

Beauty

'Trump's decomposing ear of corn': what does 'hair certainty' tell us about our leaders?

From Starmer's stiff quiff to the Maga movement's glossy TV locks, a politician's mane can speak volumes - it says as much about what side of the divide they sit on as it does about the prevailing political winds



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📷 'Unnoteworthy hair' ... Keir Starmer. Photograph: Victoria Jones/Shutterstock

L about has an image problem. In a recent YouGov survey, people expressed a view that the party is “dishonest”, “only interested in themselves”, and “the same as the rest”. It’s no wonder that they are currently, terrifyingly, [10 points behind Reform in the polls](#). They also, by a slightly different - you could say less data-driven - metric, have a different kind of image problem. They lack “hair certainty”, from the top down.

The idea of “hair certainty” was coined by the writer Simon Doonan. Writing in [the buildup to the 2016 presidential election](#) that would see Donald Trump first take office, he explained: “Presidential hair = hair with certainty ... Hair-certainty describes *hair that is what it appears to be*. No illusions. No Greco-Roman fakery. Presidential hair can be thick or thin. Presidential hair can be messy. Presidential hair can be sparse, naff, and filled with dandruff. But, whatever it is, it just needs to have that certainty.”

Back then, Doonan discounted Trump’s “iconic coiffure”, saying: “It’s Liberace’s candelabra. It’s Mick Jagger’s lips ... But is it presidential? I am rather afraid not.”

Speaking now, he explains: “I put him in the category of ‘not going to get elected’, because his hair is a bit of an enigma; overly complex and requiring salon maintenance.” Subsequently, Doonan realised “where his hair certainty lies. It’s in the idiom of the 50s pompadour. It’s Elvis. It’s Johnny Hallyday.” It is, he says, “attention seeking ... a showbiz kind of do. I thought, ‘Oh, that’ll never fly in Washington’. But then, bingo, it did.” Keir Starmer’s, by contrast, is, “unnoteworthy”.

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📷 Hair today ... Trump and Starmer go head to head. Photograph: Leon Neal/Reuters

Last week afforded the perfect opportunity to see the contrast. As Trump and Starmer brandished their freshly signed tech prosperity deal at a joint press conference during Trump's state visit to the UK, they also gave us a chance to see, side by side, their signature coifs. Trump's wispy champagne top gave way, as usual, to a Mr Whippy swirl, in turn descending into a duck's arse flip. Starmer's, by contrast, was rigor mortised up into its usual stiff, baklava-like crest.

While both of these coifs are "signatures" - recognisably their own - one is far larger than life than the other. Trump's hair, variously described as "a decomposing ear of corn", "an airboat skimming the Everglades" and a "complex superstructure", [takes centre stage in merch](#) and on the blimp that hovered over anti-Trump protests. Like his bombastic written signature, it demands attention.



📷 Propelled by the hair? Kamala Harris. Photograph: Jacquelyn Martin/AP

Hair matters, according to Rachael Gibson, who goes by [The Hair Historian on Instagram](#): "There's not many body parts which tell people about us ... hair reflects anything from your status, your place in society, your religion." None of which is new. "Since day one people have done strange things to



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their hair for the sake of wanting to be interpreted differently, or to pass a message about themselves.” (She points to Louis XIV’s “big brown curly wigs [as] showing wealth and status”.)

Far from it being a nonsense to think about political hair, it is yet another lens through which we can scrutinise politicians and the prevailing political winds. “It’s another form of nonverbal communication,” says Washington DC-based image coach and style strategist [Lauren A Rothman](#). Consistency is all. “The language that I’ll use with my clients is ‘clothing, hair, makeup; your appearance that feels intentional, even if messy, creates trust’.”

While Doonan stresses that hair certainty can’t get you elected, he thinks it can help. He takes Kamala Harris’s, which was [read by some as a symbol of black hair autonomy](#), as an example. Not to say her success wasn’t down to her capabilities (or to forget that she went on, of course, to lose), but, he says, her hair “played a role in propelling her forward”.

It now feels like a salon’s worth of Republicans have hair certainty by the pound. Take the hair of newly minted “secretary of war” Pete Hegseth. While not a million miles from Starmer’s, it is different in ways that make it far more certain: it is extra stiff, extra pomaded; extra. Or the director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, and her grey streak. “It’s like Mrs Robinson or Cruella de Vil, or Susan Sontag, that stripe ... that seems to resonate with that theatricality the Republicans uninhibitedly embrace,” says Doonan.

📷 Low-key certainty ... Wes Streeting. Photograph: Jaimi Joy/Reuters

📷 Hair as discipline ... Pete Hegseth. Photograph: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

For men in power in particular, having a healthy head of hair, according to Gibson, “suggests that you’re a healthy person, you’re virile, you’re strong, you’re in good shape ... all things that we want from a leader”. It’s enmeshed with masculinity. Hegseth, a former national guard officer, makes a hair-based performance of his; his mop is unruffled by the winds of a chopper, [or by a work out](#). (Proof of how important all of this is to him came earlier this year, when he passed new rules and regulations about “standards” of grooming and appearance for the US army.) “He’s using hair and appearance as a proxy for discipline, order and tradition,” says Rothman.

Much of the hair certainty trend is a symptom of the glossy Maga aesthetic.

“There’s a showbiz overlay that isn’t normally there in politics,” says Doonan, although US politics is consistently glossier than the UK’s. Hegseth is a former Fox News host, Trump is a former reality TV star.

It also fits with the dominant politics of the day. As Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, [told the Guardian in 2023](#): “All politicians have a brand, but when you’re a populist politician, it has to be outsize, and outsize hair is part of that brand. It makes you recognisable to people who pay little attention to politics.”

There is a fine line between good grooming and looking as if you’re spending too much time in the salon, and too little in the Senate or the House - particularly for women, and particularly in the UK, where we saw fit to reward Boris Johnson, a man who appeared a stranger to a hairbrush, with the top job. British politicians, says Doonan, “have to be self-denying. You can’t seem like you’re spending all day agonising about your look.”

While Doonan would argue that hair certainty is largely “an American phenomena”, he thinks that’s changing: “The media and social media has propelled all of us into this world where everything is about hair, basically.” Thankfully for us, whatever you think about Starmer’s cut, Nigel Farage’s hair is distinctly lacking too.

📷 'Like Mrs Robinson or Cruella de Vil' ...
Tulsi Gabbard.
Photograph: John
McDonnell/AP

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