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News / Canada

Not all Hill interactions are on a level playing field: Hébert

Perhaps the biggest question in the back of the minds of many of those familiar with Parliament Hill at the end of this week is whether this is just the tip of a larger iceberg.

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What exactly the MP who came to Justin Trudeau expected the Liberal leader to do remains unclear but she had to know that, in so doing, she was taking the matter a number of steps up the political ladder, writes Chantal Hébert.

By: Chantal Hébert National Affairs, Published on Fri Nov 07 2014

In the chain of facts that led Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau to take the extraordinary step of [suspending two male MPs](#) over allegations of serious personal misconduct in their dealings with two female colleagues, many links are missing.

But what can be inferred from the [statements of their own party](#) is that the alleged NDP victims did not decline to go public for fear that they would not be believed.

On the contrary, their rationale for keeping quiet seems to have been based on the relative certainty that if they disclosed the incidents they would be taken seriously.

In interviews this week NDP whip Nycole Turmel stated the MPs chose not to file formal complaints for fear of destroying the careers of their [Liberal colleagues](#).

By the time one of them approached Trudeau with both stories last week, a year had gone by since one of the incidents. The other reportedly took place some months ago.

The ripple effect from allegations of sexual impropriety levelled at the CBC's former broadcast star Jian Ghomeshi could well have brought about the belated decision to bring the matter to the attention of the Liberal leader.

That scandal has unleashed an unprecedented outpouring of previously untold stories of sexual harassment and/or assault in both the mainstream and social media.

What exactly the MP who came to Trudeau expected the Liberal leader to do remains unclear but she had to know that, in so doing, she was taking the matter a number of steps up the political ladder.

As of that point Trudeau's options were limited.

As party leader he is responsible for setting the behavioral bar for his MPs. In the absence of factual information as to the substance of the allegations it is hard to ascertain whether he has just set that bar impossibly high or just raised it to a minimally acceptable level.

One Liberal adviser compared what his leader did this week to starting to push a huge rock up a steep slope.

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Fair enough, but it should be pointed out that in the case of the two aggrieved MPs the slope was ultimately less steep than for most victims of harassment in the workplace.

In contrast with the dynamics at play in the Ghomeshi saga for instance, Turmel's statements suggest that her colleagues did not worry about ending up on the losing end of a battle for credibility.

On that score, events have so far proven them right.

Given a choice between the denials of his two MPs and the word of the New Democrat complainants, it was to the latter that Trudeau gave the benefit of the doubt.

Should the two women decide to go the extra step of public disclosure, the Liberal leader and his advisers assumed that they would be crucified for not having acted decisively.

In the post-Ghomeshi climate, it is hard to quarrel with that assessment.

But what does the widespread presumption that male MPs could feel empowered enough to act improperly with women who are their elected equals say about the larger Parliament Hill working environment?

It is not entirely in jest that the staffers who toil on the Hill are often described as boys in short pants.

Parliament would not function without the devoted services of an army of young men and women who work as interns, parliamentary pages or as support staff for MPs and senators.

For most of them a job on the Hill is an entry-level position that many hope will become a springboard to a career. As opposed to the interactions between MPs, their dealings with parliamentarians do not take place on a level playing field.

The events of this week rattled the Parliament Hill community for a variety of reasons.

They highlight a fundamental absence of reciprocal trust between the various parties.

They raise serious issues as to due process as well as troubling questions as to the way that some MPs may feel entitled to act with each other.

But perhaps the biggest question in the back of the minds of many of those familiar with Parliament Hill at the end of this week is whether this is just the tip of a larger iceberg.

Chantal Hébert is a national affairs writer. Her column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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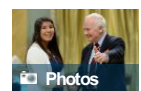
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