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TVO's Steve Paikin is in the clear, but Sarah Thomson's thinking is obscure

After investigation clears TVO's Steve Paikin of sexual harassment, Sarah Thomson's behaviour seems puzzling, writes Rosie DiManno.

 Steve Paikin, anchor of TVO's flagship current affairs program, The Agenda, and a married father of four, expressed relief, on Twitter, that a third-party investigation has cleared him of allegations he made an inappropriate sexual comment to a Toronto mayoral candidate.

MeToo. MeNotTrue.

Perhaps Sarah Thomson was seeking her close-up moment, her MeToo movement inclusion, because, Lord knows, she does crave the limelight, on a soupçon of substance.

That — a purported shunning by Steve Paikin, as host of TVO's *The Agenda* — was part and parcel of the publicity magpie's complaint, stemming from an allegation of inappropriate sexual cajoling on Paikin's part during a private 2010 luncheon at Grano restaurant.

Some 11 weeks after an independent third-party investigation was launched, Paikin, on Friday, was cleared of a pernicious accusation that had its genesis on social media, the pitchfork platform for so much damage that is never proven, but inevitably lives on, wedging into the minds of those who choose to believe what they believe and evidence be damned.

Read more:

[Steve Paikin cleared after investigation into allegation of inappropriate comment](#)

Not substantiated, in the legal parlance.

And therein lies the dilemma.

Because a man fingered for lechery can't really walk back his reputation, not in the surly tenor of these times.

All it takes is one assertion, one imputation of character, and the I-believe-you imbalance is established.

To TVO's admirable credit, broadcasting veteran Paikin didn't lose his job outright and wasn't taken off the air in the interim.

Institutional integrity is rare in this era.

But the harm from an allegation, wobbly and uncorroborated, following interviews with a wide-ranging cast of principals and supporting characters accrues to others with far more legitimate and verifiable grievances.

Thomson was not the best self-proclaimed victim to fly these colours. Many who've had dealings with the erratic flibbertigibbet, thrice a failed candidate for political office, could have told you that.

The alleged conversation between Thomson and Paikin from that luncheon 7½ years ago — Thomson: “Let’s talk about your show.” Paikin: “Let’s talk about you having sex with me” —was not confirmed by the third party at the table, a volunteer on Thomson’s mayoral campaign.

Granted, there were whopping inconsistencies between what this individual claimed in a follow-up email to Thomson and what he offered when interrogated by the independent investigator, Rachel Turnpenny. The credibility of this person left much to be desired, which, of course, swings both ways.

A “person who likely panders or seeks to appease based on his audience,” as described in the report released Friday.

Either he’d been wildly inaccurate, fundamentally deceitful, in an email to Thomson from Nov. 5, 2010: “He seemed so focused on trying to get you into bed with him that he didn’t give a shit that I was there. I think he just saw me as just your purse holder. Arrogant.” (That email, Thomson conceded, *may* have been sent at her solicitation.) Or he’d been attempting, in a subsequent Facebook Messenger exchange, to “play along” (his words), and, as stated in the report, “pander to” Thomson.

The witness, unidentified in the report, certainly recalled the occasion and the discussion, with Thomson at the time angling for face-time on The Agenda for her forthcoming candidacy in the provincial election. But to the gist of the allegation, the witness “maintains that nothing, as alleged by Thomson, occurred at that lunch. Specifically, (the witness) told the investigator that Paikin did not sexually proposition Thomson, did not engage in making a sexual advance/pass, and did not engage in sexual or inappropriate comments or jokes of anything along that vein.”

There went the bulk of Thomson’s I-have-a-witness declaration.

Nor did Thomson’s campaign manager, whom she allegedly texted or called when excusing herself from the table, have any recollection of such a communication.

As for Thomson’s contention that Paikin blackballed her from his show, because she’d been unreceptive to his advances, uh-uh. The indisputable record shows Thomson was a guest on the program almost a year later, an appearance she insists (belatedly) was

attributable to orchestration by the Liberal party. “The investigator has satisfied herself that Thomson’s belief in this regard is without foundation.”

Further, Paikin had minimal input into which guests were booked. Further still, a producer told Turnpenny that Thomson wasn’t invited back after the 2011 appearance because she’d engaged in unpredictable and “gimmicky” behaviour.

This, as any data search of media reports related to Thomson’s ubiquitous publicity gambits shows, was very much a Thomson pattern. Toss out an accusation — Rob Ford had groped her, in one alleged instance — and bask in the media maelstrom.

Contrary to tangential assertions, the investigator found that no one inside Thomson’s core 2010 mayoralty campaign team had any knowledge or recollection of her claims, allegedly shared with them after the luncheon.

And, nope, no evidence that Paikin, some two years later, made yet another unwanted advance on Thomson at a Liberal Party event. Thomson couldn’t provide any hotel receipts or expense records of even having attended such an occasion at which Paikin was present.

Yet Thomson cleaves to it, all of it.

She approached potential witnesses during the investigation, “in what appeared to be either a fishing expedition to secure other potential complainants against Paikin or to garner support for her recollection.” She “demonstrated a tendency to suggest to witnesses a version of events (in line with her own perspective) prior to their interviews with the investigator. And she didn’t sit down for her own first interview until early April, despite requests for an earlier meeting.

Maybe this was not the closer-look outcome that Thomson, CEO and publisher of an online publication, the Women’s Post, had anticipated when she initially posted in February, on that platform, a lengthy but cryptic lament about the unnamed talk show host trolling for sex, using his program as leverage. “In the years since he’s approached me several times, usually at political functions, to suggest we ‘sleep together’ and he always laughs about it. I wonder if he does this so that if he is ever

held to account he can claim he was only joking? ... How many women have not been invited back to his show simply because they won't sleep with him?"

Thomson subsequently sent an email directly to Paikin, essentially a threat. "Steve, I sincerely hope that you don't have to face the court of public opinion as I did with Rob Ford ... You have time to step down without having to face the public shaming that could come out as more women step forward. I can't control how the other women will want to handle their issues with you — they may want to expose you.

"My advice to you is to step down now, before this blows up. That is the right thing to do."

Paikin, who immediately disclosed the email to his employer, has categorically denied the allegations from the start.

In her own testimonial to the investigator, Thomson was "a complex complainant," says the report. "There is little doubt that Thomson genuinely believes that Paikin made a sexual advance and/or sexually propositioned her." But that claim, without any supporting evidence, was dubious.

"Ultimately, the investigator did not accept Thomson's assertion that Paikin, a seasoned journalist with an immense knowledge of politicians, would have conducted himself as alleged. Specifically, the investigator found it implausible that Paikin would flagrantly ask Thomson, in a public place, to sleep with him or have sex with him ... in the presence of Thomson's team member, who Paikin was meeting for the first time."

Adding: "The investigator has doubts surrounding Thomson's ability to accurately observe and recount the events in question. For example, she tended to make leaps without sufficient evidence to do so and she linked evidence without factual foundation. Thomson's evidence also veered towards being exaggerated and untrue."

Yet therein is the out-clause, seized upon by Thomson's lawyer, Saba Ahmad, who yesterday tweeted a statement on her client's behalf, which read in part: "The investigator did not believe Sarah Thomson because she was not open to considering the possibility of inappropriate conduct by Steve Paikin. Her statement reveals a lack

of objectivity; the same reasoning could be used to dismiss any allegation of inappropriate conduct against any man who enjoys a good reputation.”

That is emphatically not so.

The investigation was comprehensive, encompassing more than 20 witnesses apart from the principals.

Too easy to dismiss all that, wrapped in a shroud of righteousness, piggybacking on MeToo.

Don't like the outcome? Blame a conspiracy of offender-protectors.

On Friday, Paikin, married father of four, issued one slim tweet: “While the last 11 weeks have been pretty difficult, I'm relieved to read this report. My deepest thanks to all who believed me.”

What was it all about, Sarah?

Because there are only two options left: Mania or malice.

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