

The Sexual Harassment Storm in British Politics. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon's Fall

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Feature image: Michael Fallon

Sexual harassment – it's revelation, that is – is all around at the moment, a toxic cold that is giving political establishments not so much a sneeze as debilitating pneumonia. In Britain, the cold covered various parties, initiating investigations, concerns and the promise of further actions.

It also hit Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary who found himself without a portfolio, resigning for having engaged in conduct that fell, in the words of his resignation letter, “below the high standards that we require of the Armed Forces and that I have the honour to represent.”

Those standards were allegedly given a good dumping in past remarks made to Andrea Leadsom, leader of the House of Commons. On Monday, Leadsom wished to give some instruction about what needed to be done. “I have made it clear that the issue is around, first, those who are made to feel uncomfortable: I am setting the bar significantly below criminal activity. If people are made uncomfortable, that is not correct.”^[1]

Not that all whom he has allegedly touched feel the same way. Journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer had no desire to be considered a “victim” of Fallon's advances fifteen years ago, her knee the unfortunate excuse for ending a ministerial career. Fallon has been busy on that front, effusively expressing apologies for placing his hand on Hartley-Brewer's knee at a Tory party conference dinner in 2002. Hartley-Brewer, for her own part, thought it all ridiculous, an over-egging of an already overdone pudding.

The letter from Prime Minister Theresa May did everything to mollify and ease the fall of the axe. Was Fallon to be remembered as deviant, fondler and ogler, one inclined to press flesh rather than move armaments and send men and women to their deaths? Or perhaps a mighty figure of the realm, swaddled in the blue of good British conservatism in the fight against terror?

May insisted that his qualities be remembered. “You should take particular pride in the way the United Kingdom has risen to the challenge of tackling the barbaric threat of Daesh. Thanks to the bravery of our Armed Forces, Daesh is being defeated, and three million people have been freed from its murderous rule.”^[2]

Well he might have had “a long and impressive Ministerial career”, having served in four departments under four prime ministers. He had also been Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. But for all that, the smear cloaked and caked with sufficient force. May is simply too vulnerable to treat these matters as farcical utterances and suspicions. Nor can

she afford having encores.

The Tories have decided to engage in, much in the manner of what they have done at stages of their muddle through history, some promised, and ultimately failed behavioural modification. The bad Tory intends becoming good, entailing some awakening and self-chastening. As always, it is a cursory case of moral response: codify conduct that is bound to be undermined at every given moment.

When John Major won the election as Margaret Thatcher's successor in 1992, his moral insistence on angelic purity for members of his party was disastrous. Major himself was found out to be having more than just his hand in the cookie jar.

Now, Prime Minister May is insisting on fundamental "minimum standards" for members of the party fuelled by the doctrine of taking "all reasonable steps" to investigate concerns raised over inappropriate conduct. An element of independence in the process is also being encouraged.

This procedure is one which replaces the voluntary code embraced in 2014. It all sounds prosaic, determinative and expected, the material that suggests what has been essentially considered in the order of normality. Conservative members must "treat others with civility, courtesy and respect" and avoid using "their position to bully, abuse, harass or unlawfully discriminate against others."

On the Labour side of politics, investigations are also being undertaken into two of its MPs. Suspensions have taken place, with Kelvin Hopkins having to cool off over allegations made by Labour activist Ava Etemadzadeh that he embraced her inappropriately after a student event in 2014.^[3] A new complaints procedure has been introduced, though the need for an external, independent body is also being mooted.

In the aftermath of Fallon's fall, the relieved and the delighted are directing their bolts. But they mention, less the issue of his alleged misbehaviour than the general sense that he has been an atrocious being worthy of overthrow.

The *New Statesman* reminded readers that he had sterling form, the sort that terriers and attack dogs tend to have for their owners. Fallon had described the current Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, as a "Labour lackey who speaks alongside extremists".^[4] He had also attempted to box Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in a category comfortable with terrorist insurrection.

The bigger, more besmirched picture is one where cultures are being outed, behaviour given a wringing. From Hollywood to Westminster, the veils are being lifted on power, misguided hands and more. Fallon's problem is hardly unique, or individual. Given a society where sex is deemed problematic, dysfunctional and dirty, harassment is bound to given a further layering of significance.

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Notes

^[1]

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/02/michael-fallon-resigned-defence-secretary-andrea-leadsom>

[2] <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/michael-fallon-quit-over-kneegate-11453218>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-41866351>

[4]

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2017/11/michael-fallon-was-quite-literally-shameless-i-m-glad-he-s-gone>

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