



# Not *now*! Construction of the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse of Theresa May and Boris Johnson vis-à-vis the second Scottish independence referendum

Monika Brusenbauch Meislová<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Between 2016 and 2021, in response to calls for a second Scottish independence referendum, two British Prime Ministers—Theresa May and Boris Johnson—adopted a holding position, at the core of which was the “now-is-not-the-time” argumentative scheme. As a particular expression of strategic ambiguity, this delay discourse was intended to fulfil a specific political function: to postpone the second plebiscite *sine die*. As such, it marked a stark difference to the 2014 Scottish referendum campaign and provided the anti-independence camp with a new rhetorical resource. Having adopted the general orientation of the Discourse-Historical Approach to discourse analysis, and working with a dataset of May’s and Johnson’s public utterances on the second Scottish referendum, this article investigates how exactly this discourse of referendum delay was constructed in prime ministerial rhetoric. It concludes that some differences notwithstanding, the two PMs managed to create a largely consistent argumentative scheme.

**Keywords** Scottish independence · Second referendum · Theresa May · Boris Johnson · Discourse analysis · Discourse of delay

## Introduction

The article explores the British prime ministerial discourse surrounding the issue of the second Scottish independence referendum. Scotland held a vote on independence on 18 September 2014, with 55 per cent of the voters rejecting leaving the United Kingdom (UK). Yet, the issue was thrust back into the spotlight in 2016, when the UK voted to withdraw from the EU, with repeated calls for a second Scottish plebiscite growing louder ever since (Johns 2021; Keating 2021; Martill 2022;

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✉ Monika Brusenbauch Meislová  
brusenbauch.meislova@mail.muni.cz

<sup>1</sup> Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University Brno, Brno, Czech Republic



Paun et al. 2021; Whigham 2020; Whigham et al. 2021). As in 2014, the generally accepted (albeit not universal) position has been that Westminster's approval is needed to put a referendum on Scottish independence beyond legal doubt (McCorkindale and McHarg 2021; Torrance 2021). The two British Prime Ministers (PMs) who held office during this time (2016–2021), Theresa May and Boris Johnson, consistently reiterated their opposition to another referendum and ruled out granting any such consent. In doing so, they employed various discourse strategies that drew upon anti-independence discourses mobilised in the 2014 referendum campaign but also departed from them in a significant manner. The originality of my article lies in arguing that is that one key point of departure was the strategic mobilisation of the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse, which provided the anti-independence camp with a new powerful rhetorical resource and which served to convey the message that it did not make sense to revisit the question of Scottish independence *now*. Realised through a variety of linguistic techniques, the article avers that, some differences notwithstanding, this discourse was deployed with notable consistency by both PMs in the 2016–2021 period and reproduced the multi-level complexities of the polarised Scottish question.

The overarching aim of this article is to examine how exactly was the “now-is-not-the-time” discursive template constructed by two British PMs—Theresa May and Boris Johnson—during the 2016–2021 period. More specifically, taking the discourse-analytical perspective, the central research questions that the article seeks to answer is what were the dominant narratives employed within this discourse and how did they differ among the two PMs?

The main contributions and originality of my article lie in the following four aspects. Firstly, the Scottish independence referendum has been a dominant issue in British, and more broadly European, politics in recent years and—what with the current pro-independence majority in Holyrood—will remain so for the foreseeable future (Bone 2021; Johns 2021; Keating 2021; McHarg and Mitchell 2017; Paun et al. 2021). It was the 2016 Brexit vote to leave the EU that created new opportunities for the Scottish independence movement (McEwen 2018) and contributed to a new surge of support for Scottish independence (Paun et al. 2021, p. 4). For the Scottish National Party (SNP), the significant and material changes in circumstances brought about by the 2016 result amounted to a new mandate for a second referendum (Cowie 2016; Simpkins 2018), and the party has pushed for it ever since. In late June 2022, Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, even set a specific date (19 October 2023) for the second referendum (BBC 2022). With the foundation of the UK devolution arrangement heavily destabilised (Gamble 2018; Keating 2021, p. 14; McHarg and Mitchell 2017; Swan and Cetra 2020, p. 46), the UK has become a “paradigmatic case of state nationalism rearticulating and becoming explicit in the midst of constitutional crises” (Swan and Cetra 2020, p. 46). At the same time, however, the Scottish independence question has serious implications for wider European politics, too, as it strongly touches upon the role of sub-state entities and self-rule demands in Europe more generally, including but not limited to those in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Flanders and Northern Italy (Liñeira and Cetrà 2015; Schappner 2015). As such, it is reflective of the current “wider diachronic trends towards fragmentation and disunion” (Douglas 2021, p. 1).



Secondly, despite the obviously different situational contexts (unlike 2014, there was no formal referendum campaign going on between 2016 and 2021), today “[m]any of the questions remain the same as in 2014” (Hepburn et al. 2021, p. 22). Hence, it is worth exploring the present debate in light of the previous one, searching for patterns of both continuity and change between the 2014 Scottish referendum campaign and the current state of affairs.

Thirdly, I consider it highly pertinent to deal specifically with the two most recent PMs in the context of the Scottish independence question, even more so in the current period when the “legitimacy of Westminster decisions over Scotland is subject to regular scrutiny and doubt” (McAnulla and Crines 2017). May and Johnson were, after all, the very central figures in the independence debate, since the generally accepted position is that the permission from the UK Government is required for the referendum to be legally binding (McCorkindale and McHarg 2021; Torrance 2021). What is more, both May and Johnson were the first post-referendum PMs in the UK, and both members of the Conservative Party—the traditional party of the union (Whigham 2020, p. 1231). Both have been dubbed Brexit PMs and both operated in highly challenging contexts. Both were also tasked with extricating the UK from the EU—the very issue that reignited the Scottish independence question; in both cases, the premierships became heavily influenced by the mind-boggling complexity of this endeavour (Byrne et al. 2021; Figueira and Martill 2021; Gamble 2021). With the Scottish independence at the top of their political agendas, so far they have been the only PMs that have had to deal with the calls for a second referendum.

Fourthly, illuminating how the two PMs acted through language to influence other people’s attitudes towards a second Scottish referendum is particularly needed, since “much of the action of government is language” (Fairclough 2000, p. 157). As much of the current scholarship reveals, the policy-making discourses play a vital role in “determining the trajectory of policy change and, as such, should be treated as objects of enquiry in their own right” (Hay and Smith 2005, p. 135; similarly also Durnova and Zittoun 2013). The general orientation of this article, thus, sits well with the ever-growing interest in discourse-analytical approaches to politics as such (Cap and Okulska 2013; Kranert and Horan 2018; Lynggaard 2019).

The article proceeds as follows. The first part provides a literature review and elaborates on the original contribution of the study to the extant scholarship. The second section identifies elements of continuity and change between the recent British prime ministerial discursive treatment of the second Scottish referendum and the 2014 anti-independence discourse. With the scene being set, the next part attends to the theoretical background of the article, unpacks the data and puts forward the methodological approach. The subsequent part is devoted to the empirical analysis, mapping the predominant narratives of May’s and Johnson’s delay discourse. Finally, drawing on this analysis, the last section discusses the empirical findings and provides some critical conclusions.



## Literature review and contribution to scholarship

By uncovering how two British PMs discursively expressed themselves on, and created meaning around, the second Scottish independence referendum in the 2016–2021 period, this article makes two original contributions. Firstly, it complements a growing body of empirical research seeking to document the discourses surrounding the issue of the Scottish independence referenda. So far, however, this body of work has concentrated solely on the first referendum and herein lies the research gap that this study makes a start in filling. Drawing on Gorski's conception of nationalism as discourse and mobilisation, Engström (2018) analyses interviews conducted with the National Collective and the SNP, suggesting a great degree of discursive overlap between them, but also revealing wide divergences in terms of imagined recipient scope. In his later work, Engström (2020) examines how the "Yes Scotland" and "Better Together" campaigns used social media messages (multimodal tweets) to legitimise their own, and delegitimise their opponents', positions. He concludes that Better Together ran a negative campaign and Yes Scotland's use of de-legitimising strategies was more balanced. Whingham (2020) looks into the discursive visions of Scotland's constitutional status by analysing party manifestos and constitutional policy documents produced by three largest political parties represented in the Scottish Parliament (the pro-independence Scottish National Party, pro-union Scottish Labour, and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party), demonstrating the contrasting representations of each party on the distant and recent history of Scotland as a nation. McAnulla and Crines (2017) analyse the rhetoric of Alex Salmond according to the Aristotelian modes of persuasion during the 2014 independence referendum, demonstrating that his rhetorical style was driven by a concern to reassure voters about the consequences of independence (logos centred), combined with a positive vision informed by both civic nationalism and anti-Toryism (pathos centred), and constructions around his own character and credibility (ethos centred). Taking their cue from securitisation literature, Donnelly and Vlcek (2021) investigate the "tale of two currencies" that played out during the 2014 referendum. Their work reveals how the question of currency shaped the Better Together and Yes Scotland campaigns in divergent ways. Based on a 60 million-word indyref corpus, Douglas (2021) compares reporting on the campaigns by Scottish and UK newspapers, yielding insights into how the questions of independence, nationalism and unionism were dealt with and highlighting the importance of symbolic nationalism and Scottish identity. Buckledee (2018) delves into Project Fear, dealing with the anxiety-arousal strategies exploited in the 2014 referendum campaign. Last but not least, Moragas-Fernández and Gómez (2015) apply a rhetorical-argumentative methodology and study the different arguments used in the 2014 political ads, paying special attention to the use of figures such as personifications, metonyms and metaphors. This article builds upon, extends and updates these earlier discussions, showing how the 2016–2021 British prime ministerial discourse both drew on and departed from the discourses of the 2014 referendum campaign. The article, thus, makes



an original empirical contribution in the sense of enriching the literature on the Scottish referendum discourses by demonstrating that the discourse of delay is a new tool at the disposal of the anti-independence camp, and by unearthing how exactly this tool was wielded by the two British PMs.

The second contribution is theoretical, adding to the literature on political strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 1984) as a discourse strategy. Previous research on the utilisation of political strategic ambiguity (Fløttum 2013; Leith and Davenport 2007; Lynggaard 2019) asserts that it is particularly during turbulent periods of rapid change and uncertainty that “ambiguous communication can be more useful than clear communication”, inasmuch as ambiguity “allows varying and divergent interpretations and even overinterpretations to be made” (Fløttum 2013, p. 3). The period under scrutiny in this paper was exactly like that—turbulent, characterised by rapid change and lack of certainty—for both PMs (Byrne et al. 2021; Figueira and Martill 2021; Gamble 2021). This article makes a contribution by treating the discourse of delay as a significant discursive phenomenon amenable to analysis and evaluation, and as a way of understanding and explaining political positions. It highlights its importance as a useful discourse strategy (with discourse strategy understood here as the means by which actors achieve goals within discourse [van Dijk 1997, p. 31]), and unpacks its (de)construction. I argue that the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse is, in principle, closely connected to Cornford’s (1908, p. 30) argument/principle of the unripe time and Bentham’s (1824, p. 11) fallacy of delay, the subject matter of which is “an assigning of reasons for delay in various shapes, and the object, to postpone such discussion, with a view of eluding it altogether”. So far, the scholarly discussion of delay discourses in politics has been limited solely to the topic of climate change (Lamb et al. 2020). This inquiry investigates the delay discourse in a novel setting, arguing that the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse on the second Scottish referendum is a particular expression of strategic ambiguity and a response to multi-faceted blame risk.

## **Then and now: elements of continuity and change in the Scottish referendum anti-independence discourses**

There are patterns of both continuity and change in the current anti-independence discourse and the 2014 Better Together campaign—the principal campaign for a No vote in the 2014 referendum. Let me start with the former. In the period under investigation here, the key political goal remained the same as in 2014: to keep Scotland in the UK. Just like in 2014, an important proposition in the prime ministerial discourse was the narrative of the union, woven around the key topic of togetherness and replete with direct references to the value/ideal of unity. Both PMs purposefully reinforced the centrality of British national narratives by placing emphasis on a plurinational union (cf. Swan and Cetrà 2020) and the value of unity, and engaged in acts of positive self-presentation (of themselves and their governments). This macro-area functioned as a key legitimisation strategy, with the PMs spotlighting the urgent need for the unity of the union to overcome (shared) challenges. Just like pro-union figures in 2014, both PMs made a case for the union with England on the grounds of the benefits it bestows on



Scotland (Donnelly and Vlcek 2021; Moragas-Fernández and Gómez 2015; Whigham 2020). This overarching scheme was reproduced in other, more concrete arguments: while Johnson overwhelmingly legitimised staying in the union by referencing economic output, which sat well with the 2014 Conservative strategy (Donnelly and Vlcek 2021; Whigham 2020, p. 1230), May's discursive construction relied, apart from economic aspects, on security considerations (for instance, May 2017b) as a subject that, according to her, advanced the anti-independence argument. This echoed the Better Together 2014 campaign, which highlighted both economic and security considerations (Whigham 2020, p. 1230). Moreover, just like Better Together, both PMs used a number of de-legitimising strategies to discredit their opponents, including othering (Buckledee 2018; Douglas 2021; Engström 2020).

At the same time, however, many notable differences are to be observed between then and now. Unlike 2014, the current debate is not conducted in relation to the European Union (Buckledee 2018, p. 111) and there seems to be fewer allusions to the more-than-300-year history of the union (Moragas-Fernández and Gómez 2015, p. 251). Moreover, in contrast to the Better Together campaign, which made direct action claims, in terms of voting No in the referendum and voting for Conservatives in the 2015 Westminster and 2016 Holyrood elections (Whigham 2020, p. 1230), May and Johnson did this only rarely. If they rhetorically appealed to collective action, it was exclusively in the sense of negotiating a favourable Brexit deal (May) and fighting the coronavirus crisis (Johnson). Most importantly, however, while in 2014 attention centred upon the likely outcome of the vote and the major substantive issues of contention (Tierney 2015, p. 633), the predominant focus during the 2016–2021 period was on postponing the calls for a referendum, with almost zero substantial engagement with the post-independence position per se. Indeed, to rebuff calls for any new referendum, both Theresa May and Boris Johnson adopted a holding position (which, in itself, is also a decision) at the core of which lay the “now-is-not-the-time” argumentative scheme. It strategically filled a specific political function: to justify inaction and postpone a fresh vote *sine die*. This discursive posture functioned to carry the message that it is only *right now* (or, to quote, “at this time”, “right now” and “just at this point” for May, and at “this moment”, “right now”, “now”, “at this of all times” and in “the current context” for Johnson) that the moment is not suitable to rerun the vote. Both PMs deliberately talked at a high level of abstractness, thereby adding to the evasiveness of their “now-is-not-the-time” message. Neither specified the meaning of “the now moment” that they so often referred to, and when it would come to pass. I hold that mobilisation of this delay discourse marks a stark difference to the 2014 campaign, when the timing of the referendum was not questioned. In what follows, the article scrutinises in detail how exactly the two British PMs constructed the discourse of referendum delay.

## Theory, data and methodology

I draw upon the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to discourse studies (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2011) for the conceptual and theoretical framework of this study. The Discourse-Historical Approach



considers discourse analysis “not just a method of language analysis, but views it as a multidimensional project which incorporates theory, methods, methodology and empirically based research practices” (Reisigl 2018, p. 48). As such, the paper aligns itself with the view of Schäffner (1996, p. 201) that any political action is “prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language”. My understanding of political discourse follows that of van Dijk (1997, p. 12), who perceives it as attached to political actors who are engaged in political processes. This positioning of political discourse among other properties of the political system enables researchers to view it as a distinct form of political (inter)action and a functional and/or strategic component of the political process (van Dijk 1997). Against this backdrop, the second Scottish independence referendum is understood as a critical issue in which various contingent and historical discursive trajectories have been at play. It is a site of contestation over the meanings of the issue at stake, with the actors who are involved in it “mak(ing) their meaning of dominant discourses and transl(ing) it into the way they appropriate policy instruments and make sense of organisational processes” (Courtois and Veiga 2020, p. 813).

My approach to data collection was as follows. I constructed a qualitative dataset of public utterances by May and Johnson on the second Scottish independence referendum in the period between 2016 and 2021. As detailed in Tables 1 and 2, these are usually in the form of speeches, interviews and pronouncements included in news releases (for a full list, please see Appendix 1). There is, unfortunately and perhaps also somewhat surprisingly, only very limited data on the issue, which suggests that both PMs avoided it. Relying on Reisigl and Wodak’s (2001) understanding of discourse, the corpus includes both the written and the spoken and comprises six public pronouncements for each Prime Minister<sup>1</sup> (with at least one each per year in office).

Regarding specific method, the study is guided by Krzyżanowski’s (2010) analytical operationalisation of DHA. In line with this approach, the analysis operates at two basic levels: 1) a thematic analysis and 2) an in-depth analysis of argumentation and related linguistic features. The first level touches upon the embedded, easily detectable dominant narratives (semantic macro-propositions) that typify the given discourse (Krzyżanowski 2010, pp. 81–83). It affords an opportunity to dissect the core themes that form the structure of such discourse, through an indicative analysis, i.e. via “decoding the meaning of text passages—usually taking place via several thorough readings—and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes” (Krzyżanowski 2010, p. 81). Narratives, understood here as macro-topics in a sense of “a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (Kreuter et al. 2007, p. 222), are crucial in politics as they are means of making sense of the social world around us, with a considerable body of evidence attesting to their significance (for example, Hagström and Gustafsson 2019; Mintrom and O’Connor 2020). Within the second level of the

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception is Johnson’s pronouncement of 28 January 2021, which is captured in two different sources.



**Table 1** Theresa May corpus

Date	Source	Title	Format	References
16. 3. 2017	The Guardian	Theresa May rejects Nicola Sturgeon's referendum demand	Interview (video)	May (2017a)
3. 3. 2017	BBC	PM Theresa May makes case for "our precious Union"	Speech (video)	May (2017b)
27. 3. 2017	GOV UK	PM speech to Department for International Development staff	Speech (transcript)	May (2017c)
3. 10. 2018	The Telegraph	Theresa May's Conservative Party Conference speech 2018 in full	Speech (video)	May (2018)
23. 1. 2019	BBC	Sturgeon and May clash over indyref2 ahead of Brexit talks	Public pronouncement reported in the news story	May (2019a)
4. 7. 2019	GOV UK	PM speech on the Union	Speech (transcript)	May (2019b)

Source: the author





**Table 2** Boris Johnson corpus

Date	Source	Title	Format	References
2. 10. 2019	The Telegraph	Boris Johnson's Conservative Party Conference speech	Speech (video)	Johnson (2019)
6. 10. 2020	Conservatives	Prime Minister Boris Johnson's keynote speech at CPC20	Speech (video)	Johnson (2020)
28. 1. 2021	BBC	Boris Johnson says independence debate “irrelevant” to most Scots	Public pronouncement reported in the news story	Johnson (2021a)
	Reuters	UK PM Johnson tells Scottish nationalists: stop going on about another referendum	Public pronouncement reported in the news story	Johnson (2021b)
14. 3. 2021	The Independent	Boris Johnson speaks at Scottish Conservative Spring conference	Speech (video)	Johnson (2021c)
5. 5. 2021	Belfast Telegraph	Boris Johnson: Now is not the time for reckless and irresponsible	Public pronouncement reported in the news story	Johnson (2021d)
9. 5. 2021	Deutsche Welle	UK: Boris Johnson calls for talks after Scottish Nationalist victory	Public pronouncement reported in the news story	Johnson (2021e)

Source: the author



analysis, attention is paid to the structure of the discourse that underlies the content, concentrating on the employed rhetorical and linguistic devices, such as, for instance, referential and predication strategies, metaphor usage or argumentation fallacies (Krzyżanowski 2010, pp. 83–89). This level enables to discover what characteristics and attributes the two PMs have ascribed to the second Scottish referendum and its supporters. I consider this two-level assessment particularly suitable, as it promises to yield critical insights into various discursive dimensions involving both content (proposition) and the form (style).

## **Analysis: constructing the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse**

The analysis revealed five predominant narratives deployed by both PMs within their “now-is-not-the-time” discourse, namely the (1) narrative of the referendum as a momentary distraction; (2) narrative of the currently unwanted referendum; (3) narrative of the responsibility for past choices, (4) narrative of recklessness and (5) narrative of the repeated divisions. While narratives 1–3 were not present in the 2014 referendum campaign, narratives 4 and 5 are more embedded in the earlier discourse (while at the same time, departing from it in a substantial manner). This section takes a close look at each of the five narratives.

### **Narrative of the referendum as a momentary distraction**

To start with, a central narrative underlying the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse of both PMs is that of the referendum as a momentary distraction, built around the topic of *disturbance*. To delegitimise calls for a second plebiscite, both PMs frequently accused the referendum supporters of putting the push for independence ahead of much more important and urgent matters. The only difference lies in the delimitation of what the self-determination demands have distracted from. For May, it was Brexit, as her government was putting “all its energies” into the negotiations (May 2017a). For Johnson, it was handling the COVID-19 pandemic, or, more specifically, first “fighting this pandemic” (Johnson 2021a) and later “recovering from the pandemic” (Johnson 2021c). This discursive code was characterised by constructing the “now” as unsettled times—as a time of crisis—with both PMs positioning themselves as reliable, stable individuals who care about the collective welfare and social responsibility.

Particularly in the case of Johnson, however, this narrative was often needless, as Nicola Sturgeon repeatedly vowed not to seek a public vote until after the coronavirus crisis passed (Cameron 2020; also Scottish Government 2021). In this respect, Johnson was committing a “straw man” fallacy by exaggerating the scope of the standpoint of his opponents (Eemeren and Houtlosser 2015b, p. 437). Moreover, unlike May, Johnson also diminished the importance of the second referendum demands by downgrading them to “arguing about the Constitution” (Johnson 2021a) and/or “constitutional wrangling” (Johnson 2020, 2021b). On top of that, Johnson, also aimed to create the impression of being exhausted by the independence debate,



referring to the talk about a new vote as “endless” (“I think endless talk about a referendum without any clear description of what the constitutional situation would be after that referendum is completely irrelevant now to the concerns of most people” [Johnson 2021a]).

It was especially within this narrative that both PMs made emotional appeals, particularly feelings of compassion (*argumentum ad populum*, *argumentum ad misericordiam* [Eemeren and Houtlosser 2015a]). To increase the persuasiveness of his messaging, Johnson in particular infused his delay discourse with emotions, as the emotionally charged expressions such as “great British spirit” (Johnson 2021c; bringing back memories of British greatness) or “Scotland which I love” (Johnson 2021c; dispersing elements of romanticised discourse) attest to.

### **Narrative of the currently unwanted referendum**

Another key discursive construct underlying the delay discourse was that of the currently unwanted referendum, foregrounding the topic of the *present undesirability*. This narrative critically relied on *ad populum* argumentation, but the two PMs differed in their identification of who did not want the referendum *now* and who they claimed to speak on behalf of. May’s discourse was constructed, somewhat simply, mostly around “the people of Scotland” (May 2017a, 2019a). By way of comparison, Johnson operated with the floating signifier of “people” much more often. Sometimes he gave agency to “the people of Scotland” (Johnson 2019), too, or to “most people in Scotland” (Johnson 2021d). Frequently, however, the referential range included the general British public (“the people of the country” [Johnson 2021b]) or even “the people” in general (Johnson 2021c, e), in which case the expression was used metonymically to stand for all British citizens.

In doing so, Johnson identified himself as spokesperson for the whole of Scotland and/or the UK, or at least the majority of the people living there, implying that the government and he himself were voicing the people’s concerns and experience(s). Here, his language bore signs of the *ad populum* fallacy, creating the impression that he was appealing to popular opinion (Eemeren and Houtlosser 2015a, p. 409). Indeed, Johnson habitually foregrounded elements of populist stylisation of political messaging, using rhetorical devices that signified (re)connecting with the people, as in “I think what the people [...] want in particular is to fight this pandemic” (Johnson 2021a).

Characteristically, both May and Johnson conveyed an image that nothing was less needed and/or wanted *now* than a new vote on Scottish independence. To achieve this, both utilised an intensification strategy through which a second referendum was reified as a “thing” and further modified by superlatives of late—“the last” (“the last thing” that is needed [“How can the SNP say that a referendum is the priority to them? It is the last thing they need right now”; Johnson 2021c] or “the last thing” that one wants [“The last thing we want is a second independence referendum—the UK should be pulling together not being driven apart”; May 2019a])—which essentially admitted of nothing further. The reifying process was further



strengthened by use of the present tense that presented the given claim as generally true.

### **Narrative of the responsibility for past choices**

To delegitimise the timing of the second referendum demands, both PMs made skilful use of the narrative of responsibility for past choices, with *liability* as its constitutive topic. At the core of this macro-area lies the claim that the Scottish people had already exercised the right to choose their future. The repeated insistence that the Scottish government had accepted the decisive 2014 verdict as a once-in-a-generation event, implied that a second vote should not be held *now*, with both PMs (but more strongly on Johnson's part) construing themselves as upholding the conclusive 2014 result (as in "I'm inclined to stick with what they said last time" [Johnson 2021c]). This narrative provides pro-unionists with a stronger position than in 2014.

Interestingly enough, the comparison indicates that Theresa May applied this narrative less often than Johnson, but in addition to the decisiveness of the 2014 plebiscite, she also emphasised its legality and fairness, as appositely illustrated by the following excerpt: "Scotland held a referendum in 2014—it was legal, it was fair, it was decisive and the people clearly voted for Scotland to remain part of the UK" (May 2019a; very similarly also May 2019b). May, however, also considered the 2019 general election result as a clear, unequivocal indication that a second referendum was not desired: "at the last general election the people of Scotland again sent a very clear message that they do not want a second divisive referendum" (May 2019a).

In contrast to May, Johnson questioned the very trustworthiness of those calling to revisit the independence question. He did so by suggesting that even if there was another independence referendum, Scottish nationalists might, again, accept its result only temporarily and later reconsider their past choices again (Johnson 2021c; similarly also Johnson 2021a). He exploited this topic in a bid to send the message that the nationalists' whimsical nature would, again, expose the whole country to a new degree of uncertainty and risk. In his case, "again" and "another" were often reiterated as a rhetorical device and intensifying strategy to signal that the country has already been through all of this (particularly Johnson 2021c).

### **Narrative of recklessness**

Another key narrative detected in the corpus is the narrative of recklessness, with the key topic here being *irresponsibility*. It has a clear pragmatic function of depicting the SNP as reckless for making the calls for the second referendum *now* and positioning it as an UK internal other that threatens the centre and stability of the whole country. Both PMs established a typical, and easily understandable, dramatic plot here that indicates that there is a Villain (SNP) who threatens the Victim (the Scottish people/British people) and a Hero (the UK government/PM) who takes action to defend the Victim.



What also emerged from the empirical assessment was the vital role played by functional means of self-othering in the prime ministerial discursive treatment of the second Scottish referendum, which represents a strong point of continuity with the 2014 referendum campaign (Douglas 2021). Their discursive portrayal of the second independence referendum was infused with references to the other(s), embodied by the SNP and those calling for the second referendum. Thus, using the exclusionary rhetoric of othering, both PMs routinely engaged in negative other-presentation and explicitly attached various negative attributions to the SNP. In Johnson’s case, the prominent focus was on the SNP’s carelessness (careless promotion of the second referendum “regardless of the cost to Scotland and the whole of the UK” [Johnson 2021c]) and thoughtlessness (talking about the second referendum “without any clear description of what the constitutional situation would be after that referendum” [Johnson 2021a]). In May’s case, it was the SNP’s remoteness from the people’s concerns (incapability to understand what the people of Scotland want, as “the SNP sadly are out of touch with the people of Scotland” [May 2019a; also May 2017b; cf. May 2018]) and selfishness (pressing ahead with an erroneous “tunnel vision nationalism, which focuses only on independence at any cost” [May 2017b, very similarly also May 2019b]). Both further anthropomorphised the SNP, especially in the sense of its (in)ability to hear, with the party construed as “not listening” (“It is clear, though, that the SNP are just not listening” [Johnson 2021c]) and not yet having “heard that message” (“But the SNP sadly [...] haven’t yet heard that message” [May 2019a]). In both cases, the chief expression of difference was made through use of the exclusive “they/them” personal pronoun (and all the corresponding possessive pronouns). This pronoun has the SNP as a key referent (as in “Yet surely even they have a sense of priority, of what is important right now” [Johnson 2021c]; or “For them, it is not about doing the right thing” [May 2017a]), which is a rather convenient use in that it replaces the various nuances within the “Other” with a simple “they”.

Alongside this, especially for Johnson, the SNP’s appeals for a second referendum were effectively equated to a single-minded obsession (“Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised by this—it is their party’s obsession. Yet surely even they have a sense of priority, of what is important right now” [Johnson 2021c]). Compared to May, however, Johnson delegitimised the SNP’s choice of timing for the second referendum by using a larger repertoire of very strong evaluative adjectives, such as “incredible” (“I just find it incredible then that the SNP would choose this moment to again push their campaign for separation” [Johnson 2021c]) or “completely irrelevant” (“I think endless talk about a referendum [...] is completely irrelevant now to the concerns of most people” [Johnson 2021a]).

While this tendency to denigrate opponents bore a strong resemblance to the Better Together 2014 strategy (Douglas 2021), the ongoing debate contained fewer *ad hominem* attacks than in 2014, when the portrayal of political opponents as animals or psychopaths was not unusual (Engström 2020). The PMs’ endeavours to delegitimise the SNP as a whole, rather than singling out one political figure as a key political adversary, was another aspect that made the discussion between 2016 and 2021 different from 2014 (Engström 2020, p. 591). As such, the recent discourse tended to be more subdued and not as escalated as the one in 2014.



## Narrative of repeated divisions

An essential role in the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse was played by the narrative of repeated divisions, built around the topic of *threat*. Both PMs told cautionary tales of what would *again* happen if the calls for a second referendum were *now* successful. In this sense, the narrative closely built upon the Project Fear that was deployed by the Better Together campaign, but diverged from it noticeably in the sense that in 2014 the pro-union campaign seized particularly upon the currency issue as a key element in its anxiety-arousal strategy (Buckledee 2018; Donnelly and Vlcek 2021). By contrast, in 2016–2021 the impact of these envisioned worst-case scenarios relied on references to the threat of the new—and repeated—disruptive divisions that would *again* be inevitably wrought by the prospective referendum. Pervaded by numerous evaluative statements to discursively construct the divisive nature of the second referendum (Johnson 2020, 2021c; May 2017a, b, 2019b), this narrative served to scare referendum campaigners away from supporting a fresh vote.

Neither PM explained the repeated divisions in any detail, staying on a high level of abstractness. Johnson, however, tended to employ more eloquent and emotional language in this respect, emphasising that a referendum would “turn us all against one another” (Johnson 2021c), “turn Scotland against itself” (Johnson 2021c) and “tear us apart” (Johnson 2020). Unlike Johnson, May used a somewhat different strategy and alluded to the past, recalling “the shockwaves” that the 2014 referendum sent throughout the UK (May 2019b). Johnson, on the other hand, applied “fight” metaphors in his imaginary of a future state of affairs, as in, holding a second referendum would mean “start(ing) another political fight” (Johnson 2021c).

Correspondingly, the imagery employed here evoked a picture of a second independence referendum as a terrible, disconcerting threat to protect against. In the two PMs’ delay discourse, it was the Prime Ministers and the UK Government that were typically placed front and centre in the protection of the extant stability and the status quo. By systematically casting themselves as the protectors of the people against the threat of an unjust and illegitimate second plebiscite, they became the mediating factor between division and unity, and chaos and stability. Such discursive manoeuvring seems well in line with studies manifesting that negative framing encourages support for the party and/or the proposed solutions (for instance, Hobolt 2009). Curiously enough, in stark contrast to the 2014 Better Together campaign (Moragas-Fernández and Gómez 2015; cf. Engström 2020), neither PM reached beyond the vote and built this narrative around the risks that the Scottish independence itself would induce.

## Concluding remarks

The picture that emerges from the comparison between and within the two cases is complex, varied and multi-layered. Seen through a comparative lens, there were many striking structural similarities in the British prime ministerial constructions of the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse in 2016–2021. To postpone another popular



vote as a particular cause of action *sine die*, both PMs consistently constructed their arguments on a binary logic of divisiveness versus togetherness, chaos versus stability, sensibility versus responsibility, and other dichotomies. Principally, both viewed the second referendum as a currently loss-imposing action, and therefore, used negative, fear-based arguments to make their case. In doing so, both constructively and reproductively employed the strategy of othering, with the functional means of othering marked by an “us–them” person deixis. In particular, they centred on constructing negative images of the SNP and referendum supporters, systematically portraying them as a distant, antagonistic outgroup, antithetical to the notion of stability and unity and constructed in opposition to the people’s interests. Simultaneously, to attract sympathy, both PMs systematically engaged in acts of positive self-presentation, contrasting themselves sharply to referendum supporters, who were depicted as reckless and irresponsible. Through their characterisation, both PMs constructed themselves and their governments as the protectors of the people against the threat of the second referendum.

At the same time, there were also numerous different and nuanced positions expressed vis-à-vis the second Scottish referendum within their “now-is-not-the-time” discourse. While in Johnson’s case the focus was on the SNP’s carelessness and thoughtlessness, May emphasised the party’s remoteness and selfishness. Compared to May, Johnson delegitimised the SNP’s choice of timing by more frequently using strong evaluative adjectives, with his language tending to be generally harsher and more dramatic. Further to this, the empirical mapping of the delay discourse found that the PMs differed in the exact forms of their delegitimation of the second referendum through moral value-based evaluations. Whilst Johnson accentuated the value of responsibility vis-à-vis the calls for a new vote, May pointed to their unfairness. Having said that, the differences between the two cases were rather minor, with the two PMs having managed to create a largely consistent (and, thus, powerful) argumentative scheme (cf. Spencer and Oppermann 2020).

It is my contention that the “now-is-not-the-time” discourse closely reproduced the multi-level complexities, both internal and external, of the complicated Scottish independence question and illustrates the PMs’ attempts to neutralise this contested and highly divisive issue and keep it largely off the agenda. Exploitation of this communicative pattern was convenient for the PMs, as it helped them deal with a delicate, acute dilemma and allowed multiple perspectives to co-exist. In other words, it helped them pre-empt criticism, gain control over a difficult rhetorical situation, and address different situational exigencies. If the PMs were principally against the Scottish referendum as an outlet for public consent, they would be accused of undemocratically denying the right of the Scottish people to self-determination. Indeed, the “government determined to keep the Union together must be careful not to imply that the Scottish people should not have the right to determine their own future” (Sargeant 2019; cf. Seawright 2008). An outright denial of a referendum would “play into [First Minister’s of Scotland] Sturgeon’s hands by fueling nationalism and her anti-Westminster narrative and building even more support for independence” (Rahman 2021; similarly Cooper 2020; Dickie 2021; The New Statesman 2021). After all, the surge in support for the SNP and Scottish independence after Johnson’s 2020 disparaging remarks about Scottish devolution serve as



a case in point here (Carrell 2020; Maddox 2020). If, on the other hand, the PMs were to concede and allow the referendum, they would be accused of giving up on the country's territorial integrity too easily (as was the case with Conservative PM David Cameron and the first Scottish referendum) (Watt 2014).

Nevertheless, mobilisation of the referendum delay discourse came at a price. I propose that it is this particular discourse that *inter alia* contributed to the oft-voiced critique of both PMs' (and their governments') approaches to the issue of Scottish independence. Such communicative behaviour vis-à-vis the second vote is tricky as it may easily become a source of perplexity, cause misinterpretation of the PMs' intentions, and be framed as evidence of prime ministerial/governmental negligence, ineptness and irresponsibility (for informed discussions on inaction and neglect in policy-making, see de Vries 2010 and McConnell and 't Hart 2019). Indeed, both PMs and their governments did face harsh criticism for, to quote McCorkindale and McHarg (2021, p. 38), "looking the other way" in the Scottish independence context. To provide a few examples thereof, May was accused of behaving in a "sickening" McKenna (2019) and "high-handed arrogant way that is completely dismissive of Scotland" (Brooks 2019) and for "overlooking the UK's multi-national character" (Byrne et al. 2021, p. 712; cf. Atkins 2021, p. 11). Likewise, Johnson, to many in Scotland, embodied "the figurehead of the UK government's plans to over-ride Holyrood's devolution powers post-Brexit, and, underlying that all, showing an entitled disregard for their preferences" (Carrell 2020; similarly also Maddox 2020), with his approach being denounced as "unacceptable" by Sturgeon (McCurdy 2022).

The results attest to the instrumental character of May's and Johnson's discourses on a new referendum and their communicative rationality as individual political orators. Because the question of a second referendum is characterised by a high degree of situational complexity, conflict and divisions, both pragmatically adapted their discursive positions on the referendum based on their political calculus of the domestic situation. The critical-analytic exploration of the constitutive macro-conversational practices of the "now-is-not-the-time" discourse, and the examples presented, suggest that both PMs' discursive strategies were essentially reactive, directed at de-mobilising (and arguably also disorienting) the referendum campaigners.

## Appendix 1: Data sources of public pronouncements by Theresa May and Boris Johnson

Johnson, B. 2019. Boris Johnson's Conservative Party Conference speech. The Telegraph. 2. October. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlvK7XLNXNU>

Johnson, B. 2020. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's keynote speech at CPC20. Conservatives. 6 October. <https://www.conservatives.com/news/boris-johnson-read-the-prime-ministers-keynote-speech-in-full>

Johnson, B. 2021a. Boris Johnson says independence debate 'irrelevant' to most Scots. BBC, 28 January. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-55829578>





- Johnson, B. 2021b. UK PM Johnson tells Scottish nationalists: stop going on about another referendum. Reuters, 28 January. <https://www.reuters.com/article/britain-politics-scotland-idUSS8N2J401R>
- Johnson, B. 2021c. Boris Johnson speaks at Scottish Conservative Spring conference. The Independent, 14 March. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFtF0Vc4ChI>
- Johnson, B. 2021d. Boris Johnson: Now is not the time for reckless and irresponsible indyref2. Belfast Telegraph. 5 May. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/boris-johnson-now-is-not-the-time-for-reckless-and-irresponsible-indyref2-40389648.html>
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- May, T. 2017b. PM Theresa May makes case for ‘our precious Union’, BBC, 3 March. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-39291860>
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- May, T. 2019a. Sturgeon and May clash over indyref2 ahead of Brexit talks. BBC, 23 January. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-46961172>
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