

Social Media Harassment of Women Politicians

For politicians, shaking hands, kissing babies, cutting ribbons and being on the receiving end of angry diatribes from unhappy members of the public, all come with the territory. But women parliamentarians have been speaking up and speaking out about a particularly gendered form of social media bullying, harassment and threats that appear to have become more prevalent. In this roundtable three current or former women parliamentarians discuss the abuse they've encountered, how they've responded to it, and what they believe needs to be done to combat it.

Hon. Cathy Bennett, MHA, Hon. Joanne Bernard, MLA, Hon. Rochelle Squires, MLA

Editor's note: This roundtable contains unparliamentary language and, in particular, a derogatory slur. Prior to publication, the editorial board had a fulsome discussion and debate about whether to run this slur uncensored. Proponents of running the term uncensored noted that Hansard policy is to run slurs in an unedited form. Moreover, as women parliamentarians have had to hear or read these terms while serving the public, there was a sense that it would be hypocritical to censor the words for other readers in an article of this type. Alternatively, some members of the board felt running the slur unedited would revictimize women by perpetuating it and that it was beneath the dignity of the magazine to do it. And, in a very practical matter, it was noted that publishing these terms unedited could influence Web search engines to lower the Canadian Parliamentary Review's ranking on these pages. By way of compromise, we have opted to run the terms with an asterisk in place of a vowel to clearly indicate the slur or language being used, but to blunt its impact and eliminate search engine concerns. However, we include this note to explain that our decision to censor was not done without careful consideration and it is a decision we do not take lightly. We invite anyone who disagrees with the decision to send a letter to the editor, and have given all participants in this roundtable the opportunity to write a response which we will print alongside this article if they disagree with our decision.

Cathy Bennett is MHA for Windsor Lake. She is Newfoundland and Labrador's Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board. Joanne Bernard served as MLA for Dartmouth North, Nova Scotia from 2013-2017. At the time this roundtable was held she was Minister of Community Services. Rochelle Squires is MLA for Riel. She is Manitoba's Minister of Minister of Sport, Culture and Heritage.

CPR: I've always assumed that partisan politics and elected office is not for the faint of heart – that if you are working in this environment you'll need to be prepared to face people and constituents who may strongly disagree with what you're doing. But all of you have spoken out about a particular form of social media bullying, harassment or threats that goes well beyond what most people would deem to be fair and respectful dialogue with their political representatives. Is this really a new phenomenon that has come about

A Message To My Younger Self

Carole Poirier
MNA for Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (Quebec)

What every woman should know before going into politics" is the title you would expect for this kind of article. I would tell my younger self to think bigger. Why should women go into politics? Because we're 50 per cent of the population but have less than 30 per cent of the seats in our democratic institutions. Because we need to take our rightful place. Going into politics shouldn't be the goal; the goal should be to change things! Our collective challenge is to advance our values and aspirations and those of the society we want to create.





Cathy Bennett

with social media, or is social media simply a new way to express this kind of hateful speech?

JB: I think what goes hand in hand with this online bullying, which seems to have really increased over the past five to 10 years, is the anonymity that goes with it. The anonymity, combined with the different forms of social media, has escalated this abuse particularly against female politicians. It's made it easy and there is little to no accountability. The perpetrators do what they do, get up and walk away. They don't think about the impact of their words, or their trolling, or their abuse has on the people they're directing it to. I've had these experiences on everything from Twitter, to Facebook, to YouTube. I don't think directing this kind of language towards female politicians is a new phenomenon but I think it's become far more sophisticated.

RS: I know when I first was elected in 2016 I think I had on some rose-coloured glasses that were quickly ripped off my face. I had recently seen some news coverage about Sheila Copps's time in Parliament and how things had evolved since some of these pioneering women were first elected. When I was elected I had this notion that the way had been paved for me – and indeed it has been in many ways. But, although we still had a way to go before achieving parity and full



Joanne Bernard

equality, I thought we would still be treated the same as our male counterparts were once we actually go into office.

Within two weeks there was a nasty outrage on Facebook, Twitter and anonymous comments on news sites about me. There was a very legitimate concern being expressed. I was appointed the Francophone Affairs Minister and I was not bilingual. I said I was going to enroll in classes and strive to achieve bilingualism, but at the time of my appointment I was not fluently bilingual. There was a discourse that followed that was legitimate and worthwhile. That's what makes our democracy so strong – when a person holds public office people have the right to give the thumbs up or the thumbs down.

But it quickly devolved to this nasty form of sexual bullying and degradation. I knew I was going to be in for a long haul when I read a comment on CBC's Facebook page that said I had obviously performed a lot of sexual acts to get to where I was because there was no way a woman who looked like me, and talked like me and had my limited abilities could have achieved office on my own. Then there was just this dog-piling on from others about what kind of sexual acts I may or may not have done to get my job.



Rochelle Squires

I slammed my computer shut and my heart was in throat. I was just devastated and mortified. I thought, “Maybe I’m the only one seeing this?” But two minutes later my son walks into the room and says, “Mom, are you seeing what they’re saying about you?” That was my induction into being a woman who holds public office. It was only about five per cent of the comments that had degraded me and devolved to this level, but those are the ones I remember.

CB: I was not prepared for how, as Joanne said, social media provided such a specific anonymous outlet for people to do or say things that they would never say in the context of a non-social media life. I don’t believe anyone would come up to me in person, no matter how angry they were about a certain policy or decision that was made, and say some of the things that were said in social media, such as, “You should kill yourself.” I think social media is a new element, but in talking to my colleagues across the country and at an event at the United Nations earlier this year, criticism about women over their competency and abilities in a sexual or gendered way is certainly not new.

CPR: I want to touch on the anonymity. You’re facing this venom from largely anonymous sources on social media which is quite unlike what a person might ever

say to you in person. But when this kind of anonymous veil is available, these kinds of comments come out. Do you often think about the idea that these views and this hatred is present in people talking to you face to face who simply aren’t brave enough to vocalize it if there might be repercussions?

RS: I wholeheartedly agree that people use the anonymous platform to say things they would never say to my face. In the last year on the campaign trail and then getting appointed to my cabinet position, I met some 14,000-15,000 people and heard many diverse voices. Going back further to 2011, when I ran previously, my party was not as popular then. There was a lot of sentiment against my party, and even some anger over past decisions, was expressed at the door. But never did a single person say anything to me like what I’ve read online. People are taking advantage of an anonymous platform. They’re cowards who are using this as an easy way to score their own points and make themselves feel better. I’m sure I could go face to face with every one of the people who said nasty and disgusting things about me online and they would not dare to say it to my face.

JB: I’m openly gay, so I not only had to face the misogynistic slurs against me but homophobic ones, too. One moron who uploaded a YouTube video where he was talking about my sexual preferences and saying disgusting, vile things was stupid enough to attach his name to it. I could actually go to the police about that. But for the most part, these men – most are men – feel some sort of ownership over politicians, and particularly female politicians. They take it upon themselves to target us very intimately. And, even with my recent defeat [in the 2017 Nova Scotia general election], they are still kicking me on the way out. They’re saying things like, “Don’t let the door hit your fat *ss hit on the way out.” And you just think to yourself, “Oh my God, I’m not going to miss this.” It’s very difficult for accomplished women, regardless of their party, to talk to the generation behind us. We want to encourage them to run but also to warn them they need to go in with their eyes wide open about this kind of abuse.

CB: Like Joanne, I’ve had the privilege to serve as the Status of Women Minister in cabinet. It’s clear in the discussions I’ve had while serving in that position that the sexist and misogynistic words chosen to attack women in these ways are all part of what contributes to a society where there is violence against women. As women serving in public office, the more we are able to speak out about these issues, the more we’re going to help change the language and choice of words used

when people criticize women. We're going to expose it for what it is: language that creates a culture that allows violence to happen.

About 10 days after I spoke out publicly in December [2016], about the kinds of messages I was receiving, I had a really profound conversation with my Premier. Both of us had been focal points for some significant criticism coming out of a very difficult budget in our province. He said to me, "You know, Cathy, I didn't get any of the kind of abuse you got." I thought it was very interesting that he noted the difference, because it is a very different experience for women in politics as opposed to men. All kinds of viewpoints are filtered through a lens of misogyny. The idea that gender parity is here to stay is something that some men are quite resistant to. We have to continue to challenge that paradigm.

CPR: It's interesting to hear what you've said about the gendered paradigm at work here. I wanted to quickly go back to something Joanne had said about receiving homophobic abuse in addition to sexist and misogynistic remarks. Because you've all spoken publicly about this you may have heard stories from other parliamentarians who have experienced similar bullying, harassment and threats. Have you found that there are similar dynamics at work in commentary against parliamentarians and politicians who belong to other minority or marginalized groups such as

racialized persons, LGBTQ persons, or immigrants and refugees?

JB: The homophobic stuff started for me on the campaign trail. And about two years in I just had enough of it. Too many lines were being crossed. I went on the 6 o'clock news and spoke about acceptance and tolerance around the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community. I made it very clear that if a 53-year-old white lesbian cabinet minister is getting this kind of abuse about her sexuality, can we just imagine what a kid in rural Nova Scotia is going through in their own home if they are afraid to come out to their parents or friends at school. It was easier to turn that around than the misogyny, and I don't know why. I don't know if it was more entrenched or what. But it just seems as though there will always be a level where it will be acceptable to sexualize women and equate their power and leadership to how they look and what they wear.

RS: That's a very interesting perspective, and I'm interested in hearing more about the intersectionality of women and other minority or marginalized communities, and especially for newcomer women or LGBTQ women or others, hearing how having that identity may compound the effect. When I spoke publicly about what I was facing I was contacted by many other women who shared their experiences, including the leader of another party in our province who is a woman and the member of racial minority

A Message To My Younger Self

Anne Kang
MLA for Burnaby-Deer Lake (British Columbia)

Dear Anne,

Turn passion into action. Keep the values of community involvement and volunteerism close to your heart, and be ready to embark on an incredible journey that life will take you on. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone, and never miss an opportunity to learn.

Sometimes, the journey will get tough, but when you stop and look around, you will find your family, friends, and community standing right next to you, and you will find the strength, through their support, to keep going.

Dream big! There are endless possibilities in life, and many different ways to support and empower others. It doesn't matter what you do when you grow up, as long as you help others and make your community better. Stay true to yourself, as you are destined for great things. I believe in you!

Love always, Anne



group. She faced some profound abuse along these lines and it just seemed to exasperate the situation. But, there just seems to be this desire to “put women in their place” when they achieve success.

CB: About four of five months after the initial flood of abuse towards me things seemed to have quieted down. And then one morning, out of the blue, I woke up to a death threat on my phone. It wasn't long after that I was at a forum about bullying in high school and there was a young woman who had faced some intense and persistent bullying. She told us how she could never get away from it. She said to us, “Your generation could get away from it. But our generation can't because we take our phones to bed with us and they can get us there.” I remember having a very emotional reaction to that. When I thought about my 19-year-old self, dealing with what I had to deal with last year as a mature 55-year-old adult with my own children... I can't imagine what

we're doing to our children and our young women when we're not screaming at the top of our lungs that this type of thing has to stop. It taught me a lesson about someone who has the privilege to serve needing to speak out. It's not just our right, it's our responsibility. We give voice to those young women like the one who sat next to me and shared her experience, which was similar to mine, but at a very different point in her life.

CPR: Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, whose office has recently publicized the kind of hateful and threatening social media comments she receives, spoke to some of the Daughters of the Vote delegates. She advised them if they planned to go into politics or public life they would need to have a thick skin but porous so that they can still feel. How do you balance the need to protect yourself from this kind of online/ or face-to-face abuse while still being available to hear directly from constituents who may not reach out to you in any other way?

RS: It is a real fear that I face. If my portfolio, my department, hits the news for whatever reason and I'm more front and centre, it creates a panic and fear. I have to overcome that and not continuously put up these walls. I have to accept that there may come another time when I will be subjected to the same kind of abuse I faced. I try to remember how I talk myself out of these moments of fear – it's only a small, small section of the population. I have built a legion of strong feminist women around me who will support me and have my back. And I have to confess, I was watching in awe of what Cathy was doing in Newfoundland and Labrador with the #LiftHerUp campaign, so I replicated that here in Manitoba and started up the #LiftHerUpMB hash tag.

JB: A few years ago, I had a constituent who wasn't even in my Twitter feed call me a retarded c*nt. I remember reading that and then seeing people coming to my defense. I remember my son, who had taken himself off social media the day after I was elected, calling me in a rage because someone had sent him a screen shot of that through a text message. I have a 6-foot, 200-pound welder son and he was going to find this guy... So, after talking him off the ledge, and after talking my partner off the ledge, I went to bed angry, hurt, and p*ssed off at the world.

I woke up to an email from the person who had called me that. He was the single dad of a little girl whose cat had died that night and I was in his crosshairs. He apologized to me and I accepted his apology, but not before I wrote back and told him the effect those two words had on me, on my son, on my partner, and on my



A Message To My Younger Self

Monique Pauzé
MP for Repentigny
(Quebec)

I'm proud to see that you were already fighting for gender equality, environmental protection and Quebec sovereignty at such a young age.

Protecting ecological systems from overly voracious economic activity will become increasingly important, as will persuading decision-makers to adopt fairer social policies as inequality rises.

If one day you're asked to jump head-first into the leadership of a union or into politics, go for it. If your decisions are motivated by the pursuit of fairness, respect for nature and social justice, you will never have regrets. Put aside your doubts and believe in yourself. One day, you will be elected to represent the people of Repentigny, and you will be able to pursue your goals. Finally, don't plan on a quiet retirement; it's not going to happen.

friends who all saw it and called me the night before for support. I think by letting him know that this was the affect he had on a person whom he had never met was cathartic for me; and I don't care what it was for him.

Another tactic I used was screenshotting these comments. If their name was attached to them I tweeted them out and embarrassed them. To me, that was reclaiming some of my power in defending myself. If you are going to call me a c*nt and you're stupid enough to attach your name to it, I'm going to make sure it is out there in social media land. Hopefully someone who knows you can say something or at the very least embarrass you at the end of the day. That was about taking back my power.

I'm a very "say what you mean" kind of person. I remember when the Daughters of the Vote came to Nova Scotia to attend a parliamentary session. We had MP Bernadette Jordan and other MLAs there for a Q&A. The question posed to us was: What do you say to someone who is misogynistic or anything like that? Bernadette said she tried to figure out where they're coming from with that type of language, and others agreed that if you try to understand it then you can name it and fix it. When they got to me, I said the first thing that came to my mind. I tell them to f*ck off!

I don't care where you're coming from. I don't care what's going on in their lives. I don't care if that's how they value women. You cannot talk to me like that. You cannot talk to any woman like that. I think we need to

start fighting back in a more aggressive way instead of just saying it's part of an entrenched patriarchy and part of society's fabric. I'm too old for that. If someone is going to call me a derogatory name I'm going to fight back. I'm not going to answer it with something as equally derogatory, but I'm going to say it's not okay and you need to stop.

CPR: Building on that example of a personal response for when this type of hateful language is directed at you, is there anything that governments, social media companies, or concerned observers can or should do when they observe it?

JB: When Rochelle was reading those remarks posted on mainstream media websites, shame on them! Shame on them for allowing those remarks to remain up there and not filtering them. We have seen that all across the country – Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and local news outlets just let this garbage sit. I don't care if it sits for a minute, an hour or a day. They don't do their job.

RS: I was just enraged when I saw they were still up. Finally, I called out CBC publicly on Twitter and asked, "Is nine months long enough? All my constituents have read them, my children have read them... are you leaving them there for my grandchildren to read?" That morning they were having a discussion about the responsibility of government, corporate Canada, and all good citizens to call out misogyny. Walk the walk, people!

A Message To My Younger Self

Nicole Rancourt
MLA for Prince Albert Northcote (Saskatchewan)

If I could send a message to my younger self, my main message would be to stay true to yourself. Never feel that you need to be someone that you are not. Dress the way you want, and be proud of who you are because people will appreciate you for being authentic. People will always judge you but that is because they may not be truly comfortable with who they are, so don't let their insecurities affect you.

Never forget where you came from because all the people in your life and experiences make you the wonderful person you are today. Stay humble, and always treat others how you would want to be treated. Remember your manners and respect everyone. Don't sweat the small stuff and ask yourself "will this matter a year from now?". Have good boundaries with your personal and work life. Surround yourself with people who stay true to their values and morals. Make time for your family and friends because they are truly what matters in the world.



I called out CBC and said these comments have been sitting on your Facebook page for nine months. It wasn't as though there were one or two; there were a significant number of them. I screenshotted some of them as a part of taking my power back and hopefully embarrassing some of the people who made the comments in the first place. CBC is a leader in the media world and they've got to have some skin in this game. They need to take a stand and put a filter on their Web pages and social media sites, or have someone there who will erase the content or not even allow it to appear.

CB: I just want to add a point about the social media companies themselves. When you think of how media and technology have developed over the past decades and centuries, there's always a wild west mentality with new, disruptive technology until societal norms wrap themselves around it to determine what's okay and what's not okay.

With social media companies, we have some very successful companies which peaked with their success very quickly. They often have young, male CEOs without robust board governance. But I do think there's a corporate social responsibility that these platforms are not acknowledging. They talk about the things they're doing, but the action is really lacking. As policy makers, I think we need to put some accountability on them in terms of creating platforms that are socially acceptable while giving power to individual voices – and these are excellent platforms for that.

Joanne, I'm not sure if you remember a speaker at a conference we attended who said: "As feminists, we have worked for decades to help you have a voice in the legislatures and we are not going to let social media take that voice away." We have a right to be in the House. We need to be in the House. And, better policies result from us being in the House. We can't let social media platforms and the companies that run them to do things, unchecked, that allow women's voices to be diminished in these very important roles.

CPR: When this roundtable is published I hope to share a link with all of you on social media in case it's something you'd like to share with your followers. On the off chance one of the anonymous trolls who have harassed you and other women politicians reads this, is there anything you'd like to say to them?

JB: I remember what my son said to me when this happened. "Mom, you may have signed up for this,

but I didn't." I didn't sign up for it. I have never been treated in such a derogatory, hateful way as I was when elected. But it's not just these anonymous troll accounts. There are legislatures where women parliamentarians have received derogatory comments from their male colleagues – and I'm thinking of particular examples in Alberta and recently in New Brunswick. It has to start within our own Houses. We have to set the tone. But to the trolls, and to anyone who engages in this type of behavior, I would just say knock it off.

RS: I agree. I am always open and willing to have a conversation with anybody that I serve in the Manitoba public regarding my policies, my party platform initiatives, and what my government is doing or not doing as the case may be. I'm always open to those discussions. I will never back away from that, and I believe that is my duty as a public servant. But, please remember, let's talk about the policies and let's talk about the issues with intelligent language. If you want to make your point, use respectful language. I'll respect you, and all I ask in return is a little common courtesy and decency.

And to the trolls, just remember that all of us are someone's mother, sister, daughter, spouse, partner... We're human beings. Do not dehumanize us. Treat us with the same respect that you would treat a female in your family or another woman that you respect in your personal life. Just treat people with respect. We're not asking for anything outside the norm.

CB: The only thing I would add to the trolls is: you are in the minority. If my experience is similar to what other women have experienced, the outpouring of support that continues today amazes me. People who stopped me in the street – who stopped my children in the street – to say how proud they were of me for speaking up and how brave I am – they are in the majority. Troll behavior is not going to stop me or any other woman from exercising our right and responsibility to sit in the legislature.

CPR: Thank you all so much for this. It's been a privilege to participate in this conversation with you.

RS: I do want say – and I have made a point to say this since I spoke out about what happened to me – thank you to you, and any man who chooses to participate in or initiate a dialogue like this. The only way we are going to open minds and show support to women in legislatures dealing with these issues is to talk about them and publicize them.