

POLITICS AS USUAL: Sexism in Politics?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Amid the circus that was the Rob Ford Dramedy these past few weeks, there was one curious statement by a Toronto Councillor which stood out for me.

During one of the two council meetings at which Ford was unceremoniously stripped of his non-statutory powers, Councillor Krystan Wong Tam stood up and alleged Rob Ford was 'maybe' a misogynist.

I believe the context of the allegation was the truly grotesque sexually vulgar statements Ford made in the media about his former female staffer as well as his wife.

Now, I believe that the Councillor was sincere in her conviction that Ford's actions warranted severe public chastisement and I share that belief; however, the charge of misogyny is extreme, in my opinion.

Misogynist/misogyny is an extremely pejorative term. As a consequence, it is a highly loaded charge to level at someone? especially a public figure.

The Oxford dictionary defines misogyny as 'an ingrained prejudice against women?'. Thus, unless the Councillor can demonstrate repeated instances where Ford has exhibited 'ingrained prejudice?' against all women, then I think that the charge is unwarranted.

Allegations of woman hating are flying about the political realm at all levels of government. It seems politicians of all stripes are keen to mobilize female voters by attacking male candidates with allegations of sexism or, worse, misogyny.

I don't think it's a winning strategy. As a woman, and a former politician, I can tell you I find it a rather transparent, and ultimately ineffective, strategy.

Personal attacks do nothing to further political discourse. Rather, they represent a devolution of it.

There are concerns women's voices are not being heard. Maybe so. It is true that there is still a relative dearth of female representatives in our corridors of power.

However, even those who have managed to grab a seat at the table complain that their ideas, their motions are 'being ignored?'. Again, that may be so.

However, it may also not be so. Perhaps it has nothing to do with sexism. Maybe no one supports their ideas because they aren't very good. Or maybe the ideas could be supported if they worked collaboratively, 'built bridges?', or tried again?

Playing the sexism or misogyny card does not further the cause.

And besides, ageism is more of a problem in my opinion. Try being 55 or older and try to get a job in today's workforce and you'll understand how ageism impacts virtually every aspect of our lives.

And what about being unattractive? Or too attractive as the case may be. Look-ism has always been an issue - and certainly we see it in today's political realm on both sides of the divide.

Justin Trudeau is sneered at precisely because of his good looks. He is dismissed by his political foes as a lightweight, a 'Teen Idol?' wannabe.

Yep. He's a good looking man. So what! His physical appearance has nothing to do with what he does or doesn't stand for.

And Rob Ford is the other side of the 'look-ism?' coin.

But back to the drive-by smear of male politicians as sexists or misogynists. Knock it off. It serves no purpose but to further diminish the stature of women in politics.

I, like many women I know, have endured many instances of sexism over the course of my adult working life. From the overt - butt grabbing in an elevator by a drunken male colleague - to the more benign such as when- as a Councillor? I was told by a resident not to wear my hair in a ponytail and to put on more lipstick during televised council meetings, so I'd look more attractive. I kid you not.

Was it sexist crap? Absolutely. Did any of it deter me? Absolutely not. Why? Because it's nonsense. That's why.

And besides, I am a big girl and choose to act like one.

I work hard, state my opinion and do my best to be heard. If no one listens then it's up to me to either try another approach or start talking louder.

Yes, some may argue that we still live in an era where women need to be twice as good as men to be taken seriously. And that, perhaps, like Ginger Rogers dancing, women must do everything that Fred Astaire does but backwards and in heels.

But you know what I say to that? Just watch me dance.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.