



Political sex allegations

by **Simon Belt**

Spreadsheets and gossip have been circulating Westminster in the last week, fueled by a press keen to boost waning circulation figures and broader reach in society. A rather febrile atmosphere has been allowed to develop whereby very few will stand up and be counted as saying it's a problem. Sure, plenty are saying there's a problem and will cite various fumbblings with sexual intent, and when that doesn't work will cite allegations of sexual harassment or assault as proof of the real problem at the heart of party politics.

The real problem is somewhat harder to define though. Some say that Westminster and party politics with its murky career ladder built on patronage, encourages an old boys network

whereby the party leaders tend to cover up unwanted sexual advances, harassment or assault in a bid to keep up appearances of their party being above widespread misogyny in society.

Others would say that flirtations in politics are no different to other areas of life and should be dealt with by those involved as they see best. Where there is sexual harassment or assault, it should be dealt with by the police as criminal activity, and that it is most unhelpful to blur the distinction between awkward and drunken flirtations and more serious matters.

So how should we begin to unravel this? Is political life any different to other spheres? Well this week it has become different. Take the case of Michael Fallon MP, the Tory defence secretary who has just resigned over revelations of sexual misconduct. What did he do? Well, Julia Hartley-Brewer, the broadcaster and newspaper columnist, cited that Fallon had put his hand on her knee some 15 years ago. That wouldn't really be much cause for concern in any other period in politics, and indeed Hartley-Brewer said she dealt with the matter at the time by threatening to punch Fallon's lights out if he did it again, and he duly apologised. In today's puritan climate, Fallon had to resign much to Hartley-Brewer's dismay who said "Both my knees are still intact. Get a grip, people".

In parliament a dirty dossier of some 40 Tory politicians has been circulated and leaked online for the rest of us to gorge on. What does the dirty dossier contain by way of showing up the seedy life of Tories? Well, nothing much except some gossip of which MPs are having an affair with other MPs and some sexual preferences - all rather tame compared with leaks of sexual dalliances in less puritanical times. No claims of actual sexual harassment, but political malignant through mildly titillating innuendo.

Westminster Party leaders have responded very quickly by agreeing to new cross-party proposals to address claims of sexual harassment and an independent grievance procedure. A distraction hungry political elite, reeling from the Brexit vote, seem intent of fanning the flames of distrust in politics and re-asserting the role of unelected bureaucracy in managing the political process. More importantly though, it is not just adults in politics who are being trashed as incapable of managing their own affairs, but women in politics in particular who need the civil service and independent mechanisms to help them get a leg up the political ladder.

As we discuss this, news of Carl Sargeant's suicide is being reported. The febrile atmosphere around public allegations of sexual harassment invites a high profile media focus on those in the spotlight, with the possible consequence of innocent people having their lives wrecked and the more serious criminal proceedings not being given the attention they deserve. That working class women who faced serious and systematic sexual assault have been ignored whilst hands on knees around Westminster gets wall to wall coverage compounds the mistrust many people have of politicians rather than resolving it.