

CSPG Seminar: The #MeToo Movement and Parliament

The #MeToo movement has been a watershed moment for changes to workplace culture, particularly for women in fields traditionally dominated by men. On March 29, 2019, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a seminar to explore the impact of the #MeToo on parties, politics, and Parliament Hill.

Charlie Feldman

Panel One: The Experiences of Women

University of Waterloo Political Science Professor Anna Esselment chaired the first panel, which brought together Brenda O'Neill from the University of Calgary, Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star*, and Judy Wasylycia-Leis, former MP and member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

Brenda O'Neill began with an overview of the #MeToo movement, noting that while #MeToo is new, movements for equality in the workplace are not. She recounted how labour and feminist movements of the 1970s brought about reforms and progress, but highlighted that these movements were largely working-class focused. Indeed, those pushing for equality in the workplace did not have women parliamentarians top of mind because these women were not perceived as being those in need because they were viewed to be in power. However, we now better recognize structural and systemic barriers to women's full and equal participation in all workplaces, including in the political sphere.

O'Neill noted that #MeToo is not only an issue of equality in the workplace but one of sexual violence. Rather than turn a blind eye to inappropriate sexual advances, comments, or assaults, as had been commonplace in the past, there are now repercussions – with premiers and MPs alike losing spots in cabinet or their positions entirely owing to allegations

(or proof) of inappropriate behavior. She concluded with an overview of the social-networking peril and promise of #MeToo. While social media has allowed for the #MeToo movement to have global reach in a short amount of time, it has also created a risk of “slacktivism,” whereby those supportive of a cause merely express support online but are unprepared to take concrete steps to remedy a situation. She concluded with her hope that those concerned with these issues today continue to press for progress as did women in earlier feminist waves and not relent simply because an issue, while acknowledged, is not also actively addressed.

Judy Wasylycia-Leis began by describing the challenges women in the legislature face today, pointing to a recent incident in the British Columbia legislature in which certain female staff were told they could not have exposed arms. In her words, “Women are judged more by the clothes they wear, the hair they have, and the voices they use instead of their brains, values, and voices”. She said that #MeToo was watershed movement that exposed and made visible that which women have endured throughout the ages – violence, assault, sexism, and misogyny.

The women's movement was a formative moment in Wasylycia-Leis' life and inspired her to run for office. In 1986 she became the 17th woman elected in Manitoba. She felt pressure to do well because “so many women were watching” but faced many uphill battles owing to, as she put it, “cultural conditioning in all our institutions that you have to combat day in and day out”. She recounted her numerous experiences of sexist attacks and commentary on everything from her breastfeeding in the legislature (leading to a characterization of her as a “high-priced babysitter”) to cartoon depictions of her that were

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Panel 1: (Left to right) Judy Wasylycia-Leis, Susan Delacourt, Brenda O'Neill, and moderator Anna Esselment.

ageist as well as sexist. In her words, we “must do more to give voice to women in all aspects of society”. Sadly, she concluded, progress is far too slow: “At the pace we’re going 2090 will be when we see women’s equality in Parliament. I don’t have time to wait around for that.”

Susan Delacourt began by recounting her first experiences as a journalist on Parliament Hill in 1988. She explained that then most bureaus had only one woman and it was “like a pet or an experiment – let’s see what’s it like just having one [woman] for now”. In the early years, she noted, women were not allowed to attend the Press Gallery dinner and, when she went, she was expected to serve cocktails to her male counterparts. Still, there was some solidarity between women MPs and women journalists in the Hill in those days as the two were roughly equal in numbers.

Delacourt recounted that, at the time, male subjects of stories would sometimes assume that an interview request was really a request for a date. In general,

she said, the experience of female parliamentary journalists reflected the experiences of women in politics: “One step forward, two steps backlash”. She noted, for example, in 1993 a record number of women were elected in federal politics but two women leaders saw their parties wiped off the map. In her view, the same situation exists now in the media; there are more women in the industry, but the bureau chiefs are still all men.

Panel 2: Contemporary Realities

University of Ottawa Law Professor Vanessa MacDonnell moderated the second panel, which brought together Shaheen Shariff from McGill University, Chief Human Resources Officer for the House of Commons Pierre Parent, and Teresa Wright of the Canadian Press.

Professor Shariff began by explaining her work leading the “Define the Line” project at McGill, which studies sexual violence in university settings. She noted that there are many similarities between



Panel 2: (Left to right) Moderator Vanessa MacDonnell, Shaheen Shariff, Pierre Parent, and Teresa Wright.

universities and Parliament, and suggested that the conclusion from one holds for the other – legislation and policy are simply not enough. She spoke of some of the challenges associated with addressing sexual harassment and violence in the university context – protection of victims, privacy of parties, cumbersome processes – and suggested these were also issues likely to be observed in Parliament. She noted that more public institutions are moving toward having independent investigators, whereas Parliament is a largely inward-looking institution when problems arise. Finally, she stressed the need for the momentum of the #MeToo movement to continue, with a focus on incorporating intersectionality.

Chief Human Resources Officer of the House of Commons Pierre Parent began by recounting the events of 2014 that saw #MeToo hit Parliament Hill in a significant way when two MPs reported inappropriate behaviour on the part of other Members. It can be difficult to address employment matters on Parliament Hill because parliamentarians themselves are not employees and each MP is considered a separate employer.

Parent explained that there are policies in place regarding sexual harassment both between Members of the House of Commons and between Members of the House and staff. Training is provided to both MPs and their staff, and there is reporting on the administration of the policy. MPs, for their part, must sign a document (and all have) stating that they will abide by the House of Commons' policies regarding sexual harassment. In respect of issues between MPs, there is a new Code of Conduct (Sexual Harassment)

that forms part of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. It was recently reviewed by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and updated in the 42nd Parliament.

Canadian Press journalist Teresa Wright began by stressing the importance of conversations about #MeToo, noting that change can only occur if we talk about what is not working and what we want to see done. She explained that in 2018, the Canadian Press conducted an informal survey of Hill staff and female MPs and found that a majority of the 226 respondents experienced sexual misconduct but did not want to report it because they were worried about their jobs and future. Thirty-five per cent expressed concern that they would not be believed if they reported their experience, while another 30 per cent said they were unsure where to report. Approximately 20 respondents reported experiencing what they would consider sexual assault in the workplace from their employer (in this case, a Senator or Member of the House of Commons). The impacts noted by respondents included trying to avoid certain people (particularly when alcohol is involved), changing the way they dressed in the workplace, and consequences for mental health, including PTSD.

As she drew to a close, Wright reminded the audience that “You can have the best policies in the world but if people don’t follow them then it doesn’t really matter”. In her words, the important thing is to make sure the conversation continues and that we take action to change the culture rather than grow complacent or assume the mere adoption of policies will suffice.