

'Legsit' is no joke. It's symptomatic of a reactionary Brexit political culture

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*The Daily Mail's 'Legsit' headline was defended as 'only a joke'. Not so, writes **Roberta Guerrina**: it is symptomatic of a political environment in which women politicians are forced to prove their femininity and forces opposed to progressive politics – like the Mail – are newly emboldened. The Great Repeal Bill gives government the chance to roll back EU equality legislation and the press knows it.*



It was only a joke, Sarah Vine told R4, and those who objected should find their sense of humour. The Daily Mail's front page showed Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May sitting side by side with the headline 'Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!' It was a 'joke' that comes at a critical juncture for progressive politics, and was received with scorn and widely criticised for its obvious and open misogyny. Beyond the headline and the reduction of two political leaders to their performance of femininity in the public sphere, the idea that it is "just a joke" – and the pushback against the widespread criticism – can be seen as an example of the confidence of the right-wing press as it seeks to challenge progressive politics in a post-Brexit environment. The Mail's article is symptomatic of a concerted rejection of equality, social inclusion and diversity. This point that needs unpicking, particularly in relation to the long-term implications of the politics of Brexit.

The Mail's reaction to those criticisms may reveals that we are on the cusp of a critical juncture for social democracy. It is becoming increasingly legitimate to scorn some of its core values, such as social inclusion and social justice. Ridicule is a well-established tool for marginalising and sidelining issues that force us to challenge hegemonic structures. It is a strategy that seeks to delegitimise key claims by traditionally marginal groups. In this one instance, Sarah Vine's response did just that. The confrontational tone of her reply highlights the fact that we entering a "battle" for the normative foundations of political discourse.



Geopolitical alliance ... Margaret Thatcher's relationship with Ronald Reagan was sometimes characterised by the press as flirtatious. Photo: [David Seaton](#) via a [C-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

We have seen this before. When women come to the forefront of politics, taking on high level political positions, the "establishment" and the media have sought to reassert traditional gender norms and representations of women ([Adcock, 2010](#)). Women's political bodies thus become the battleground for competing political agendas. The coverage, the focus on women's leadership style, dress code, their adherence to "feminine codes" seek to divert attention from women as political leaders with agency, to women as objects. In this context, politics becomes like a theatre for the performance of femininity and masculinity (Guerrina, 2014). This discussion matters because gender

norms are not fixed, but performed through our everyday interaction with others. The media is one of the vehicles through which gender norms are produced, reproduced and challenged. It also helps to legitimise specific gender codes that disadvantage women in the political sphere (Guerrina, 2014; [Wright & Holland, 2014](#)).

The Mail's article seeks to re-cast Sturgeon and May from political leaders to feminine heroines. Understanding, "women's media(ted) representation" (Adcock, 2010: 136) helps to expose gender bias in the way the media treats women as political and public figures. As Adcock (2010) further explains, the way the media covers women's contribution to and participation in political events highlights the constant struggle they face in trying to fulfil traditionally masculine roles whilst performing traditional codes of femininity in the public eye.

Reporting on political women's attire and appearance is one of the many ways in which media disciplines and binds the performance of femininity in politics. Wright & Holland (2014: 458) point out that "As well as shaping perceptions of politics, the media, therefore, plays a crucial role in mediating gender norms and reinforcing the double bind", the perennial tension between the way they are seen as performing femininity and political leadership. Given these considerations, it is no surprise that May dismissed the Mail's article and the criticisms of it:

"Obviously what we do as politicians is what makes a difference to people's lives. I think that most people concentrate on what we do as politicians. But if people want to have a bit of fun about how we dress, then so be it".

Unsurprisingly, Sturgeon's response to the story was much stronger, claiming that "Brexit may risk taking Britain back to the early 1970s, but there is no need for coverage of events to lead the way". Many high-profile Labour women joined in the criticism.

If we think of the 2016 EU referendum campaign as a critical juncture, it is possible to see the increasing confidence of a new form of populism that has the full sway of progressive politics in its sight. The fundamental pillars of progressive politics (and post-material values) have become the symbol of a "broken" system that disregards the interests of the "common" people. Equality, diversity, social cohesion, inclusion, and development/aid are the new targets of this "new" form of politics that focuses inwards and exploits growing resentment stemming from the politics of austerity. Yet it is these same principles that provide a policy platform for addressing growing inequalities.

The growth of populist politics therefore provides the backdrop to the government's Brexit negotiations. The next two years will prove extremely challenging, as the May government seeks to establish its negotiating position. As competencies for core policy areas, such as employment and women's rights, are transferred back to the national level, gaps and inconsistencies will become increasingly evident. This will require the government to move beyond transposition to the adoption of new legislation. This is exactly why the Great Repeal Bill seeks to extend the powers of the executive to make significant changes to existing legislation ([Fox & Blackwell, 2014](#)).

The equality *acquis* is particularly vulnerable in this context. Given the UK government's performance during the negotiations of key policies, e.g. the Amendment Pregnant Worker Directive, we can expect a significant rethinking in the way women's employment rights are administered and regulated in the future. Gender equality and women's employment rights are particularly vulnerable in this context. Not a high priority area, but often seen as an extension of "Brussels' red tape", they are likely to fall pray to bureaucrats seeking to give the UK a trade advantage by deregulating the employment market (Guerrina & Murphy, 2016).

The story in the Daily Mail thus becomes important as a site of contestation for the position of counter-narratives and progressivism within the mainstream politics ([Jones, 2017](#)). The coming together of key political forces (populism, UK-EU negotiations, failure of the government to secure core values) poses a real challenge to gender equality in the future. Considering that during the EU referendum campaign women's voices and presence were [largely marginalised](#) until the post-referendum settlement, it is important not to underestimate the impact of stories such as

the one discussed here. The mainstream media is trying to adjust into a new state of affairs where women have claimed the centre-stage of high politics. As such it is producing gender norms by ascribing pre-determined roles to women in positions of leadership. Moreover, drawing attention to the fact that women are at the negotiating table, it is a way to move attention away from the fact that Brexit poses a significant threat to gender equality policies in the UK.

References

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This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

[Professor Roberta Guerrina](#) is Reader in Politics at the University of Surrey.

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