

CALGARY HERALD
PROUDLY CALGARY SINCE 1880

Calgary Herald: Ghomeshi case is a wake-up call

Published December 6, 2014 Also published in the *Vancouver Sun*, *Edmonton Journal* and *Windsor Star*
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Laying five charges against Jian Ghomeshi closes only the opening chapter in a scandal that began with his dismissal from the CBC and his own attempt to justify his sexual proclivities on Facebook. That justification comes down to one word: consent.

Amid all the discussion of the whole mess, a question remains: Why should consent as the standard for sexual behaviour succeed in minimizing harm when so many other standards, far more clear, have often failed?

Put differently, why are conservative sexual mores held in such disdain? In some places, CBC headquarters among them, the only thing less popular than non-consensual sex is the idea that sexual activity be reserved for marriage.

Pre-sexual revolution, consent came when you were prepared to commit for the long term, for life. In an era our grandparents knew (a.k.a. not so long ago) premarital and extramarital sex were viewed by common consensus as inappropriate, if not outright wrong.

Post-sexual revolution, consent is far easier to get. Yet today, arguably, we have more people hurting than ever before.

This is in part because consent is not enough to prevent pain. Ghomeshi is charged with sexual assault, a crime that is always indefensible. Many others have caused pain because they thought they had consent. Many consented to one act, but not another. There is little clarity, and the stakes of sex are too high for ambiguity to result in anything good.

One of the most harmful things about 21st century sexual morality is that it refuses to condemn anything that is not outright criminal, even though tremendous suffering is caused by immature, unkind and possibly immoral, but legal, behaviour.

Take the still-developing allegations among members of Parliament. If indeed the men in question forced their accusers to have sex, they have broken the law.

Yet, even if there was "only" confusion, if consent meant one thing to the men and another to the women, then there is something wrong with a culture that allows for such confusion over something so intimate, so often. Consent will fail where commitment to the whole person is absent.

Let's be clear: consensual adultery, promiscuity and BDSM are not illegal, nor should they be. But in the race to replace higher sexual standards with consensual hedonism, we have lost sight of the guidelines that define not what makes a criminal, but what makes a decent person.

Marriage as the sole appropriate context for sex is a high standard, and an imperfect one. Yet in theory, it demands commitment, not for a single encounter, but for a lifetime. It encourages respect and care not only for your partner's body, but also for their heart, mind and soul.

We may think it an impossible ideal, and nobody has ever argued that it is easily achieved. The question remains why those who aspire to it are consistently laughed out of town.

The courts will decide if Ghomeshi is guilty. If so, he is fully culpable for what he has done. Simultaneously, however, he is the product of a culture that belittles modesty and rolls its eyes at self-control. The stories that emerge of his non-sexual mistreatment of his co-workers, of casual arrogance and haughtiness, paint a picture of a star judged exclusively by his ratings, his popularity, his presence at the Gillers.

If he is genuinely perplexed to learn that abusing women sexually won't be tolerated, it is at least in part because harassing and degrading women carried no cost as long as his cool coefficient was sufficiently high.

It is time to truly rethink sexual ethics. At the very least, mocking idealistic sexual mores seems cruel, not compassionate, given the suffering of so many under our sexually liberated regime.

Andrea Mrozek and Rebecca Walberg are writing a book about the negative effects of the sexual revolution on women, men and families.

Read this article online at <http://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/mrozek-and-walberg-ghomeshi-is-proof-of-what-ails-society>

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