

Party Games

All the major political parties are renovating their policies on women - so, although there's a feeling that everything has got worse for women since the decline and fall of social democracy at the end of the 1970s, feminism is holding its own against the 'moral majority'.

Despite some damaging raids on radical sexual politics, and despite the best possible conditions - two general election victories for the most rightwing government in Europe - the patriarchal moral minority in Britain has remained just that.

That is not to say that feminism is winning, but that strangely enough its influence in the state and in the political parties is greater now than it was in 1979. And all the major parties are aware that without women they can't win.

But the impact of modern feminism has been greatest in the Labour Party. Its current policies are the most coherent. Jo Richardson, who has emerged intact from the Labour Left's sectarian wrangles with more allies than enemies, has launched her plan for a Ministry for Women, and secured party endorsement for a minister with cabinet status.

None of this yet defines the tone and the priorities of labourism. But the Labour Party is now well aware that women are moving away from the Tories, they're the more progressive sex on a wide range of social issues from homosexuality to nuclear missiles - yet they're not necessarily Labour voters.

Labour's transition from an old fashioned patriarchal party has, of course, invited calumny. We shouldn't underestimate the fragility of feminism in the labour movement; it has always been a dissenting tradition within both revolutionary and reformist socialism. And even when women's politics impinge, they have never

had the power to define 'the conversation'.

For instance Labour's defence strategy was inaugurated last year as a Boys-Own scrum, with no sense that insofar as Labour has a disarmament mandate, it has been made among women; women are the anti-nuclear majority in Britain. Yet there was not a women in sight.

And women have remained largely absent from the hushed talks over the new economic deal between the trade unions and the party.

In the wake of Greenwich, Labour is being urged by its Right to seek political asylum in old fashioned values - and we know what that has meant for women. It's been urged by the hard Left to do its version of the same thing - and we know what that meant for women, too.

Jo Richardson argues in last November's *Campaign Group News* that socialist feminism not only challenges the Right but the fundamentalists on the Left: 'socialist feminists have rightly criticised their comrades in the labour movement for their tendency to view society as merely a mass of undifferentiated capitalist oppression - an analysis which has rendered women invisible and relegated all action other than the overthrow of the capitalist system as diversionary. Such analyses render us powerless and fail to grasp the complexity of the divisions which exist within classes as well as between classes'.

The implications are both theoretical and practical: complex social divisions require complex webs of challenge. The very evidence of other sources of oppression and of contradictions within the working class itself has broken the lucky charm of cause and effect between exploitation, trade unionism and socialism.

The Communist Party in 1971 faced the challenge to the idea of the vanguard party as being uniquely baptised for the heavenly road to socialism when it supported the autonomy and the principles of the women's libera-

tion movement. That meant recognising the integrity of a separate movement, pluralism of political forms, and that participation in politics was not so much for the good of the party, but that parties and movements had to be for the good of the people. What it also understood was that it could not *be* the women's movement, but that it could not do without it.

The strength of Labour's new policies on women is that they come not just from smoke-filled alchemy in party headquarters, but from the infusion of feminism, a symbiotic traffic between the party and the movement.

If the initiatives are to become popular, and ultimately if they are to be protected in the scramble for priorities after any election, then they have to be carried into 'popular discourse' - they can't be appropriated by the party.

And yet in the same issue of the *Campaign Group News*, Ann Pettifor, organiser of the Women's Action Committee, the source of energetic campaigns for women's constitutional rights in the party, has launched an attack which, though directed against Communist feminists, implies a broader attack on the women's movement's autonomy, its pluralism and on the very notion of alliances between movements and parties.

The details of the attack are bizarre: that Communist feminists, including me, are supporting the formation of a women's party which she says exists and would ultimately oppose Labour (I've never heard of it, by the way); she claims that we are in 'active opposition' to a strong Labour women's organisation (actually, we actively support a strong Labour women's organisation); that we 'want to control women's campaigns and expect to do so in opposition to a Labour government.'

Well, we wouldn't be the only people on the Left to have opposed Labour governments - Ann herself has spent much of her political life doing so. But more importantly Communist feminists' history in the women's

liberation movement has been to oppose any parties or sects trying to control or split the movement.

The implications of this argument go deeper than the specifics because they deny the autonomy of the women's movement, which is regarded as a waste of time. Contempt for the separateness or otherness of movements has allowed Labour to scorn alliances - every other political formation is only seen as a rival, never a co-operator.

But if Labour creates no politics, except for itself, it can never be popular. If it's not sensitive to the separation between movements and parties then it can neither learn from movements nor define its distance and difference.

Communist feminists refused to treat the women's movement as a place to possess, to instruct, or to operate within on instructions from above. If anything, it was the other way round - our experience in the women's movement clarified how we wanted the party to change.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that modern feminism emerged as a force in the Labour Party, strengthened by a tide of entryism from the far Left bringing with it considerable experience from the women's movement. But there was something else the tide brought in - sectarianism masquerading as feminism.

It destroyed, instead of built, alliances among women within the party itself. Will it now seek to isolate the Labour Party's new feminist initiatives, particularly the ministry, from the coalitions they will need beyond the Labour Party both across parties, and outside parties if they are ever to become realities, and if they are to belong to women - any and all women? We're playing for high stakes here - all the parties are in transition, they're all pitching for 'the modern woman' but none are yet commodious places for women, and none have yet set the agenda for women. •

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