

Opinion

Mr. Prime Minister, meet George Costanza

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Where Prime Minister Justin Trudeau goes after the muddled mess he has left the #MeToo movement in is unclear, writes Kathleen Finlay. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

TORONTO—That loud beep, beep, beep you’ve been hearing is the sound of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau backing up and rolling over the #MeToo gains of the past several months—his own contributions included. Victims of sexual misconduct have especially heard the crashing of the progress that had finally given them the courage to raise their voices and seek long delayed accountability for life-altering abuses. Today, they are looking out at a world where it is suddenly not nearly as safe to come forward as they thought.

What we have witnessed in recent weeks has been a tortured series of dodges, weaves and reversals on the part of the prime minister as he tried to explain recycled reports that he allegedly groped a female reporter during an outdoor summer festival in 2000.

His first attempt occurred at a July 1 picnic. Trudeau bizarrely chose to break two cardinal rules when defending accusations of sexual misconduct. He spoke about what a good day *he* had on the day of the reported groping in 2000. And then he smiled.

Having shaken #MeToo’s sense of progress in his first news conference on the scandal, Trudeau trampled all over it in his next, taking refuge in the old and much discredited *she said-he said* defence.

In January, Mr. Trudeau loudly trumpeted, like a white charger-mounted tribune of the #MeToo movement, that women need to be “supported” and “believed” when they voice allegations. Not more than six months later, he resembled *Seinfeld*’s infamous George Costanza asking, in effect, “was that wrong?” about the groping incident, which he seemed to rationalize by evoking the typical lawyerly defence that “the same interactions can be experienced very differently from one person to the next.” Just perception? Hardly.

The man who boasted a cabinet of many women because, as he said at the time, it’s 2015, seemed to have retreated back to the 1950s, when women were often dismissed as being confused, overly sensitive, and too emotional when it came to objecting to male advances they found threatening or degrading.

What's been missing in this discussion is the impact on all the women who, in an effort to heal, have recently been finding the courage to speak out about incidents they were previously afraid to bring forward. I've been hearing a lot from these survivors lately—I'm one myself—at [The ZeroNow Campaign](#) advocacy and victim support program I run. There's a perceptible chill in the #MeToo air, and it's not from an early autumn. They're asking "What will happen to me now?" "Will I become just another a *perception*?"

Speaking up and reporting sexual misconduct has never been easy, even with the path cleared by #MeToo. I know that all too well, having decided recently myself to come forward about an incident where I was sexually assaulted by a high ranking government official at a conference some years ago. But after discovering that *I* was the one being investigated, and being met by a wall of disbelieving government lawyers, I have to say it's been something of a nightmare. And this was before Trudeau's backward flip. Can you imagine what it will be like now?

Scratch the surface of many organizations and you will find there is much more hype and hypocrisy than substance when it comes to #MeToo values.

There is a good reason why, following the monstrous misdeeds of Harvey Weinstein and so many others, women should be believed. For too long, victims were reluctant to speak out and report abuse. When they did, their concerns were often trivialized and their character smeared.

Through the prism of #MeToo, we were given a shocking glimpse at how harmful our workplaces can be to women and how, in too many cases, standing up against sexual misconduct costs victims their jobs, their dignity, and very often their health.

We needed to change that narrative in a big way by assuring all women that they will be supported and believed when they choose to speak out, and by giving victims a chance, through programs like [Hire US Back](#), to restart their careers with employers who are fully committed to keeping the workplace safe and gender-respectful.

Where Trudeau goes after the muddled mess he has left the #MeToo movement in is unclear. But here's what *is* clear: there is a danger because of his back peddling that women will be forced again into the shadows of abuse and disrespect, fearing they will not be believed—or worse. Every day, I see more evidence this has begun to happen.

What an irony that so much harm has been done by someone we thought was a champion of #MeToo.

Or was that just a perception, too?

Kathleen Finlay is an advocate for victims of sexual misconduct and founder of The ZeroNow Campaign.

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