

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's courtship of his wife, Chirlane McCray, has all the makings of a Hollywood romcom. They met in 1991 when she started working at New York City Hall. He — according to a 2013 New York Times profile on the story, a “lanky, bearded operative across the building” — was instantly attracted to her, but she had “zero interest” in him, or in any man, being a lesbian and a veteran of the black feminist movement to boot. So OK, maybe not a Hollywood film, maybe a Netflix series. But still. According to McCray, de Blasio “flirted with her mercilessly.” He called her nonstop and even tried to “steal an unwelcome kiss.” Once the relationship got into tentative motion, de Blasio pressed her to advance at a pace she was uncomfortable with. “I actually told him, ‘Slow this down,’ ” McCray told her interviewer. When he persisted, she ordered him to “back off.” He didn't. She called his behaviour sweetly persistent, but always respectful (--image--)

(--image--)

In the light of contemporary sexual politics, McCray felt compelled to later elaborate on her lighthearted revelations. Reframing her narrative, she said she did not push back against de Blasio “because he was in any way out of line.” Rather, she called his behaviour “sweetly persistent,” but “always respectful.” A thought experiment: say they didn't marry, because Chirlane remained uninterested, and in fact continued to consider de Blasio an annoying pest. In 1991, his seduction campaign would not have made her feel she was a “survivor” of vile misconduct. It was a different cultural moment. She would have finally told him to naff off, he would have naffed off, and she'd have got on with her life and career. Say now it's 27 years later, and memories have sharpened up and perspective shifted as the result of the #MeToo movement, and suddenly Chirlane is “woke” to the fact that hey, that de Blasio Lothario wasn't just a pest. Maybe he was waaaaay “out of line”; in fact his behaviour was so out of line that he should now resign his high position. (In revisiting the scenario, she might drop the “sweetly” and “always respectful.”) The exact same behaviour in a male can end with happy-ever-after for one guy, and public humiliation and sudden career death for another (--image--)

(--image--)

So, funny thing, male-female relations: the exact same behaviour in a male can end with happy-ever-after for one guy, and public humiliation and sudden career death for another. To be clear, I'm not talking here about behaviour that is Harvey-Weinstein-level abusive, or a demonstrable pattern of Jian-Gomeshi style harassment; that stuff is, or should be, dealt with by courts or institutional conduct codes governing penalties (often in place but observed in the breach, another problem entirely). It's de Blasio-ville where confusion reigns. Negotiating the sexual pitfalls of the workplace is clearly a bit of a crapshoot. Workplace sex is the only sport in town where any adult is eligible to play, but there are no protocols, no referees, the goalposts keep moving, and fouls are made up on the spot (or years later) by disgruntled players with no numbers on their jerseys. Penalties and suspensions are imposed by angry spectators, but only on the players of one team. This sport cries out for rules (--image--)

(--image--)

This sport cries out for rules. Such as: When dealing with non-criminal charges based entirely on subjective feelings of “discomfort,” allegations should be tabled within days or not at all. Ten years later? Please. Given the high stakes for the accused, it is unfair to give women the advantage of retrospective trauma for an “awkward” situation, while punishing men for their lack of retrospective cultural clairvoyance. Next: Enough with anonymous charges already. Anonymity is a court-assigned privilege. Media have no such obligation. Given the stakes for the accused, assigning anonymity to accusers is tantamount to taking a side in the now-powerful court of public opinion. And: Consider how sauce for the goose would taste before ladling out sauce for the gander. Note to former lawyer (now NDP leader) Jagmeet Singh: stop weighting the scales by calling everyone who accuses a male politician of misconduct a “survivor.” They are complainants. If a subordinate male “survivor” of unwanted sexual come-ons from a female boss (yes, it happens!) accused her publicly, he'd be named, and screams for “due process” would be bouncing off the walls. Christie Blatchford: For the accused men overtaken by the #MeToo tsunami, there is no recovery. Andrew Coyne: #MeToo's moment of reckoning is good, but it has its dangers too. As the French say, it is time to reset the clock of common sense on sexual misconduct in the workplace. Meanwhile, have you noticed that U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence, whose policy is never to be socially alone with a staffer, hasn't been accused of any impropriety? Everyone sneered when his self-imposed discipline came to light, but in this somewhat hysterical, often shark-jumping #MeToo moment, better safe than sorry as a motto for men with much to lose could, career-wise, be words to live by. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter:

