that are widely interpreted as symptomatic of a coarsening of political discussion. However, the article also emphasises the performative quality of these masculine discourses in line with the personalisation of politics, and stresses the scope for contestation and ridicule. The article thereby identifies the articulation of a performative masculinity with a nation-based politics of the right, which, while disputable and occasionally subject to derision, produces a gendered component in any antagonistic turn in contemporary political culture.

Keywords: Masculinity, political communications, political rhetoric, European Union, populism

Introduction

Political campaigning around the terms of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Brexit) both transcended party lines and excited debate around the content and tone of political culture. Even though a July 2016 public referendum returned a narrow majority for the UK's departure from the EU, by late 2019 the terms of the exit were unresolved and the subject of rancour. Often contrary to the official policies of their parties, many individual Members of Parliament openly contested the terms of departure, even calling for the referendum to be revoked or rerun. In its apparent chaos, this process of Brexit typifies recent developments in political culture. For one thing, the manner in which Brexit has cleaved the political establishment is consistent with what Mouffe (2005) describes as an "agonistic" political culture, rejecting consensus in order to foreground a dynamic contest of ideas and interests. Secondly, and related to the individualised terms within which this agonistic dispute is pursued, Brexit has opened a space for a politics of personalisation and private renown (Langer 2011), sets the conditions for politicians to for speak on a personal rather than party basis.

Disquiet over Brexit's implications for the relationship between language and political culture extend into the political realm itself. In a highly publicised intervention, Labour MP Paula Sherriff stood in the House of Commons to assert that PM Boris Johnson "continually used pejorative language" in relation to Brexit and the lesson is that fellow parliamentarians "must moderate our language" (Hansard 2019). MP from the governing Conservative Party Amber Rudd also charged the Prime Minister with employing "the sort of language people think legitimises a more aggressive approach and sometimes violence" (BBC 2019). In contextualising this aggressive language, political

commentators have also remarked on the prominence of men in the Brexit campaign, drawing upon a longer-established concern about the dynamic between politics and the masculine (see Hooper 2001). In her *Guardian* column, Catherine Bennett (2018) lamented that Brexit had become a “vehicle for hypermasculine displaying”. Similarly, in the political magazine the *New Statesman*, James Millar (2018) describes Brexit as a vortex of “toxic masculinity”.

Such links between inflated masculinity and politics are neither novel nor confined to Brexit. Smith (2016) directs us to a range of examples, from the overt misogyny of Berlusconi in Italy to the cultivated menace of Putin in Russian, where political power is articulated with excessive masculine display. In Brexit, however, we will see that particular types of masculinity come to dominate. In one of several similar interventions, rich in the popular war imagery we will discuss below, newspaper columnist Marina Hyde (2018) refers to the “psychopathic machismo” of the main Brexit players. As Connell (2005) emphasises, such discourses of masculinity are not equivalent to the mere being of men, but rather speak to the varieties of activity and representation that situates the masculine at different points within a “gender order”. In illustrating this place of masculinity within a field of comparative judgement, Fahey (2007) highlights the mobilisation of discourses around Continental Europe and femininity in a discussion of the symbolic emasculation of former US presidential candidate John Kerry, asserting “masculinity” as a measure of fitness to govern.

Beer and bravado: masculine consumption and heroic bearing

Having highlighted these discussions around Brexit and their implications for political culture, the initial component of the analysis will now look at examples of performed masculinity in political talk around Brexit. Since the Brexit argument is one primarily around political policy and sovereignty, it

is inevitable that explicit references to gendered identity account for a small proportion of the political discourse to be found there. Nonetheless, the suggestion here is that these discursive activities are crucial in establishing or reiterating particular types of political agency and power. As we will see in this section, these establishing discourses often take the form of conviviality rituals, engaging what Wodak (2009, 14), following Goffman (1972), refers to as a “back stage” performance of male status and mutual geniality, which in themselves sustain the political space as a male domain. These forms of engagement also accord with performative aspect of producing what Goffman (1981: 181) calls “fresh talk” in projecting a particular political personality.

As first leader of the Brexit-supporting United Kingdom Independence Party, and then head of the newly formed Brexit Party, Nigel Farage was a prominent figure in the Brexit campaign, his status confirmed in campaign interventions from the US President (The Guardian 2019). The following passage is drawn from a speech introducing Farage as guest speaker to a rally of the pro-Brexit Leave *Means Leave* movement on 21 January 2019, and demonstrates a specific kind of myth making in the description of Farage’s character. (In this extract and those that follow, ellipses denote pauses and xx denotes audience applause.):

1	He (xxx5xxx) and that courage was of course epitomised (.) when had a slight argument (.)
2	with an aeroplane (.) about eight years ago (..) when he crashed (..) it was pretty nasty (...)
3	it would’ve killed some people (.) but not our Nigel (..) oh no (....) he dragged himself out
4	(..) wiped away the blood from his forehead (.) dusted himself down (...) looked around
5	the field (.) put his hands (.) in his pockets (..) pulled out a fag and promptly (.) lit it

This passage assists in the illusion of Farage as embodying a particular iteration of British masculinity. As the applause occasioned by the teasingly unspecified male pronoun acknowledges (line 1), this is produced as an amiable rehearsal of the qualities of a speaker held in mutual affection. As a piece of mediated public talk, the commitment is the projection of a “media personality” (Tolson 1991) more than the conveyance of information. The narrative itself follows a common trajectory. It builds from the markedly understated “slight argument” (line 1), the humour of which rests on an ironic relationship with supposed irascibility of Farage and the absurd contrast of “with an aeroplane”, before reverting to the sobering “it was pretty nasty (...) it would have killed some people”; the gravity of the concluding assessment emphasised by a substantial pause. As a passage concerned mainly with the ritualised obligation to maximise the audience’s affection for their guest speaker, the facticity of the account is of limited immediate relevance. Yet it is worth noting that, contrary to the account presented here, images of the crash show that far from having “dragged himself out”, Farage was rescued by two onlookers and taken to an ambulance for treatment. Nonetheless, the introduction’s mythologised produces an illustrative fable on Farage’s personal resilience.

Of course, even if the intrusion of accuracy would serve only to puncture the jovial mood, what is more telling about this passage are the tropes within which Farage’s actions are presented. His response is crafted into a heroic narrative in which he shrugs off the effects of the crash and gathers his composure: exiting the stricken plane and removing the markers of physical injury and dishevelment (“wipes away the blood from his forehead (...) dusted himself down”), engaging in a casual reconnoitre of the circumstances (“looked around the field”), before reinstating a carefree demeanour (“put his hands (.) in his pockets”) with the endearing vice of the informally expressed “fag” (British slang for a cigarette). Overall, the mood is one of Farage’s manly insouciance in responding to a life-imperilling catastrophe.

In the context of British popular culture, the description draws upon popular tropes around male heroism including fictional spy James Bond (Hoxha 2011) and the “downed” Royal Air Force fighter pilot in popular depictions of the 1940 Battle of Britain (Smith 2000). Again, realism has limited purchase in these representations. Although historians have emphasised the brutal realities for downed allied pilots in a dogfight (Overy 2004), Aldgate and Richards (2007, 296) stress the distracting necessity of humour in the portrayal of British airmen. Popular depictions of the Battle of Britain are rich in the imagery of the resolute British combatant, regathering their nerves in spite of their injuries (MacKenzie 2007, 80).

Wreathed in these rhetorical laurels, Farage takes to the stage and delivers his speech from which the following two passages are taken. The first of the extracts is from the introductory section of his speech:

1	What a great line-up of speakers (....) just a couple of disappointments <u>for me</u> the first
2	(..) is that Rocco Forte got the protesters they were meant for me and I’m very very (..)
3	disappointed (...) the second is (.) that Tim Martin (.) is doing a pub crawl (..) of a
4	hundred pubs around the country (.) and he HASN’T EVEN INVITED ME

In order to fully understand the expressive latitude this section of the speech enjoys, it is necessary to point out that this opening functions as “speech about the speech”. This status as “meta-speech” enables a high level of reflexivity on Farage’s part: to produce remarks on the occasion, on the experience of delivering the talk, and to display his familiarity with the other participants (prominent Brexit supporters, hotelier Rocco Forte and Wetherspoon’s pub chain owner Tim Martin). These

remarks provide the pretext for Farage to claim two distinct forms of masculine credential. The first is an assertion of what Messerschmidt (2018) refers to as the hypermasculine commitment to conflict, produced as a mock expression of regret that protesters outside the event had directed their ire towards Rocco Forte rather than Farage himself. Like the example below, this is double-coded as an assertion of Farage's individual standing, both as the alpha target for the enemies of the Brexit project, and of Farage's enthusiasm to meet and presumably confront the protesters.

The second claim draws on an association between masculinity and alcohol. A prominent symbol of Farage's populist claim of alignment with "ordinary", "decent" people over politicians has been his association with beer (McDougall 2017). As Thurnell-Read (2016) has argued, beer, and the imperial measure overtones of the "pint of beer" in particular, occupies a mythical place at the centre of British male affability. In an assessment of the relative popularity of party leaders prior to the 2015 UK general election, Evans and Mellon (2015, 8) acknowledge the success of Farage's "beer drinking man in street persona", fun-loving, argumentative and grounded in common sense. This associative pairing of Farage with a pint of beer has thereby enjoyed repetition as his trademark pose.

This broad articulation between Farage's physical courage and masculine consumption habits are essential components in what Kelsey (2017, 53) describes as the representation of Farage's personal "journey" towards a political destiny to represent the forces of common sense; navigated by unconventionality and nourished by the ridicule of the political establishment. McDougall draws upon the semiology of Barthes (1972) in referring to Farage as a "hyper-signifier":

...a fictional character. This face object is at once human flesh and Spitting Image mask, a parody of itself. And yet the face itself signifies in combination with the clothes worn on its

body and the props attached – the cigarette, the pint of warm English beer [...] the mythology of a historical golden age of empire and cultural homogeneity (McDougall 2017, 60).

The depth of this mythical association between Farage and the myth-laden pint glass is confirmed in what Genova (2018, 95-96) identifies as the use of a “face-like image of spilt beer” as an item of synecdoche in political caricature.

If a love of a pint of beer secures Farage’s status as a hero of the ordinary voter and the champion of the politics of common sense, then juxtaposition with other socially significant beverages produce their own connotations. Fahey (2007) has already referred to the emasculation of war veteran US Presidential candidate John Kerry through association with the intellectual pretensions and implied gender ambiguity of Continental Europe. In Farage’s discourse, similar tactics to strip rivals of their claim to masculinity are in evidence, where Labour leader and political enemy of Farage Jeremy Corbyn is shamed by his alienation from the norms of masculine consumption:

1	The only person who didn’t turn up of course (..) was <u>Jeremy Corbyn</u> (.) which is <u>odd</u>
2	(...) well he’s perfectly happy to meet Hamas isn’t he (...) perfectly happy to meet
3	Hezbollah (..) happy to take tea with the IRA but wouldn’t go and meet Mrs May (.)
4	which I find (.) a bit strange

In listing and amplifying Corbyn’s misdeeds, this passage from the speech has a recognisable three-part structure, one that is common in political rhetoric and exploits the familiarity of the

arrangement to emphasise and choreograph approval and applause around the third item (Atkinson, 1984). Listed here are meetings in which Corbyn is willing to engage, proceeding through three political groups that the audience are likely to see as terrorists. In terms of priming the hostility of the audience for the third item, the first two use a repetition of “happy to meet” Hamas and Hezbollah in turn (lines 2-3), whereas the third represents the meeting as “to take tea with the IRA” (line 3). While clearly intended as facetious, this description has two important components. First, the verb phrase “to take” emphasises ceremonial procedure over consumption, foregrounding the effete ends of manner and civility. Second, are the particular connotations that are attached to tea. In a study of eighteenth century domestic culture, Kowaleski-Wallace (1994) describes the emergence of tea as “a defining British and feminine activity”, setting associative gender boundaries on its place in rituals of mutual belonging between women in the domestic setting.

Further still, Kowaleski-Wallace (1994) points to accounts that propose tea as a potion for women to use upon “the man in need of humanising” as part of a “feminising and civilising force at work in British culture”. In these terms, tea was not only feminine, but an active threat to norms of male conduct. The rhetorical strength of the association of Corbyn, tea and proscribed terrorists therefore rests in a contrast: what is expressed as a friendship ceremony with those depicted as antidemocratic criminals, intensified in its grotesqueness by its association with the feminised fripperies of “taking tea”: presented in contrast with the refused democratic duty of meeting the Prime Minister, styled formally as “Mrs May”.

Mentioning the war: Appeasement

Manhood is clearly a valuable commodity in the representation of Brexit. However, the following sections will now consider those aspects of masculine identity that Marina Hyde highlighted in her column referred to above: the conduct of the Brexit debate terms motivated explicitly by the language of war. It would be little surprise to Storey (2010) that the lexicon of war should feature in discussion of Brexit. He argues that the contours of Britain's cultural and political identity have been shaped between identification with empire and the collective memory of warfare. While the identity of the belligerent forces are as subject to change as the notion of Britishness mobilised to counter them, Storey (2010, 12-13) points to a long-standing opposition with continental Europe, a tension that has intensified with the development of the European Union. It is within this setting that popular tropes around the last major war in Western Europe, WWII, are sustained within political discourse around international politics. We will look at the most prominent of these here, beginning with "appeasement" and its surrounding discourses.

While "appeasement" has presented a loaded manner of describing offering concessions to an enemy state since prior to WWI, its common association is with UK Prime Minister Chamberlain's ultimately discredited negotiations with Hitler in 1938 and with the attendant implications on the inherent wickedness of the enemy and on the certain failure of the appeasement. Drawing upon this association with the mismanaged lead-up to WWII, "appeasement" became a way of exercising negative judgement in circumstances of "conflict and consensus" (Fowler 1991, 6). Stressing its flexibility, Philo and McLaughlin (1995) identify "appeasement" as the dominant discourse in media condemnation of "spineless" economic sanctions in the lead up to the first Gulf War. Thus, while trawling for instances of nouns such as "appeasement" and the phrases that follow might seem "pernickety", in Chilton's (1987) phrase, their use militarises language and colludes in the transaction of human affairs in a currency of organised violence.

In this and the section that follows, a non-date-specific search was undertaken in Nexis for the keyword appearing in the text of the same article as Brexit. In a number of examples, although appeasement and Brexit are collocated, appeasement still retains its conventional association with Chamberlain's pre-war negotiations, illustrated by the following example:

Tory leaders over the years would have given different answers to the question at different times, sometimes contentious ones. There were serious disagreements, for example, about free trade, appeasement, decolonisation and, naturally, Europe (Harris, *The Daily Telegraph* 2019).

While presenting a list that concludes "naturally" in an axiomatic assessment of the present topic of Europe, this article engages a frame of historical perspective, the underlying suggestion of which is that since the other issues were eventually resolved, it may be assumed that the latest problem will be as well. Less positively, the unqualified inclusion of appeasement as an example of "serious disagreements" represents a categorical assumption that appeasement represents political irresponsibility. While signalling appeasement as an irresponsible term to use, it also presents appeasement as a suitable term to portray and engage in political antagonism:

Tory Brexiteers must tone down their language because it is fuelling death threats towards MPs in their party, a former minister claimed yesterday. Remainer Nicky Morgan said that Conservative colleagues are acting recklessly by using words like "betrayal" to describe Theresa May's handling of Brexit. She hit out after veteran Brexiteer Bill Cash said the Prime Minister had been guilty of "capitulation" and "appeasement" to Brussels and called

Remainers pushing for the softest possible Brexit – or no Brexit at all - “devious” (The Express 2019)

Here, we see appeasement’s association with the politics of attack and conflict. While its use here is predicated on the recklessness of accusing a colleague of appeasement, it sets Sir Bill Cash, lent added esteem by the modifier “veteran”, against one woman (Nicky Morgan) complaining of his aggression and another woman (Theresa May) presented as the target of Cash’s hostility. On the one hand, this presents Cash’s use of language as aggressive and irresponsible, reiterating “appeasement’s” contribution to the antagonism, while contextualising this anger with his length of service and experience.

While providing an opportunity to amplify the emotional engagement of pro-Brexit MPs, this established meaning that appeasement enjoys also enables former officials such as former Chairman of the Bank of England Mervyn King (2018) to also offer it as an example of UK governments having betrayed the confidence of their citizens, modified only by the timeframe “in the 1930s” (King 2018).

In a manner that draws upon this reservoir of historical meaning and contextual resonance, there is also scope to deploy appeasement in specific reference to Brexit, as this example from *The Express* shows:

It was the unaccountable EU, not Britain, that was in profound trouble because of its obsession with federal integration and the destruction of national identities, an outlook that has triggered angry populist movements throughout the continent. In Italy, Hungary, Austria, Germany and now Sweden, anti-immigration parties are major forces, something

that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Yet instead of exploiting Britain's advantages our Government displayed timidity and appeasement. As Boris puts it: "At every stage in talks so far Brussels gets what it wants." So the EU's demand for a £39billion so-called "divorce" bill was agreed without anything in return, while the minor question of the Northern Ireland border was absurdly turned into a deal-breaking obstacle (McKinstry, *The Express* 2018).

This extracts develops from a summary of context expressed within an explicitly political register ("federal integration", "angry populist movements") to the reported speech of Boris Johnson invoking a "divorce" metaphor of domestic strife. The sentence linking these registers projects a contrast between the empowered action of "exploiting" and the associations of surrender and vulnerability in "timidity and appeasement". The advocacy of empowered action on Johnson's part is consistent with the article's explicit alignment with Johnson's style of engagement and talent for "generating controversy", partly betrayed in the familiar use of his first name "Boris". Although just coincidentally alongside his use of a divorce analogy, the same article's introduction refers to Johnson's private life and its relationship with his public profile and its gendered associations:

Last week again, he dominated the headlines, this time through his private life, whose wayward exuberance has led to the breakdown of his 25-year-old marriage. Yet if diehard Remainers and his Tory enemies thought Boris would be shamed into temporary silence then they badly misjudged him (McKinstry, *The Express* 2018).

There are two forms of description that are worth highlighting initially. The first is the euphemism "wayward exuberance" to refer to an extra-marital affair on Johnson's part. In terms of expected

behaviours, “exuberance” implies an excess of energy and cheer, rather than misconduct. As such, this uses the assumption that exuberant masculine behaviour includes sexual infidelity in order to assess Johnson positively. In stark contrast to Johnson’s playful waywardness, those wishing to retain the UK’s place within the EU are presented in unshifting terms as “diehards”. Notably too, where judgement is applied to Johnson, the focus rests on his thirst for publicity, on which matter Johnson is presented as having indulged his masculine instincts and defied his critics.

The Dunkirk spirit

Having looked at how appeasement offers a means of describing concession in manner that is conventionally associated with dealings with Europe and accords with masculine discourses of a politics of contest and aggressiveness, we will now look to a still more lexically specific representation of relations with the European mainland: references to the 1940 evacuation of British Expeditionary Force and allied troops from the beach at Dunkirk. The phrase “Dunkirk spirit” has largely been incorporated into everyday use in Britain, to refer to the efforts of groups of downtrodden citizens to prevail under trying circumstances. For example, Tiresias’ (1984, 20) travelogue *Notes from Overground* attributes English commuters’ stoicism in the face of institutional incompetence to their possession of the “the Dunkirk spirit all right”. From the contemporary examples that mention Brexit, this first example from *The Express* refers to the stereotypical British commuter’s topic of small talk, the weather:

It is no wonder we can't crack Brexit if our once great country is paralysed by a few inches of snow. If the EU has been laughing at our negotiating skills, they'll be splitting their sides today at how pathetic we are in the face of a bit of bad weather [...] So what happened to

our Dunkirk spirit, our do-or-die attitude? When I was a kid growing up in Newcastle, we routinely had a foot of snow overnight. No school ever closed and if the bus didn't come or the car didn't start, I had to walk to school three miles. Everyone did it (Malone, *The Express* 2019).

This is an opinion column by a personality journalist, emphasising their credentials to speak on the basis of personal and collective experience. As well as the Dunkirk spirit, related expressions of British determination are called upon (“Our do-or-die attitude”, “Everyone did it”). Using inclusive pronouns, the readers are interpellated into a shared perceptual world in explicitly national terms (“our once great country”, “how pathetic we are”), while marginalising the European Union as ungenerous witnesses to Britain’s folly (“they’ll be splitting their sides”). Moreover, while this illustrates Dunkirk’s role in marking out an inherent antagonism between Britain and Europe, the next extract from the *Mail on Sunday* mobilises the association of the Dunkirk spirit with military rather than rhetorical acrimony:

“[Headline] AS WILLIAMSON INVOKES DUNKIRK SPIRIT: I WILL ORDER THE NAVY TO REPLACE CHANNEL FERRIES. [Intro] The Royal Navy could be pressed into action to ferry vital supplies across the channel in the event of a No Deal Brexit, Government sources have told the *Mail on Sunday* (Owen, *Mail on Sunday* 2019).

The military implications of this speculative news story are most obvious in its reference to the services of the Royal Navy. Furthermore, “Dunkirk spirit” is invoked amidst a range of items from the military lexicon, from the use of “order” to describe government minister Williamson’s proposed speech act to invoke Dunkirk, to the navy-specific historical term “pressed into action”. This may be

said to be a perverse reconfiguration of the phrase that it be applied to the endeavours of a national institution, since the Dunkirk evacuations were conducted by citizen sailors in support of an over-stretched Royal Navy. Yet, we see a similar association between the Dunkirk spirit and the coordinated might of the institution in the following example, from the business section of the *Daily Telegraph*:

“Exporters and firms exposed to foreign currency risks have also been identified as potentially hazardous for banks, the source said. A rival bank executive told *The Telegraph* in July that the industry may have to invoke a ‘Dunkirk spirit’ to support the economy: ‘Extending credit to firms impacted is one thing we’re looking at’” (Withers, *The Daily Telegraph* 2018).

Whereas the previous example was weighted in the language of military order, this occupies the expressive field of economics, where the reported speech of the bank executive places “Dunkirk spirit” alongside field-appropriate adjectives “extending” and “impacted”. In this regard, the extract confirms Boers and Demecheleer’s (1997, 116) identification of a dominant “war metaphor” in the expression of economic relationships. As well as investing conventionally expressed institutional action with the common virtue and spiritedness of Dunkirk, this example joins with the other in expressing the developing commercial relationship between Britain and the European in conflictual terms.

Yet, just as the Dunkirk spirit can be mobilised as a nationalist call to arms, in a manner which articulates politics with masculine militarism, so can an emphasis be placed on its status as a contested and problematic term. We have already referred to the columns of Marina Hyde that

situate these war discourses within a toxic and aggressive masculinity, and pointed to examples of problematisation in the use of appeasement, and the following extract from a *Guardian* column stresses the complicity of British popular culture in foregrounding myths of nation founded in a *misremembering* of war:

When *Dad's Army* launched, Paul Fox, then the controller of BBC One, was worried that it might offend veterans or those who'd lost loved ones in a war that had ended less than 25 years earlier. In the event, he found that its soft-focus portrait of defiant Britain muddling along was just how people wanted to remember it. It was reassuring in the turbulent and uncertain 1960s to be reminded that pomposity, hierarchy and incompetence had somehow produced victory, and it played into the idea that it was the Dunkirk spirit and British genius rather than the mighty US war machine that had won the war (Perkins, *The Guardian* 2018).

In a manner that has echoes of our analysis of appeasement, this extract produces a more critical and reflexive interpretation of the usefulness of the Dunkirk spirit. The phrase appears only at the end of a lengthy paragraph in which the reader has already been altered to its absurdity, through the use of irony (“pomposity, hierarchy and incompetence had somehow produced victory”) and culminating in a sardonic contrast between “spirit” and “genius” against “machine”. So while the Dunkirk spirit provides a means to express collective action against the machinations of an enemy EU in a manner that extends from the original agent of the resourceful citizen to the national institution, the appropriateness of its use is as contested as a posturing on the platform of a set of far-fetched war myths. This performative component of the masculine posture and its contestability in a context of widespread political personalisation is pursued still more vividly in the next section.

The Military Man: Masculinity Challenged

A more intentional and explicit claim to masculinity, and its articulation with the Brexit project, calls upon an even less subtle exercise in inhabiting the military bearing that is central to the discharge of Brexit. In the following extract from a widely shared interview, this retreat to discourses around military service and heroism are more straightforward in their personalisation by the enunciator, while also revealing the extent to which these discourses are subject to challenge. The interview is between the political editor for Sky News (“I” in the transcript) and the Conservative MP and prominent Brexit-supporter Mark Francois (“MF in the transcript), and the occasion is the aftermath of a House of Commons debate over the Brexit arrangements, bringing a further delay to the UK’s exit has resulted:

1	I	The Commons has just ruled out a no deal (.) Brexit (.) tomorrow they’ll vote for
2		an extension ah you’ve got May’s deal as an option (.) the likelihood is that
3		what they’ll do is vote for a softer Brexit custom union (.) an all of <u>you guys</u> (.)
4		haven’t got an option (..) the <u>best choice</u> you’ve got is <u>May’s deal</u> (.) why won’t
5		you just back it
6	MF	Because it means we don’t leave the European Union
7	I	[You’ve not leaving anyway (.)
8		they’ve just voted that you’re not leaving you have an extension
9	MF	[Ah no
10	I	You got a no deal off the table
11	MF	[No with respect that’s <u>not</u> what they voted for (.) by
12		<u>four</u> votes (..) four

13	I	[Yeh but it still passed
14	MF	[Yeh but hang on (.) they voted that we wouldn't
15		leave on the twenty-ninth of March well that we wouldn't leave with no deal (.)
16		okay that's one thing
17	I	[And then
18	MF	[Right but you (.) sorry cause you're mixing up a lot of
19		things here if I may say so (.) with regards to the <u>withdrawal</u> agreement (..)
20		whatever people think of Members of Parliament (.) and I'm under no illusions
21		about that (.) they can read (.) and we've <u>read</u> the withdrawal agreement and
22		we it means we <u>don't leave</u> the EU (..) so if we give them two choices (.) which is
23		stay in the European Union (.) and vote for the withdrawal agreement to stay in
24		the European Union (...) we're <u>not</u> gonna vote for the withdrawal agreement
25		when it keeps us in the EU (.) we're just not gonna do it
26	I	I just see it just seems to me that tonight your (.) options are narrowing as it is
27		the Prime Minister (.) uhm and you're still ploughing on I just don't understand
28		why you don't just take her deal and bank the win
29	MF	I think that I've tried to explain it's because it's not a win it's a lose (.) I'm not
30		banking a lose (.) I was in the army and I wasn't trained to lose
31	I	Okay (.) alright

This starts off as a relatively conventional “broadcast news interview” (Montgomery, 2007), in which the interviewer formulates questions that summarise the circumstances for the benefit of the overhearing audience in a manner designed to provoke the interviewee. Elements of informality are in evidence throughout, with the designation “you guys” (line 3) used by the interviewer to place

stress upon Francois' capacity to speak freely on behalf of the pro-Brexit "European Research Group". As is characteristic of such interview arrangements, there then follows a series of turns in which the interpretation of the topic under discussion – the implications of then-Prime Minister May's proposals for the implementation of Brexit – are disputed between the interviewer and interviewee, most notably with Francois' refusal of the interviewer's question ("sorry cause you're mixing up a lot of things here if I may say so", lines 18-19).

However, whereas the interviewer's earlier contributions were marked by categorical assertions such as "You got a no deal off the table" (line 10) and "Yeh but it still passed" (line 14), the interviewer then engages Francois in a more subjective style using what Montgomery (2007, 122) calls "markers of propositional attitude" in "I just see it seems to me tonight your options are narrowing" (line 27) and "I just don't understand why you don't just take her deal" (line 29). In addition to producing an unusual degree of personal alignment on the part of the interviewer, this produces a correspondingly subjective response from Francois. Initially, the expression of the context-appropriate degree of commitment in Francois produces a cooperative marker of attitude in responding to the interviewer's formulation "bank the win" ("I think that I've tried to explain because it's not a win it's a lose", line 30). Significantly, however, Francois then sustains the win/lose trop to implicitly attribute this determination and resolve to his experience of military service ("I was in the army and I wasn't trained to lose", line 31). In terms of his status within the exchange, Francois pulls upon the dominance of military discourses in the debate to produce what Clayman and Heritage (2002: 168) refer to as an attempt at credibility enhancement.

Comparatively quickly, and propelled by social media reaction, Francois' claim to military experience was extracted as the "money shot" of the interview. Newspaper columnist Marina Hyde (2019) who, as noted above, has remarked on the hyper-masculinity associated with Brexit, made sardonic

reference to Francois' claim to a military attitude by referring to Francois "who you may know serves as Second Lieutenant in the Brexit Catering Corps (Territorial)". This has echoes of previous claims to military credentials or legacies by UK politicians. Perhaps most notably, then-Secretary of State for Defence Michael Portillo's invoked the spirit of the "SAS" as embodying that of the UK in an earlier era of negotiations with the European Union, a remark that occasioned widespread ridicule (Bellamy 1995). Whatever the credibility of Francois' army experience, the claim is read within a critical environment in which the militaristic overtones of the campaign have already been problematised. Thus, as Street (2004) reflects, the foregrounding of resources of self in order to burnish a political position is limited by the reputational capital of the politician, combined with the recognisability of a claim as a political tactic. In this sense, the use of masculinity is subject to similar limits to those that apply to populist tactics, such that their sustained deployment produces a counterproductive association with the existent lexical field of establishment politics (Higgins, 2013).

Conclusion

What we see during the Brexit campaign is the articulation of particular forms of masculinity and ordinariness, with the associated capacity to offer insights associated with "common sense" rather than political interests. There are numerous historical precedents for this, and De Blasio *et al* (2012) point to the presentation of 1930s UK Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin as "Farmer Stan", with a country gentleman's love of field sports and livestock. One key difference between that case and the examples considered here is that Baldwin entwines the common touch with the majesty of power, whereas the Brexit campaign mobilises British masculinity as antithetical to the political establishment and its effete admiration for Europe. Thus, while both call upon the reassuring tropes of manhood, the contemporary example of Brexit articulates these with a cultural iteration of nationalist populism.

Through the example of Francois in particular, we see that performances of masculinity may be subject to the same forms of popular judgement as other political competences and types of political performance. For one thing, there is the obligation of those politicians seeking to adopt a populist mantle to appear “unpolitical”, in this case by producing the “bad manners” (Moffitt 2016) of masculine excess. However, these performative tactics diminish in power the more prominent these modes of performance become in the political sphere. The second factor is answerability to what Street (2004) emphasises as the performative capabilities and credentials of the individual behind the political persona. As we reflect upon the mythical character of masculinity (Connell 2002), so the contingencies of the masculine and its political purchase become apparent: both in terms of the inflation of the necessary performative claims and the demonstrable qualities of the individual.

However, the very contestability of this association between machismo and war can also be keeping with the desired problematic association with the political centre. Like the “Bernie Bro” tag associated with male supporters of US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, what may be presented as excessive masculinity is both celebrated and criticised in tandem; foregrounding an exclusionary “gang” mentality while presenting evidence for what Katz (2016) describes as Sanders’ “street fighter” appeal. As Davies (2007) points out in his analysis of the rise of white male politicians and anti-intellectualism, exposing the shortcomings of political masculinity – “male authority reconstituted around the admission of its limitations” (Davis 2007, 190) – might perversely solidify the position of the self-styled political renegade as eternal outsider. As with other forms of populist discourse, and in keeping with the political antagonism within which it thrives, the application of scorn can fuel rather than dowse.

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