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'This is not about sex, but about power' - Sexist aggression against women and the British parliament

Wednesday 8 November 2017, by [KELLY Jane](#) (Date first published: 6 November 2017).

What is it that has happened to open up the huge debate across the media and beyond about sexism? Why has it happened now? It's been going on for ever yet suddenly everyone is talking and writing about it. From Hollywood to the British parliament, from the popular press to left wing blogs, everyone has something to say about it, writes Jane Kelly.

First of all we should say 'about time too'! And it's clear from the number and variety of women complaining that it has been and is widespread, crosses classes and has been partially hidden from view until now. It's as though a dam has been breached and all women and some men who have experienced it want to talk about it. Partly, like other recent changes in everyday discussion, this is a result of the popular media like Facebook. Everyone with access to a computer or mobile phone can say what they think and follow debates about everything without fear of censorship.

Already one Tory minister has resigned his post, presumably because there is more to be revealed about his behaviour, another has been suspended after serious accusations have been made and his case has been referred to the police, others are being investigated. Nor is it confined to one party, Labour MPs are also implicated and as the Tory leader in Scotland has rightly pointed out, 'This is not about sex, but about power'.

And of course this tells us something about why it is so prevalent: women (all women) are second class citizens compared to men and although middle and upper class women have more power than working class women, we are all less powerful than equivalent men.

The other issue is age. The reason why it has been so widespread in parliament is the age difference between male MPs and younger women, often working unpaid to gain experience, who act as secretaries, assistants, etc. with a view to getting a political post.

But female MPs have not been exempt from this sexist behaviour as some of them have testified. The cross party TV interviews by female MPs make it clear that they too have been treated in ways that show how widespread it is and how unaware or thoughtless the male perpetrators have been of their sexist behaviour.

One of the problems with the process in Westminster is that the mostly female secretaries and assistants are employed directly by MPs themselves, so complaining to your employer about his behaviour wouldn't have got you very far.

That is one thing that should be changed immediately. There should be a central employment system and everyone employed there should have the right to be in a trade union. There will be a cross party meeting this week to discuss setting up an independent process to deal with complaints made

about behaviour in Westminster. The Whips' offices have also been involved in covering up complaints about male behaviour, using the knowledge to ensure MPs vote the right way!

Whether Theresa May will manage to deal adequately with this situation is questionable. It is clear she has known about such cases for several years, as have many MPs, but given her vulnerable position in Parliament, with her majority dependent on the Northern Irish DUP, she finds herself in an almost impossible position. If she calls out those who are clearly guilty, with MPs losing their seats, bye-elections may lead to a collapse of her government. Alternatively if she ignores the situation and carries on as if nothing is happening, she may witness the collapse of her credibility.

Sexist aggression against women has long been tolerated in parliament, but this is no longer the case and May's government is in a weaker position than ever as a result.

But it is not just in Westminster that such sexist behaviour is prevalent. In most workplaces, especially ones where women are less well paid, have less power and are more easily sacked than men, they suffer from both verbal and actual physical sexism. Perhaps the widespread news coverage of this situation will enable women to speak out against it. But I'm not holding my breath!

Jane Kelly

P.S.

* November 6, 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/this-is-not-about-sex-but-about-power/11050>