

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? No apology for false allegation

The brilliant American writer and humorist Mark Twain once quipped: ?It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.?

Ontario Status of Women Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris thought she knew for sure that Tory Leader Patrick Brown was going to speak at a male-only private club ? perish the thought ? and she also thought she knew she could score a few cheap political points by being outraged and accuse him of sexism.

So, without further ado ? and under a huge full-color picture of herself and World War Three-size headlines in the Toronto Star ? the minister raged that, ?The decision to attend an event at a private all-men's club shows an appalling lack of judgment and insensitivity on Patrick Brown's part. Mr. Brown still has time to do the right thing and cancel this private event.?

The club which outraged her is called the Cambridge Club, a site, you may recall, where now federal Liberal minister Chrystia Freeland crashed in to protest a planned appearance by then Tory minister Joe Oliver during the last federal election. Oliver, withering under the criticism, canceled, but that didn't stop Freeland from using the opportunity to make herself appear as if she's a victim of the patriarchy. Some victim.

Meanwhile, back in Ontario politics, it took Ottawa Citizen columnist David Reevely to point out that, ah, Brown was not speaking at the Cambridge Club. Instead, his speech ? on ?Ontario's Affordability Crisis? ? was booked in a public restaurant attached to the Toronto Athletic Club in downtown Toronto. It was open to anybody, male or female, who wanted to pay \$40 to go listen to Brown's speech.

Reevely points out that club is affiliated with the aforementioned Cambridge Club through the corporate group called the ?Cambridge Group of Clubs,? but it is in ?a different building and has a different clientele. It's a corporate cousin . . . but is not the Cambridge Club.?

That little detail wasn't fooling Naidoo-Harris, however. She knows sexism when she sees it. While The Star's story did quote a Tory ? a quote which didn't really make the situation clear ? the Citizen quoted Tory deputy leader Steve Clark saying that Brown ?is not speaking at the Cambridge Club to a men's-only event.?

No matter, at least not to Naidoo-Harris. She says it's related to the Cambridge Club so, ?He's going to give a speech through a group that doesn't count women in . . . so he's sending a strong message that, in terms of how he regards Ontarians, he's leaving women out.?

Again, he wasn't leaving women out. Or men. It was a public event, unlike, dare we say it, all those cozy private events the Liberals had been doing before being shamed out of it, charging people thousands of dollars for private tete-a-tetes with the premier or various ministers.

A further irony in all this is that the Liberals have a campaign called ?Facts Still Matter In Ontario,? supposedly to root out the lies proffered by Tories and New Democrats. But the ?facts? about Brown's actual venue didn't seem to matter a whit to Naidoo-Harris. He's a man after all. And he's giving a speech. Surely that's enough to accuse him of sexism.

I would go one step further and suggest that even if Brown had been speaking to the male-only Cambridge Club, as falsely charged, so what?

Every time you speak to any group you can be accused of excluding all the rest of Ontarians who aren't invited. And ? dare we say it ? if you Google ?women-only clubs? in Toronto, you'll find dozens of them, from the high-end Verity Club (which features former prime minister Kim Campbell among its well-heeled members) ? to a whole series of women-only organizations such as the Toronto Professional Women's Meetup, the Young Women in Business, Toronto Chapter, and many others.

The idea of an all-women's club is exactly the same as those traditional all-male business clubs, i.e. to network in comfortable surroundings with members of your own sex and social status. Why is it ?sexist? when men do it, but perfectly wonderful and empowering when women do the same thing?

But that debate, of course, is beside the point here.

What counts in this space at the moment is that a minister of the Crown made a false accusation against the Leader of the Opposition and ? at the time of this writing at least ? there has been no apology and very little interest from the media outside of the Ottawa Citizen..

Imagine if Brown made a false accusation against Naidoo-Harris. They'd be publishing special editions to roast him.

