ARTICLE

'Fatherhood, UK Political Culture and the New Politics'

Author: Prof Candida Yates

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Abstract

This article discusses the trope of fatherhood and its deployment within the UK

political scene in order to ask how and why this has become a strategy in the post-

ideological context of contemporary party politics. It uses psychoanalytic ideas to

explore the fantasies of what is at stake in such a move, and explores how politicians

can be read as symptoms of broader struggles around hegemonic masculinity as

represented within the celebritized arena of political culture.

Key Words: Fatherhood; political culture; masculinity; mediatization

Following the UK riots in the summer of 2011, there was much talk of a 'moral collapse of society' by politicians in the UK coalition government, with Prime Minister, David Cameron, citing 'children without fathers' as their key cause (Sky News, 2011); he argued in a speech shortly afterwards: 'I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home' (Cameron, 2011a). Concerns about absent fathers and the importance of paternal authority within family life have contributed to Cameron's political imago as a father himself, one who is equipped to pick up the pieces of what he calls 'broken Britain' (Cameron, 2011b). Anxieties about the loss of paternal influence have emerged as a new form of common sense, in which disquiet about the absent father has also been expressed by those on the centre-left of British politics, such as political researcher, Marc Stears (2011), or Labour MP, David Lammy (2011), who, like Cameron, argue that absent fathers played a key role in lawless behaviour of rioters and black working class males in particular.

This lament for the lost father conjures up an older notion of politics grounded in patriarchy. Concerns about the loss of paternal influence within families, and in society more generally, evoke fantasies about the return of the containing 'good father', and the electorate's identification with political leaders and their parties may also be linked to such desires. Today, parenting has become a key terrain of politics in terms of both policy (Lewis, 2002) and, notably, the performance of male politicians. In an age when party politics is as much to do with promotional techniques of marketing as it is with policies, emotive descriptions of the family are often used by politicians to address male voters as 'fathers' and members of 'hardworking families'. In addition, male politicians from Tony Blair to Barack Obama often define themselves in terms of being 'a good father' and attempt to court voters with images

of themselves and their children (Patterson, 2006: 16), thereby tapping into this relay of fantasy and anxiety at the visible level of political image-making.[1]

Blair's influence on Cameron has been widely documented (Prabhakar; 2011; Seymour; 2010) and the continuities between them are symbolized through their identities as modern 'new' fathers, with particular events in their private family lives providing justification for positioning themselves in this way. For example, during the period of the 2010 election, Cameron became a father again, an event that received enormous publicity, echoing the widespread coverage of the birth of Blair's child 'Leo' during his time in office as Prime Minister (BBC News 2000; BBC News, 2010). Cameron's coalition partner, Nick Clegg, Liberal Party leader and deputy Prime Minister in the new government, has also foregrounded his identity as a father, and Cameron and Clegg's early relationship as coalition partners was symbolically sealed when it was reported that they had together constructed an IKEA cupboard for Cameron's new baby at Downing Street (*Daily Mail* Reporter, 2010b).

However, this self-conscious move toward a new emphasis on the discourse of fatherhood has not emerged solely as a response to the individual circumstances of the politicians involved. It has also emerged against the backdrop of a culture that is now widely held to be particularly 'feminized', in which ideas about fatherhood entail a specific focus on 'parenting ideals' grounded in emotional literacy. The adoption of 'feminized' values and a language of 'nurturing' is often evident in the personalized rhetoric of politicians such as Cameron and Clegg, a move which has emerged in public and popular discourse as a response to cultural and political changes associated with feminism, the emergence of 'therapy culture' (Richards and Brown, 2011; Yates, 2011) and changes associated with the alleged 'crisis of masculinity' (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005; Layton, 2011). Nevertheless, such a move contradicts the more

reactionary stance implied by the recent call of the same politicians for the reconstitution of 'traditional' family values and the restoration of paternal family authority.

To explore such contradictions, this article will discuss constructions of fatherhood as a key signifier of UK politics over the past fifteen years, from the era of New Labour government to the 'new politics' of the Conservative- Liberal coalition government today. The three Prime Ministers of this period, Blair, Gordon Brown and Cameron all made fatherhood a key thematic of their terms of office through the much publicized births, losses and illnesses of their children. I argue that political representations of fatherhood within popular culture symbolize broader struggles over patriarchal masculinity in an era of celebrity politics in which the values of promotional culture are widespread.

Constructions of patriarchal masculinity are not fixed, but subject to contestation and change as hierarchical definitions of masculinity compete for hegemonic dominance (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005). Given the inherent instabilities of masculinity as a psychosocial and cultural construction, one can argue that it is always 'in crisis', and that such contingencies were symbolized and made particularly visible in the 1990s, when the old fictions and entitlements of masculinity appeared less credible than previously, and the notion of 'masculinity in crisis' became widespread in academic research and popular culture (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005; Layton, 2011; Yates, 2007). As I discuss, the loss of such entitlements has been a recurring theme in popular discourses of fatherhood within popular and political culture over the past fifteen years. The discussion will focus on whether contemporary images of fatherhood on the political scene signify a transitional shift in hegemonic masculinity away from discourses of mastery, or whether they represent a mode of

seduction that merely shores up traditional formations of authority and patriarchal masculinity.

The rise of fatherhood as a key trope of political culture is also linked to its status as a reassuring signifier of authenticity in an age of uncertainty, risk and a growing cynicism about the meaning of Western social democratic politics in what some define as the 'post-political' or 'post-ideological' age (Fisher, 2009; Mouffe, 2005).[2] It is also linked to the growing personalization of politicians and to the celebritization of politics more generally within postmodern party politics (Corner and Pels, 2003; Yates, 2010). There is now a vast body of scholarly research on the topic of 'political communication' and its influence in shaping voter preference and our engagement with politics (see for example, Sanders, 2009; Negrine, 2008). Yet following recent research in the field of cultural and political studies, the term 'political culture' is preferred here to that of 'political communication', as the meaning of the latter is too narrow and functional to encompass the many areas within popular culture and the media where political engagement now takes place (Corner and Pels, 2003; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010; Yates 2010). From radio phone-ins to soap opera and comedy satires, the notion of what 'constitutes politics' now extends beyond the traditional communication channels of political engagement to the mediatized spaces of popular culture (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2006: 6). Following in the tradition of Raymond Williams (1976), 'popular culture' is defined here in its broadest sense to mean 'a way of life'. In the past, popular culture has been defined in terms of its difference from 'high' culture, yet within the contemporary postmodern context, the distinctions between high and low culture, have become increasing blurred. The same can be said about the blurring of boundaries between 'official' and 'popular' culture where, in political culture

especially, politicians market themselves or deride the opposition by using populist, social networking techniques.

Furthermore, the emotional tone of much political culture invites a mode of analysis that is able to accommodate the often irrational and contradictory nature of popular political discourse in an era of economic crisis and flux. Psychoanalysis offers a perspective on such issues that takes into account these contradictions and opens up new modes of thinking them through. From Freud onwards, there has been a history of applying psychoanalytic concepts to socio-political themes and events (Freud, 1921, 1930; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Rustin, 1991; Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson, 2006; Glynos and Stavrakas, 2010). Yet the application of psychoanalysis has been used less within the field of politics, media and cultural studies, which is often skeptical of what are viewed as the universalizing claims of psychoanalytic thinking (Nunn and Biressi, 2010). This article deploys psychoanalytic ideas to explore fantasies of what is at stake in the lament for the absent father within political culture in order to suggest that the focus on the father within political culture is symptomatic of hegemonic struggles around masculinity and the emotionalized experience of consumption and celebrity culture. It begins by providing a social and cultural context for the discussion of representations of fatherhood within political culture by linking them to broader anxieties about the loss of paternal authority within a post-familial era.

The absent father in a post-familial age

Stephen Baskerville (2002: 995) argues that in the UK and US, there is a common focus on the discourse of 'parental abandonment' and its role in shaping contemporary families both in the work of scholars on the 'left' and 'right' and also in the language of political and media commentators who echo this sense of loss. Recent political rhetoric in the UK about the need to 'shame' absent fathers, who leave 'wives and mothers unprotected', betrays anxieties about the loss of containing structures associated with the patriarchal family (Cameron, 2011c). Such attitudes are linked to the history of UK government social policy, in which, as Jane Lewis argues, there has always been an emphasis on promoting the role of father as the traditional male provider of child maintenance. What marks out the attitude of UK social policy, is the 'negative character' of debates around fatherhood, where concerns about the inability of fathers to father tend to be emphasized (2002:126).

Yet as psychosocial studies research indicates, today we live in a 'post-familial' age, in which new, fluid and diverse models of the family have emerged that are less rooted in a fixed traditional heterosexual model of the nuclear family (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Elliott and Urry, 2010). Elliott and Urry are positive about the 'constructive renewal' of the family in a post-traditional era, highlighting opportunities afforded by the blurring of the old gender boundaries within family life (p.89). Yet this ambiguity has been less well received elsewhere, as it also threatens the patriarchal inheritance upon which a traditional model of masculinity and fatherhood has been based, evoking anxieties that find expression in the sphere of popular and political culture. As Richard Collier argues (2009), discourses about the role of the husband often intersect with those that articulate a backlash against the gains made by feminism within popular culture, and thus underline the significance of 'father-rights' discourses and related representations regarding the loss of paternal

possession and control for the preservation of hegemonic masculinity. The notion of 'father-rights' may sound extreme in its reactionary nostalgia for a lost patriarchal authority within the family, yet the anxieties that underpin its demands also resonate with a yearning for 'the good father' as symbolized in popular images of masculinity and fatherhood in the media and their representation in politics and popular culture in particular (Yates, 2007).[3]

The past fifteen years have produced some iconic representations of masculinity within UK political culture which capture broader shifts and contradictions in hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood – as symbolized via the metro-sexual posturing of the guitar playing, jeans-wearing Blair, and following him, Cameron and Clegg, who adopt a similar 'dressed-down' style of presentation. The latter contrasts with the more brooding angst of Gordon Brown, who identifies with an earlier model of the would-be patriarch, often making reference to his father as a 'minister of the Kirk' (Martin, 2009). The excruciating awkwardness of Brown's attempts to 'humanize' his image before the 2010 election should be seen against the backdrop of an increasingly mediatized political culture, which forces politicians to engage with the media in a bid to sustain a position of power and responsibility. This development has occurred at a time when faith in the social democratic system has been tested by a series of crises in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and the US. As recent public protests in Europe and the US suggest, popular disillusionment is linked to a widespread contempt for the banking sector, cynicism about the UK parliamentary expenses scandal and the loss of accountability of the political system through the fourth estate, which, as in the recent Murdoch phone tapping scandal, is now perceived by some to be corrupt and unable to hold governments to account. Such protest confirms the view that the lack of trust in the post-political machine of

party politics does not eradicate the material reality of political struggle, nor the desire for it (Zizek, 2009). Yet the processes that drive political culture are always mediated by fantasy, and the wishes and anxieties associated with such fantasies may, as in the Occupy movement, become displaced onto other spaces so that the desire actively to occupy and fill up such places becomes symptomatic.

Against this background of disenchantment and cynicism about the integrity of the political system, a sense of nostalgia has also emerged for an age when politicians were somehow more authentic and 'real', and the maverick appeal of some UK politicians – past and present – from Winston Churchill to Boris Johnson can be seen in this light (Yates, 2010). The nostalgic wish for continuity with a mythical past combined with a desire for a certain future are condensed within the sign of the 'good father', who can safeguard the narcissistic fantasy of past entitlements and inheritance at both personal and national levels of experience. Indeed, images of fatherhood have played an important role in signalling the authentic virtues of male politicians – whether as playful, active and caring 'dads', or as 'providers' – conveying fantasies of reliability and a capacity to contain anxieties about leadership in an age of change and uncertainty.

The mediatization of politics in a post-ideological era

The pleasures – or not – of consuming such images within political culture are linked to the pleasures of a mediatized popular culture with which politics is now closely interlinked. John Street (1997: 7) has defined popular culture 'as a form of entertainment that is mass produced or is made available to large numbers of people'.

It is closely linked to consumer culture and the consumption of politics is now big business.[4] Andrew Wernick (1991) and others argue that politics should be viewed in a promotional context, where the values and practices of advertising and consumption have come to the fore, influencing all aspects of daily life (Featherstone, 2007). Consumerism is shaped by the irrational vicissitudes of desire and identification – as in the development of celebrity politics, where, as with other forms of consumption, voters' responses are not always governed by rationality. This is not to say that voters are manipulated victims of false consciousness, but rather that the engagement with politics is partly bound up with the emotional pleasures of what Colin Campbell (1993) calls 'illusory' hedonism. The links between celebrity culture and the emotionalization of politics have been noted by researchers in field of political and cultural studies (Biressi and Nunn, 2010; Evans and Hesmondhalgh, 2005). In an age of post-ideological party politics, where in the West, the boundaries between political parties have become increasingly indistinct, the branding of politicians through the politics of 'personality' and celebrity has become significant as a means of marking out and promoting political parties to voters, whose loyalties and political identifications have also become more fluid than previously. There are numerous politicians – for example, Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy, Sarah Palin and Arnold Schwarzenegger or Boris Johnson and Louise Mensch in the UK – who, in different ways, exemplify this trend of celebrity politics. A key aspect of this development is the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private and the performance of emotional life in front of the camera.

The performance of emotional authenticity through images of fatherhood has become a way for politicians to connect with voters. Nikolas Rose contextualizes this development in his compelling account of the ways in which 'psy' discourses now

'saturate' a popular culture where 'public conduct' is increasingly scrutinized and judged in terms of psychological and emotional 'authenticity':

> By the later twentieth century, public life and public actions become intelligible only to the extent that they can be converted into psychological terms, understood in terms of expressions of the personalities of the individuals concerned (1999: 267).

The development of 'personality politics' is linked to the emergence of what Richard Sennett (1977) has called 'secular charisma'. As I argue elsewhere, the latent oedipal aggression or 'envy or *ressentiment*' of voters towards politicians is displaced by focusing on their image and personality, rather than 'substantive political issues and policies' (Yates, 2010: 287). These strategies coalesce around the image of the politician as father and David Cameron provides a good example of this.

He began life as a 'spin doctor' for Carlton TV and, with the support of communications expert, Steve Hilton, he applied his Public Relations expertise in order to 'detoxify' the brand of the hitherto 'nasty' Tory party (Cockerill, 2007). In 2006, Cameron starred in his own short promotional films, produced in the authentic style of a home video, entitled 'web Cameron' (Oliver, 2006). The first of these focuses on Cameron the father, as we see him washing up at the kitchen sink in his London home, talking to camera with his children chatting in the background. Discourses of paternal care and provision come together here as the reassuring fantasy of Cameron's authentic persona as a young, loving, affluent father is evoked.[5] As one contributor noted in the online 'comments' section, this film presents Cameron as a 'normal' – if 'upper class and twitish' – father, deflecting the envy of his privileged

background by focusing on his persona as a regular dad.[6] Cameron's *presence* as a father in this and subsequent promotional material stands in for the figure of the lost father, as articulated by him through his rhetoric about the *absence* of paternal authority more generally. The highly emotional rhetoric about 'feckless' absent fathers has been a recurring theme of Conservative party policy, offering politicians from a privileged class background the chance to salvage their reputations by tapping into the reactionary commentary about the links between 'work-shy fathers' and 'broken Britain' (Travis and Stratton, 2011), appealing to a reactionary desire for paternal authority and the re-constitution of the traditional family. As the pro-family government Minster, Iain Duncan Smith, recently argued: 'We have been ambivalent about family structure in Britain for far too long' (Sparrow, 2011). In his 'fathers' day' broadcast, Cameron argued: 'It's high time runaway dads were stigmatized, and the full force of shame was heaped upon them. They should be looked at like drink-drivers, people who are beyond the pale' (Hennessy, 2011). Such examples show how the figure of the father becomes the siphon through which the promotional tendencies of political culture tap into the emotive and personalized character of politics today. Interestingly, this reveals the extent of the investment in the father figure at the political and social level. It also shows the extent to which fantasies of encountering a paternalistic figure of authority can shore up the sense of crisis characterizing the contemporary socio-cultural scene, and as I discuss, psychoanalysis offers a useful means of articulating such dilemmas.

The idealized father in psychoanalytic discourse

The emotive rhetoric of Cameron and others raises questions about what is psychologically at stake in the desire to punish absent fathers. It is perhaps not surprising that there should be a yearning for a good father as a symbol of stability amidst an era of social, political and economic crisis, and this desire has been explored more generally in the field of psychoanalytic studies. A well-known exponent of this view is Christopher Lasch (1979) who linked the growth of narcissism as a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon with the symbolic decline of the Oedipal father and the paternal authority he represents. Lasch was writing at a time when identity politics was gaining influence in the US and Europe and when feminism was challenging the patriarchal certainties that underpinned the structures of the nuclear family (Tyler, 2007; Yates, 2011). As Imogen Tyler and others document, Lasch has been subject to extensive criticism from feminists for his reactionary stance regarding the family in which he bemoans the loss of the father. Lasch argues that the family has been threatened by external agencies and professional 'experts' who undermine the more traditional role of parents, thereby creating the conditions for narcissistic personality disorders. The rise of consumer culture and the influence of the media are also foregrounded by Lasch as causes of narcissism, in which the paternal influence of the superego is replaced by guilt-free, narcissistic self-obsession. Lasch's descriptions of a narcissistic 'me' society are linked to its feminization, which provides a cultural vision of a relationship between the siren call of consumption, regressed infantile appetites and selfish mothers who disrupt the normative parameters of psychosocial family structures by challenging the rights of the patriarchal father. For Lasch, the role of the father should be to lead the child away from the all-engulfing irrational sphere of the pre-oedipal mother, to enable the child to acquire a sense of third-ness and (for boys at least) to identify with him and

develop a social conscience by internalizing the patriarchal norms established by the father and generations of men before him. Yet as Benjamin (1990: 138-146) and others have noted (Yates, 2007), in mourning the loss of the father, Lasch utlilizes a 'fatherless society' critique as deployed by the Frankfurt School in the late 1940s, and reproduces a particularly selective reading of Freud that idealizes the father and pathologizes the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and baby. This idealization of the father can be found in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which has tended to focus on the son's murderous rivalry towards the father rather than vice versa (Freud, 1913). As Benjamin argues, in Freud's later formulations of the Oedipus complex, he paid more attention to the ambivalence of Oedipus, the son, toward the father, Laius. Yet in 1900, Freud emphasizes the inherent rivalrous aggression experienced by the father toward the son, whom he knows will eclipse him (Freud, 1900: 261-264). Freud explored the irrational, nostalgic longing for the primal father in the story of *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Here, the hated primal father is murdered by his sons and they later experience a mixture of guilt, desire and aggression towards the father they collectively destroy. The brothers respond to such feelings by idealizing the primal father as a totem, and this idealization is later transformed into the worshipping of gods. A 'gulf' is opened up between the 'unappeased longing' for the primal father and the patriarchal father of the family, who is later restored to his place in the family and wider society (1913: 149). As Susannah Radstone (1995:153) reminds us: 'Totem and Taboo emerges … as an account of patriarchal masculinity's psychic foundations in an impossible nostalgic identification with an idealized image of the father'.

This tale of collective (if deluded) longing for the lost father arguably problematizes the idealization of the father within formations of hegemonic masculinity and contemporary fantasies about the wish to restore the absent father in

political life. As feminist readings of *Totem and Taboo* indicate, such a reading also highlights the irrational nature of fantasy associated with the patriarchal father, thereby blurring the boundaries within Lasch's split gendered reading of the rational father versus the irrational pre-oedipal mother. Yet, as Benjamin argues, one can also counter the psychoanalytic narrative of idealization of the father with a mode of parental identification that is less omnipotent and freer from both authoritarian connotations and the ambivalent feelings that emerge from that configuration (1990: 14). This counter-narrative is necessary to challenge the dominant account of hegemonic masculinity and the accompanying fantasies that circulate within popular political culture, where discourses of fatherhood can be found and are used to woo voters.

As Benjamin (1990) says, identifications with the father need not necessarily be authoritarian in order for a healthy sense of self to emerge, and it is helpful to take up this alternative model to explore the potential identifications with images of the father in political life. Today, object relations psychoanalysis sees the oedipal complex as the culmination of the pre-oedipal struggle to separate from both parents, in which the main development task is one of coming to terms with difference and acquiring what Christopher Bollas (1992) has called 'a generational consciousness'. In his narrative of 'the good enough Oedipus complex', Bollas discusses the passage from pre-oedipal 'matrilineal' love to the triangular conflicts of the Oedipus complex. In this account, the erotic desire for the mother is not pathologized as a source of guilt and anxiety, but rather 'is affirmed as a necessary stage in the development of the child's ego, before internalizing her and moving on to wider psychic horizons, and the emotional complexity of cultural life more broadly' (Yates, 2007: 39). Developing the ideas of D. W. Winnicott (1974) and Bollas (1992), I have used the notion of a 'good

enough masculinity' to imagine a more fallible and less idealized notion of masculinity and fatherhood that escapes the neat dualisms of the fatherless society critique, in which identifications with the sphere of the maternal are pathologized or barred, as in the Lacanian-inspired accounts of masculinity and sexual difference (Yates, 2000, 2007). To be 'good enough', is to allow both spheres of masculine and feminine identification to exist and is not seen to 'dilute' 'real' masculinity'.

This capacity to tolerate 'good enough' masculinity has implications for the kind of fantasies and identifications invoked in relation to discourses of masculinity and fatherhood within political culture. Andrew Samuels (2001) has discussed the notion of a 'good-enough political leader' and the capacity of voters to cope with the disappointments of such a leader who rejects the omnipotence and *hubris* of heroic leadership. He reminds us of the analogies between the 'art of parenting' and the 'art of politics' and the similar processes of identification that occur in both contexts. Winnicott's original idea of the 'good enough mother' is one that acknowledges that, as in the relationship between electorate and politicians, there is never a 'perfect fit' between parent and baby, but instead there is a kind of 'graduated let-down or disappointment of the baby carried out by her or his parents' (Samuels, 2001: 77). As Winnicott argues, this 'let-down' is equated with a perception of 'failure' on the part of parents, and it is this same sense of failure that the electorate may find hard to tolerate in their leaders (Samuels, 2001: 78).

The task of political analysts is to explore the degree to which both leaders and voters can cope with living with the 'good-enough leader', without resorting to 'idealizing' or 'denigrating' the leader as a defensive response (Samuels, 2001: 78). In this context, the changing images of Barack Obama as an object either of adoration or denigration provides an example of such processes at work (Pace, 2011). In his

speeches, Obama consistently foregrounds his identity as a father, often referring to one of his daughters as a means of conveying to us the notion of benign paternal authority and his status as the father of the nation. In the stirring rhetoric of his election campaigns, Obama sometimes links himself to Martin Luther King, thereby establishing a generational link in the minds of the electorate to the totemic power of King, the father of the black civil rights movement. In one example, Obama visited a monument dedicated to King, reinforcing his paternal identity by quoting his daughter: 'I know that one of my daughters will ask, perhaps my youngest, will ask, "Daddy, why is this monument here? What did this man do?"' (Pace, 2011). The generational consciousness of Obama is conveyed here by looking both back to King and forward to the next generation. This desire for a sense of heritage is not new, yet in the contemporary political age, beset by doubt, fear and crisis, the desire for certainty and knowledge takes on a new sense of urgency, and this lies behind the emotive images of fatherhood discussed so far. As I discuss below, questions of history, patriarchal inheritance and the difficulties of mourning are recurring motifs in discussions about masculinity in crisis, and these themes can be applied to the trope of fatherhood in the UK political scene and beyond.

The phantom of the lost father: From New Labour to the new politics

The mediatization of political culture and the deployment of PR and 'spin' has been a defining aspect of UK political life since New Labour first came to power in 1997. New Labour's emphasis on what I elsewhere call the 'flirtatious' mechanisms of spin and PR, provided a model for the newly re-branded UK Conservative Party in which David Cameron was represented as embodying the new 'caring' brand of a party once

labeled as 'nasty' (Yates, 2010). Images of 'hands-on fatherhood' (Rayner, 2010) as a means of connoting a 'safe pair of hands' have been deployed by both parties as a way of winning over floating voters and the important familial events of pregnancy, disability and the loss of children have allowed this to be a key thematic of their terms of office. As Jessica Evans (2009: 72) argues, the personalization of politics is closely linked to the history and values of celebrity, which include 'intimacy, confession and revelation of personal lives', qualities that are 'leaked' into political life more generally'. Brown's decision to appear on the Piers Morgan's television show in the UK to discuss, amongst other topics, the death of his child, was also used as a strategy to 'humanize' him in the face of negative personal publicity and reduce Cameron's lead in the opinion polls ahead of the 2010 general election (O'Reilly, 2010; Piers Morgan's Life stories, 2010). Brown was not the only minister to mourn the loss of his child whilst in office, and the death of Cameron's own son, Ivan, who suffered from cerebral palsy, was also widely publicized before and during the 2010 election campaign shortly before the birth of his daughter (Chapman, 2010). The spaces that were opened for the public who were able to identify with the bereavements of Brown and Cameron as mediated news events at once facilitated a potential space for mourning that might have enabled new modes of identification to emerge on the part of the electorate, whilst also allowing the leaders to appear as vulnerable and sad icons of fatherhood. A widely reported theme of Blair and Cameron's terms in office has been the mourning of their fathers. Cameron, in particular, was moved to say 'My father is a huge hero figure for me…he is an amazingly brave man', citing his bravery in living with a 'disability' (Mulholland, 2010).

The role of fatherhood in these examples is central to the re-working of political culture in process. The notion of 'the new politics' that emerges here is

grounded in mourning and its relationship to the myth of masculinity. Whilst the theme of mourning of fathers and children is an actual recurring theme within press accounts, it is also significant when analyzing the fantasies at play on the contemporary political scene. On the one hand, representations of the father in the press open up spaces for identification, which have the potential to facilitate mourning for the lost, idealized father of fantasy. Yet against a backdrop of social, political and cultural disintegration, there is a simultaneous failure in coming to terms with necessary loss and disillusionment entailed in accepting both a 'good enough' father and a good enough politics. The contradictions between fantasies of the 'new', good enough father and those of the authoritarian father can be found in the mediatized representations of politicians such as Blair and Cameron, yet these contradictions are not easily worked through. Within the emotionalized scene of promotional politics, new spaces for mourning are created, yet the desire for the certainties of the patriarchal father returns, precipitating further cynicism and contempt as both a reaction to, and a defense against the loss of the idealized object. The loss of the idealized father evokes the memory of the archaic object that once provided safety, and whose idealized imago in later life is maintained as an illusory source of comfort and stability (Bollas, 1992: 242-3). The processes of mediatized politics tap into such fantasies, when, as with the ghost in *Hamlet*, the melancholic identification with the chimera of the lost patriarchal father continues to haunt us. This failure to mourn implies a kind of cultural 'haunting', a theme that has been discussed in various contexts by psychoanalysts and cultural studies scholars (Kristeva, 1992; Schiesari, 1992; Royle, 2003). As Schiesari argues, one way of dealing with the riddles of patriarchy and its disappointments is for masculinity to borrow from that which is culturally associated with femininity. This is pertinent in an era where emotional

expression is valued and when the performative politician father must parade his vulnerability and use the currency of his private life in exchange for votes. Alternatively, the difficulties of coming to terms with the losses of the patriarchal father may be dealt with in a more traditionally masculine fashion, by projecting such anxieties onto unemployed 'feckless fathers' and also lone mothers, whose apparent rejection of the father is – for authoritarian politicians at least – a disturbing fantasy writ large.

A psycho-cultural approach to fatherhood and the new politics

I have argued that political representations of fatherhood are linked to the celebritization of politics, in which politicians use media platforms to promote themselves as fathers in order to shore up a containing fantasy of paternal authority in a post-political era that has seen democratic party politics lose its significance as a source of meaningful engagement. Analyzing the fantasies at play within such representations helps us to understand the mechanisms of mediatization in relation to political culture and offers a useful critique of what is psychologically at stake. I have argued that the disillusionment with the political system potentially opens up new spaces for mourning, where less idealized notions of the 'good enough' father can emerge for public consumption. Such a move precipitates the circulation of new modes of fantasy to underpin the formation of new political culture based less on narcissistic fantasy and the projection of envy and contempt.

I have also argued that it is the newly emotionalized spaces of political culture that define 'the new politics', and that these create the potential for mourning and

change. Although such spaces may be characterized by an older hankering after patriarchy, the mechanisms of mediatization within political culture are new, and have the potential to open up new spaces and techniques within it. Discussing the nature of mediatized politics and its representations raises questions about the performative aspects of fatherhood within public life and the connections we make to politicians as mediated objects for consumption and fantasy. The cultural idealization of the father can be viewed as a defensive hegemonic strategy against the loss of paternal authority in an era when the old myths of patriarchal masculinity fail to convince. As my discussion suggests, various spheres of political culture share a tension between a wish to promote a 'new' feminized model of fatherhood versus one that is more concerned with a reactionary, defensive wish to re-constitute traditional notions of patriarchal authority. I have also discussed how a less authoritarian, feminized model may be co-opted by the forces of a promotional political culture that follows the logic of a market that resists the complexities and uncertainties of a new politics where politicians cannot afford to be seen as merely 'good enough'.

Yet, what the proliferation of images of fatherhood also signifies, perhaps, is a refusal to imagine the possibility of alternative family forms within a post-familial age. This has implications for the lived experience of UK family policy, in which the traditional model of the breadwinning father is currently being promoted once more.

Notes

1. See for example, the front-page photograph of David Cameron and his son watching a football match with the caption 'Anything Ed can do, Dave can do Better',

referring to earlier press coverage of the UK Labour party Leader, Ed Milliband, who was pictured with his wife and children as they arrived for the Labour Party conference (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2011: 1).

2. The notion of the 'post-political moment' is a contested term within the field of political philosophy and cultural studies and broadly refers to the decline of progressive social democratic politics in the West and the triumph of neo-liberalism in all aspects contemporary life (Mouffe, 2005; Fisher, 2009).

3. The proliferation of images of fatherhood can be found in the press and self-help books (Yates, 2007). A whole television season on the theme of 'fatherhood' was recently scheduled (2010, BBC4).

4. In the UK, there are numerous examples, including political biographies and autobiographies, television political comedies and quiz shows and films.

5. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTd3j31PIPo, accessed, 1st August, 2011.

6. See previous note.

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