

Beyond Jam And Jerusalem

A 'pillar of society' is how the National Federation of Women's Institutes was recently described by another of that kind, BBC Radio Four. The WIs' Annual General Meeting, held in London's Albert Hall in May, certainly conveys the impression of middle England in class, age and dress.

But it would be a mistake to regard this band as henchwomen for Thatcherism. In the last few years the WIs have very slowly moved away from their image of behatted ladies in the shires, discussing jam and singing *Jerusalem*.

Since 1971 the Federation has been able to discuss political matters: 'Provided of course it is done in an apolitical way' says WIs' chairman Agnes Salter. Such matters aren't limited to issues concerning women and children only - a restriction placed on the Women's TUC until very recently.

Although the AGM is not a riproaring decision-making gathering - delegates are mandated in advance by their branches on how to vote - the discussion gives some hint of the debate that takes place at the grassroots. The speeches this year on the ozone layer pointed to women's power as a consumer lobby in forcing manufacturers to abandon the use of chlorofluorocarbons. The debate on rape sentencing displayed a concern that 'all females are potential preys' and that 'no man, however learned, can possibly imagine the horror inflicted upon women in rape', in the words of Jean Entwistle of Sefton.

There were some political subtexts too: the wish to affirm the role of parish councils because of concern about the impact of the poll tax; the debate on water pollution revealing the government's intent to lower standards as part of privatisation.

The Federation is now reviewing its 75-year old constitution (described as 'authoritarian' by Salter) in order to halt its membership decline and to reach the 'magic half million'. •

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