

The strange allure of Ms. Marsden

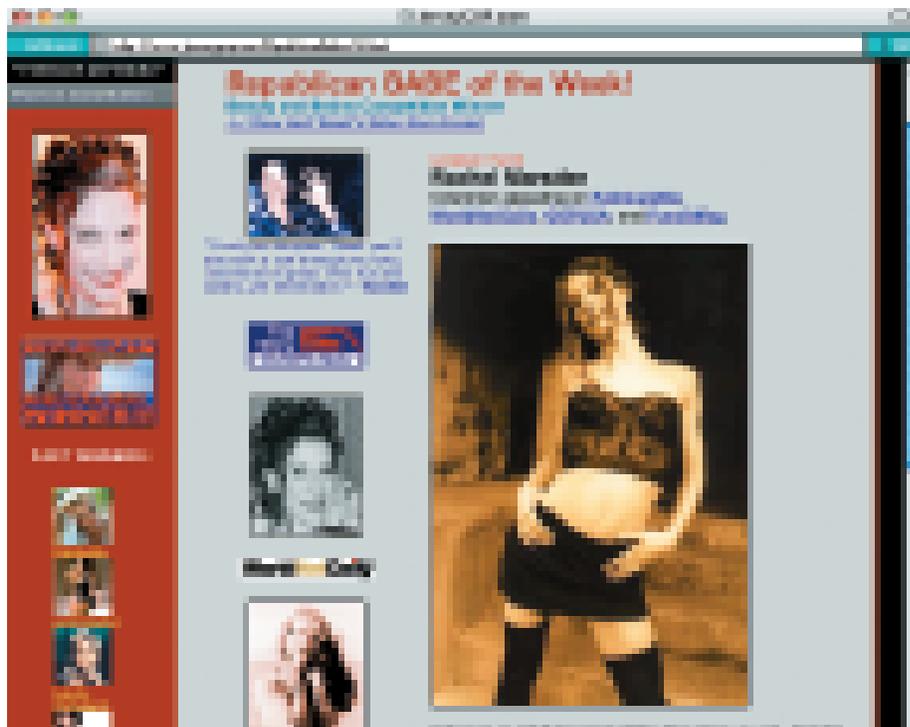
How does a serial stalker, convict and fraud artist end up Canada's hottest young conservative pundit? Quite easily, actually

KEVIN STEEL

If ever the saying “there’s no such thing as bad publicity” applied to anyone, it would apply to Rachel Marsden. After all, the thirtysomething brunette with the TV movie good looks has overcome a lot of, er, obstacles to get where she is today—the newest twice-weekly columnist for the *National Post* and the official voice for Canadian conservatives on the number one Fox News Channel in the U.S. Before she was penning newspaper content, Marsden was busy making headlines. Among other things, she’s been convicted of being a stalker, she caused a scandal at a B.C. university after making false rape accusations, and she was busted last year working for an MP under a fake name. Each time, Marsden has bounced back even stronger than ever. Her latest incarnation—as a vociferous, right-wing, pro-Bush, Muslim-bashing, Anne Coulter knock-off—has lefty media insiders tittering over the state of conservative commentary in Canada. And, for that very reason, more than a few conservatives wishing that she would just go away.

Within 48 hours after her June 1 debut column appeared, Marsden was being interviewed on CTV Newsnet and Fox’s *O’Reilly Factor*. But while Marsden seems determined to remain high-profile in spite of her dishonourable past—in addition to frequent appearances on *O’Reilly*, she’s been on CNBC’s *Dennis Miller Live*, and her website claims she’s worked for network news in the U.S., has acted as a “political consultant,” and written for *United Press International* and *The Washington Times*—she wouldn’t return calls requesting an interview for this story. And while media outlets often eagerly publicize new celebrity columnists, senior staff at the *Post* weren’t interested in talking up their latest “get” at all. “I regret I cannot comment on personnel decisions,” was the only statement (by e-mail) from comment editor Jonathan Kay.

Then again, *Post* insiders know well the walking controversy that is Rachel Marsden: the same newspaper ran an exposé on Marsden only a couple of



Despite a history of stalking and false rape accusations, Marsden positions herself as a right-wing sex kitten. The extensive portfolio of boudoir photos available on her website until recently led to her being named “Republican Babe-of-the-Week” by this New Jersey website

years earlier, zeroing in on how she padded her resumé—including her website’s claim that “her work” had appeared in the *National Post*. It turned out that Marsden had once had a letter to the editor published. That’s it. Further examination revealed that wasn’t the only embellishment on her bio. There was no evidence that she had ever worked for network news in New York. Meanwhile, Marsden’s allusion to a career as a “political strategist” likely refers to the time she was a volunteer on the re-election campaign of Surrey, B.C., MP Gurmant Grewal. That is, until she was discovered working under a false name—“Elle Henderson”—and was forced to resign. (In a poetic twist of fate, Marsden was invited on the CTV show to discuss the controversy engulfing Grewal after he taped conversations with senior Liberals trying to bribe him to vote with them.)

Peter Worthington, founder of the Sun chain of newspapers and senior columnist

with the *Toronto Sun*, says he’s puzzled by the hiring. “She’s good-looking, she’s articulate, but she’s nine miles of bad road,” he says. “You might want to live dangerously, and they seem to have decided they want to do that.” He admits the *Sun* has lived to regret its share of strange hires and is willing to give his rivals the benefit of the doubt that maybe they’ve made a mistake. But, he warns, “the editor better not be in a room alone with her—she has a lethal reputation.”

That reputation began in 1996, when Marsden publicly accused Liam Donnelly, a swim coach at Simon Fraser University, where she was enrolled, of sexual harassment. After an investigation—which Donnelly boycotted—the coach was fired and publicly censured by SFU. The story made national news, but later, Donnelly was able to prove that, in fact, things were the other way around: Marsden had been stalking him. In July 1997, he was reinstated. Just days later

Marsden contacted the CBC and went on *The National* to accuse Donnelly of rape. The charge was false, but the episode became such a scandal for SFU that the university's president resigned, citing stress. Marsden was unfazed and unapologetic. Of the fallout, she told a reporter: "Fifty per cent of people want to sleep with me, and the other 50 per cent want to kill me." (Marsden has long cultivated a highly sexualized image. Her website, until very recently, contained near-pornographic images of the columnist in skimpy lingerie, as well as photos of celebrity Julia Roberts with Marsden's face digitally superimposed over the star's.) A few years later, she was warned by RCMP to stop harassing SFU criminology professor and author Neil Boyd.

In 2002, Marsden was arrested and charged with criminal harassment for repeatedly phoning and e-mailing a former lover, Michael Morgan, then a 52-year-old Vancouver radio personality. Search warrant documents obtained by the Vancouver *Province* alleged that Marsden threatened to publicly humiliate

Morgan with nude photos she had taken of him and documents she had stolen from his office. She had also harassed his former girlfriend and her daughter. Just last year, Marsden pled guilty. A B.C. judge ordered her to keep out of trouble and sentenced to her to 12 months probation, which she is still serving.

Though editors at the *National Post* may not be commenting, the paper's journalists—in a profession where a history of fraud and deception is usually a guaranteed career-killer—are less than thrilled to see their bylines on the same page as Marsden's. The *Post*, after all, has taken a hard line on misrepresentations in the past: last year they dropped high-profile columnists Elizabeth Nickson and Gillian Cosgrove for fudging the facts. Nickson had reprinted a paragraph that had appeared on a U.S. magazine's website without properly giving attribution, while a Cosgrove column about Governor General Adrienne Clarkson had "fundamental errors and intentional misrepresentations" according to the *Post's* official retraction and apology.

Serious business—but surely nothing compared to going on national TV with false claims of rape. One writer still at the paper sums up the newsroom's feelings this way: "Two words: uniform embarrassment. It's just amazing that any employer would take a risk on, and associate its credibility with, somebody with such a record of cruelty and hysteria."

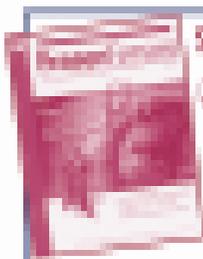
More important than the embarrassment Marsden may be causing her colleagues, is the damage she'll do the cause of conservatives, warns Margaret Went, columnist for *The Globe and Mail* for the last 18 years. Went says Marsden's attempt to mimic the bulldog rhetoric of Coulter can only make matters worse. "The job of the Canadian right at the moment is to reach out to wary Ontarians," says Went—who says she considers herself a conservative. She's convinced that Canadian centrists "would rather cut their throats than vote for the Liberals again." But, she says, most Canadians "are simply not convinced that the right has shed itself of its lunatics—and here's one." **WS**

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