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Where to from here for feminism?

Change seemed so simple in the somewhat revolutionary two decades (1960-70) that followed the post-war adjustment period. Then major political and social changes seemed not only desirable, but possible. The seventies in Australia built on the widespread radicalism, and we were all in there and making some significant differences.

We were optimistic, despite the threat of a 'hot' cold war with possible nuclear annihilation, as we believed that political activism and the growing power of the state could fix the world's inequities. Our political engagement would achieve more equitable and more civil societies that would ensure the system no longer allocated privileges via class, ethnicity, race or gender biases.

My main involvement then was in the growing women's movement, in particular in the newly formed Women's Electoral Lobby (1972), which pushed for political change. We saw the expanding power of the state as offering options to ensure rights and social well-being for those who were not sharing the benefits of the post-war boom. Women had been broadly engaged in wartime, but were again excluded, and we wanted to be *included*. We felt we could undermine entrenched power by political campaigns offering alternatives. It wasn't all that easy, but the next decade or two saw our efforts bring major changes in laws and programs that meant we had been able to ameliorate many of the obvious differences.

In the early days, we had many debates about reform versus revolution, but this was more about means than ends. Feminists then were more likely to identify with the women's liberation movement, as we saw ourselves as more radical than the relatively modest ambitions of earlier feminisms. If we were not all committed to the revolution we were certainly about changing what was valued and how women's stuff rated. We wanted to put the feminised parts of our world onto the public agenda, to break the dominance of male interests.

We wanted to share the power for making big decisions so we could redefine what was valued and rewarded. We recognised the need to shift the way that jobs were allocated and valued, paid and unpaid. We demanded the same rights as men, but intended to do things differently. Our version of equality was not to become like men but to reorganise the structure. Our feminism wanted to make a good society that did not allocate rewards and controls on the basis of gender or gender biases. This was to be a radical revamp, not just some adjustments that let us share space on the current gravy train.

While this was obviously a long term dream, many were happy to start by removing the barriers that stopped women accessing jobs, higher pay and more power. We did a lot: we removed the many legal barriers and discriminatory laws, equalled pay for the same jobs, controlled our fertility more effectively, put domestic and sexual violence on the public crime agendas, and increased the education levels of women till they exceeded those of men. And there was evidence of attitudinal change so we assumed that progress, although slow, was inevitable. We were wrong!

By the eighties times were changing and so was the political climate, in ways that would seriously affect our analysis and hopes. The gradual decline and overthrow of the Soviet controlled communist states undermined the argument for increased government activity, but we hoped for the continued growth of the interventionist post-war welfare state. However such options were lost as a paradigm shift took social well being off the political agenda. This change came because the political context that nurtured radical change, including our second wave women's movement, was based on continuing progress and growth. These beliefs were undermined when the oil shocks of the seventies created globalised capital movements which no longer needed their nation state bases. By the mid-eighties, the new globalised corporations were imposing limits on the states that taxed them. This raised the status of market economics in its neo-liberal form as the dominant political driver of an extraordinary shift to globalised gross market materialism, based on individualised self interest.

This change undermined the various movements fighting for liberation of diverse populations, as these sought reform collectively in their claims and campaigns, and so were not a good fit for the individualism of 'economically rational man'. His basic assumption was that economic growth came from freeing up markets, and this didn't fit with employing state interventions to create equity. The changes created a serious dilemma for politically active feminists, who had achieved some traction in government funding e.g. various 'women's services', as well as success in removing formal gender barriers. There were elements of superficial similarity between some liberation rhetoric and the 'individual freedom' mantra of neo-liberal markets, which we thought might allow the use of the language of the market to push for progress, via a focus on individual women.

There has not been any analysis of why this shift contributed to the current loss of traction for feminist political options. There has been surprisingly limited discussion in feminist circles over the past two decades about what has been happening, and how to counter it. Were our original intention watered down? Why are there so few questions on the possible reasons for the stalled social progress which has, in some areas, reversed.

We have had relatively small wins and some societal changes that belatedly addressed claims we made in the seventies. There are many public feminist debates on services such as domestic violence, and sexism in media representation and images, but few discussions address political and social changes. So few of us seem to have noticed that since the early nineties there has not been much to celebrate, while there is some evidence that we may be losing some of what we have gained.

I'm not going to give the figures, but will mention a few troubling areas:

- Education rates are up but progress into senior employment ranks has stalled.
- The wages gap moves up and down but is little better than the early eighties.
- We have a sprinkling of very senior women in top positions, but they seem to squeeze through flaws in the glass ceiling rather than cracking the barriers. They are often one-offs and not followed by other women in most cases, for example some state Premiers and maybe the PM. I don't get the point of state Premiers and the PM ??
- The very macho workplace cultures of long hours have, in fact, got worse, and most part-timers are still not seen as serious workers.
- Motherhood is rarely compatible with high career options.

- Gender is still very much a classifier of who you are, what you do, and how much power you acquire.

Some of what we wanted has been co-opted and distorted. Equal Employment Opportunity for example, wasn't about putting more women in top positions, but about infiltration, change and takeover. That tactic has been lost as we note the capacity of institutions to resist entry from those who want to transform cultures and structures. Another area is Gender Studies, which was about transforming disciplines and redefining knowledge, not building up a new academic speciality. The boys' clubs have won out in almost every area, and the presence of some limited numbers of women in high posts only serves to show how adaptable some of us have become.

Women are seen as a special interest group whose issues are not of general significance. Most of the policies we wanted included in the mainstream are still defined as 'women's issues', so child care and other carer services are not general policies unless they free women to enter paid work. Shorter working hours are for women and sookie men. If we 'choose' to continue to do unpaid work we are not seen as productive, because this is not counted economically. Young educated women plan to delay their childbearing because they need to be child-free to establish a paid working life. They know that they cannot combine making a career and bringing up kids. These examples make it clear we are still the second and less important sex.

Government payments are sexist when they fail to recognise the more limited earning capacity of those with dependent children. These are not assessed on individual income, but on combined couple incomes as top-ups. This creates disincentives for the 'second' income earner. The main income support payments also fail to recognise the value of time spent on many socially valuable unpaid work such as parenting, informal care of others, and other activities that make people feel good. This failure to value social contributions leads to bad policies such as cutting income in order to pressure sole parents into paid work once their youngest child turns eight. It is also stupid policy because most of those sole parents cut were already in part time paid work and were using the parenting payment to top up the low pay many face from jobs that fit kids' needs. The idea of ongoing subsidies for those who offer unpaid services in a range of roles needs to be part of non-sexist income support.

The design of the current Labor Government's structure of public paid parental leave is another example of how women's activities are undervalued compared to men's. Offering all eligible recipients the same minimum wage means parents (mothers?) and employers know this is not *real* leave, because real leave pay relates to their normal pay. It is clearly a government welfare payment, as clearly stated by the Ministerⁱ. This means our expectation, that parental leave would normalise the rights of parents who are also paid workers, has been undermined. If we are to break down the image of good workers as those without family responsibilitiesⁱⁱ, we have a long way to go.

What did we do wrong? Mea culpa! I remember writing up child care policies and leaving out the community aspects, emphasising only the cost savings if more mothers would work. We changed our rhetoric to show how women contributed economically, but failed to recognise that extra time for women in a macho model workforce was problematic. Hours for full time workers lengthened over the nineties and are now well over the 35 hour week. What happened to the idea of cutting weekly hours even further? If we want to make better use of women's skills, we need to make the

necessary adjustments to hours so that all of us, men and women, have time to parent, care and contribute unpaid work.

Neo-liberalism, in theory, is not gendered, but is motivated by the deeply sexist assumption that human nature is powered by 'rational' self interest. As economics is basically about the distribution of material goods and/or their symbolic equivalents, it fails to deal with emotions, connections, beliefs, altruism, etc. Its origins are trade and ownership of capital which created much of the industrial revolution that clearly separated the domestic and communal from commerce, politics and nation states. The only concern of family and community maybe the role of producing future workers. Those aspects of society, such as relationships, obligations, feelings and nurture are not covered unless they are traded. So we can understand how social issues lose traction in politics and policy.

One recent critic of the neo-liberal paradigm, Michael Sandelⁱⁱⁱⁱ (in both his 2009 Reith lectures and his visit to the Sydney Writers Festival) shows how the limits of our market societies are undermining the non-economic values in our policy and political debates. He describes how moving from the market economy to the market society damages politics by the overemphasis on using money as the measure in decision making, rather than including other values or ethical criteria. He shows how market based trading assumptions use limited value-neutral, commodified goods and services to inform decision-making on the basis of profit. In sum, the market models leave out what is important to most of us: the social relations that give our lives meaning and a sense of who we are.

So my priority now is to work out how we can put social well-being back on priority lists, with appropriate updates. So I wonder whether we diluted our strong case by reframing feminist change as polite requests for equality on current economic (male) terms? Probably we did, so I think we need to go back to Glen Tomasetti's anthem of the seventies '*Don't be too polite girls,*' and redevelop our arguments.

Now that the GFC has shown up obvious market and governmental failures, I want to see feminist leadership in the debates about alternative futures. *We need to push for a good society, not just a growing economy!* We need to lead with some serious radical ideas to undermine the continuing dominant machismo which ignores the social side of life: the soft skills, social glue, values, feelings, mutuality, love etc, all of which fail to fit into the crude market monetarised model.

Feminism has always been a broad movement which attempted to make the personal political, but now it seems to have shrunk when much feminist activism makes the political personal. Individual political efforts and personal protests are evidence of the fracturing of society. Sexist encounters and body images are important; but there is a need to recognise that the power structures supporting these manifestations are part of the problem. The protest movements that have emerged against sexist media and attitudes need to ask *why* sexism is not only rife, but seemingly more acceptable than it was.

There will obviously be different choices for women activists, and there are obviously changes to the priorities that feminists will set over time. However, I am concerned that the lack of wider political agendas put our limited gains at risk. More importantly, feminist leadership should offer alternatives to the possible macho directions that are now on the agenda. We want our versions of gender-fair social issues put on the political agenda, because the signs are that any revolt

against neo-liberalism may involve much more conservative values. If we look at some of the signs from the UK and Europe, the conservative racist right is doing well, and the response from groups like Blue Labour is back to promoting more conservative social values and an emphasis on paid workers only. The rise of a range of fundamentalisms, and conservative values as a partial response to non-values of markets, suggests it is imperative we can offer feminist alternatives to backward looking nostalgia for past roles and values.

We need to devise a good society that doesn't depend on traditional gender roles and seek out new options. Interestingly George Megalogenis^{iv} has looked at the changes in industry employment and points out it is the service areas that are growing in importance as manufacture and mining fade, so our assumed feminised skill base deserves more attention

We must promote alternative feminist ways of looking at society and our future. We need to move beyond just being critics to actually proposing the changes we want. Step one is making it clear that it is society that counts as our priority, and the economy just pays for it.

So what can we do to re-start a feminist revolution?

Some immediate policy proposals

From my Hoopla piece

days we work so we can spend more time on what we want to do, need to do and can do. Time can't expand so let's work out how to manage a 24/7 society and economy!

Change long hours work cultures: Being there doesn't necessarily mean doing something! Just offering flexibility or the right to request shorter hours to carers and family oriented people is career costly, and that is why few men take it on. So let's work out how to give everyone more time by cutting the working week to 32 hours (four days or five shorter ones).

Shorter working hours will redistribute paid work to more people, allow more home production, cut living costs and offer time for community, family and friends. Costs would be minimised as evidence shows that part-timers usually produce more output per hour worked than full-timers. Shorter paid working hours can offer social benefits at little economic cost, and if productivity rises, so will pay!

Change how skills are valued: We must fix the gender pay gap. The Productivity Commission should ?? show that good people skills are both desirable and high level, and should attract higher pay. Dealing with people requires more skill than inanimate money or machines. As most industrial male technical skills are out of date, it is time to stop the gendered biases against 'female' identified jobs. Maybe, if we raise child care pay, more men will do it!

Fund child care as a public service, like schooling: What happened to quality neighbourhood community children's service that took in kids for the hours they and their parents needed? The early years are the time when kids learn most so they need good quality, communal affordable, if not free, centres. So let's start direct subsidies to the services which meet various local needs: more spaces for babies, flexible hours, located where and when needed, plus more services for school kids too!

Provide non-judgmental out-of-paid-work payments: This will allow everyone, including those excluded from paid jobs, to contribute. Time out of the workforce can make space for social contributions across the life cycle – children, family or friends needs, so basic payments should recognize the range of non-economic obligations, e.g. from sole parents

Offer retirement incomes that are adequate for those who haven't earned (enough)

super: Women earn less and take out more time for care and kids so are often unable to save enough super. They need to access cuts to the overly high tax concessions for the rich to ensure a decent retirement.

Improve the quality of political debates and public commentary: Regardless of how one interprets recent political changes, the evidence shows deficits in respect and civility. We need to discuss how to reduce the level of sexist, racist and personal abuse and replace it with serious debates on merit. Equality means both women and men deserve respect for who they are, what they do and how they look.

Next steps? Are these are utopian dreams? They shouldn't be, because we need to think big to start making even small changes. So let's work out how to put at least some of these ideas onto the current election and post-election policy agendas.

ⁱ "Our family payments and income-support systems are not like the social insurance schemes of many European OECD countries," she will say. "Our system is funded from general government revenue and is highly targeted. It is not funded through premiums paid by individuals and employers, as is the case in many European countries. http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/class-war-is-back-as-jenny-macklin-lashes-tony-abbotts-parental-leave-scheme/story-fn59niix-1226680443517?utm_source=The%20Australian&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=editorial&net_sub_uid=69279286

ⁱⁱ Australia's ideal worker: Male, childless, single BY WOMEN'S AGENDA / JUL 22, 2013)
<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/top-stories/australias-ideal-worker-male-childless-single/201307212565#.Ueyinek4jus.twitter> via @womensagenda

ⁱⁱⁱ May 25, 2013 - *Michael J Sandel* rails against the commodification of everyday life in this thought-provoking polemic, writes Julian Baggini. [*Michael Sandel: What Money Can't Buy - Sydney Writers' Festival*](#)

^{iv} *Blue collar hardly in the pink* GEORGE MEGALOGENIS The Australian 2013 July 20,

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/blue-collar-hardly-in-the-pink/story-e6frgd0x-1226682164924>