

Being a Better Ally: #IWD

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Sunday, March 08, 2015

<https://politicsrespun.org/2015/03/being-a-better-ally-iwd/>



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International Women's Day is a check-in point for me: I try to take stock of what has improved or worsened since last year. Doing so helps me be a better ally.

Our soul as a nation has suffered this past year. It has suffered from the continuing culture of rape and violence against women. The behaviour of the Dalhousie male dental students is just one more indicator of our continued dismissiveness and our neglect of dignity, though the process of restorative justice they're now participating in offers some hope.

The worst sign, by far, that things aren't getting better fast enough comes from our supreme leader, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper.

Last year, despite calls for a public inquiry into Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women, the prime minister ended 2014 by saying a public inquiry, "[Um it, it isn't really high on our radar, to be honest, Peter. You know, our ministers will continue to dialogue ah with ah those who are concerned about this.](#)"

I honestly believe him.

He could have tried to dodge the issue. He could have tried a non-answer. But ultimately, the communications wizards in the prime minister's office decided that he should tell the truth.

People who don't like the prime minister weren't surprised by the answer. People who do like him probably appreciated his honesty. And those who are sexist or racist likely respected his bravery in championing the Conservatives' continuing racist and sexist neglect of this national crisis. In 2015, the situation remains unchanged, with the government once again publicly stating it will not conduct an inquiry.

Another sign of the times lies in people's continued reluctance to identify as feminist. They fear an increasing backlash, and they fail to see how feminism assertively addresses systemic injustices, past and present. They fail to see how feminism untangles the nature of oppression, the kind that has normalized hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women in our society.

Though I've proudly identified as a feminist for decades, lately I've learned about complications that come from layered oppressions. For instance, what happens if you are a woman and suffer economic, social or political discrimination? And what if you also happen to be an Indigenous woman, who suffers from discrimination because of your heritage? Does one oppression "win," or do oppressions interact?

The academic term for this is intersectionality. Miriam Dobson, a professor of modern history at Sheffield University in England, provides one of the best illustrations of the term you'll find on the internet. In it, she describes intersectionality as "[the belief that oppressions are interlinked and cannot be solved alone.](#)"

So do Indigenous women address oppression as women or as Indigenous people? It's not a binary.

As an upper-middle income, white, straight, English-speaking, university educated, fully employed, able-bodied man, I represent the demographics of the dominant class in Canada. In fact, I share more entitlements in common with Stephen Harper, demographically not ideologically, than most other Canadians.

This disturbs me.

And it motivates me to be a better ally. Luckily there are resources for everyone, including people like me, whose demographic entitlements often impede my ability to be useful to people suffering discrimination and oppression.

One of the best ally resources around is a short video by YouTube comedian and activist Chescaleigh. Watch "[5 Tips for Being an Ally.](#)" [It's below, for your viewing convenience!]

If you're reading [Our Times magazine](#), you're already an ally. Way to go! But we could almost always be better allies. Chescaleigh's words encourage us to do just that. She defines an ally as "a person who wants to fight for the equality of a marginalized group that they are not a part of."

Being an ally is noble and altruistic. But it can also be condescending, arrogant and paternalistic if we're not careful. Thus, she provides these indispensable tips:

1. Understand your privilege.
2. Listen and do your homework.
3. Speak up, but not over.
4. You'll make mistakes; apologize when you do.
5. Ally is a verb.

Many of us could more effectively acknowledge and restrain our entitlements.

And since as allies we're helping others who have lived different lives from our own, we should ensure that our arrogance doesn't make us think we know it all already.

Entitled people often don't even know that people defer to them. How many times have you been in a group where women allow men to speak first?

Allies need to have humility: there are no alliances without humility. Allies need to acknowledge that we'll make mistakes: there is no growth without our changing unhelpful or damaging behaviours.

Once we've addressed Chescaleigh's first four tips, we must remember to be allies in action, not only in identification. One way I can do this is to discuss my understanding of intersectionality with people I am close to: the people I trust, the people who have my back, and the people who help me rise above more pathetic versions of me.

When we establish our role as an ally with our people, we set up relationships that make us accountable. This makes it easy for people to help us help others.

Chescaleigh speaks about her journey to becoming more conscious, about unpacking her own privilege, about redefining comedy for herself and using it in the service of social justice rather than to reinforce stereotypes of all kinds – something she calls out as “lazy” comedy. We are all on a similar journey. But while we can always be better allies, we can also better understand the dynamics of intersectionality.

If we don't, we risk oversimplifying our understanding of marginalized people. We cannot afford to be so ineffective.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dg86g-QIM0

This piece appears in the current issue of [Our Times](#) magazine.