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OPINION

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OUR VIEWS

Culture at Oregon Capitol needs review

A scathing report about sexual harassment in the Oregon Capitol is both deeply disturbing and deeply flawed.

Legislative leaders must take its concerns seriously, instead of focusing on its shortcomings so as to protect their reputation. Regardless of what Senate President Peter Courtney, Speaker Tina Kotek and others say, they failed to adequately address sexual harassment through meaningful training, effective monitoring and swift action against offenders.

They are not alone. State archives show that lawmakers as far back as the 1990s struggled with how to address sexual harassment. The slight progress made since then is demoralizing.

A state Bureau of Labor and Industries' Civil Rights Division report issued last week found substantial evidence of unlawful employment practices based on sex. Critics of the report will say that is no surprise, because the investigation was instigated through a complaint filed by the head of BOLI, Brad Avakian.

Indeed, much of the report does read as if it were designed to reach a pre-ordained conclusion. Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, who like Sen. Sara Gelser had filed a sexual harassment complaint against Sen. Jeff Kruse, said she was not interviewed by the BOLI investigators and disagreed with their conclusions. The failure to talk with Steiner Hayward and some other key figures is odd and diminishes the investigators' findings.

AP Photo/Andrew Selsky, File

This Jan. 11, 2018, file photo, shows dark clouds hovering over the Capitol in Salem.

But the overall issues raised in the report remain valid.

The report was released just days before Avakian's term as BOLI commissioner ended. That leaves it up to his successor, Val Hoyle, to recommend any sanctions, including whether interns who were sexually harassed should receive compensation.

A Capitol work environment can be toxic because of the overwhelming imbalance of power. Everyone wants to gain the approval of elected officials and is expected to treat them deferentially. People have the valid fear they will be marginalized — politically, professionally and socially — if they complain.

"I believe harassment is based on power," lawyer P.K. Runkles-Pearson told Kotek, Courtney and other members of a legislative committee last month. "It starts with the power associated with privilege. …

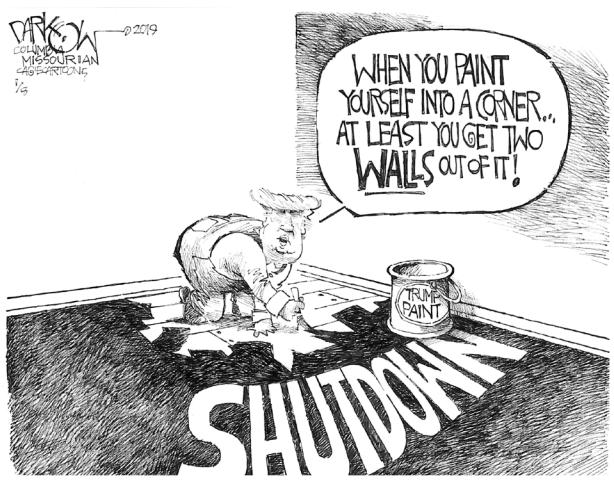
"Enhanced power relationships inherently make it difficult for anyone to make waves. And this includes victims of harassment, those who observe harassment and those who are charged with addressing harassment."

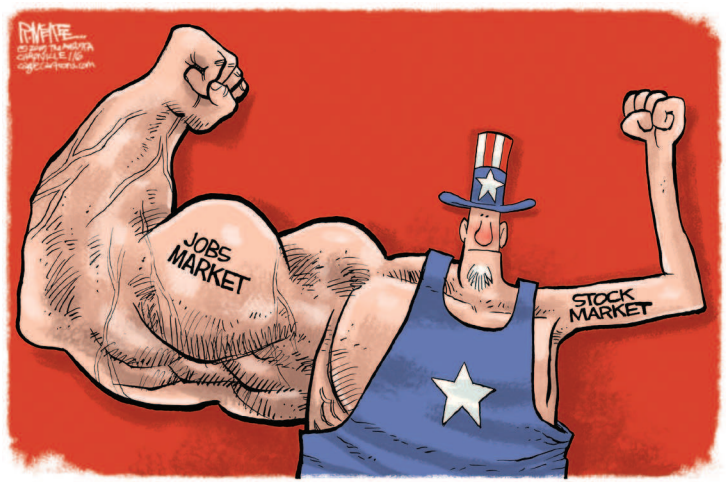
Courtney and Kotek had asked the Oregon Law Commission to recommend improvements in how the Legislature dealt with sexual harassment. Runkles-Pearson chairs that work group. Its upcoming report — a draft was released last month — calls for a complete change in Capitol culture and offers a series of recommendations.

There is no justification whatsoever for sexual harassment of any form or in any place or against any person. Yet there are those in the Capitol, including some legislators, who still seem to believe in "Boys will be boys," "Go along to get along" and "Quit your whining!" It will be difficult, but imperative, to help them understand what sexual harassment actually is and how it affects the victims.

"The way you change culture is that you have people in power show that they want the environment to change," Runkles-Pearson said.

So true. Instead of arguing whether the Capitol was or was not a hostile workplace, legislative leaders must ensure it is not one. Update the rules, overhaul the training and start to change the culture so the Oregon Capitol truly is a harassment-free environment for everyone.





OTHER VIEWS

Why 2018 was the best year in human history

NICHOLAS KRISTOF
COMMENT

The world is, as everyone knows, going to hell, but there's still the nervous thrill of waiting to see precisely which dark force will take us down. Will the economy collapse first, the ice sheets melt first, or chaos and war envelop us first?

So here's my antidote to that gloom: Let me try to make the case that 2018 was actually the best year in human history.

Each day on average, about another 295,000 people around the world gained access to electricity for the first time, according to Max Roser of Oxford University and his Our World in Data website. Every day, another 305,000 were able to access clean drinking water for the first time. And each day an additional 620,000 people were able to get online for the first time.

Never before has such a large portion of humanity been literate, enjoyed a middle-class cushion, lived such long lives, had access to family planning or been confident that their children would survive. Let's hit pause on our fears and frustrations and share a nanosecond of celebration at this backdrop of progress.

On a dirt road in rural Angola a few years ago, I met a woman named Delfina Fernandes who had lost 10 children, out of 15; she had endured perhaps the greatest blow any parent can, and she had suffered it 10 times.

Yet such child deaths are becoming far less common. Only about 4 percent of children worldwide now die by the age of 5. That's still horrifying, but it's down from 19 percent in 1960 and 7 percent in 2003.

Indeed, children today in Mexico or Brazil are less likely to die by the age of 5 than American children were as recently as 1970.

The big news that won't make a headline and won't appear on television is that 15,000 children died around the world in the last 24 hours. But in the 1990s, it was 30,000 kids dying each day.

Perhaps it seems Pollyannish or tasteless to trumpet progress at a time when there is so much butchery, misrule and threat hanging over us. But I cover the butchery and misrule every other day of the year, and I do this annual column about progress to try to place those tragedies in perspective.

One reason for this column is that journalism is supposed to inform people about the world, and it turns out that most Americans (and citizens of other countries, too) are spectacularly misinformed.

For example, 9 out of 10 Americans say in polls that global poverty is worsening or staying the same, when in fact the most important trend in the world is arguably a huge reduction in poverty. Until about the 1950s, a majority of humans had always lived in "extreme poverty," defined as less than about $2 a person per day. When I was a university student in the early 1980s, 44 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty.

Now, fewer than 10 percent of the world's population lives in extreme poverty, as adjusted for inflation.

Likewise, Americans estimate that 35 percent of the world's children have been vaccinated. In fact, 86 percent of all 1-year-olds have been vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

"Everyone seems to get the world devastatingly wrong," Dr. Hans Rosling, a brilliant scholar of international health, wrote in "Factfulness," published in 2018, after his death. "Every group of people I ask thinks the world is more frightening, more violent and more hopeless — in short, more dramatic — than it really is."

I suspect that this misperception reflects in part how we in journalism cover news. We cover wars, massacres and famines, but are less focused on progress.

In the last year, I've covered atrocities against the Rohingya in Myanmar, starvation in Yemen, climate change in Bangladesh, refugees and child marriage at home, and some of the world's worst poverty, in Central African Republic. All those stories deserve more attention, not less. But I never wrote columns or newsletters about three nations that registered astounding progress against authoritarianism and poor governance in 2018, Armenia, Ethiopia and Malaysia.

It is of course true that there are huge challenges ahead. The gains against global poverty and disease seem to be slowing, and climate change is an enormous threat to poor nations in particular. And the United States is an outlier, where life expectancy is falling, not rising as in most of the world.

So there's plenty to fret about. But a failure to acknowledge global progress can leave people feeling hopeless and ready to give up. In fact, the gains should show us what is possible and spur greater efforts to improve opportunity worldwide.

Every other day of the year, go ahead and gnash your teeth about President Donald Trump or Nancy Pelosi, but take a break today (remember, just for a nanosecond!) to recognize that arguably the most important thing in the world now is not Trumpian bombast. Rather, it may be the way the world's poorest and most desperate inhabitants are enjoying improved literacy and well-being, leading to a day when no mom will again lose 10 children.

Nicholas Kristof, who grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill, Oregon, is a columnist for the New York Times.