



Op-Ed: Respect for women in the House of Commons matters

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Let's say you've just won a hard-fought election campaign. During it, you studied the issues of concern to constituents, demonstrated your mastery in all-candidates debates and effectively convinced thousands of voters that you had the integrity and smarts to represent them. Arriving at the House of Commons, one of the first things one of your new male colleagues says to you is what a "fine body" you have.

That was NDP MP Megan Leslie's experience, and it must have made her wonder what she'd signed up for. Speaking about the incident last year, and reflecting the sentiments of many women on the Hill, she declared, "There is a locker-room mentality of casual sexism in the House," one that persists to this day.

This past fall, Liberal MP Chrystia Freeland's first question in the House — after her byelection win in Toronto Centre — was met with heckling and condescension as a reporter tweeted that she should be using her "big girl voice." After a mini-Twitter revolt among several women present, the reporter quickly recanted and published a piece about becoming more sensitive to the realities of women on the Hill.

And just this past week, Conservative MP Michelle Rempel took on the Hill Times for asking — yet again — who is the sexiest female and male MP, a question that has been part of its annual MP survey for over a decade. When Rempel, a rising star in the Conservative party, had the misfortune of winning the female category last year, it was all the media — and some of her colleagues — could talk about. Her work as a well-respected elected representative and minister of state for Western economic diversification was

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overshadowed by this entirely irrelevant designation. Within 24 hours of Rempel asking for the question to be pulled on this year's survey, the Hill Times agreed.

Such is the life of a female MP on the Hill. Politicians who could not be more different, in terms of their age, appearance, background and ideologies, are increasingly speaking out about how their gender, not their talent, taints their lives as elected representatives. And while we've always known that female MPs, who are a distinct minority in Parliament, with only 25 per cent of the seats, haven't had an easy ride, the sexist incidents of recent months are disturbing. As the demographics of the women on the Hill have changed in the past two elections to reflect a somewhat younger female population, the ugly sexism that has always lurked there appears to be re-emerging on so many fronts.

That is why Equal Voice is launching a social media campaign with Informed Opinions this week entitled #RespectHer. We think it's our responsibility as a national, multi-partisan organization to call out, in a non-partisan way, the gendered experiences of women in elected office — even as more and more of them are getting elected.

This is not to say every male MP or reporter is a problem. Women of every political stripe regularly cite the loyalty and collegiality of male MPs and supporters who choose not to engage in this behaviour.

Nor does the behaviour that women MPs experience suggest that Canadians are averse to women on the ballot. Repeatedly, polling shows that Canadians believe that electing women will bring positive change to politics. Further, research indicates that the public regards female MPs as doing just as good — if not a better — job in representing their interests.

All this positivity, however, doesn't immunize our political institutions, or those who serve in them or surround them, from contributing to a culture that can hurt and impede women who have gained both power and voice as members of Parliament. Power has never been shared equally among female

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and male MPs, and that threatens to disrupt the prevailing norms of these institutions as women claim their rightful place at the table.

Female MPs don't get elected to crusade about a sexist culture. Like their male counterparts, they are passionate and motivated by a wide variety of issues — the economy, transportation, access to good jobs, health care, education — that will benefit their communities. This commitment to their constituents and Canadians has been well captured in the new book *Tragedy in the Commons*, by co-authors Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, which documents the reflections of 80 former MPs.

But without a wholesale wake-up call as to how sexism infects behaviours that undermine, discredit and diminish the immense value female MPs bring to the table, it is not easy to see how we will ever reach a level of fair representation in the House — not to mention fair treatment for those women who sit in it. No one would argue that women MPs deserve less respect than their male counterparts. Improving the parliamentary environment and curbing sexist behaviour are key parts of raising the bar for everyone in the House and changing the game for women and men both.

So, whether you're on the Parliamentary sidelines or occupying one of those coveted seats in the House, it's time we all showed a lot more respect toward elected women if we're going to smash the glass ceiling once and for all.

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