

 Subscribe



## Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

# 'Never mind her policies, what's she wearing?' Newspapers run a sexist eye over UK election

April 27, 2015 4.16pm BST



Odd man out. Stefan Rousseau/PA Wire

## Author



### John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

In a recent interview with Scottish Television's Debi Edwards, the leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon spoke about the sexism she routinely encounters. Referring to the fact that her appearance is regularly scrutinised, Sturgeon also told of how she is often asked about not having children. She said:

*Alex Salmond doesn't have children. He might tell you differently but I'm not aware of reading an interview or seeing an interview with Alex Salmond asking that question.*

*So yes, I understand it but I think it's just one of these things. I'm not moaning about this but it's just one of these things that I think is just a bit different if you're a woman in politics.*

Sturgeon's estimation that things are a "bit different" for women in politics is an understatement – which, to be fair, I'm sure she realises. Over the past few weeks the media coverage that she, Leanne Wood (leader of Plaid Cymru) and Natalie Bennett (leader of the Green party) have received indicates that we still have sections of a news culture fixated not on them as elected officials but as stereotypical representatives of their sex.

It's fair to say that their potency as politicians is undermined by a general coverage which links their perceived characteristics to their gender. This just does not happen with men. Sturgeon in particular has been sexualised, patronised, demonised and even animalised.

It's become an almost daily occurrence - the day after Sturgeon's interview with Edwards **The Sun** ran an article entitled: "The Scotweiler – Early years of the woman who would break up Britain" which began:

*As a child, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is said to have devilishly hacked the hair from her sister's beloved doll. It was an early sign of the ruthlessness which has propelled her to the top of Scottish – and potentially British – politics.*

## Godzilla in high heels



**James Doleman**  
@jamesdoleman



Daily Mail dispenses with quotation marks when calling Nicola Sturgeon The Most Dangerous woman in Britain

Labelled as the most dangerous woman in Britain by the Daily Mail on April 21 (where, as James Doleman pointed out, the quotation marks which would normally be used in making such a statement have been left out) references to Sturgeon's appearance have been the norm.

For Liz Jones, Sturgeon was living proof that women become sexier with age, writing that she had shed the pounds, bleached her hair and squeezed her feet into Kurt Geiger heels. Piers Morgan reasoned that this diminutive but sharp-witted woman has rampaged through the UK election campaign like a mini-Godzilla, breathing fire and brimstone.

In the Telegraph, the increasingly beyond parody Boris Johnson railed against this "Lady Macbeth" whilst invoking King Herod and Attila the Hun at the gates of Rome.

## Wrecking ball

But the Daily Mail and The Sun are the usual suspects, patently terrified of a minority Labour government supported by the Scottish nationalists. Recently Karen Boyle argued that these representations of Sturgeon – most notably when she was depicted, again in The Sun, clad in a tartan bikini swinging on a wrecking ball a la Miley Cyrus – have received widespread condemnation demonstrating that the news media can be proactive in challenging "everyday sexism".

Up to a point this is true – but then what are we meant to make of the BBC's Newsnight of April 23, where in the closing credits, Sturgeon's head was photoshopped onto the body of Kim Kardashian? OK, the skit was part of a sequence which, in the light of the "Milifandom" story last week, saw the heads of Cameron and Miliband superimposed on the bodies of David Beckham and Harry Styles. So equality of sorts, but it was hard to disagree with the sentiments of The Sun's head of PR, Dylan Sharpe, who tweeted:

Presence in the leaders' debates notwithstanding, the coverage of Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett has generally reflected the minority status of the parties they represent. Outside of some splendid portraits and interviews in The Guardian, there has been little national focus on Wood. When she did hit the headlines in the first leader's debate for challenging UKIP's Nigel Farage's "scaremongering" over immigrants use of the NHS, the Metro reported:

*The votes are in and it's clear which party member won 'Biggest Heart Throb' during the election 2015 debate.*

*Drum roll*

*Leanne Wood.*

*Yes, the Plaid Cymru leader had Twitter swooning when she took on Nigel Farage.*

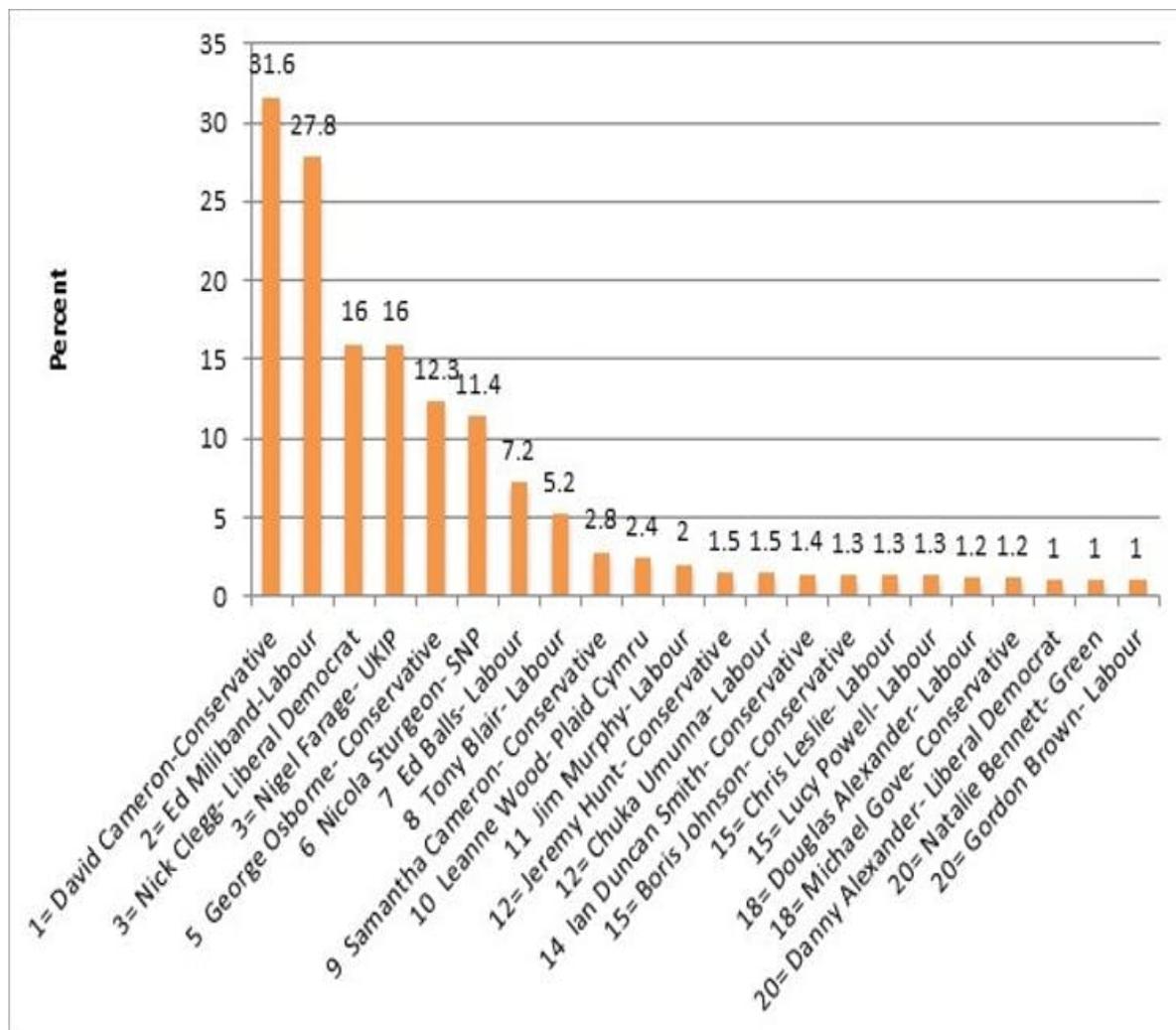
In the name of humour, the Daily Mail's Quentin Letts easily managed to live up to the caricature of a Mail journalist by resorting to lazy cliché and patronising prose. He wrote:

*And Who On Earth was that Welsh Leanne? Had she walked in from a recording of Gavin and Stacey? ‘I’m from the Valleys,’ she announced. Well blow us all down with a kestrel feather, darlin’.*

Natalie Bennett’s media performances both before and after the campaign began have attracted criticism but when she took part in a disastrous radio interview with LBC’s Nick Ferrari in February she elicited widespread sympathy from both commentators and the general public. Her failures to communicate were met with offers of a hug – the subtext of that sympathy disturbed Radhika Sanghani in the Telegraph who wrote:

*I felt sorry for Bennett too, but I can’t help thinking that this collective reaction is gendered. Would we really want to give David Cameron a hug if he failed to explain his policies?*

The key thing to consider amidst all this sexist coverage is that it is, broadly, all there is: analysis from Loughborough University has found that women account for less than one in five of the individuals featured in election news coverage and that the second most prominent woman after Nicola Sturgeon is Samantha Cameron – more attention paid to a leader’s wife than prominent female politicians from all parties bar one.



The important point to remember is that the sort of coverage afforded to Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett is entirely to be expected. What the examples above illustrate is the oft-stated tenet that sexual oppression or prejudice in democratic societies is normalised by the prevailing social structure. Women politicians are women in the public eye, yes, but equally subject to the same depressingly familiar tropes and clichés that everyday sexism highlights with weary regularity.



[Sexism](#) [UK tabloids](#) [election 2015](#) [UK newspapers](#) [Political journalism](#) [Nicola Sturgeon](#) [UK elections 2015](#)

[Natalie Bennett](#) [Leanne Wood](#) [PREVIOUS POST](#)

April 20, 2015 Katie Hopkins and The Sun: when the unreadable prints the unspeakable

[NEXT POST](#)

May 1, 2015 Two-faced Sun shows Rupert can swing both ways if there's something in it for him