

# Liberalism and Power - Feminism - Socialist or Liberal?

by **Michael Meadowcroft**

Western society is still remarkably male orientated. Its language, its images, its structures and its politics reflect traditional masculine attitudes, despite hard-won gains and trenchant criticism by women's organisations. It is interesting that the widespread concern about the economic and social stability of our communities rarely focuses even on the numerical dominance of men in positions of influence. At the very least one would imagine some slight sense of vulnerability on the part of male politicians contemplating the state of the world over which they have presided.

The irony of having a female Prime Minister who is regarded as the toughest member of her Cabinet is not lost on feminists. Mrs Thatcher epitomises an aberrant strand of feminism which argues, rightly, that women are inherently at least the equal of men and, wrongly, that if they are as determined as she is then they too can be successful. This "cult of the exceptional" is simply untrue in that it ignores the very real practical disadvantages that men impose on women and which prevent the majority from achieving their potential. Because it accepts the male world as the norm with which women have to contend, it also tends to rely on a particular type of tough, extrovert woman to succeed.

Edwina Currie typifies the new Conservative "feminist". She has been subjected to a remarkable level of abuse, much of it sexist, from the media and from both sides of the House of Commons. If anything the nastiest comments are uttered - sotto voce of course - by Labour Members. Having got to know her while we were both members of the Select Committee on Social Services, I confess to rather liking her. Certainly she is invariably underestimated. Her comments on feminism (*Sunday Times*, 28 June 1987) deserve critical examination. "It was a movement," she said, "that went completely off the rails, antagonised those it should have convinced and achieved nothing." It has actually achieved a great deal but, with due allowance for partisan exaggeration, there is certainly some truth in the statement. However, if reaction to such Tory opinion drives feminists deeper into the impotent Left they play right into Conservative hands. What is required is an analysis and a prescription that is not clouded by existing party affiliation.

Arguably the overwhelming exclusion of female perception from Parliament has been a key factor in the blinkered view of society as a physical environment in which personal satisfaction is dependent on successful economic planning. The virtual exclusion of the "personal" from the "political" has led to the postwar dominance of economic determinism which can only be reversed by a Liberalism that is confident in its unique awareness that economics exist to enhance human

values, not vice versa. It cannot be achieved by swapping the economic determinism of the left for that of the Thatcherite right.

### **Personal liberation**

Liberalism is concerned with personal liberation, rather than class liberation. If women's liberation becomes subordinate to class identity it minimises the potential of feminism rather than maximising it. Liberalism also makes a distinction between individuality, which values women and men for what they are, and individualism which recognises them for what they have or can gain. These are not mere semantic distinctions but are crucial to a philosophy which is holistic, that is it treats people for good or ill as complete individuals. Feminine influence is often most effective when it impinges on methods, structures and style because changes in these have a knock on effect on specific issues. If, for instance, society begins to understand the need to operate on a human scale, rather than, say, on a scale dominated by industrial capacity, the effects are felt throughout the whole process of government.

The women's movement is by no means monolithic. In some respects this is a strength in that it enables every woman unwilling to put up with male chauvinism to find a group of like-minded colleagues. It is, however, sometimes a weakness in that it can confuse numbers with influence and thus encourage a bland, non-ideological, attitude which is incapable of challenging entrenched male power structures. It is that very breadth of women's organisations, from the Women's Institute to political lesbianism, that frustrates those who believe in a common sense of sisterhood as a means of depriving men of their illegitimate power. As a consequence many of those who would willingly call themselves feminists drift towards the Labour Party as a uniting umbrella for their cause.

### **Avoiding the Labour embrace**

Paradoxically, a political or social movement that aligns itself with a single political party diminishes its influence unless the movement's basic values are compatible with those of the party. The superficially attractive idea of the "rainbow coalition" of radical, black, feminist and environmental groups with the Labour Party, once promoted by Tony Benn and the Labour Coordinating Committee, is flawed precisely because the groups' aims are incompatible with socialist economic determinism. In any case women's exploitation has been aided and abetted at least as much by the state as by capitalism over the centuries.

Indeed, the most consistent critics of the Labour party are the "socialist feminists" and yet, despite their trenchant and powerful attacks, they rarely appear to ask whether underlying their analysis is a crucial incompatibility between feminism and Labour's particular brand of socialism. Indeed it is ironic that women who genuinely question every aspect of life and society appear unwilling to consider whether the traditional link of feminism with socialism is valid today - or, indeed, whether it ever was.

I believe that one reason why the remarkably popular "Beyond the Fragments" movement of the early 1970s was unable to sustain itself and now is no more than a warm memory is because it was hung up on the touching belief that Labour was its natural home. The reality, blindingly obvious to Liberals who had spent years combatting Labour local authorities, was that the enthusiastic espousal of community based links and new more local ways of working politically that gave "Beyond the Fragments" its distinctive flavour was inimical to Labour but was, and is, perfectly at home with Liberals. This blindspot not only continues to inhibit and constrain feminism itself but it also enables Labour to continue in its own macho way whilst minimising the direct impact of feminists on Liberal policy.

It is interesting also that in her recent book [*Women in Political Theory*, Brighton, 1988] what Diana Coole calls "second-wave feminism", to distinguish it from the first wave fostered particularly by Simone de Beauvoir, emerged out of the New Left and students' movements of the 1960s. The Young Liberal Movement saw a remarkable growth at the same time and responded enthusiastically and intellectually to the new challenges of the late 1960s. In the women's movement as with the young liberals the radical spirit of the time lost its momentum but its twin legacies were, for women, the impossibility of unlearning the liberating experience they had gone through, and, for the Liberal movement, the community politics strategy which is still the touchstone by which the radical credentials of political action are judged.

### **Economic liberalism inimical to feminism**

As with all political reformers and philosophers, Karl Marx must fairly be considered in the context of the times in which he wrote. His followers today, however, all too often invest his writing with a timelessness it neither merits nor deserves. Essentially Marxism is defective in its treatment of women as women in that it associates "their liberation with a communist society in which wage-labour and economic dependency would have dis-appeared altogether" [Coole, op cit]. I doubt whether even the most ardent socialist feminist is prepared to wait that long.

Typical of the optimism which sustains socialist feminists against all the evidence is Michele Barratt's comment in *Feminist Review* (June 1986):

"Marxism and feminism are different theories trying to explain different things and nobody has satisfactorily reconciled them. ... I now think this is not now necessary and that we should recognize the different theoretical objectives of Marxism and feminism. It is far more important for us to understand the way in which class is, in a profound way, gendered and to argue for a socialism that is informed by feminism."

In other words, let us give up on socialism as it is and try to create a new one. Fair enough if there is no alternative philosophy that is more compatible with feminism itself. But there exists in Liberalism a philosophy which both challenges the traditional economic and social structures and which is powered by liberating

individual women and men from the constraints that frustrate their personalities, talents and skills.

Melissa Benn was honest enough to admit that "Definitions of a 'socialist feminist' - any woman who is active in, or sympathetic to, socialist or left/radical politics who also holds to a distinctive feminist position - are elusive in their non-specificity," (*Marxism Today*, April 1987). Anna Coote was nearer to the mark when she commented that "sadly, the serving wench phenomenon survives to this day, lodged like shrapnel in the disabled imagination of the male left," (*Marxism Today*, Nov 1985). In the face of such honesty on the traditional Left, my argument is not that the Liberal Party currently encompasses feminist thought sufficiently in its policies but that its philosophy and values are intrinsically more compatible with feminism.

The fundamental distinction that makes this so is that, alone of the political philosophies, Liberalism is not predicated on a preferred economic structure but rather on the view that the fulfilment of the individual's human potential, and her or his beneficial and enabling links within the community, are paramount. Obviously the economic structure and its immense power for good or ill influences that Liberal concentration on individuality but in the words of the 1928 Liberal "Yellow Book": ".. the end of all political and economic action is not the perfecting or perpetuation of this or that piece of mechanism or organisation, but that individual men and women may have life and that they may have it more abundantly." It is entirely a question of which direction one comes from. Labour's basic economism tends to regard individuals as malleable cogs in a grand plan rather than as men and women that the economy has to serve.

This crucial distinction was particularly clear at the time of Labour's Alternative Economic Strategy. At the same time as Peter Hain was arguing that it was because of the need for the state's economic role in society that "many in the women's movement have come to accept that it is not possible to be a feminist without being a socialist", (*The Democratic Alternative*, 1983) Anne Phillips devoted a whole book to attacking the strategy from a feminist standpoint (paradoxically in the "Arguments for Socialism" series, 1983). She argued that "the alternative economic strategy is a strategy for growth; what we want is a strategy for equality .... the strategy is both inadequate and biased. It is not a neutral, but one that tends to identify the economy with men." The same criticism can be levelled at every political philosophy that seeks to maximise efficiency and growth for its own sake rather than in relation to its liberating effect on individuals.

### **Liberalism and "Life Chances"**

This same Liberal emphasis on "life chances" as the purpose of politics conflicts with Labour's whole approach. The Liberal perception is that to achieve lasting social change requires the winning of hearts and minds rather than just the passing of some law or the making of a declaration on equal opportunities, however correct

the contents of such laws and declarations may be. Not only does such dependence on the legislative process tend to be a substitute for effective campaigning but it can easily become an impotent gesture. The Liberals, with their commitment to the dual strategy inherent in community politics, recognise the powerful link between campaigning and legislation.

Furthermore because it is easier to legislate for uniformity than for equality of esteem - and thus for diversity - a reliance on legislative action often implicitly accepts male values and norms. Women's liberation will only be partially successful if it simply enables women to compete equally with men in male ways and in male roles. For women's liberation to be society's liberation requires the undermining of patriarchy and chauvinism by an increasing awareness of the variety of alternative styles and values. Such pluralism comes much more naturally to Liberals with their views on devolution and on autonomous voluntary organisations than to a highly centralised and prescriptive Labour Party.

Nowhere are the constraints of the Labour movement's straitjacket seen more clearly than in the trade unions. Some trade unions, to their credit, have made genuine efforts to examine their structures and rules with a view to recruiting more women and to increasing their influence but in general the craft based, centralised, hierarchical union structures are intrinsically masculine. Cynthia Cockburn, in a recent Fabian Society pamphlet, (*Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*, 1987) commented that "For men it is possible to inhabit a culture that brings together under the umbrella of masculine identity, of male fraternity: work, working class allegiance, trade union membership and Labour Party affiliation." By its macho characteristics such a culture directly alienates women. A Labour Party linked financially and organically with the trade unions cannot escape also being linked with their image. It is no wonder that the argument for very different pay structures and working practices to accommodate women's needs is largely marginalised in the present Labour movement.

To their credit some unions have made the effort to recruit women members and to overcome the logistic problem of the growth of service industries, particularly retailing, which are dominated by a part-time and largely female workforce which is both difficult to organise and is traditionally less interested in union activities. In High Street food retailing part-timers now make up over 70% of the workforce. Union structures themselves may well have to change if they prove to be barriers to women's involvement.

### **A different perception of health**

The issue of health care demonstrates clearly the difference between political rhetoric and feminist initiative. The arguments over the National Health Service across the floor of the House of Commons, and in the media, are obsessively concentrated on the amount of money being poured into it by the Government compared to the amount the Labour Opposition would like to see spent. This

apology for debate is based solely on what the NHS is currently doing, with its expensive bias towards curative work, rather than what it could be doing to improve the health of the nation. Clearly, such an immensely difficult change of emphasis cannot possibly be achieved within the present grossly overstretched budgets. The transition must be adequately pump primed, but the terms of the debate need to be changed if health care is to be improved.

Meanwhile, amidst all this, around the country the women's movement is campaigning with some success to establish Well Woman clinics based on a very different perception of preventive health care than the male oriented mainstream political debate. Liberal efforts to change the terms of that debate have not been picked up sufficiently because it is too easy for the media to concentrate on price rather than value. The scandalous and the glamorous make better television than public health and prevention. But future health policy can be transformed if the experience of women becomes influential within the political debate. Frankly it is the best hope for the NHS to escape from the sterile slanging match that prevents the urgent issues being tackled.

The attention being paid to health care by women is part and parcel of the feminist slogan that "the personal is political". The traditional compartmentalisation of politics has meant that men have established an agenda that they regard as important and thereafter relied on women to take care of them and their dependants to facilitate male concentration on what men decide are higher things.

Liberals who sometimes seem to think that their history begins in the nineteenth century ought to appreciate the importance of Hobbes and Locke two centuries earlier. Diana Coole [op cit] goes so far as to state that, "Despite some obvious lacunae in the thesis, patriarchalism provided a horizon for all English political thought in the seventeenth century. It was the attempt to refute it that gave birth to liberalism. .... Here then is the novel and revolutionary core of liberalism: every individual is at liberty to compete for autonomy and success through the exertion of will." Women were explicitly included as being entitled thus to compete but it was assumed that "natural" disadvantages would prevent all but the exceptional few from succeeding. It was left to a somewhat later age to wrestle with the key need to enable women to develop their own skills and talents both in different ways to men and also in equal competition with men.

### **Community politics and feminism**

The consistent feminist criticism of Liberalism has been that historically it has had a narrow and traditional view of the family which has prevented Liberals from recognising the ball and chain effect it has on the liberation of women.

Significantly the criticism usually comes from American sources and is applied to American Liberalism. As such, as Chris Willmore points out, [*Liberal Feminism*, 1986] it fails to recognise the crucial role of community politics in women's liberation.

At its heart, community politics deals with the links between the public and private domain and the legitimacy of autonomous organisations within a plural, Liberal, society. Its significance for feminism is that it personifies the belief in the need for women to "connect". By enabling individual women to be influential through organisations with which they feel comfortable, and by demonstrating the role of creche and child minding facilities in freeing those women who wish to be active in public affairs, the whole world of politics is opened up.

Nevertheless it is important to address the issue of the family, and the apparent conflict between public and private life. Criticism of Liberalism historically has coupled recognition of John Stuart Mill's superb work, *The Subjection of Women*, (1869), with regret that he did not challenge the lack of equality of opportunity within the family structure of the time. Brilliant Mill may have been, and Harriet Taylor may well have had considerable influence on him, but it is expecting a great deal of a Victorian gentleman if he is to be berated for failing also to promote fundamental reform of the family structure.

Mill's basic philosophy is, however, perfectly capable of application to today's different attitudes:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes is wrong in itself and is now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. It ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

Neither a Conservatism that promotes the narrow view, complete with the traditional wife and mother roles, nor a Labour left that often seems to deny any legitimacy for the family unit as such, are able to produce a valid synthesis for our time.

### **The equal validity of work**

The availability of genuine choice requires, first, recognition that child rearing, the family and the home can be satisfying and enjoyable responsibilities for each individual, male or female. Secondly, it requires an acceptance by the public authorities that practical assistance is required if young children are not going to be insuperable barrier to participation in public life for many women and for most single parents. The fact that better off women are also assisted by it is no reason to prevent help from reaching those for whom it is a crucial means of liberation. The fiscal processes must be attuned to redress such purely financial imbalances.

No progress will be satisfactorily achieved without changes in attitudes to create a perception on everyone's part - including children's - that activity outside the home is both valid and beneficial. Such changes would help to ease the feeling of guilt which still often besets women who take on public responsibilities. Men have had their influential male "networks" since time immemorial and women have

increasingly developed different but complementary networks to enable mutual support to be available. The reluctance of some women to utilise them may be partly the result of generations of conditioning and partly another example of the dangerous "cult of the exceptional" on the part of those who, probably rightly, believe they can compete with men on their own terms.

The current conservative consensus has also re-opened the debate on the control of reproduction and on the rights attached to diverse sexual orientation. Neither issue is capable of simplistic solution and the dangers of absolutist attitudes are apparent in the campaigning stances taken up on each issue. No Liberal should treat lightly the legitimate but competing arguments as to the rights of the mother and of the unborn child. Nor will the concerns of those who fear the open expression of homosexuality be dispelled by assertion alone. Even ethical issues, where, traditionally party ideology has been set aside, have begun to be politicised. All too often the "party line" is a substitute for rigorous thought and prevents the emergence of a sustainable consensus. Without such consensus it is impossible to deal sensitively with those most vulnerable within our society.

### **Stereotypes**

A change in the perception of male/female roles would liberate men almost as much as women, if men did but realise it. Why should men be locked into stereotyped role images of the macho male? The hunter killer of the Stone Age cartoon has given way to the beer swilling provider, wanting the meal on the table, and expecting the house and children to be equally presentable. Sexist attitudes and language are no less objectionable for being from nurture rather than nature but men need to be challenged as to whether they really wish to continue conforming to some immature male image.

Rebecca West identified the problem and the cure: "... the spirit that makes people talk coarsely about sex is the same spirit that makes men act coarsely to women. It was not Puritanism at all that would put an end to this squalor and cruelty, but sensuality," (*The Judge*, 1922). John Mortimer is equally perceptive: "If there is a sex war it's not between two clearly defined sides, but within each of us where our male and female characteristics have to learn to live together in something like harmony," (*Sunday Times*, 8 April 1984). Advertising is now probably the area of society most untouched by feminism and whenever I see advertising that utilises sex to sell a product it is very often deliberately using a woman to sell to a man. I do not object to the depiction of sensuality but I object to the one-sidedness of it which in itself exploits women.

### **Censorship**

The Liberal opposition to censorship is challenged by such advertisements and, more fundamentally, by the current debate on pornography. Until recently the feminist position, expressed most powerfully by Andrea Dworkin, tended to oppose all depiction of female nudity. Such a line may well have been consistent



but it took no account of the purpose or effect of the image in question and was challenged by women who themselves sought to make a distinction between crudity and sensuality. Gloria Steinem expressed the distinction vividly:

Though both erotica and pornography refer to verbal or pictorial representations of sexual behaviour, they are as different as a room with doors open and one with doors locked. The first might be a home but the second could only be a prison. ...  
Pornography is about dominance. Erotica is about mutuality. (*Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, 1977)

Jo Brocklehurst, a female artist whose 1986 London exhibition celebrated the male nude, said:

I regard myself as a feminist and for this reason I have been very concerned to paint women - and I have painted a lot of them - to appear strong and confident; but I don't think being a feminist means I cannot look at and enjoy a beautiful male body.

It is not an easy area in which to draft legislation and Liberals at least recognise the competing arguments. Liberal and SDP MPs supported Clare Short's Indecent Displays (Newspapers) Bill in 1986 on the specific principle that the use of pictures of naked women to sell mass circulation national newspapers is intolerably intrusive and exploitative. Her initiative has at least opened up an important debate and her persistence is inhibiting the routine male ribaldry that would be a lucrative area of study for a multitude of psychologists. The problem of drafting legislation still remains. Gestures, unsustainable in logic and in the courts, are the stock in trade of the left and the right. Liberalism, based on rationality, seeks solutions that enhance human values and do not give easy hostages to prejudice.

Women's influence is urgently needed in our politics. Competitive, hierarchical structures have patently no answer to the deep social and economic problems of the 1990s and the next century. Nor can a narrow economism produce security and stability in our communities. It requires a very different dimension and it is one in which Liberalism and feminism are at one in seeking to create interdependent, mutual communities, with co-operation in the workplace and with devolution and decentralisation wherever possible. None of this can be achieved if traditional male attitudes continue to prevail.

The Liberal Party has been far from perfect in its internal machinery and attitudes. The bibliography below includes some of the specific policy publications. The Party has always had many worthy and specific policies, as has the Alliance, but it has not always realised that to be effective in debate those policies have to be promoted within a compatible philosophic framework that seeks to shift the balance of power and influence between men and women.

### **The role of legislation**

Liberals advocate a strengthening of equal opportunities legislation and of the

Equal Opportunities Commission, envisaging a single Anti Discrimination Board that can focus its attention more clearly on the nature and redress of discriminatory and prejudicial action wherever it occurs. The rule must be equal pay for work of equal value with access to an independent job evaluation service. The longstanding Liberal proposal to link taxation and benefits would require the treatment of individuals on an equal basis and thus eliminate the wholly anachronistic and demeaning linking of a married woman to her husband for tax purposes.

European Community law has been more progressive on women's rights. Its proposals for parental leave in employment, for instance, marked an important advance which would have, in effect, have recognised the reality that women bear more of the responsibility for child rearing and would have offered them further protection. Liberals have supported the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into our domestic legislation as a means of facilitating easier access to legal redress on discrimination.

Changes in economic circumstances are important, not least for the doors they open to further opportunities and choices, but changes in power structures are even more influential. It should be a ground of referral to an Anti Discrimination Board that any appointing body, including a Government Department, has failed to secure the appointment of at least 50% of women to all quangos and similar bodies within an agreed period of time.

Elected offices raise a different problem: how does one legitimately curtail the free choice of the electorate, and balance the need to secure an equitable balance of female representation against the voter's free choice in a democracy? Personally, rather than setting aside a quota of seats for each sex, which could entail the election of a man or a woman for whom one would not have wished to vote at all, I would go for an equality of nominees. This would mean that an election could not initially proceed unless, say, there at least one third of the nominees are men and one third women. If, however, at the second of asking, this condition was not fulfilled then the election could proceed. What evidence there is suggests that if the nomination process is balanced then the final vote will produce fair representation between the sexes. This assumes that the system of election is fair and it is clear that the "first past the post" system is itself discriminatory in its outcome. Democracies that use a proportional system have a higher proportion of women elected than does the United Kingdom.

The Women's Liberal Federation, notwithstanding its radical roots and its honourable record of work and of pressure, has tended to put its main emphasis on practical action and policy. These aspects are vital but they gain extra weight and influence when they stem from a thorough and broad analysis and by being expressly founded on clear political values. Liberals, for instance, have not always realised the significance of language in the feminist debate. Those who object to addressing the "chair" would, if in court, no doubt address the "Bench" as a matter

of course! Awareness of the importance of the whole dimension of feminism and women's rights must go hand in hand with policy formation. Potentially that will be best accomplished within Liberalism.

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