Feminism for the 21st Century

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Let me acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past and present. May I also thank Maggie Shapley, the ANU Archives and the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre for the honour of presenting the 11th of the annual Archives Lectures.

In my lecture I shall be traversing some of the ways in which feminism has been represented in the media over the past century or so. This will include observation of how the media framing of feminism has influenced attitudes, including the attitudes of women's movement activists themselves. I shall point to the much truer picture of feminist activity that can be extracted from government and non-government archives. I shall finish by looking at the opportunities provided by social media to sustain feminist perspectives and to provide a response to the bad press feminism has so often received.

To start with the media framing of feminism. From the beginning, women engaged in the struggle for the vote were depicted as unattractive to men. This has proved a hardy evergreen ever since, even if the unattractive characteristics attributed to feminists have varied over time. During the campaign for the vote, male cartoonists regularly depicted women activists as scrawny, beaky-nosed, short sighted and armed with umbrellas for attacking men. This was a cliché

of cartooning in the English-speaking world in the period between the 1890s and 1914.

[Hop cartoon Shrieking sisterhood about here]

While male cartoonists and poster artists depicted women who wanted the vote as vinegary and unattractive, they presented women who were not interested in equality as rounded and buxom.

['The appeal of womanhood' about here]

The association of campaigning for equality with lack of sexual attractiveness was a useful way of discouraging women from joining the cause. John Stuart Mill acknowledged the effectiveness of the tactic when he wrote of the value of countering it by having pretty women as suffrage lecturers. This he thought would persuade young women that joining the suffrage movement would not unsex them or cost them a husband.¹

A more forthright approach was taken by feminist artists, who set up organisations like the Artists' Suffrage League and the Suffrage Atelier in London. Here the anti-feminist rather than the feminist became the butt of the joke, as in this depiction of an evil-looking magician conjuring up bogies such as the unwashed babe and the unsexed woman.

['Votes for Women Bogies' here]

Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein experienced the full range of hostility from cartoonists. In 1900 *Punch* showed her trying to persuade the attractive women of the 'Anti Female Suffrage League' to

try on a pair of men's trousers. They reply 'Take away the horrid things.' (Cartoon reproduced in *The Age*, 28 December 1984, p. 11).

[Goldstein cartoon]

When Goldstein nominated for the Senate in 1903 she was given spectacles and trousers by *The Bulletin* and shown climbing up a ladder to get to the top of the poll. *Punch* depicted her being carried into Parliament by women and accompanied by a bespectacled chaperone who beat the Whip with her umbrella. ii

Journalists who actually attended Goldstein's political meetings or interviewed her were amazed to find she was not at all 'mannish', was humorous, nice to look at and well-dressed, even if she refused to wear a train while outdoors and her skirt cleared the ground. This was not the image that had been provided by cartoonists. As one journalist wrote after interviewing her: 'If we believed the artist of the illustrated weekly the typical advocate of women's rights is tall, gaunt, goggled, and hideously attired in semi-masculine garments. Miss Vida Goldstein has none of these attributes...'. iii

What a surprise!

[picture of Vida Goldstein]

More recently women in politics have no longer been depicted just as assuming men's trousers. There is now an even more basic equation of political power with masculine attributes. At least one cartoonist has frequently depicted Prime Minister Julia Gillard wearing a dildo. I refrain from reproducing the more pornographic versions of these

cartoons, which Larry Pickering has been sending to federal parliamentarians, or the photoshopped nude images of the Prime Minister circulating on the Internet. You can see some in Anne Summers' recent lecture 'The Political Persecution of Australia's First Female Prime Minister'. In this cartoon the Prime Minister is only taking the dildo out of her desk drawer in preparation for negotiations with Andrew Wilkie.

[Pickering cartoon]

In a press conference on 23 August 2012 the Prime Minister referred to the sexism of these images and the misogyny and 'nutjobs' around on the Internet. While there is widespread concern over this kind of misogyny, which has been going viral on the Internet, at least one Murdoch columnist has dismissed such concern as being 'the result of feminist brainwashing over the past 40 years'. The idea that for the past four decades feminists have been rounding up the population and sending them off to boot camps for feminist re-education might be attributed to a somewhat fevered imagination if it was not part of such a persistent campaign of denigration.

On the Facebook page, 'Julia Gillard – Australia's Worst Prime Minister' even an image of Julia Gillard's swearing in as Prime Minister in 2010 (a less attractive version of the one below) has attracted lewd suggestions as to what the Prime Minister and Governor General might do next.

[Swearing in of PM about here]

Despite the commentary on the 'Australia's Worst Prime Minister', Facebook page, the presence of women in leadership positions has now been normalised in Australia. Compare the image of the swearing in of Prime Minister Gillard with the swearing in of the Tasmanian Cabinet only 20 years ago – it is an all-male line up in government that now looks extremely odd.

[Swearing in of Tasmanian Cabinet about here]

Attitudes towards the term feminism from within the women's movement

But despite the achievements of feminism in normalising the presence of women in public decision-making, it is not only conservative media that have negative reactions to the word. Whether accepting media stereotypes of feminism or not, women's movement activists have often been ambivalent about the term.

Clara Zetkin, widely regarded as the mother of the major annual feminist festival, International Women's Day, associated the term 'feminism' with the class enemy. She believed that 'bourgeois feminists' were seeking to lure working-class women away from the class struggle. International women's day demonstrations were to show that women's rights were really a socialist cause. Naturally the posters featured socialist red.

[1914 IWD poster about here]

In the interwar period, feminism had rather different but still negative associations in the United Kingdom (UK). One long-time activist, Ray Strachey, noted:

Modern young women know amazingly little of what life was like before the war, and show a strong hostility to the word 'feminism' and all which they imagine it to connote. They are, nevertheless, themselves the products of the women's movement and the difficult and confusing conditions in which they live are partly due to the fact that it is in their generation that the change-over from the old to the new conception of the place of women in society is taking place.

As we shall see, very similar explanations were to be offered for young women's hostility to the word 'feminism' in the 1990s.

But while young women in the interwar period might have associated feminism with the out-of-date preoccupations of older women, mainstream women's groups like the UK National Council of Women avoided the unpopular 'feminist' tag in order to maximise their membership. Vii For these mainstream groups there was a popular perception that feminism was hostile to the vocation of wife and mother. Vera Brittain, author of *Testament of Youth* and mother of politician Shirley Williams, wrote an article for the *Manchester Guardian* entitled 'The Bogy-Feminist'. In it she described how feminists were popularly perceived as 'spectacled embittered women, disappointed, childless, dowdy, and generally unloved.' She herself had been denounced as a bespectacled spinster, clearly with 'strong feelings against the opposite sex', after she gave a public lecture suggesting women could now combine home and family with a career.

In Australia too, 'feminism' came to connote something old-fashioned and out-of-step with the times. An article in 1965 in the leading current affairs weekly, *The Bulletin*, claimed that feminism had no folksongs and hence was out of date compared with the new social movements that were beginning to appear. The author suggested that

feminists had been made to seem ridiculous soon after the achievement of political rights. The Feminist Club in King Street in Sydney was a 'pleasant backwater', while 'hard-core feminists' clustered around the League of Women Voters. ix

The Bulletin's label 'hard-core feminist' referred to the separate organising and persistent advocacy of women's rights that had been maintained by organisations such as the League of Women Voters over decades. The League, like other women's advocacy organisations of the time, engaged in polite lobbying through letter-writing and delegations to ministers and other authorities. Its newsletters served to maintain feminist discourses through hard times, presenting feminist perspectives on public affairs and affirming feminist values. This kind of activity and the associated friendship networks are typical of how women's movements have operated over time. Of course, this activity can be traced though the Archives, even when it has been obliterated by popular versions of Australian history.

One of my favourite examples of the evidence of feminist activity is from the Cabinet records of 1961. In September of that year the Menzies Cabinet had decided not to lift the bar on permanent employment of married women in the public service. The attitude of government at the time was that lifting the bar might encourage married women to evade their domestic responsibilities. The bar was also supported by the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association in the interests of their members.

In October 1961 Cabinet revisited the issue, in the light of the forthcoming election. They decided that although the original decision should stand, that the bar not be lifted, in the election context the 'line

of comment' should be that 'the question is one to which the Government has been giving some consideration but concerning which it has not yet come to a conclusion'.*

The reason for this second Cabinet decision was that bodies such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters conducted regular election surveys on attitudes of candidates to issues such as equal opportunity, equal pay and the bar to married women's employment. As the Cabinet Secretary, Sir John Bunting, put it in subsequent advice to the Prime Minister, while Cabinet had decided not to lift the marriage bar, it also decided 'to lie low for the time being' so as 'not to provoke the feminists and others'.xi This is a wonderful image, of the Menzies Cabinet lying low so as not to provoke the feminists, and certainly not an image of feminists as being quaint or ridiculous. My papers relating to the documentary history of the lifting of the Commonwealth marriage bar are available in the Noel Butlin Archives.xii These show how the marriage bar blighted the lives of many women who lost hardearned jobs and superannuation if they married (or if they were found out after concealing marriage). The marriage bar affected unmarried women as well, as the assumption they would marry and leave the service meant they were denied training and promotion opportunities.

Despite this documentary record of the importance of continued feminist activity on issues such as these, it was common in the 1960s for public commentators and indeed social scientists to decry separate organising by women as something holding them back. Norman MacKenzie, brought to Australia by the Social Science Research Council to investigate the status of women was very critical of the attitudes of sex antagonism and sex loyalty he associated with

feminism. As an aside, when queried by the *Sydney Morning Herald* about the choice of a male author from overseas to undertake the study he responded that the study 'needed someone who was neither a woman nor an Australian for it to be a fair analysis'.

Mackenzie's masculine objectivity did not prevent him being heartened to find 'evidence that the older forms of women's organisations are losing their appeal and finding it hard to sustain their numbers'. He concluded this might well 'be due to the fact that younger women with more education and a wider experience of employment are not so much interested in "women's questions". This is a fine example of the disastrously wrong predictions that social scientists are prone to. We tend to be so much better at predicting the past. Within only a few years there was to be a great resurgence of women's organising, to the general delight of those who had kept the flame alive during hard times. XiV

However, the media image of feminism as quaint, out-of-date and basically ineffectual made it perhaps unsurprising that when the second wave of the women's movement arrived, young women at first did not want to be seen as feminists. They saw themselves instead as liberationists. Their vocabulary was one of the features that distinguished them from their predecessors, along with their scorn for formal meeting procedures. Their attitude to sex was also 'liberated' and very different from that of earlier generations of feminist activists. Gisela Kaplan notes that the Australian women's liberation groups of the 1970s spurned the word 'feminist' as insulting and old-fashioned.**V

To our consternation the term 'feminist' was starting to appear more and more in the American publications. It was not one we could identify with. We were liberationists. Granted, the term was rather clumsy, its meaning was far from clear and it was easily lampooned...But it at least signified that we were modern, and forward looking. 'Feminist' was so old-fashioned: to us it conjured up elderly ladies with umbrellas who had fought for the vote and then campaigned to close the pubs. In our ignorance we believed that they were all wowsers and puritans, nothing like us.*vi

In the early 1970s the women's movement was the women's *liberation* movement and *not* the feminist movement. It was a radical movement like the colonial liberation movements with which many of its founders identified. Ironically media imagery associated with women's liberation and some of its own iconography was soon appropriated to depict feminism.

Much of the world became aware of the arrival of the second wave of the women's movement through media coverage of a disruptive 1968 protest against the Miss America Contest. A 'freedom trashcan' was planned where bras, girdles, stiletto-heeled shoes, curlers and other instruments of torture were to be dumped. A sympathetic journalist added flames in her article for the *New York Post*, thinking the analogy with the burning of draft cards would give the event added gravitas. This gave rise to the headline that went around the world of 'Braburners and Miss America'. **viii* The alliteration of 'bra-burning' and the image it conjured up became so pervasive in the media that even many women's movement activists came to believe that some bras

must have been burnt somewhere by someone. And feminists everywhere came to be dismissed as 'bra-burners'. In 1972 the then Liberal Treasurer, Billie Snedden, responded to the Women's Electoral Lobby federal election survey of that year, which included questions of equal opportunity in employment, by advising that: 'burning a bra seems unlikely to be a high recommendation for selection for executive office'.xviii In fact it was he who was about to lose executive office.

Another symbolic element of the Miss America protest, this time a genuine one, was quickly appropriated by women's liberation groups around the world. It was the image of a clenched fist within Venus's handmirror, the latter being the symbol used in biology to denote female. The inclusion of a fist within a female symbol provided a visual jolt, together with its reproduction in 'menstrual red', the name used by Robin Morgan to deter appropriation by lipstick manufacturers. xix

[Norwegian Women's Front logo about here]

The clenched fist symbol was still being used by the Norwegian Women's Front in 2008, the year they finally succeeded in their struggle to criminalise the purchase of sexual services. In the same year, however, the Canberra Rape Crisis Service one of the hundreds of feminist women's services that exist in Australia today, ceased using it, believing it was too confrontational. Meanwhile many versions of the symbol without the radical fist were popularised in the 1970s and became associated with feminism, whether incorporating the name of an organisation or being combined with equality and peace symbols.

[slides with WEL and IWY symbols about here]

The modification of the symbol reflected the shift from the mid-1970s from the use of the term 'women's liberation' to the revival of the term 'feminism'. Ann Curthoys has described this transition as a sign of the women's movement's constant change and adaptation. It was a sign of the times that the more left-identified term 'women's liberation' was being replaced by the more all-embracing term 'feminism'.** In the US, Gloria Steinem was winning converts to the women's movement from both the city and the suburbs with her wit and style. As she put it: 'Women have two choices: Either she's a feminist or a masochist.'

In Australia Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) had emerged out of Women's Liberation in 1972, as an organisation focused on achieving policy reform. At first WEL saw itself as part of a brand new movement, but as WEL members discovered the continuity of the women's movement over the longer haul, the term the term 'feminist' became an important identifier. The 1980 WEL Papers began with a period woodcut and a 1915 definition:

Mother, what is a feminist?

A feminist, my daughter,
Is any woman now who cares
To think about her own affairs
As men don't think she oughter.

At the same time as the revival of the term 'feminist' came the rediscovery of the colours of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) founded by the Pankhursts. These became the dominant

colours of feminist events from 1975 in Australia and those who wore the colours felt they were expressing solidarity both with other women and with their feminist forebears. **xi* The WSPU colours became the dominant colours of International Women's Day, as can be seen in the change from the red used in the 1914 German International Women's Day poster to the purple, green and white used to advertise the 1984 Sydney march.

[1984 Sydney IWD poster about here]

As noted, however, the term 'feminist' was to fall out of favour again among young women. By the 1990s a survey of young US college women found that while they supported equal rights and non-traditional roles for women, the term 'feminism' evoked negative responses. This is the phenomenon that has been labelled 'I'm not a feminist, but...' xxii

The term 'feminism' became a flashpoint for inter-generational tensions in the 1990s when the pressures of combining work and family would be seen as the ambivalent legacy of feminism to the new generation, the myth of 'having it all'. Feminism had supposedly persuaded women they could be superwomen who juggled home and work with ease or else that fulfilment lay in a briefcase. Feminism was responsible for women putting their careers ahead of babies until in some cases it was too late: 'Feminism stole my babies'.*xxiii

In 2012 Princeton academic Anne-Marie Slaughter, who had given up a job in the Obama administration involving 16-hour days, wrote a cover story for the *Atlantic* entitled 'Why women still can't have it all'. In the week after its publication more than one million people read it on-line and 160,000 commented on Face book. This phenomenon was written

up in the Murdoch press under banner headlines such as 'Death of the Feminist Dream'xxiv as though 'having it all' was a feminist concept and feminists had dreamed of women having 16-hour days in the paid workforce.

Of course the death of feminism has often been proclaimed in recent times. It is said that by 1998 *Time* magazine had proclaimed the death of feminism at least 119 times over the past 40 years.** Feminism had failed, the news magazines said, because it had left women worse off than before. This is an odd perspective even if one takes into account the failure to achieve adequate childcare, community services or family-friendly work provisions in the face of the increased policy influence of neo-liberalism and free market mantras. Quite apart from the standard 'failure of feminism' stories were the more extreme denunciations by American tale-evangelists such as Pat Robertson, who apparently told his flock that: 'Feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, become lesbians, and destroy capitalism'.**

As with the first wave, there were also the media stereotypes of feminists as sexually unattractive. Sarah Maddison found when Convenor of Younger WEL in NSW that media images of feminists as 'ugly, hairy legs, separatists, man-hating, fat', were a barrier to the recruitment of young women. **x*v*ii* While these images were different from the scrawny, bespectacled and beaky-nosed images of the suffragists, they carried the same message: challenging the gender order made women unattractive to men. In London, the leading women's rights advocacy organisation, the Fawcett Society explained in 2005 that it rarely used the term 'feminism' because 'it was perceived negatively in focus groups'. **x*v*iii*

Eventually women's organisations in the US, the UK and Australia started to respond to this media denigration. In the US the Feminist Majority Foundation sponsored a Feminist Expo in 2000, involving almost 600 organisations. xxix The Foundation became the publisher of MS magazine in 2001 but also took to social networking by organising YouTube celebrity endorsements of feminism and the wearing of 'This is what a feminist looks like' T-shirts by a diverse range of men and women. In Australia the YWCA took a lead in a similar promotion, while in the UK the Fawcett Society rebranded itself as 'Fawcett: Closing the gaps since 1866', with a slogan saying 'Reclaim the f-word with Fawcett' (it also had T-shirts). In the UK the Fawcett Society and the popular F-Word website used the term 'third-wave feminism' to indicate this was feminism for young women. For some the term thirdwave feminism indicated a feminism that was 'pro-sex', which might include men and which was sensitive to forms of difference that intersected with gender. Whether these were characteristics that in fact differentiated 'third-wave' from 'second-wave' feminism was a moot point and owed much to the ways in which the feminism of the 1970s was reconstructed in the 1990s.xxx

In the US a high point in the reclamation of feminism was the cover of *Ms* Magazine in January 2009, showing President Barack Obama revealing a 'This is what a feminist looks like' T-shirt under his suit and tie.

[Slide of Barack Obama about here]

2009 was also the year when the Dalai Lama declared himself to be a feminist. This campaign to reclaim feminism is continuing in 2012. In Sydney the F Collective has embarked on a blog project to showcase on a weekly basis 'other organisations and people who are part of a

movement that is alive and kicking patriarchy in the arse'.xxxi Gender students at Duke University in the US have invited contributions to a 'Who needs feminism?' blog – almost 3000 testimonials from women and some men were posted in the first four months.

In its 40th year Women's Electoral Lobby is reaching out through Facebook, Twitter and extremely useful eUpdates – published weekly by WEL NSW since 2010 and providing links to feminist news stories at home and abroad.^{xxxii}

Feminist communities thrive on the Internet and present lively and humorous counterpoints to the kind of depictions of feminism found in the mainstream media, particularly in the work of Murdoch columnists. Typical of the effective use of humour is the social networking campaign 'Wrecking the joint' conducted in early September. This was a response to talkback radio host Alan Jones, who had criticised the Prime Minister's commitment of funds to the Pacific Island states, to assist the entry of women into public decision-making – the Pacific Islands have fewer women in parliament than any other part of the world including the Arab region. Jones' knock-down argument against this commitment was that women in Australia were 'wrecking the joint' and he named Julia Gillard, Clover Moore and Christine Nixon. The 'wrecking the joint' response took off on Twitter, Facebook and You Tube.

Conclusion

To conclude, feminism has rarely had a good press in the mainstream media. Younger women have often been put off feminism by these media constructions and ideas that feminism is the realm of the

unattractive and of those who are anti-men, or that feminism is responsible for the pressures involved in combining career and family. Feminism has continued to adapt and evolve despite this bad press. This can be seen from the logo of UN Women, the new United Nations agency for women. As you can see, the radical fist of women's liberation has disappeared, along with the dove from International Women's Year, but the hope of equality for women is still encapsulated in it.

[UN Women logo about here]

Moreover, the new communication technologies available in the 21st century mean that feminists now have the resources at their fingertips to respond to such bad media and to make sexist commentary rather than feminists the butt of humour. Just look at some of the Australian feminist blogs. We already had fine feminist cartoonists. Now they are online along with all those other young feminists 'wrecking the joint' or as the F Collective says, 'kicking patriarchy up the arse'. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

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iii New Idea, 1 October 1902, p. 193.

iv Anne Summers, The Political Persecution of Australia's First Female Prime Minister', 2012 Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture, University of Newcastle, 31 August 2012.

- ^v Angela Shanahan, 'Women are not fools at the ballot box', The *Weekend Australian*, 1–2 September 2012.
- vi Ray Strachey, Our Freedom and its Results, London: Hogarth Press, 1936, p.10.
- vii Catriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: The boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organizations in England, 1928–39', *Women's History Review* 9 (2), 2006, p. 422.
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- xi E. J. Bunting, Memo to the Prime Minister, 'Married Women in Public Service', 3 April 1962, National Archives of Australia, A4940/C3548.
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- xv Gisela Kaplan, The meagre harvest: The Australian women's movement 1950s–1990s, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996, p. 34.
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- xx Ann Curthoys, 'Doing it for themselves: The women's movement since 1970', in Saunders, K. and Evans, R. (eds), *Gender relations in Australia: Domination and negotiation*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Australia, 1992, p. 441.
- xxi See the survey of wearers of the WSPU colours conducted by Marian Sawer and discussed in Marian Sawer, 'Wearing your politics on your sleeve: The role of political colours in social movements', *Social Movement Studies* 6 (1), 2007, pp. 39–56.
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- xxiii Monica Dux and Zora Simic (2008). *The great feminist denial*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press Dux, 2008, p. 73; see also Natasha Campo, *From Superwomen to Domestic Goddess: The Rise and Fall of Feminism*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2009.
- xxiv Rosie Kinchen, 'Death of the Feminist Dream', *The Australian*, 2 July 2012, p. 11 xxv Erica Jong, quoted in Jennifer Baumgartner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young women, feminism and the future* New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2010, p. 93.

xxvi Baumgartner and Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 61.

xxvii Sarah Maddison, 'Why feminism is a dirty word', Interview with Jan Bowen, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1998.

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xxxi http://fcollective.wordpress.com/about/ [visited 4 April 2012].

xxxii http://welnsw.org.au/publications/wel-eupdate/