

Why the Mike Pence Dining Maxim is a Rule for Realists

As male heads [continue to roll](#) following claims of workplace sexual harassment, so strategies and rules for reforming men's behaviour towards female co-workers multiply. In the [US Congress](#) there will be revisions of sexual harassment awareness training; everywhere, there is talk of streamlining complaints procedures, mandatory counselling, new rules about mediation, financial settlements, legal action, and so on. It's mostly about making men pay for bad behaviour until they get the message.

The one rule that is not on the agenda of most reformers is the so-called Pence rule. On the face of it this is strange. Vice-President Mike Pence, taking his cue long ago from Billy Graham, has made it a rule not to eat alone with a woman or attend an event where alcohol is being served unless his wife is present. According to [a 2015 report](#), some politicians will not travel alone in a car with a female staffer; others exclude any staff from the office before 7am or after 7pm.

What could be more obvious as a way to prevent powerful men with a sense of entitlement from molesting women in the workplace than to minimise dealings between him and her alone?

Has Mike Pence been accused of sexual harassment? No. Have others with similar rules appeared among the lists of the shamed? Not that we've heard – and we most certainly would have if any such hypocrites could be found. So it works. Even *The Atlantic's* liberal black writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, [subscribes](#) to it.

But feminists and other liberals will have none of it.

Back in March when the Pence rule first hove into public view,

a female legal scholar [wrote in Vox](#) that it was “clearly illegal” under sex discrimination law (Title VII). “By law, working dinners with the boss could be considered an opportunity to which both sexes must have equal access,” Joanna L. Grossman opined. The Pence rule could be traced to a gender-based stereotype (for example, “that women are temptresses”) and would “cost women professionally” by cutting them off from “potentially productive business interactions.” The charge of “illegal” no doubt scared a few men off.

Following the Weinstein revelations, however, a few men invoked the rule as preventive of Weinstein-like behaviour. Vox (which, a few days later, had to [sack its own editorial director](#), Lockart Steele, for sexual misconduct) [attacked it again](#). It was “a completely self-serving maxim, designed to protect men against women,” doubling for powerful men as “avoidance of the appearance of scandal” while depriving women of career-building “access to good mentors and peers,” a “system that penalises women for existing.” The charge of heartless pharasaism was intended to shame the likes of Mike Pence.

Not to be outdone, a former editor of *Christianity Today*, writing in the *New York Times*, denounced the Graham-Pence rule as [not even Christian](#) for its lack of charity towards women. Citing her own experience, Katelyn Beaty said that finding two men instead of one at a business breakfast meeting made her “acutely aware that my existence as a woman was a problem that needed to be managed in a public setting.” Another anecdote about a man who would not enter the hotel room of an incapacitated female colleague to carry out her bag for her showed just how pedantic and mean these rule-bound characters could be.

Beaty, however, has a problem making her case against a rule identified with conservative Christian men, because a man who is apparently not conservative or religious at all, Ta-Nehisi Coates, has [already said](#) this:

"I've been with my spouse for almost 15 years. In those years, I've never been with anyone but the mother of my son. But that's not because I am an especially good and true person. In fact, I am wholly in possession of an unimaginably filthy and mongrel mind. But I am also a dude who believes in guard-rails, as a buddy of mine once put it. I don't believe in getting "in the moment" and then exercising will-power. I believe in avoiding "the moment." I believe in being absolutely clear with myself about why I am having a second drink, and why I am not; why I am going to a party, and why I am not. I believe that the battle is lost at Happy Hour, not at the hotel. I am not a "good man." But I am prepared to be an honorable one."

So Beaty acknowledges that "there's wisdom in married people avoiding settings that naturally cultivate attraction" and that "Alcohol and isolation put otherwise honourable people in precarious situations," but she dismisses the relevance of the Pence rule to Weinsteinian behaviour on the basis that the latter is about "power" and not, by implication, about run-of-the-mill Coates-style "moral vulnerability" (which, in all fairness, must include women, mustn't it?).

Now, what exactly is wrong with taking your moral vulnerability seriously, especially if you have a wife and children, or a husband and children, at home?

"The Pence rule arises from a broken view of the sexes: Men are lustful beasts that must be contained, while women are objects of desire that must be hidden away. Offering the Pence rule as a solution to male predation is like saying, "I can't meet with you one on one, otherwise I might eventually assault you." If that's the case, we have far deeper problems around men and power than any personal conduct rule can solve."

Here Beaty hits on a fundamental truth, but then denies it by

resorting to caricature. The truth is that the sexes *are* broken. It goes back to the Garden of Eden and the Fall, and all of history, especially the last few decades, testifies to it. Just think of how divorce rates have sky-rocketed and marital commitment declined. Men and women can love unselfishly and faithfully only with a lot of effort and – on a Christian view of things – heavenly assistance.

The Pence rule is realistic; it recognises that men and women do “tempt” one another, without even trying. It’s the law of attraction, which is a biological and social imperative, but not something to be cultivated in the workplace and professional relationships. The idea that you can throw men and women together in close proximity and not have any rules about sexual expression other than “consent” is either naïve or deceitful.

There are a number of areas, such as dress codes and speech, where more formal etiquette would improve the working environment for both men and women (although US gymnast Gabby Douglas was twitter-shamed last week for saying that women should “[dress modestly](#),” and “be classy” so as not to attract “the wrong crowd.”) However, the Pence rule takes a necessary further step.

In discouraging situations where a man – especially, let’s concede, a “powerful” man (the boss, supervisor...) – and a woman are alone together, particularly if it’s on a regular basis, it is not simply a self-serving ordinance that suits certain men. It protects everyone: women, men, the company, the family at home, and indeed society at large since the costs of bad behaviour often spread that far.

But what about that all that mentoring that women will miss out on if they cannot have dinner alone with the boss, or travel with him, or work late at the office with him?

Well, girls, be creative. If that is what it takes to get

ahead at the moment, isn't it time the system changed? Shouldn't you be promoted on your competence, your performance? If it takes wheeling and dealing and gossiping and impressing the boss with your incisive insights over dinner, isn't that just as likely to work against you as for you? Remember, there will likely be others in line for the same treatment. And what advice can he have for you that he would not share with anyone else?

Women account for at least half the workforce today. Many are in senior positions. But even where they are not so powerful, if they showed the same candour and solidarity in the workplace as they are showing now at #metoo, they could reform the old boys club rules for career advancement overnight.

That they are instead, in 2017, fighting a rearguard action against sexual harassment, shows that something very important is missing from the current model of women's empowerment. That something is realism about sexuality and how its expression should be regulated in the workplace, and elsewhere in the public sphere. The Pence rule addresses that gap and it should not be dismissed on specious grounds.

—

Carolyn Moynihan is deputy editor of MercatorNet. This [article](#) has been republished from MercatorNet under a Creative Commons license.

[Image Credit: Flickr-Gage Skidmore [\(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)]