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If [the headlines](#) are to be believed, new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has been rude to the Queen and snubbed the veterans involved in the Battle of Britain – all without saying a single word. When it came time to sing the national anthem at a commemorative service, Corbyn stood in what his [defenders described](#) as “respectful silence” throughout the song.

Of course, whether or not Corbyn sings is not an important political issue per se – not like his stance on [Trident or NATO](#). But the media maelstrom whipped up by his omission suggests that performance of ceremony and ritual matters a great deal in politics, and public life more broadly. And surprisingly little effort has been made to explain why.

## Not the first time

This is not the first case of its kind: a similar hullabaloo ensued when the then-Welsh secretary, John Redwood, [mimed the Welsh national anthem](#) in 1993. By contrast, praise was heaped on Kate Middleton for [learning the Welsh anthem](#) because "she wanted to integrate herself into the community around her Anglesey home".

Nor are these events particular to the UK. In India, there has been a spate of [intimidation and violence](#) against those who do not stand up when the national anthem is played in cinemas.

National anthems are expressions of our sense of belonging to a country. Think of the tears often shed by sports people as they stand on victory podiums, facing their flag and singing their national anthem. Anthems resonate with us because we either grow up singing these songs of nationalism or we see them as symbolic of state power. This is not just because of the words that are sung – it's also because of the feeling of belonging and unity that anthems generate.

## Cause and effect

But it's not all bad news for Corbyn. A research programme I directed back in 2011, called [Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament](#) (GCRP), sought to uncover the significance of ceremony, rituals and symbols for political institutions.

We found that political institutions, and their ritualistic performances, have a two-way relationship. Ceremony and ritual have an important effect on the development of institutions and can help substantiate their claims to legitimacy. For example, the rituals surrounding the state opening of parliament on the one hand are a gesture to the history of conflict between the lower and upper houses, and on the other, socialise MPs into accepting and working with each other. Yet, by responding to, contesting, neglecting or rejecting these ceremonial and ritualistic forms of power, citizens and politicians alike can disrupt and even change the rules and norms we take as given.



The ceremonial role of the Black Rod, responsible for maintaining buildings, services, and security at the Palace of Westminster, dates from 1522. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

People standing in and out of place, debates and disruptions, regulation and subversion in parliament all work together to create what's known as [a representational affect](#). When Corbyn refused to sing the national anthem, he called into question the legitimacy of the monarchy, but also asserted his own republicanism; the disciplining affect of the storm of criticism can be contrasted with Corbyn wanting to do politics differently – choosing to represent his convictions about the state and monarchy.

This representational affect, I would argue, is at the heart of the current controversy – through one act Corbyn has tried to represent his conviction and the republicans in the UK. That he has failed to convince the majority will lead to further disciplining of any further disruptions – the Labour party has already declared that Corbyn will sing in future such events after all.

## Rebel, rebel

As a symbol of state power, the national anthem has historically been the target of disruption; my father was first arrested when, as a student leader in British Lahore, he and his comrades threw stones at the cinema screen showing the Union Jack and playing God Save the King. The national anthem of independent India [became an object of struggle](#) when the nationalist hymn, Vande Matram, was appropriated by the Hindus, in moments of Hindu-Muslim violence after 1926. The refusal of the republican Corbyn to sing in praise of the Queen is another such moment.

Many commentators on radio and television [have reflected](#) that the controversy over Corbyn's omission is unnecessary; that it is taking away our attention from the "real issues". But is it? The research carried out by the GCRP programme concluded that the performance of ceremonies and rituals in parliamentary politics gives us a way to understand changes in political systems, processes and events. Rules themselves [are recognisable](#) in their performance or disruption, after all. The (non)performance of rituals and ceremonies is vital to disrupting old traditions, which often rest on privilege, and [creating new ones](#) in their place.

If the sedimentation of political power is to be challenged, then the symbolic challenges are as important to the progressive project as changes to rules. They push us to confront our own biases, and reveal the power of elites and disrupt the status quo.

The next challenge for Corbyn, given the outcry about the anthem, will be whether to wear a white poppy or a red one. Aesthetics matter because they [signal our sentiments](#). They also matter because they point to a different way of doing politics – and that's what Jeremy Corbyn is all about. Whether he succeeds in bringing about change of course remains to be seen.

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