



Full Length Article

“There, seated upon the toilet, apparently in the midst of defecation, was the president of the United States”: Toilets and elite politics in the USA and UK

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ABSTRACT

What can we learn about elite politics from the humble toilet? How do the relations between toilets, bodies, and waste materially and discursively reveal, and become enrolled within, the summits of state political power? While there has been a growth in research on the political geographies of the body, including work on toilets, and a long history of research on elite politics, the two intellectual concerns and debates have not been brought together. Yet the toilet and the bathroom, in both their material and discursive reproduction, provide intriguing insights into the seemingly sanitised, even disembodied domain of elite politics. We explore the space, use, and meaning of the toilet in two powerful contexts: the White House in the United States, and Downing Street in the United Kingdom. Shaped by differences in cultural and political context, we study the ways in which toilets feature in the working of elite power, and how that connects to gender, sexuality, race, nakedness, humour, and space in the (re)making of the political. By making the toilet an object of study we aim to shed light on this often forgotten and silenced, yet inevitable geography of elite politics.

1. Introduction

What might toilets tell us about elite politics? It is well known that political elites use what we might call ‘toilet talk’ to describe all kinds of political opponents (see Goldstein et al., 2020), but this recognition has not precipitated more fundamental questions about how toilets connect to the worlds of political elites. Even political elites, after all, must use the toilet. We ask what this simple, mundane, and perhaps slightly odd observation means for how we ‘see’ and understand elite state politics.

This is not an entirely new question. Elite politics has a long scatological history. We might think of the covering of Marcus Bibulus in excrement in ancient Rome as he tried to block Julius Caesar’s land reforms. Human waste has long been a political weapon of both the powerful and the marginalised (Wright, 2000 [1960]; McFarlane, 2023). Yet, the specifics of bathrooms, the bodily practices that take place in them, and the discourses connected to them are barely considered in the study of elite politics. There is a curious contradiction in the lack of research on political elites and toilets, despite the theme receiving attention in popular media.

On the one hand, the direction of critical geographical research in recent times has been to pay greater attention to the body. This is part of

a more general shift that we see, for instance, in the growth of feminist accounts of state diplomacy, power, and violence (e.g. Neumann, 2008; Towns, 2020). On the other hand, political elites, particularly men, have remained a somewhat disembodied constituency in geographical research. The tendency in critical geopolitical accounts of political elites is to focus on the ideas, ideologies, and arguments of intellectuals of statecraft (e.g. Haverluk et al., 2014; Kuus, 2013). Elite politics is projected as taking place in the abstract and the spectacular, as a world of suited diplomacy, high-level negotiation, and bureaucracy, and one that belongs not with the toilet – surely a side-show – but with purpose-built conference rooms, offices, control rooms and other places of constructed authority.

This incongruity can partly be attributed to the shift in research focus from political elites to anti, alter, and subaltern knowledges and actors, including those involved in diplomacy outside traditional state channels (e.g. Jackson & Jeffrey, 2021). However, considering the extensive literature on toilets, bodily processes, and their broad political implications, along with the larger scholarly recognition of bathrooms as “bitterly contested spaces” (Penner, 2013, p. 22), this lack of discussion is more surprising than it may first appear. When discussed, toilets and bathrooms are seen as policy areas external to elite politics, such as in

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the development of sewage infrastructure or debates over gender-neutral toilets. Sysiö (2022) notes in a study on Finland's "Sauna Diplomacy" that such sites are often considered as backgrounds for diplomatic activities, not objects of study in their own right. By examining the faux triviality of toilet spaces and practices, we make explicit bodies of power and challenge the traditional disembodied masculinity in some of the most extreme spaces of elite power.

Our argument is that attending to the relations between political elites, toilets, and bodies is a fruitful exercise for political geography. The elite toilet, we argue, offers a distinct window into the operation of political leaders, while the ways in which those elites interact with and speak about toilets provide insight into how processes as diverse – yet interrelated – as gender, sexuality, race, nakedness, humour, and space enter into the making of the political. Both the toilet and its embodiment matter for elite politics as a material geography – including what goes on in the bathroom – and as a discursive performance. The discursive politics of the toilet, including its association with dirt, as in the case of President Trump's reference to "shithole countries," exist in tension with its embodied materiality, as we will see in the case of President Johnson's performative display of masculinity, in which the use and space of the toilet served as an embodied extension of elite power. Distinguishing between discursive and material forms of knowledge provides insight into how elite toilets function as unique sites where these knowledges intersect, revealing their relevance for how power operates. We are, in short, concerned with the (re)making of the assemblage of social and material activities linked to elite toilets. Our focus not only brings political elites 'down to Earth' but also shows how toilets and bodies matter to how politics 'gets done', providing a fresh perspective on elite governance and feminist accounts of power.

We focus on the United States and the United Kingdom, and in particular on the toilets of the White House and Downing Street. By contrasting these broadly similar political, economic, and cultural contexts, we hope to encourage others to expand the research horizon on this topic. Bringing these cases together provides an instructive comparison, highlighting the different issues associated with toilets and political elites. For instance, in the US context, there is a stronger connection to race and masculine power, while in the UK, humour plays a more prominent role. Before getting into these cases, though, we first set out a political geography of the toilet.

2. A political geography of the toilet

Our argument is not that more geographical research on toilets is needed—although we acknowledge that this literature is expanding—but that extending this research to less-explored spaces is valuable. While much of the existing research focuses on poor and marginalised contexts or the cultural politics of toileting, we suggest that examining the relationship between toilets and elite power can illuminate key geographical themes. We recognise that there is already *public* debate and speculation about elite politics and toilets, from the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to Trump's reported germaphobia and historical anecdotes about Churchill's bathroom habits. Our contribution, however, lies in exploring how focusing on political elites through the lens of toilets can deepen our understanding of political geographies, particularly concerning power, gender, and the body.

There is a large body of literature on bathrooms and toilets cutting across Sociology, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Design Studies, and Development Studies, including work in Geography (e.g. Jewitt, 2011; McFarlane, 2023; O'Reilly, 2016; Sesan et al., 2018). The growing body of geographic work examines aspects of sanitation, including: inequalities in access to toilets; inadequate conditions of toilets including the lack of maintenance; the relations between sanitation provision and health, dignity, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and other social vectors such as age and bodily ability; the conditions of formal and informal sanitation labour; and the potential of off-grid, decentralised structures versus centralised sewer systems (e.g. Jewitt, 2011; McFarlane et al.,

2014; Meehan et al., 2023; Sharior et al., 2023; Speer, 2016; Truelove, 2021).

Researchers in Design and Cultural Studies harbour a shared commitment to taking seriously the bathroom, its infrastructure, and the practices around it as sites of enforcing and making differences of gender, class, race, ethnicity, disability, and age (e.g. Abel, 2010; Cavanagh, 2010; Gershenson and Penner, 2009; Greed, 2003; Jones & Slater, 2020; Molotch and Norén, 2010; Morgan, 2002; Penner, 2001, 2010, 2013; Slater & Jones, 2018). Inspired by Alexander Kira's ground-breaking study *The Bathroom* (1976 [1966]), this work views toilets and bathrooms as political infrastructures that "enforce order and existing power relations" (Penner, 2013, p. 22).

The toilet brings together the extremities of private and public, cleanliness and dirt, the embodied and the sensory, the self and the other. As a place of material difference and social differentiation, and as an intimately embodied medium of sensory and tactile exchange, the toilet appears as both mundane and suspended in a permanent state of crisis. Carrying and transporting bodily waste of all sorts, opening the scope for multiple transgressions, and differently relating to different bodies and bodily conditions, the toilet's geography is freighted and bordered in ways unlike other places. For Freud (2001 [1908]), writing in a late colonial period characterised by the emergence of modern urban sewage systems, flushing toilets, and elaborate hygiene and sanitation regimes, excretion was vital to the formation and development of social subjectivity, to discourses of 'civilization', and to the notion that the West's successful transition into modernity rested in part on the effective sublimation of excrement, or on "anal sublimation" (Moore, 2018). In his bestselling *History of Shit*, Florian Werner (2017 [2011]: 65) observes that "western understanding of civilization is ... intertwined with the disappearance of shit; the degree of its (in)visibility signifies the position of a country on a scale of civilizational development."

Today, Freud's idiosyncratic and colonial theories of the anal stage in child development have been abandoned by psychologists. His focus on attitudes, feelings, and emotions towards defecation, however, remains current in studies of societal responses to dirt, disgust, and abjection. What these works retain from Freud is his insight into excrement and, by extension, the toilet not as self-evident, but as social and historical categories that entwine material conditions, bodies, and subjectivities into new societal relations (e.g. Elias, 2000 [1939]; Bakhtin, 1984 [1965]; Douglas, 2002 [1966]; Kristeva, 1982; Grosz, 1994).

Among the most important ideas coming from this tradition is Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of the 'abject'. In *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the relationship with bodily waste in a much greater variety of embodied materialities, including saliva, phlegm, urine, menstrual blood, vaginal mucus, snot, and others. Abjection, Kristeva argues, is an affective distancing from bodily waste in the formation of the subject, including through incomplete boundaries between embodied interior and exterior. Abjection to bodily waste shapes a body's borders and at the same time serves as a reminder of its fragile integrity, corporeal porosity, the fragmentary sense of bodily self, and notions of individual and social revulsion. The toilet plays a material and symbolic role, separating and keeping out the 'dirt' as 'matter out of place' in Mary Douglas' (2002 [1966]) influential rendering, which threatens to destabilise, contaminate, and leak into the orderly body of the self. Yet the space of the toilet is not always contained, and the intersections of body, toilet and culture are (re)negotiated – even among the world's political elite.

Bringing the toilet and its bodily and discursive relations out from its repressed location in the sanitised arena of elite politics is not a straightforward task. Political elites are reluctant to discuss this space, and for others, the prospect might invoke disturbing (or comical) reactions (Strohming, 2014). Yet, an important reason for the attraction and potency of 'toilet humour' – which has been part of the long durée of western culture from Rabelais' lengthy toilet paper discussion in *Pantagruel and Gargantua*, to Shakespeare's Pompey Bum, Jarry's *Ubu*

Roi, and the tradition of political cartooning — is precisely the taboo associated with bodily waste (Stead, 2009). Starting with an account of John Harington, the inventor of the flush toilet, in *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called the Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596), a book that satirises Elizabethan morality, to Trump's extensive scatological politics, Rowley (2023: 146) provides a succinct account of how "toilet humour became intertwined with politics hundreds of years ago." It facilitates "transgressive" relief (see also Gerlofs, 2021) for bodily practices and materialities that are normally negated and repressed.

The politics of the toilet and its connections to the body, nakedness, and subject are at once profoundly serious and often ludicrously comical, repellent yet oddly seductive. This simultaneity is less surprising than it may seem. Indeed, the power of toilets, bodies and waste to shock, in their different ways and in their changing relationships, is common to disgust, intrigue, and humour (Critchley, 2002). While the logic of disgust is quite different from that of laughter, the form is similar: both respond to something explicit, subversive, perhaps even liberatory (Bakhtin, 1984 [1965]). They speak to a long cultural history that crosses the line between the monstrous and the carnivalesque, a space that the female body, in particular, and the male gaze upon it, has been made to inhabit (Hennefeld, 2020).

To take just one example: in the lead-up to the 2008 political party national conventions in the US, both the Democratic and Republican parties accused each other of planning to use weapons connected to human waste. All kinds of rumours circulated: that the police were going to use a weapon that caused protestors to involuntarily defecate, that protestors were going to spray urine or excrement on the police, and more. Ahead of the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado, local newspaper *Westword* initiated, with tongue-in-cheek, what they called the "NoCRAP" campaign – "Normal Citizens Rising Against Poo" – and called for a "moratorium on the public throwing, spraying, smearing, hosing or inducing or excrement for the week," and set up a "Doo-Doo Accord" (Maher, 2008). But, as geographers of humour remind us (e.g. Ridanpää, 2014), there is often a serious politics lurking in the background of jokes, perhaps especially those about human waste. David Meieran, a civil liberties advocate, described the claims from the police as "part of a spectrum of information war strategies that the state uses to repress dissent ... We've repeatedly heard the same language used in different cities ('urine and faeces,' 'not your father's protesters')" (Solnit, 2011).

"When thinking about how bodies become objects of disgust," Sara Ahmed (2014: 88) writes, "we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations." During the 2011 Occupy protests, to highlight a second instance, prominent Republican politician Newt Gingrich eagerly linked Occupy protestors to waste: "They take over a public park they didn't pay for, to go nearby to use bathrooms they didn't pay for, to beg for food from places they don't want to pay for ... you need to reassert something by saying to them, 'Go get a job right after you take a bath.'" (Maher, 2008, p. 400, our emphasis). "In demanding Occupiers 'take a bath', as Bolton et al. (2016: 866) explain, "Gingrich evoked discourses that define worthiness—godliness—in terms of cleanliness and purity."

Or, consider a more volatile context: the Israel Defence Forces spraying 'skunk water,' a concoction that smells like sewage, against Palestinian demonstrators (or *kharara*, literally 'the shitter'). Perhaps the worst part is that the smell lingers and sticks to the body for days. "Skunk sticks to the body so much that it overwhelms the body's own odour. This physical transformation results in experiences of humiliation and both personal and social exclusion. More than one victim ... admitted that the spraying of bodies makes you feel 'unhuman'" (Nieuwenhuis, 2015, np). Additionally, there is a vast but largely hidden archive of encounters between human waste and state politics, from protestors defecating on election materials in Zimbabwe, to jars of waste allegedly used by anti-abortion protestors in Texas, and police allegations that protestors in Bristol defecated on their shoes (Cohen, 2013; Cruse & Jolly, 2021).

But while many of these cases feature political elites either as targets

or protagonists, the elites themselves nonetheless emerge from these stories as stubbornly and curiously sanitised, even disembodied. The literary critic Harold Bloom invites his American readers to undress politicians from their rhetoric by imagining the House of Representatives and the Senate naked. "Envision," he writes, "our president, naked on television, smilingly charming us with his customary amiable incoherence. We might be no less moved, but reality would have a way of breaking in upon him, and even upon us" (in Carr-Gomm, 2010, p. 138). The political geographies of the toilet in the context of elite politics, in short, are shaped by these wider histories, cultures and power relations around bodies and toilets, but also possess their own dynamic to do with their peculiar context. We seek to bring a form of state power and politics into the messy and mundane realities of bodies and their wastes, and explore how toilets become entangled with various relations, from abuse, heteronormative masculinity, awkward humour and metabolisms.

Before engaging with our case studies, a note on methodology. We selected the US and the UK and examined news reports and political biographies of Presidents and Prime Ministers from World War II to the present for their accessible biographies and interviews in English. Inevitably, choices had to be made – there are thousands of biographies of US and UK Presidents and Prime Ministers since WW2, while all US Presidents and most UK Prime Ministers since the war have written at least one book, and a few (e.g. Churchill) have written several. We focussed on both biographies written by leaders themselves and some key biographies written by those closest to those leaders (e.g. in the UK context, former Director of Communications Alastair Campbell's *writings on the Blair administrations*), as well as searches using relevant keywords through mainstream media sources (BBC, CNN, flagship newspapers including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*).

These choices sharpened our empirical focus while also framing our analysis in both time and space. Future studies will be needed to explore toilet cultures, habits, designs, and discourses in different political and geographic contexts. One particularly interesting avenue for future research is the Soviet toilet, famously memorialized by the American-Russian artist Ilya Kabakov as an "allegory of Soviet reality" (Boym in Hoppe, 2022, p. 101). Another methodological issue worth reflecting on pertains to the availability of data. Despite the large volume of data available, we found that few sources addressed the topic of toilets. Elite politicians seldom discuss such topics, often presenting themselves as 'above' bodily functions. When we found references to toilets—usually brief mentions—we sought additional information from media coverage and the writings or public interviews of senior advisors close to political leaders. We do not claim to have identified all relevant discussions of toilets among elite politicians in the US and UK since World War II due to the fragmented nature of the sources. The issue of availability speaks to the myths, rumours and gossip that surround the bodies of leaders whose needs are made to appear superseded by the seemingly disembodied rituals and practices of statecraft (though there are forms of artistic critique that seek to disrupt this, e.g. Dover, 2016; Smith, 2024). Nevertheless, we believe we have highlighted key concerns that offer valuable insights for geographers and may inspire further research in this area, both within and beyond the US and UK.

3. Power, gender, and race: the White House bathroom

Since President John Adams (1797–1801), the White House has served as the primary residence and workplace for the US Head of State. Its current layout was established in 1934 when Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) added a basement and relocated the Oval Office eastward. Cultural representations of the room have shaped popular imaginations of the Oval Office's reputation as the site of elite politics, both domestically and globally. The room's décor changes with each new President to "communicate values, ideals and a brand" (Brooks, 2011, p. 16). Although it serves as a ceremonial stage and symbol of American

politics, many Presidents have preferred to work in the more modest study adjacent to the Oval Office, which often goes unnoticed.

The study originally appears to have been carved out of the adjacent lavatory. A 1934 *Time* article features a reproduction of the original plan, showing a larger bathroom with a water closet and a basin overlooking the Rose Garden (*Time*, 1934). During President Truman's renovations (1949–1952), the lavatory was moved a few meters north to create what is now known as the 'Oval Office Study.' Demarcations between the public and private appear blurred. On one end is the most visible office of global politics, the Oval Office, and on the other end is "one of the most private rooms in the White House" (Lewinsky in *Starr*, 1998, p. 24). The two places are connected by a narrow, windowless corridor that also includes the Oval Office's private bathroom. We focus on three intersections of toilets and elite politics in the White House: *extramarital affairs and the abuse of power*, *masculinist authority and discipline*, and *the abjective politics of race*.

3.1. Extramarital affairs and the abuse of power

This rarely seen and often overlooked geography, characterised by isolation from the rest of the building, played a central role in enabling the extramarital sex between President Bill Clinton (1993–2001) and Monica Lewinsky, which was perceived as spectacularly sinful at the time (*Malti-Douglas*, 2000). Proceedings from Clinton's 1999 impeachment trial, after he had tried to conceal the relationship, revealed that the sexual encounters took place in the corridor, the study, and/or the bathroom, hidden away from the sanctity of the Oval Office, which remained 'unspoiled.' The door to the study was the only part of the space implicated in the scandal. Clinton kept it ajar to warn the couple of interrupting visitors and phone calls. The hidden geography beyond the office is not homogeneous; it appears hierarchically layered in terms of the privacy and intimacy it afforded Clinton to abuse his power and get close to Lewinsky. Yet, as *Cvetkovich* (2001: 275) explains, the geography "also demonstrates the constraints of the presidency—indeed, it might even drive the need for a sexuality that can represent the possibility of privacy, of an act that is not part of his professional life."

In moments of possible intrusion from the outside, by sight or sound, the bathroom seems to have acted as a refuge, suspending the performative rituals of elite politics. The "most secluded area of his private quarters" was where Clinton first invited Lewinsky to see him (*Morton*, 1999). Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, who led the investigation that resulted in President Clinton's impeachment, reports on "the material challenges of having sex with the president in the Oval Office" (*Cvetkovich*, 2001, p. 273). It is no coincidence that the infamous staining of the blue dress occurred in the bathroom. With faucets turned on, believing that the noise of running water would suppress sounds, the two whispered and kissed (*Morton*, 1999). The dress worn by Lewinsky during sex with Clinton played a key role in the impeachment trial. The FBI determined that the semen found on it unequivocally belonged to Clinton, who previously had denied having had sex with Lewinsky. When the news broke, politicians and commentators agreed that it proved Clinton had lied about his sexual relationship with Lewinsky and, as senators agreed, "had lied directly to the American people" (*US GOV*, 1999). The specificity of the bathroom, as being a necessary and designed place of privacy within a highly visible and regulated work and public environment (*Kira*, 1976 [1966]), plays a pivotal role in explaining how Clinton's actions could take place. "There, the President was 'the most affectionate with me he'd ever been,' Ms. Lewinsky testified" (in *Starr*, 1998, p. 67). Despite the cultural and political importance of the 'scandal' (*Berlant & Duggan*, 2001, p. 4), there are no publicly available photographs of the bathroom, which only further intensified geographic imaginations of it.

It would be wrong to assume that the bodily practices associated with and occurring in the bathroom are separate from the office of power. After all, the bathroom's unassuming nature played a significant role in

enabling Clinton's abuse, along with the subsequent social and emotional fallout. Thinking about the individual and collective afterlife of the shared trauma, Monica *Lewinsky* (2018: np) writes: "[T]he events of 1998 ... may have led to some of the features we often associate with collective traumas: social rupturing and a profound sense of distress, the challenging of long-held assumptions about the world and national identity, a constricted public narrative, and a process of scapegoating and dehumanisation."

Soon overshadowed by the events of 9/11, the impact of Clinton's sex scandal on the role of the media and trust in politics remains difficult to assess (*Kellner*, 2017). Nearly two decades later, during the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump poked at the enduring national scar. Repeatedly reminding audiences of the episode, he questioned Hillary Clinton's dedication to women, American values, and morality. The issue recently surfaced again. This time Trump's lawyers used the case to compare Trump's hush money trial with Clinton's impeachment.

3.2. Masculine performativity

In our second example of bathroom politics in the White House, we focus on the masculine performativity of toilets in practicing authority and discipline. The case of President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–1969) shows how flouting expectations of privacy can be used to harness an embodied sort of discipline. Johnson famously used the bathroom's distinctive geography to intimidate or impress members of staff and journalists. Richard Goodwin (2014: np), Johnson's aide and speech writer, recounts an encounter with the President in the White House mansion: "'That you, Dick? Come on in.' The sound came unmistakably from the adjacent bathroom. There, seated upon the toilet, apparently in the midst of defecation, was the president of the United States." Goodwin would later come to interpret Johnson's "display of intimacy" not "as gross insensitivity, or an act of self-humiliation, but an attempt to uncover, heighten the vulnerability of other men—the better to know them, to subject them to his will" (*ibid.*). By using the bathroom's unique psychology while pretending it was just another meeting room, an extension of his office, Johnson employed the space to assert, cultivate, and express a particular culture of masculinity. When Johnson had to go to the bathroom in the middle of a conversation, it was not unusual for him to move the discussion there. Goodwin recounts how Johnson expressed delight when he told him of National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, who

'came into the bathroom with me and then found it utterly impossible to look at me while I sat there on the toilet. You'd think he had never seen those parts of the body before. For there he was, standing as far away from me as he possibly could, keeping his back toward me the whole time, trying to carry on a conversation. I could barely hear a word he said' (in *Goodwin*, 2014: np).

In the case of Johnson, bodily functions and materialities were not silenced, repressed, or securitised but celebrated and paraded as symbols and techniques of masculine governance. "Urinating in a sink, inviting people into the bathroom, showing off a scar, exposing his private parts ... For Johnson, they were meant to shock and confuse and leave him in control" (*Dallek*, 1998: IX). Describing Johnson's morning routine, which primarily unfolded in the bedroom and bathroom, a former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare writes that "Johnson would continue working with one or two aides throughout his morning toilet. He'd get out of bed, disrobe, get into his high-pressure shower, as he continued to discuss whatever at hand" (*Califano*, 2015, p. 14). Meanwhile, the First Lady, Claudia Alta, would remain in bed silently waiting for the entourage to leave. Johnson used the specific space of the toilet and his performative nakedness to fuse political power with heterosexual prowess and male anatomy. "Nakedness," *Sutton* (2007: 142) reminds us, carries with it "gendered connotations that are embedded in history ... and ... intertwined with ... ideologies of racism,

sexism, classism, colonialism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression.” Johnson’s white male nakedness, which persists as the historical universal norm of the body, enabled a geography of political power that extended from the hyper-visible Oval Office to his performative and overt heteronormative use of the bathroom as a site of male urination on display (see also Justus, 2006).

In stark contrast to Johnson’s unabashed showcasing of his organ, which he nicknamed “Jumbo,” was President Ronald Reagan’s (1981–1989) rumoured incontinence. Social critic Christopher Hitchens (1985, pp. 10–11) contended that it would lead to humiliating restroom incidents on the international stage, suggesting it was grounds enough for his resignation. Even though physicians successfully removed the colon cancer that instigated the rumour, the spectre of an ‘incontinent leader’ lingered in popular imagination, as brilliantly fictionalised by the novelist David Foster Wallace in his unpublished novel *Wickedness*. Incontinence, we know from Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), produces matter out of place, which becomes a pollution, an impurity and, therefore, dangerously threatens to disrupt formal classifications of order. Psychologist Nick Haslam (2012: 44) explains that incontinence is “the usual translation of the concept of *akrasia* in Aristotle’s moral philosophy, which represents a form of moral weakness in which people lack the capacity to overcome their passions and follow reason.” It follows that incontinence can be seen as an expression of irrationality or an inability to reason under the influence of passion. Reason and good governance are believed to require continence, strength, and virility. Incontinence, in contrast, throws authority and legitimacy into doubt, and speaks to embodied ambivalence and a male nakedness of vulnerability.

Presenting a lack of control over one’s bodily fluidity as a moral impairment speaks to a familiar masculine imagination of the body as whole and solid with secure boundaries (Longhurst, 2001; Nieuwenhuis, 2019). When President Lyndon Johnson’s long-term aide and friend, Walter Jenkins, was arrested for using the place of a (YMCA) bathroom close to the White House in pursuit of “homophobically abjectified desires,” the coherence of Johnson’s toxic masculinity, his virile nakedness, and the bathroom were put at risk (Edelman, 2013, p. 161). The space of the bathroom transformed from a deterministic place of absolute binary anatomic difference, shaped largely by the male anatomy, into an ambivalent site of extreme heterosexual anxiety where the risk of homosexual desire, moral corruption, contagion, and abjection threatened the legitimacy of the President.

The arrest of Jenkins for “immoral conduct,” investigated by the Metropolitan Police’s ‘Morals Division Office’, took place only three weeks before the 1964 presidential elections, resulting in news headlines that overshadowed geopolitical events such as Brezhnev’s plotting to remove Khrushchev. Driven by his Republican opponents, decrying “moral decay” and implying “cover ups,” the question quickly turned into if “either way LBJ” could still be “trusted” (Sherry, 2007, p. 120). The affair impugned Johnson’s own “heterosexual authority” (ibid.: 121). Fearing he may have been framed, Johnson ordered FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to investigate Jenkins and all “employees of the White House ... [suspected] of homosexual tendencies” (in Charles, 2015, p. 278). At a time when American progress, prosperity, and superiority (vis-à-vis the Soviet Union) were measured by the increase of middle-class households with a private bathroom, constituting the ideal of the American Dream, Jenkins’s illicit act contaminated the toilet and put at risk the health and purity of the American nation (Edelman, 2013; Sikora, 2004). Collectively felt anxieties about the bathroom were so great that cleaning and securing it from intruders became a matter of political urgency (Charles, 2015). In the same year of Jenkins’ arrest, Johnson’s presidential opponent, Barry Goldwater (in Sabato, 2014), entertained the idea of “[lobbing a nuclear bomb] into the men’s room at the Kremlin.” The bathroom (and not the Kremlin) was depicted as a dangerous and liminal zone where intrusive, corrupting, and contagious communism, along with homosexuality (often perceived as the same or a related ‘poison’), threatened to undermine social order and castrate

the nation’s masculinity. So-called ‘locker room talk’ would make a reappearance 50 years later in the run-up of another U.S. presidential election in a similar expression of heteronormative masculinity and virility.

3.3. The politics of race

Third, then, the politics of race. The position of the bathroom in popular culture took a different form with the presidency of Donald Trump who, not unlike Marcel Duchamp’s readymade Fountain sculpture, brought the affective bathroom from the periphery to the centre of his visceral politics. One observer writes how the “affirmation, amplification and circulation of disgust is one of the primary affective drivers of Trump’s political success” (Richardson, 2017, p. 747). He renamed the Oval Office bathroom “the Monica room” (Haberman, 2022; Woodward, 2018) and showcased it to White House visitors, claiming he had renovated it entirely from his predecessor, Barack Obama, expecting visitors to “understand what I’m talking about.”

Writing on the intersectional violence of segregated restrooms in mid-20th century Jim Crow America, which saw toilets divided between “men,” “women,” and “coloured,” Abel (2010: 124–125) argues that toilets were rigidly separated “because they are sites at which fluids circulate and threaten to contaminate.” The urge to avoid having to share the embodied materiality of the bathroom with Black bodies seems to have been felt also by Trump’s spouse. Stephanie Winston Wolkoff (2020: 135), a former senior advisor to Melania Trump, quotes the First Lady: “I’m not moving to DC until the Residence has been renovated and redecorated, starting with a new shower and toilet.” Wolkoff continues and explains that “[s]he did not go so far as to say that she would not sit on the same throne as Michelle Obama or whoever had used this bathroom ... But Melania did not conduct her most personal business on a previously used john” (ibid.). Trump extended the affective materiality of the toilet by calling the entirety of the White House “a real dump,” a claim which he later rescinded (BBC, 2017). These and other such references, we argue, are not incidental but part of a historical politics of racialised abjection that weaponise the discursive power of the bathroom (see also Abel, 2010; Davis, 2023).

The American critic Martha Nussbaum (2004) explains that fears of dirt are socially and historically grounded in an embodied politics of disgust and contamination. She notes that “disgust properties - sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness - have repeatedly and monotonously been associated with ... all of [those whose bodies] are imagined as tainted by the dirt of the body” (ibid.: 108). Writing on the “performativity of disgust,” Ahmed (2014) refers to abjection not as an object but as a “sticky” process that attaches itself onto certain bodies and turn into objects of disgust. Kristeva (1982: 4) adds that it is not “the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.” Sensory proximity to abjected bodies, externalised as Other, leads to them being loathed and treated as contaminated and dangerous. Trump found Hillary Clinton’s toilet break in a 2008 debate so “disgusting” that “I don’t want to talk about it” (in CNN, 2015).¹

The abject, as Kristeva (1982) and Ahmed (2014) explain, simultaneously pushes the body in recoil and pulls it in by means of intrigue. “By reducing his opponents to exaggerated bodily behaviours and habits, Trump [not only] assumed the position of a Rabelaisian clown, bringing down the old guard by exposing the grotesque body underneath,” as Goldstein et al. (2020: 98) explain, but his misogynistic abjection of bodies also creates the possibility to imagine a self that is clean, healthy, and even pure.

Richardson (2017: 748) argues that Trump’s infamous call for the “draining of the swamp ... is an image of purification, of cleaning a fetid

¹ The full quote: “I know where she went. It’s disgusting. I don’t want to talk about it! Nah, it’s too disgusting. Don’t say it, it’s disgusting” (Trump in CNN, 2015).

and corrupt government ... [It is] an end to what disgusts about government itself." Exclusion and abjection, in other words, are the flip side of inclusion and purity. Kristeva (1982: 65) writes: "Because it is excluded as a possible object, asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as abject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the 'self and clean' the order that is thus only (and therefore, always already) sacred." The toilet, as a shared site of embodied fluidity, is the liminal space that brings together these energies.

The water closet, which by design makes unfiltered bodily touch inevitable (Kitchin and Dodge, 2012), is not only a space that produces sexual difference but, as the US history of segregated bathrooms shows, also an intimate site of embodied encounter with racial difference. It is both a site of draining, cleansing, and purification and a place of fragility, porosity, and contamination. Toilet phobia, a hallmark of Trump, expresses a tension that erupts when the material and discursive aspects of the toilet converge. A popular psychiatric handbook links toilet phobia, which encompasses fears of "falling into the toilet, being attacked by some monster coming from it, or ... being infected from it," to "ideas of castration" (Campbell & Stott, 2008, pp. 118–119). The metaphorical use of castration has a long and violent history in white male anxieties associated with masculine blackness (e.g. Marriott, 1996) and appears especially prominent in post-Obama alt-right discourses (Lokke, 2019). In an essay on the racial politics of abjection, Davis (2023: 153) writes: "Intimately related to desire, castration is a structured process by which identification gives way to symbolic functioning. White masculinity metaphorically reclaims its primacy through the literal and figurative castration of Black men." Trump's well-documented aversion to toilets cannot be separated from his broader "politics of abjection" (Lotringer, 2020). This anxiety seems to stem from his self-professed germaphobia (or mysophobia), which compels him to use straws for drinking and to wash his hands after handshakes. Ultimately, as Fisher (2019) notes, this fear reflects a deeper anxiety towards the bodies of "deviant" Others.

Trump's offhand remark about the need to renovate the Oval Office bathroom signifies a pervasive racism that renders it impossible to recognise the Other(s) as equal by reducing them to the affective materiality of disgust. His infamous "shithole countries" remark, reportedly made during a meeting with U.S. senators in the Oval Office, summarises a familiar geopolitical trope rooted in not merely affirming but in exercising a fascistic order of abjection that distinguishes the human from the less-than-human. Earlier, Holocaust scholar Terrence des Pres (1980) coined the term "excremental assault" to describe Nazi dehumanising attempts to reduce and materially subject camp prisoners to the condition of being-filth. Excremental assault, des Pres (ibid.: 60) explains, is the "physical inducement of disgust and self-loathing." During the Trump administration, the bathroom's role in elite politics underwent a significant transformation. Unlike in the past, where toilets were either deliberately avoided (as with Clinton) or accentuated (as with Johnson), they became an important medium for expressing racially charged politics. This shift highlights how focusing on the bathroom can bring the dynamics of power into sharp relief, offering fresh perspectives on its historical significance and demonstrating how mundane spaces and embodied practices are deeply imbued with political meaning.

4. The body, humour, and political performance in Downing Street

The UK context of toilets and elite politics is distinct. Themes of gender and privacy are present, as they are in the US, but manifest in different ways and on a less overtly aggressive register. At the same time, other themes become important, particularly humour as "a tool of politics" (Gerlofs, 2021: 233), reflecting a British preoccupation with toilets, embarrassment, and bodies—fixations that stem from histories of middle- and upper-class etiquette and civility. We begin by sketching the

toilet context of Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament. We then describe another affair, this time not Clinton-Lewinsky but a lower-key scandal that broke only after the Prime Minister (PM) in question had stepped down: the Major-Currie affair. The section then turns to the relationship between toilets, bodies and humour, which we suggest provides insight into issues of privacy, reflection, bodily care, political performance, gender politics, political critique, and political violence.

As we wrote earlier, while humour is a distinct response to the forms of power and disgust described in the US context, it would be a mistake to think that it is free from power, control, boundary-making, and cultural discourse. A burgeoning body of work shows how humour is not merely a social affair but a practice with spatial implications (e.g. Dodds & Kirby, 2013; Fluri, 2022; Gerlofs, 2022; Ridanpää, 2014). In the context of UK elite politics, humour related to toilets and bodies often manifests as social awkwardness about the "strange fact" of having a body (Critchley, 2002, p. 44), which reveals an effort to position political office as 'above' the mundane bodily experiences of 'the people'. Alternatively, it may take on a more raucous, perhaps even carnivalesque, form aimed at mocking, undermining, or dismissing others. It may take the form of satire, or it may seek to disrupt and shift perceptions of a given topic. In short, there is a curious confluence between humour and disgust: both can be responses to shock, tackle taboos, and manage the messy, often unruly realm of the body and its wastes (Hennefeld, 2020).

10 Downing Street is an infamously odd building. From the outside, it resembles a terraced house, but inside it is a maze of corridors and rooms that have been variously rearranged, divided, and expanded over the years as new Prime Ministers and their teams have come and gone. Built in 1684, the building is both a home and an office, ill-suited to the demands of modern government. While the White House has the Oval Office and the West Wing as its centres of power, new Prime Ministers often relocate their workspaces to different parts of the building.

The result is a retrofitted 'make-do' structure that staff often describe as confined and difficult to work in. In the various cubby holes, cloak-rooms, corners, and bathrooms throughout Downing Street, whispered conversations have occurred over the years. One aide, for example, recalls overhearing fragments of a conversation between Sinn Féin leaders Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams while they were together in a restroom (Chorley, 2018). There are rumours too of the building's peculiar geography being used for other purposes. In 2021, the Speaker of the House of Commons requested an investigation into reports of rampant drug misuse, particularly cocaine, in the British Parliament. The investigation focussed on several areas, including a bathroom near then-PM Boris Johnson's office. Tests conducted in twelve Parliament bathrooms revealed cocaine in eleven of them (Wheeler & Urwin, 2021).

Yet, finding information about the toilets in Downing Street is challenging due to security reasons (and a Freedom of Information request revealed little, considered too trivial for civil service staff). The toilets are likely outdated and, if similar to those in the broader British Parliament, in need of investment. Since 2019, complaints about sewage spilling into MPs' offices, broken toilets, and unpleasant odours have sharply increased across the Parliamentary estate. About a third of MPs have expressed dissatisfaction with the state of the House of Commons toilets (Lawrence, 2012). Complaints about inadequate sanitation in government offices are not new; in the late 1960s, there were reports of a shortage of toilet rolls. The Parliament's sanitation system also has historical significance. The House of Lords has one of the oldest flushing toilets in the country, located next to the Robing Room. It is reserved for use by the monarch should they need it when attending the State Opening of Parliament. This small, decorated wooden structure, designed to be silent when flushed, was built on the orders of PM Benjamin Disraeli to address a complaint from Queen Victoria about the noise.

Reporting on the Major-Currie affair inserted a particular bodily geography into the otherwise publicly hidden and sanitised Downing Street toilet. The case parallels the Clinton-Lewinsky story only in as far

as it is an affair, but one that involved not a young intern and the world's most powerful man but two mature politicians, one then-PM John Major (1990–97) and the other Cabinet Minister Edwina Currie. The affair reportedly began in the late 1980s and continued into the early 1990s. In her 2002 memoir, long after both had left government, Currie revealed the affair and stated that it took place in the PM's official residence, and included encounters in one of the few guaranteed private spaces in the building's compressed geography: the bathroom (Currie, 2003, pp. 1987–1992). The scandal emerged not so much from the affair itself, but rather from how Major had meticulously crafted his image as a devoted family man with traditional conservative moral values. In so projecting himself, Major had reinforced the sense of the elite politician above the to-and-fro of bodily passion and private misbehaving, and so the affair and the toilet rumours served to undermine and reduce political claim-making amidst the most mundane of spaces. In the remainder of this section, we shift to a different aspect of the relationship between toilets and political elites: humour.

4.1. Toilet humour

Humour operates in three broad ways that range across political discourse, metaphor, and the toilet as a material space: as a way of talking about toilets or bodily processes, as a way of comparing the arguments of political opposition to toilets or waste, and in relation to things that happen in toilets. This makes the toilet a versatile and significant space in British politics. However, the role of toilets and humour amongst British elites extends beyond mere jokes and jibes. In the stories we collected are glimpses too of the importance of the body in political performance, and the importance of the toilet as a space of privacy and bodily care. Collectively, these stories not only bring high politics 'down to Earth', in the common human experience of metabolic processes, but hint at a larger, often unspoken hinterland of political capacity upon which political efficacy at least to some extent depends.

The Prime Minister most closely associated with the bathroom is Winston Churchill, who has come to symbolise a certain style of irreverent and eccentric humour associated with British elites. Churchill spent significant amounts of time in the bathroom for contemplation, even holding meetings with individuals on the other side of the door. Allegedly, he had a phone installed in the Downing Street bathroom because he spent so much time there and would bathe twice per day if possible, preferably at 98 °F, practicing 'full immersion.' The telephone may have created its own problems by counteracting the undisturbed time alone that Churchill prized. For instance, there is a rumour that when Churchill was disturbed by a call from the Lord Privy Seal, he responded, "Tell him I can only deal with one shit at a time" (Kutner, 2014).

In an alleged encounter in the House of Commons toilets between Churchill and Labour leader Clement Attlee, Churchill went to use the urinal furthest away from his opponent. "Feeling stand-offish today, are we, Winston?" Attlee asked. "That's right," Churchill replied. "Every time you see something big, you want to nationalise it." According to another rumour, which Churchill denied, on one occasion while staying at the White House, FDR encountered a naked Churchill leaving the bath. Churchill retorted: "The prime minister of Britain has nothing to conceal from the president of the United States" (Carr-Gomm, 2010, p. 134).

The toilet and its accoutrements are often used to take down satirical political leaders, highlighting a certain tradition of British toilet humour. In 1985, for example, a shop in Caernarfon sold toilet rolls with Margaret Thatcher's face on them. An advertisement promoting the rolls, which quickly sold out, claimed they could help "flush all your troubles away." Years later, others would produce toilet paper and toilet brushes featuring images of Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, and other elites. This tradition of satirical humour evolves with the times. In 2019, for instance, someone marked Thatcher's grave as a 'gender neutral open space public toilet,' which also inspired a single by the punk band

White Lighter.

Stories about toilets as material spaces often enter political gossip, involving jokes and humour that satirically target political leaders. Tony Blair's premiership featured several such moments. Long before he became PM, Blair proposed to his wife Cherie while she was cleaning the bathroom during a holiday. Cherie recalled, "I'd cleaned the toilet, and he suddenly announced, while I was on my knees, that maybe we should get married. It was terribly romantic!" (BBC News, 2007: np). Over a decade later, during the tense battle for Labour Party leadership between Blair and Gordon Brown, the toilet also became a site of humour amid intense negotiations. Alastair Campbell, then Director of Communications, noted this in his diary (2007: 54):

TB was clear he should stand because he felt that was the best chance for the party, but GB was not convinced. At one point, GB went to the toilet. Minutes passed and TB was sitting twiddling his thumbs and even wondered if GB had done a runner. Eventually the phone went. TB left it, so then the answering machine kicked in and GB's disembodied voice came on: 'Tony. It's Gordon. I'm locked in the toilet.' They both ended up laughing about it. TB went upstairs and said: 'You're staying in there till you agree.'

In 2001, during a visit to Camp David, Tony Blair and President George W. Bush shared a light moment at a press conference. The two leaders were asked if they had found they had much in common. "Well, we both use Colgate toothpaste," joked Bush. "Their gonna wonder how you know that George," Blair laughed. Later, continuing the jest, Blair gave Bush a personalised toilet sponge bag (Kettle et al., 2002).

However, beneath the surface of toilet humour, where "the comedy of the body is most obviously and crudely exemplified" (Critchley, 2002, p. 45), lies a more serious point. These stories shift the power dynamics of high politics to the mundane, bodily, and familiar aspects of life. In his memoir *A Journey*, Blair (2010: 544) made a brief sojourn into toilets and the body. He notes that being Prime Minister involves a tightly managed schedule and constant travel, which "does play havoc with the digestive system":

You need to eat healthily and with discipline. I am very typically British. I like to have time and comfort in the loo. The bathroom is an important room, and I couldn't live in a culture that doesn't respect it. Anyway, that's probably more than you ever wanted to know. But politicians, as I frequently say, need to be seen and understood as human beings. Have a bad night's sleep or feel lousy because your system is shot to pieces, and you perform badly. And the difference with us is that each performance is on film and reported, and there are no second takes.

Blair reflected later that year in a radio interview with Radio Australia that the world of Westminster gets "very sniffy about this," but he wanted to write a memoir from what he called a "human point of view." Blair's description of his prioritization of "the loo" as "very typically British" underscores a specific association between toilets, bodies, and humour that shapes their presence in British elite politics and public life. Indeed, during the interview, Blair audibly laughed through his comments. The humour brings to light the awkward intimacies of bodies and metabolisms that people may not associate with political leaders – politicians "are actually human," he added – into a familiar, comfortable space. His comments aim to emphasize the prosaic embodiment of elite politics, but despite its importance to daily governing, it cannot be discussed without a touch of laughter that reminds everyone else that he also finds it – referencing a history of British middle- and upper-class awkwardness about bodies and toilets – rather silly and embarrassing (hence his aside: "anyway, that's probably more than you ever wanted to know").

There is a sense in which the bathroom becomes the site that might bring the office of PM to the messiness and needs of the human body, reflecting the importance of bodily care within the private space of the bathroom for effective governance. Churchill's baths clearly mattered as

a space to reflect, while Blair emphasised that the bathroom was an “important” space for him to spend time. It is not merely that bodily and metabolic processes bring the office into the common realm of everyday waste – a realm historically defined as being beyond elite politics. Rather, these comments indicate that bodily processes are actively significant in the work of elite politics. Former PM David Cameron is the contemporary UK politician who most forcefully adopted this logic. He reportedly used a “full-bladder technique” to maintain concentration during negotiations and before speeches (Hickman, 2011). Cameron apparently learned the technique from former Conservative politician Enoch Powell and would employ it to maintain focus.

Toilets also surface in political elite discourse and practice in the UK in other significant ways. One stark example is a single, isolated case of targeted violence that forcibly cuts through contemporary politics in recent decades. In 1984, PM Margaret Thatcher narrowly survived an IRA bomb at the Grand Hotel in Brighton, in which five people were killed and many others injured. Had Thatcher stayed in the bathroom—where she had been just two minutes earlier—she might have been killed. The bomb was placed behind the bathtub, intended to destabilise the hotel’s old chimney stack.

At first glance, this spectacular and isolated incident contrasts sharply with the more mundane stories of everyday toilet humour described earlier. Yet, it shares a significant commonality: it underscores the importance of the body and its needs in elite politics. Thatcher’s survival was fortuitously linked to a mundane bodily function—a need to use the toilet—just moments before the bomb detonated. The incident, like the stories of Churchill and Blair, highlights how bodily functions and care can critically impact political performance and governance. Blair’s emphasis on the connection between a leader’s performance and the functioning of the body, including the centrality of the bathroom therein, reflects this broader significance.

Like the US context, there is a distinctly gendered theme running through these stories of British political leaders and toilets. We have mentioned Churchill’s quip to Atlee about size and Cameron’s stamina negotiation. It is arguably culturally easier for a figure like Blair to giggle at the silliness of bodily processes, but masculinity features also in other ways. At the most extreme end, there is brute force. Historian Dominic Sandbrook (2021) describes how former Labour leader Neil Kinnock, who sought to shift the Party to adopt a centre-left position, had a bloody physical fight in the toilet at a party conference in Blackpool with a supporter of Tony Benn.

On a more familiar register, Harold Wilson (1964–1970 and 1974–1976) allegedly continued discussions with his male private secretaries in the toilets, a move that his senior female aide, Marcia Falkender, felt was designed to exclude her, and which echoes Lyndon Johnson’s stories (Brown, 2019). Sometimes, the gendered coding is more subtle. For example, in 2016, as Mayor of London, Boris Johnson inaugurated the construction of a new super sewer in the city by flushing a toilet. Johnson said: “The Victorians were very ambitious – our generation should be similarly ambitious.” In doing so, Johnson was connecting himself to the long history of sewer construction in the city, particularly the figure of Joseph Bazalgette as the Victorian chief engineer who oversaw the city’s sewer construction in the nineteenth century. This is a history that casts the male figure as heroic entrepreneur, deploying modern technology to address a key city challenge.

These cases of humour point to the important role of privacy, reflection, and bodily capacity and care in high political office, but they also provide insight into the often-quiet work of gender politics, political critique, and the less-quiet acts of political violence. They are the often-mundane background of elite politics which subvert efforts by political leaders and systems to project themselves as somehow beyond or greater than the rest of us, not part of the plebeian but of some more ethereal sphere. These little moments of reminder, from Margaret Thatcher getting stuck in a toilet in Texas to David Cameron’s ‘toiletgate’ incident when he left his 8-year-old daughter in a pub toilet, reposition political elites, disrupt their authority, and humble their claim-making.

5. Conclusion

Toilets, often perceived as mundane or overlooked entirely, are intricate spaces where bodily intimacy intersects with social difference. Private, yet at the same time public, bathrooms produce and reproduce social relations of class, race, gender, age, and ability. Accepting, as one work of toiletology puts it, that “peeing is political” (Molotch, 2010, p. 2), we ask what we can learn from studying toilets, bodies and waste in elite politics. By posing this question, we follow in the footsteps of the pioneering work of feminist thinkers of the body, who demonstrate that toilets and bathrooms are as political as any other space (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2001). Our hope is that we have extended and applied their critique to the traditional centre of masculine power: the space of elite politics.

Elite toilets offer a distinct window into the operation of power. In the United States, narratives surrounding extramarital affairs, masculinist authority, heteronormative discipline, and racial politics provide insights into different political cultures, especially around race and gender, and the broader exercise of presidential power. This power is expressed not only through policies and political representations but also through the body, its secretions, and the intimate spaces of the bathroom. Our examples demonstrate the ways in which material and discursive forms of knowledge are interwoven in a secreted geography that is sometimes made unseen and other times explicit. Embodied practices associated with the elite toilet are never neutral but always shaped by discourses that can transform mundane urinary incontinence into political symbols of emasculation and turn performative public male urination into a sign of presidential prowess and power. The toilet is an inevitable, yet layered, discursive and material space of naked bodies and private behaviours, not separate from political imagining but a constitutive part of it.

As the UK case shows, the simple fact of toileting is also a powerful reminder that the operations of elite power depend too on bodies. The performance of abstract and disembodied British elite power is revealed, through the toilet, as in fact dependent on bodies, metabolisms, and the most mundane private spaces. Yet here too, we find an interesting interplay between the material practice of toileting and the discursive framing around it. At the time of writing, Britain’s newly-elected first female Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, found that she was unable to remove and replace the urinal in 11 Downing Street’s bathroom because it is a listed building. In an interview with journalist Emily Maitlis in *The Independent* (2024), Reeves laughs and says:

I am the first female Chancellor of the Exchequer. The post has existed for between 800 and 1,000 years, depending on who you listen to. And I was wondering, Emily, whether you would like to, on the way out, come and have a look at the Chancellor’s toilet to see the urinal that is still in there?

Beyond being merely a joke for laughing’s sake, the episode reveals something profound about whose body this space is designed for and who is expected to use it—or not use it. Toilet humour fulfils the purpose of an embodied, yet often gendered, form of communication in which the toilet serves as a “democratising” (Basu, 2021) medium through which ‘high politics’ travels ‘down to Earth’. We find, then, stories of bodily care and political performance, but also of bodily violence and flippant or awkward humour that links to the cultural politics of class, race and gender.

There is a broader, political critique at work here which positions itself against the sanitised aesthetics, language, and materiality of elite politics. Focusing on toilets, bodies, and waste challenges us to rethink how we understand and represent the geographies of elite politics. Typically, the geography of elite politics is associated with suited policy-meetings or media briefings, the rational space of speech writing or debate in representative chambers, the measured balancing of multiple policy positions and public concerns. It includes offices of state, official residences, jets, campaign events, and conference venues. The toilet,

however, highlights three elements: the body and bodily need and how that links to political performance and governance; behaviours that elites would rather keep private (ranging from violence and abuse to gendered power); and the cultural roles of toilets and waste in shaping political and public discourse. These three areas—body, behaviour, and discourse—together suggest a different geography of elite politics, offering alternative narratives of power and its intimacies, and opening potential avenues for further research into the political geographies of elites.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marijn Nieuwenhuis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Colin Mcfarlane:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology.

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