

University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website.

Author(s): Yates, Candida

Title: Turning to Flirting: Politics and the Pleasures of Boris Johnson

Year of publication: 2010

Citation: Yates, C. (2010) 'Turning to Flirting: Politics and the Pleasures of Boris Johnson' *Rising East*, Vol 2 Series 1 No. 2.

Link to published version:

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/risingeast/essays/2010-02-17.htm>

Candida Yates

Submission to Rising East Journal

(See: *Rising East*, Vol. 2, Series 1, No.2, Feb 17, 2010)

'Ping Pong's Coming Home';

Political flirtation and the Pleasures of Boris Johnson

(Not to be quoted without Author's permission)

'Ping pong was re-invented on the dining tables of England'

(Boris Johnson, the Chinese Olympic games hand-over party, 2009).

Boris Johnson's now notorious 'ping pong's coming home' speech remains extremely popular on YouTube, with 163,358 hits to date - presumably from Johnson's fans, whose postings can be found in various dedicated websites and newspaper columns in digital and print media.¹ In that Olympic hand-over speech, Johnson performed his usual *shtick* to great effect, and as sports journalist Matt Dickinson (2008) reported, he resembled a rather untidy, portly 'sixth former' from an earlier age, escaped from the pages of *The Dandy*. At that event, he provided his audience with an irreverent and witty account of Britain's achievement in the 1908 Olympics, which included recollections of wrestling and eating wild animals - to playing tug of war matches (Dickinson, 2008). He also used the occasion to reclaim the 'coming home' mantra from the football fans (renowned for taking their sport seriously) and instead applied it to the less muscular sport of ping-pong, a past time more associated in the minds of the British perhaps, with light-weight bats and balls and 1950s youth clubs. Thus whilst celebrating 'Team GB' and Britain's role in taking on the Olympics in 2012, he

was also cocking a snook at the pomposity of those in the sport establishment who perhaps take themselves too seriously. It is arguably this very traditional *English* trait of refusing to commit and take things too seriously which taps into Johnson's populist appeal as a 'post-ideological politician', who uses very modern methods of political communication and PR to associate himself with the fantasy of 'home' as being located within an earlier, less complicated and secure pre-globalised age of route master buses, community sport and class difference. The postmodern preoccupation with nostalgia as a defence against the losses and uncertainties of contemporary culture has been discussed at length within the field of cultural studies.ⁱⁱ The popular appeal of retro-masculinity has also been explored and can also be seen as a strategy to manage the losses of patriarchal masculinity and the fictions that have hitherto sustained it (Radstone, 2007; Bainbridge and Yates, 2004). Alongside these broader cultural shifts, the 'post ideological' status of politicians such as Johnson imply the 'playing down' of 'traditional forms of ideological and party-based allegiance' (Corner and Pels, 2003, p. 7); the emergence of celebrity politics and the branding of politicians as readily identifiable personalities, are important factors in this development (Evans and Hesmondhalgh, 2005).

Johnson is often cited as the celebrity politician *par excellence* whose charismatic eccentric public persona provides an antidote to the technocratic managerial style of party politicians today. Johnson's image is meant to be one of an un-spun 'Tory-toff', whose brand of English eccentricity is said to appeal to people across political party lines. I want to argue that alongside the idiosyncratic nature of his political persona, Johnson's playful performance as London also provides an example of a more general flirtatious political turn in British political culture, a

phenomenon that has increasingly come to the fore in the mediatisation of politics in the UK and elsewhere in a post-ideological era of postmodern party politics.

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1994) argues that flirtation is associated with coquetry, dalliance and play, connoting a lack of seriousness or intention, as in the refusal to commit romantically, or, as in intellectual or political flirtation, the desire to move between different opinions and ideas. Flirtation also involves the *play* of emotion and may be used as a strategy to manage difficult emotions evoked by desire for the other, and the pleasures aroused by it may also create an intense emotional response. As political scientist Don Miller (2003: 285) argues: ‘The psychic rewards of being seduced are many and deep’. These ‘rewards’ can include feelings of excitement, anticipation and desire. Yet despite its pleasurable, playful connotations as a mode of communication, flirtation also signifies insincerity, connoting a lack of ‘true’ feeling and emotional depth. Flirtation may also induce feelings of confusion and betrayal and there are clear analogies here with the UK electorate’s distrust of MPS.ⁱⁱⁱ Flirtation has a number of gendered meanings - often associated with femininity, and historically flirtatious women have exercised a power of sorts (Kaye, 2002). The image of the masculine flirt is interesting when applied to representations of male politicians in the UK where the lightweight, feminized connotations of the term ‘flirt’ may sit uneasily with the electorate’s desire for a more traditional image of authentic masculinity.

This article applies these ideas to a discussion of London mayor Boris Johnson, whose communication skills and playful persona appear to embody the contradictions of the flirtatious turn of promotional politics. With his teddy bear looks and public gaffes that make people laugh, Johnson is a seductive figure and often appears to represent a cuddly toy with whom the electorate can play,^{iv} thereby

undercutting the notions of governance which his role as mayor also represents. As I argue, Johnson's image as mayor contrasts with the more serious political identity of Ken Livingston, whose apparent commitment and un-ambiguous passion for the Olympics and the regeneration of East London has been well reported.

Flirtation, gender and class

The term 'flirt' can be traced back to the French term *coquette*, and from the eighteenth century, the nouns 'coquette' and 'flirt' tend to be associated in Britain with French aristocratic women (Kaye, 2002, p. 21). The feminine associations of the term 'flirt' also have nineteenth century Darwinian roots, linked to the notion of women as 'choosers', who must do all they can to attract a mate. As a consequence, flirtatious men have often been pathologised and feminised as effeminate and hysterical (Kaye, 2002, p. 27). Yet as the sociologist Simmel reminds us, there has also been a strong relationship between class and flirtation. He argues that throughout the nineteenth century, the links between sexual flirtation and the disreputable behaviour of the aristocracy versus that of the moral middle classes remained strong. However, Simmel (1909) argues that by the twentieth century, flirting was established as a classless phenomenon. Yet one can argue that in contemporary Britain, flirtation still remains a cultural signifier of class and masculinity and may provide a link to Johnson's appeal. One can cite Hugh Grant's character in the *Bridget Jones* films (2001, 2004) as a good example of the upper-class flirtatious libertine in action. His role in yet another Richard Curtis film *Love Actually* (2003) as the British Prime minister provides another example of this (if in a more benign mode), whose capacity

to flirt and charm is very much part of his job as a politician. There are obvious analogies here between Hugh Grant's prime minister and the reported charismatic charm of Tony Blair. Yet one aspect of the appeal of Grant's character, is that he doesn't flirt with the US president in the same way as his real life counterpart Tony Blair, thus refusing the feminised connotations associated with the UK's status as America's 'poodle' in the run-up to the Iraq war. Indeed, UK cinema audiences apparently cheered when Grant's PM told the US president played by Billy Bob Thornton where to get off.

In a situation of 'real life mirroring art', there have of late been some ex-Etonians in the UK conservative party such as Boris Johnson and Zac Goldsmith who have also lived up to the 'posh' class-based flirtatious stereotypes and whose flirtations and (alleged) marital infidelities have been well publicised. Part of their class appeal may lie in their difference to the puritans of the (now not so new) New Labour who perhaps, with the exception of ex-mod bespoke suited Alan Johnson, give the impression that they probably communicate with their significant others in PowerPoint when they get home. The flirtatious 'Jack the lad' stereotype has been under-represented in the context of New Labour party politics in the UK, where, with the exception of John Prescott, male and female members of the government have tended to project a 'safe' and respectable middle class image.

The fact that the Conservative party successfully fielded a flirtatious ex-public schoolboy as mayor, signals perhaps their growing confidence in the retro brand of old-Tory 'toff' masculinity, where the playful flirtation with policies and people convey perhaps, a certain authenticity compared to the perception of New Labour spin, deceit and increased state control. This rehabilitation of the old Tory is reflected in the continuing fascination with the womanising antics of Tory MP Alan Clarke

who is back in the news with a new biography about his life and marital infidelities (Trewin, 2009) and even Alistair Campbell (2008) writes in glowing terms of his friendship with Clark, whose Mr. Toad persona caused him much amusement. Johnson's affair with journalist Petronella Wyatt may have cost him his cabinet position under the austere leadership of Michael Howard. Yet as political commentators point out, despite the continuation of neo-liberal socio-economic policies, the new Cameron Tories are now channelling a more traditional Conservative look than their Thatcherite predecessors, where back-to basics morality goes by the way in favour of retrosexual masculine posturing. This image, which harks back to an earlier paternalistic age, has more in common with the old landed class of Macmillan and his Etonian cronies than more recent leaders such as Edward Heath, John Major and William Hague (Osborne, 2009).

Despite his Thatcherite love of the free-market, Johnson has constructed a persona that fits more with that of a benign 'Doctor Who'-type eccentric, a kind of mascot for London whose image in a mediatised culture has become as iconic as the routemaster buses he loves to promote. In an age of celebrity politics, the promotion of 'authentic' personality has become key to a politician's success and Johnson clearly excels in this context, where his flaws and clumsy mistakes ward off the kind of residual envy and *ressentiment* which may exist, particularly in the current period of public cynicism and anger at Westminster MPs.

Johnson may appear an unlikely sex symbol in this context, yet alongside videos of his comical persona on *YouTube*, Johnson also provides the focus for songs penned and performed by adoring young women, which in turn are playfully satirised by those in the anti-Johnson camp.^v Johnson's flirtatious reputation was reinforced by his editorial stewardship of the *Spectator*, where the sexual antics of its staff were

widely publicised, again, providing for the public, a pleasurable bacchanalian antidote to the stereotypical perception of ‘politically correct’ New Labour. The labour MP David Blunkett’s affair with the *Spectator*’s publisher Kimberly Quinn only served to underscore this association between class and flirtation, as Blunkett represented himself as ‘a working class victim of the rich’ (Bright and Hinsliff, 2004). However, Blunkett’s emasculated position as the hapless victim of Quinn’s charms attracted little sympathy, despite his protestations regarding the loss of his son, produced as a result of the affair. ^{vi}

Flirtation and cultural change

The cultural appeal of Boris Johnson as the flirtatious politician can also be seen in the broader historical context of the last hundred years and the emergence of a new flirtatious character type ‘who does not take anything seriously’ (Simmel, 1909, p. 147). The sociologist Georg Simmel links this development to the new social structures of modernity and the metropolitan life of the cities, where new opportunities for sociability and interaction emerged for brief, flirtatious encounters. This emerging flirtatious sensibility evokes Baudelaire’s (1965) description of the contingency of modernity and city life and also Benjamin’s (1986) discussion of the *flâneur*, whose voyeuristic gaze allows him to live his life one step removed from the stresses of emotional engagement in a transitory context where the culture of contingency and the flirtatious attitude ‘what if?’ is developed, perhaps, as a defence against the losses and insecurities of modern life (Evans, 2009; Kaye, 2002).

Today, flirtation has increasingly become a metaphor for all aspects of life in the postmodern cultural context. For instance, some researchers in psychosocial studies link what they perceive to be an inability to sustain emotional commitment and cope with the disappointments of attachment and loss, with the prevailing emphasis of market values and consumer culture, together with the breakdown of traditional social structures such as the family (Craib, 1995; Lasch, 1979). Lasch (1979) argues that the latter has given rise to a narcissistic personality type that is unable to experience emotions in a way that feels authentic. The implication appears to be that we are all flirts now, darting from sensation to sensation, addicted to the image and the narcissistic pleasures of short-lived encounters. This image of the contemporary flirtatious sensibility is echoed by those who emphasize, if in less pessimistic tones, the mercurial quality of contemporary interaction and postmodern experience (Elliott, 1996). Today, it is generally agreed that the language of emotion and therapy is all pervading (Richards, 2007). Yet despite the ubiquity of therapeutic discourse, some argue that both men and women seem to have lost the ability to actually feel in a meaningful way, or live with the more difficult feelings such as jealousy that may cause shame and disappointment (Craib, 1995).

Of course one way to avoid disappointment is to commit to nothing in particular, a flirtatious trick that is a recurring theme of the contemporary party political scene in both the UK and US. Interestingly, Simmel applies the theme of flirtation as a mode of communication to politics and the pleasures and annoyances of identifying with different 'political positions' (1909, p. 151). Today, the flirtation with different political positions applies equally to politicians and voters within the contemporary promotional context of party politics. Political candidates use their campaigns to flirt with 'floating voters' who, often characterised by their fickle lack

of commitment,^{vii} resemble the Benjaminian figure of the *flâneur*, window shopping for political promises and enjoying the spectacle of the political market place (Benjamin, 1986).

Psychoanalytic theory is useful to explore the fantasies that inform the flirtatious language and performance of politicians and the response by voters and the media. In 1915, Freud used his discussion of flirtation to signify his distrust of America and its difference to Europe and the seriousness of ‘continental’ romantic relations. In that essay, Freud likens the emptiness of flirtation to the experience of mourning when life becomes meaningless and ‘impoverished’:

It becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a continental love affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind (Freud, 1915, p. 79).

As Phillips (1994) argues, flirtation has a childish, playful quality to it and has its roots in early Oedipal flirtations, where the imaginary possibilities for love are not yet closed down by the strictures of Oedipal law and the customs of monogamy. There is no place for flirtation in this Oedipal developmental psychoanalytic narrative, where mature love is linked to mourning and the acceptance of loss. Whereas contemporary writers such as Phillips see potential in the playfulness of flirtation, likening it to the creative processes of ‘transitional space’,^{viii} others see flirtation in a more negative light. Davies (1998, p. 808) argues that the ambiguous, circular nature of flirtation may be used as a defense mechanism against the losses and disappointments that come with intimacy and the complexity of object relations

and ‘mature’ object love. From this psychoanalytic perspective, flirtation is not just about ambiguous meaning, as say, in a poem; it is also a process and a form of communication characterised by the ‘blurring of interpersonal boundaries’ (Davies, 1998).

Masculinity and political flirtation

The blurring of psychical boundaries that may occur in flirtatious encounters evokes contemporary descriptions of subjectivity and communication in the postmodern cultural context, where the cultural divide between the public and the private has become blurred and unclear (Wernick, 1991). Concerns about the loss of identity within the shifting and transitory context of contemporary culture have a particular resonance when applied to the Western crisis of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1997). As has been much documented, the old fictions of masculinity are no longer convincing, yet they continue to be re-worked, as different models compete for hegemonic dominance within the contemporary popular imagination (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005).

Images of masculinity in the political realm often exemplify the current tensions of hegemonic masculinity that on the one hand adopt a ‘metrosexual’, feminised style of masculinity to appeal to voters, and on the other, a more traditional mode of masculinity defined as ‘retrosexual’.^{ix} Such images of metrosexual and retrosexual masculinity offer different solutions to the riddle of masculinity as a shifting construction and they also reflect the tensions contained in the different types of masculine flirtation discussed above. Dilemmas about the ambiguous nature of flirtation as a tantalising performance resonate with current popular misgivings about the seductive nature of contemporary political spin and the desire of politicians to

woo audiences by flirting to the camera. A number of leaders on the political world stage have provided examples of how images of flirtatious masculinity have been put to work and one can also locate Boris Johnson in this context.^x

Boris Johnson is interesting, as his maverick status within the conservative party and also his much publicized rule-breaking in different contexts (as when riding his bike through red traffic lights and so on) conforms to an older retrosexual mode of masculinity, and this might explain his widespread appeal to young men.^{xi} Even his heroics are old school' – as in the recent episode in North London when he jumped off his bike to chase off the girls who were attacking a woman who cried out for help. To complete the picture, Johnson even walked the victim home afterwards and the retro-sexual language of chivalry and class converged in press reports, which told us: 'Johnson saves woman from 'oiks'' (BBC News, 2009). As discussed at the beginning of this article, this tale of Johnson's heroic 'rescue' evokes nostalgic fantasies of an earlier age, thereby shoring up the losses of masculinity in an age where even schoolgirls can mug you on the streets of Camden. Yet if his fan sites and radio broadcasts are to be believed, women are also susceptible to the charms of 'Have-a-Go BoJo',^{xii} and radio hosts such as Vanessa Feltz on BBC Radio London were hugely enthusiastic about him and his campaigning efforts during the mayoral campaign.^{xiii} As the cycling mayoral candidate, Johnson's campaign emphasized his youth and vigour, a factor that worked in his favour when compared to his rival Ken Livingston, who was perceived by some as old, grumpy and tired by comparison (Raynor and Pierce, 2008). As newspaper reports belatedly reported last year, Ken Livingston has hardly had an inactive love life, yet in contrast Johnson, his relationships have escaped the gaze of publicity (Anon, 2008).

Flirtation and the Culture of Political Spin; The Case of Boris Johnson

The public response to flirtatious politicians such as Johnson are linked to the processes of public relations (PR) and spin.^{xiv} There are two aspects of the relationship between flirtation and political public relations and these include both the medium and the message. On the one hand, 'the message' refers to the kind of images discussed above, where the theme of flirtation content is often fairly explicit. Yet as we have seen, in relation to the 'medium', flirtation also refers to the processes of communication whereby depending on the mode of flirtatious communication discussed above, new spaces for meaningful dialogue may be opened up or closed down. Andrew Wernick's (1991) work on promotional culture is useful here and is still often cited in texts on the development of spin and public relations in the postmodern context of political communication. He uses the term 'promotion' to refer to 'advertising and its practices taken in the widest and most generic sense', and argues that (like flirtation) promotion is now a 'verb' and 'a rhetorical form diffused throughout our culture. As such, it has come to shape not only culture's symbolic and ideological contents, but also its ethos, texture and constitution as a whole' (Wernick, 1991, p.vii). The 'ethos' of promotion now mediates all aspects of communication in the personal and public spheres of life and politics has not escaped this process (132). As in the US, the practice of Public Relations has now become central to British politics as politicians employ teams of PR special advisors to help get their message across to the media and also directly to the public through various media platforms such the internet.

Johnson's campaign was organised by Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby, who promoted the gaffe-prone Johnson on radio stations and conservative-leaning papers, where he was least likely to be tripped up. (Raynor and Pierce, 2008).

Andy Coulson, former *News of The World* editor and Conservative Public Relations director, ensured that alongside the promotion of Johnson's bumbling charm, there was also publicity which emphasized the less cuddly 'dog whistle' issues of crime, council tax and the spread of the congestion charge. These issues were perceived as key concerns to voters in the commuter belts of London and who were also targeted as postal voters. Boris Johnson presents an interesting case study as his apparently spontaneous, 'real' un-spun qualities are arguably key to his popularity. Johnson's communication skills have been honed over the years in various media contexts and his celebrity status on television and in politics is such, that 'Brand Boris' was the star turn of the recent 2009 Tory conference in Manchester. As David Aaronovitch (2009) observed:

And here in Manchester yesterday, it seemed to be all Boris Johnson. He was everywhere, doing the Boris thing, until he became as grating as a once favourite bubblegum track played to destruction by a feeble-minded friend. There was Boris being interviewed by Andrew Neill for the BBC somewhere and being watched on screens down among the stalls. The bookshop had three shelves of Borisiana, with Boris's dad's memoirs, Boris's collected columns, Boris's novel, Boris on Rome, Boris on children. People were digesting Boris's comments to *The Sunday Times*, reading Boris's *Daily Telegraph* column, some of them at the same time as Boris was making a conference speech.

One could add to this list Johnson's recent appearance on the BBC1 soap opera *East Enders*, where paradoxically, as a seasoned performer of himself in everyday political

life, he turned in a rather stiff performance of himself as London in the Queen Vic with Barbara Windsor's landlady Peggy Mitchell.^{xv} She is seen to flirt with Johnson as he orders a pint and smiles back benignly, enjoying this imaginary experience of East London life. Fictional it may have been, yet he still used it for his conference speech, as the familiar jangly *EastEnders* theme tune played out as he walked to the podium to begin his speech. Interestingly, his presentation was littered with references to Walford, which gave his ideas an added air of hyper-reality, undermining perhaps, his claims about regenerating the 'real' East London, which exists beyond the television studios and the seductive land of 'Borisania'.

Johnson's attitude to the planning of the London Olympic games reflects, alarmingly perhaps, the flirtatious ambiguity of Johnson discussed so far. On the one hand, his playful exterior and pragmatic can-do attitude in the face of reported economic shortfalls, have worked well so far to reassure Londoners that the games will be delivered successfully. Moreover, the current 's' enthusiasm for the games and its role in transforming the social and economic fortunes of East London as 'a fantastic new place to live' continues in a relentlessly positive manner. As one journalist put it: 'Oblivious of recession, immune to doubts, the PR machine surrounding the 2012 Olympics grinds on' (Hill, 2009). Yet despite his success in wooing the public and also the investors in this regard, Johnson, 'the blonde bombshell' as the press like to call him, continues to both tantalize and alarm - as in the notorious episode when he failed to read the Olympic 'Memorandum of Understanding',^{xvi} creating widespread anxiety and sometimes even amazement from journalists (Treneman, 2008). Johnson's more aggressive tax-cutting instincts have also come to the fore in his cost-cutting attempts to move the planned venues for various sporting events such as the shooting event at Woolwich. His behaviour in this

instance caused anger and friction with Olympic organisers and local residents who accused him of ‘meddling’ (Warner, 2009).

The differences between Johnson and Livingstone are interesting in the context of political flirtation. As we have seen, Johnson’s populist persona is linked to his post-political public persona as the people’s friend. By contrast, fellow political maverick Ken Livingstone makes no secret of his progressive political commitment to change, and what ever he actually *did* as in terms of staying on the right side of the city and big business, his reputation remains as a man publically committed to left of centre politics. Like Johnson, Livingstone is skilled in the arts of PR as a mode of political flirtation. Yet it may be that some Londoners became disenchanted with Livingstone because he took his politics a little *too* seriously and in that sense they became increasingly alarmed by what he might actually *do*, rather than as with Johnson, remain in a constant state of play and seduction, preferring to do nothing instead, thereby evoking Freud’s ‘American’ model of flirtation, which apparently leads nowhere. When Livingstone was, he also asked to appear on *EastEnders*, but was turned down on the grounds that he was ‘too political’ (Revoir and Thomas, 2009). Clearly, there were no such worries about Johnson, whose post –ideological celebrity persona presented less of a threat to the BBC’s Reithian ethos of political impartiality, a situation which conspired to make a mockery of the fact that Johnson is actually a ‘politician’ not a clown.

Livingstone and Johnson’s relationship to the ‘real’ East London are also different. Whilst Johnson ignored the Olympic games ‘memorandum of understanding’, Livingstone played a different game, as he knew the Olympic budget was ‘inaccurate’, yet says he went along with it because of the need to fund the regeneration East London (Kelso, 2008). In this instance then, Livingstone’s desires

(if in retrospect), are clearly articulated, whereas Johnson's are ambiguous and rooted in flirtatious 'misunderstanding' (Treneman, 2009). This flirtatious lack of clarity on the part of Johnson was recently compared unfavourably to Livingstone in the normally pro-mayor London *Evening Standard*:

The old mayor was wrongheaded but you couldn't doubt what he wanted. His successor is a fascinating but more puzzling and elusive creature. I wonder what the Borisken is all about' (McElvoy, 2009, p.14).

Towards a psychosocial understanding of Boris Johnson, masculinity and political flirtation

This article has argued that given the fluid and transitory nature of contemporary cultural life, flirtation can be seen as the postmodern mode of communication *par excellence* and has almost become the default position for those seeking to manage or avoid the emotional disappointments of commitment and rejection in various contexts. Party politics provides one such context and I identified three aspects of political flirtation: firstly the flirtatious (masculine) message (or flirting to camera), secondly, the flirtatious processes of spin and thirdly, the flirtation between different political positions. For some, flirtation constitutes a form of 'loitering without intent' (Kaye, 2002) and is a sign that one lacks emotional sincerity and purpose. Following on from that definition, one could argue pessimistically that flirtation has become a metaphor for a postmodern psychosocial sensibility that no longer knows how to manage or process the more difficult emotions that may arise in an increasingly

fragmented and uncertain world. Yet in a post 9/11 context where the tendency to split and adopt concrete political positions is a recurring theme of geopolitics, the fluidity of flirtatious politics might not seem such a bad thing. As Miller (2003) argues, whilst flirtation may connote a lack of purpose, we should also be wary of idealising its opposite, as in the guise of conviction politicians, whose sincere belief in the rightness of their political positions can be seen as highly problematic - and here one can cite Thatcher, and more recently the rigid stances of Bush and Blair as examples of a renewed sectarian against a backdrop of cold war style rhetoric.

Flirtation also has a number of gendered connotations and in the past, male flirtation has been pathologised as a feminised condition. Yet images of flirtatious masculinity have also been used to shore up traditional fantasies of hegemonic masculinity, involving the deployment of retrosexual imagery of male politicians, where as with Putin, fantasies of the strong father are conveyed. Images of Ken Livingstone can also be seen in this context, whose paternal authority was used positively – as in the period following the 7/7 London bombings. Yet his authority in London was increasingly perceived negatively by some to be authoritarian and was resented on those grounds. Johnson also mobilized retrosexual images in terms of a nostalgic looking back to a British ‘boy’s own’ vision of masculinity, also evoking a vision of London to match, that was less driven by progressive change and modernization. Thus, as I have discussed, both Livingstone and Johnson are skilled practitioners of PR as an inherently flirtatious mode of communication, yet both adopt different styles of applying it.

Yet flirtation does hold out the potential for a less rigid way of relating and communicating that can be called ‘feminised’ in its fluidity and refusal to remain faithful to one position, which in psychoanalytic terms can also be equated with the

refusal of patriarchal law and a fantasy of the authoritarian Oedipal father. As discussed, challenging that authority can be hugely pleasurable, hence the popular identification with Johnson, whose comical celebrity identity as ‘Boris’ belies his actual status as a politician, who, as the mayor of London, has more actual political power than his leader David Cameron.

To conclude then, psychoanalytic explanations of masculinity and flirtation suggest two models of flirtatious masculinity: on the one hand (following Phillips, 1994), flirtatious masculinity can be viewed positively as a playful mode of communication in which the traditional structures of patriarchal authority are subverted, and where creative new spaces are opened up for engagement with the other, where flirtation is used to create space between the desire of the subject and its object and where something new is allowed to happen. Alternatively (following Davies, 1998), at the other end of the spectrum, masculine flirtation may be used defensively as a form of manipulation to close down the space for creative engagement with the other, creating a narcissistic flirtatious dialogue based on projection and denial.

Using these models one can argue that flirtation in political culture often operates using different psychosocial registers of spin in quite contradictory ways. Yet what remains constant are the flirtatious processes of spin and PR adopted by all the politicians discussed here, despite the different styles of the masculinity on show. In this sense, the second defensive model of flirtatious masculinity appears dominant within party politics and for the time being, set to stay.

References

- Aaronovitch, D. (2009) 'Boris Johnson Should Do More Than Just Play for Laughs', 6th October, 2009, *Timesonline*, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/david_aaronovitch/article6862297.ece, Accessed 11th October, 2009.
- Anon (2007) 'Vladimir Putin Strips For Fishing Trip with Prince Albert'. *Foxnews.com*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,293341,00.html>, Accessed, 2nd April, 2008.
- Anon (2008) 'Ken Livingstone's youngest secret lovechild is a fifteen-year-old boy and he has two grown-up daughters as well'. *Mailonline*, 5th April, 2008. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-556169/Ken-Livingstones-youngest-secret-lovechild-year-old-boy-grown-daughters-well.html#ixzz0VRBV2jTw>, accessed 29 October, 2009.
- Bainbridge, C. and Yates, C. (2005) 'Cinematic Symptoms of Masculinity in Transition: Memory, History and Mythology in Contemporary Film'. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*. 10, pp. 299-328.
- Barnett, S. and Gaber, I. (2001) *Westminister Tales; The Twenty-First Century Crisis in Political Journalism*. London, Continuum.
- Baudelaire, C. (1965) *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Oxford, Phaidon.
- BBC News Channel (2009) 'Johnson Saves Woman from 'Oiks'', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8340865.stm>, accessed 26th November, 2009.
- Benjamin, W. (1986) (ed.) Dametx, P., *Reflections*. NewYork, Schocken Books.

Bright, M. and Hinsliff, G. (2004) 'Blunkett: I'm a working class victim of the rich', *The Observer*, 19th December, *Guardian.co.uk*,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/dec/19/davidblunkett.labour>

Accessed 26th October, 2009.

Connell, R. W. (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge, Polity press.

Craib, I. (1995) *The Importance of Disappointment*. London, Routledge.

Davies, M. J. (1998) 'Thoughts on the Nature of Desires: The Ambiguous, The Transitional and The Poetic: Reply to Commentaries'. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, Vol. 8, 6: 805-824.

Dickinson, M. (2008) 'Boris Johnson's Blonde Ambition Key to London 2012', in *Timesonline*, 26th August,

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/columnists/matt_dickinson/article4607378.ece

Accessed, October, 8th, 2009.

Duval Smith, A. (2008) 'France begins to Grow Weary with the Sarkozy Soap Opera'. *The Observer*, 13th January, p. 45.

Evans, J. and Hesmondhalgh, D. (eds.) (2005) *Understanding Media; Inside Celebrity*, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Freud, S. (1915) 'Thoughts on War and Death, 11. Our Attitude Towards Death', in Freud, S. (1985) *Penguin Freud Library 12, Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and other Works*, translated by Strachey, J., Edited by Dickonson, A., Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.

Harris, P. (2006) 'Menaissance'. *The Observer*, Sunday, 9th July,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jul/09/paulharris.theobserver>, accessed 1st

April, 2008.

Hill, D. (2009) 'Resistance is Futile', *Guardian.co.UK*, Thursday, 12th February,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/11/olympics2012-london>

Accessed 29th October,

Holmwood, L. (2009) 'TV ratings: Boris Johnson draws 8m to EastEnders',

Guardian.co.UK, 2nd October,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/oct/02/tvratings-television>

Accessed, 29th October, 2009.

Kaye, R. A. (2002) *The Flirt's Tragedy; Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction*. Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia.

Kelso, P (2008) 'Mayor 'knew 2012 budget was too low', *The Guardian*, Friday, 25th April,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/apr/25/livingstone.olympicgames2012>,

accessed 23rd October, 2009.

Lasch, C. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York, Norton Paperbacks.

Mayer, C. (2009) 'London Mayor Saves Film Maker From Mugging', *Time.com*, Wednesday, 4th November,

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1934572,00.html>, accessed 25th

November, 2009.

Miller, D. (2003) 'To Seduce or to Flirt, That is The Question'. *Time & Society*, 12; pp. 281-291.

Murphy, J. (2007) 'I am Sorry; Blair fights Tears As he Names The Day'. *Evening Standard*. 10th May, pp.1 –6.

Newbury, R. (2007) 'Brown Woos Worcester Woman', *LA STAMPA.it*. 25

September,

http://www.lastampa.it/_web/CMSTP/tmplrubriche/giornalisti/grubrica.asp?ID_blog=

[145&ID_articolo=71&ID_sezione=308&sezione=](#), accessed 2nd April, 2008.

Paddock, T. (1995) 'Blunkett and *Spectator* inspire daddy at the Kings Head', *What's On Stage*, 25th June,

<http://www.whatsonstage.com/news/theatre/london/E8821119869546/Blunkett+&+Spectator+Inspire+Daddy+at+King%92s+Head.html> Accessed 26 October, 2009.

Phillips, A. (1994) *On Flirtation*. London & Boston, Faber and Faber.

Prior, M. (2007) *Post Broadcast Democracy; How media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. USA, Cambridge University Press.

Radstone, S. (2007) *The Sexual Politics of Time; Confession, Nostalgia, Memory*, London and New York: Routledge.

Raynor, G. and Pierce, J (2008) 'Boris Johnson Profile: Shambolic Success Story'. *Telegraph.co.uk*. 2nd May, 2008,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/borisjohnson/1921671/Boris-Johnsonprofile-Shambolic-success-story.html>, accessed 28 October, 2008.

Revoir, P. and Thomas, L. (2009) 'Cor, luvvaduck, another blonde bombshell in the Queen Vic! Boris Johnson makes his EastEnders cameo', *MailOnline*, 2nd October, 2009,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1217395/BBC-accused-bias-Boris-Johnson-makes-EastEnders-cameo.html#ixzz0YBE0m9PJ>, accessed 25th November, 2009.

Simmel, G. (1909) 'Flirtation', in Simmel, G. (1984) (Translated by Oakes, G.) *On Women, Sexuality and Love*. New Haven, Yale University Press, pp.133-153.

Richards, B. (2007) *Emotional Governance: Politics and the Media*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

- Schine, C. (1999) 'Betrayal, Friendship and Nuance'. *The New York Times*, 13th February,
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C02EEDD143AF930A25751C0A96F958260>. Accessed, 8 April, 2008.
- Treneman, A. (2008) 'Sketch: Boris Johnson's Olympic talk on Today show was like a car crash', *Timesonline*, 20 June,
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/olympics/london_2012/article4175435.ece
 Accessed, October 28, 2009.
- Warner, A. (2009) 'Boris's olive branch in Olympic row', *BBC Sport, Adrian Warner's Blog*, Tuesday, 13th October, 2009,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adrianwarner/2009/10/boris_olive_branch_in_olympic.html, accessed 30th October, 2009.
- Wernick, A. (1991) *Promotional Culture; Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, London: Sage
- Winnicott, D. W. (1951) 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomenon', in
 Winnicott, D. W. (1975) *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, pp. 229-242.
- Yates, C. (2007) *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yates, C. (2009) 'Masculinity, Flirtation and Political Communication in the UK', in
 Day Sclater, S., Jones, D. W., Price, H. and Yates, C. (2009) *Emotion, New Psychosocial Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.85-97.

Filmography

Bridget Jones Diary (Sharon Maguire, 2001, Working Title Films, UK/France).

Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason (Beeban Kidson, 2004, Working Title Films, Uk/France/germany/Ireland/USA).

End Notes

ⁱ The YouTube ‘Pingpong speech’ can be found on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsFRglb8m>; see also social networking site Bebo for Boris Johnson fan postings, videos and songs.

<http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=6567343616>

ⁱⁱ For an excellent review of such discussions, see for example Susannah Radstone, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, see BBC News 24, 11th April, 2008,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7342653.stm, accessed 11 April, 2008.

^{iv} Thereby evoking psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s (1951) notion of a ‘transitional object’,

^v In the particular see the Bebo site:

<http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=6567343616>, accessed October 29, 2009.

^{vi} A play entitled ‘Who’s the Daddy?’ was staged at the Kings Head Theatre, London, where Blunkett’s affair with Quinn was the object of much satirical mirth (Paddock, 2005).

^{vii} See Prior, 2007.

^{viii} Thereby applying the language of Winnicott and his theory of transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 1951).

^{ix} These different constructions have been discussed at length in the press and in internet blogs, where it is generally agreed that the footballer David Beckham provides the image of the ‘metrosexual’, whereas the ‘retrosexual’ embodies a more rugged masculine stereotype that invokes more traditional ideals of ‘manliness’ (Harris, 2006; Mansfield, 2006).

^x Here, one can cite the (in) famous charm of ex-US President Bill Clinton or the ex-UK Prime minister Tony Blair pictured on his last day in office in a metrosexual mood, blowing kisses to his constituents (Murphy, 2007, p.1), or the French President Nicholas Sarkozy, pictured in a retrosexual masculine guise, seated on a horse like a macho cowboy, or playing the amorous lover whilst flirting with his soon-to-be glamorous second wife as part of his presidential campaign (Duval Smith, 2008, p. 45). Images of the rugged, retro-masculinity of the Russian President Putin represents another example of flirting to camera, when in a bid to remind the world stage of his virility and power, he was pictured in newspapers, naked to the waist, ‘flexing his muscles’ on a (presumably) freezing cold fishing trip in Siberia and pop songs have been penned by adoring Russian female fans on his retrosexual dependability and male sex appeal (Anon, 2007)(For more on this theme, see Yates, 2009).

^{xi} See for example the very popular YouTube videos of Johnson rugby tackling a German footballer at a charity match on the, a film which is hugely popular with young men, see:

<http://video.google.co.uk/videosearch?q=boris+johnson+tackle&hl=en&emb=0&aq=5&oq=boris#q=boris+johnson+tackle&hl=en&emb=0&aq=5&oq=boris&qvid=boris+johnson+tackle&vid=-8547246433703885184>

^{xii} The phrase used by London-based journalist Catherine Mayer for on line magazine *Time*, (2009).

^{xiii} For Vanessa Feltz website see:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/11/22/boris_vanessa_feature.shtml

^{xiv} The latter refers to the techniques of persuasion used by political parties and their press officers to lead the news agenda and present their policies and politicians in the best possible light (Barnett and Gaber, 2001).

^{xv} It is reported that 8 million viewers tuned into see Johnson performance (Holmwood, 2009).

^{xvi} An agreement, which purports to protect Londoners from financing the Olympic overspend through the council tax.

Acknowledgements

Parts of this article have been reproduced from a chapter written by the author in: Day Sclater, S., Jones, D. W., Price, H. and Yates, C. (2009) *Emotion, New Psychosocial Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.85-97.