



Feminists And Freedom

Publish Date:

May 2013

This article from the [May 2013 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by Development Coordinator at the IPA, Lydia Bevege.

Of all the warning signs that have signalled the steady decline of the Fairfax media empire, its foray into the world of 'women's websites' is surely one of the most piteous. Launched at the beginning of 2012, the *Daily Life* website is targeted at 30-45 year old women who 'take an active interest in the news of the day as well as enjoying fashion, food, intelligent commentary and debate.'

Perhaps the most bewildering offering from *Daily Life* so far is a list of the twenty most influential female voices in Australia, published late last year. The list was dominated by columnists, journalists and bloggers, whose influence—beyond the echo chamber of political obsessives that dwell on twitter and trade partisan jibes—is questionable. Tellingly, not one female business leader was deemed influential enough to make the list.

The list featured some predictable names, like Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her colleagues Penny Wong and Nicola Roxon. It also featured the usual line up of feminist commentators including Anne Summers, Jane Caro, Germaine Greer and the *Daily Life's* own blogger Clementine Ford. Nowhere to be seen was Julie Bishop, the deputy leader of the Liberal Party and a woman almost certain to be Australia's foreign minister before the end of the year. Also missing were influential columnists Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtsen, both of whom would be far more widely read than any feminist blogger.



Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*.

Daily Life's list of influential women reveals an interesting prejudice of modern feminists. The same prejudice can be identified in much of the reaction from the same high profile feminists to Prime Minister Julia Gillard's 'misogyny speech'. It was hard to escape their adulation in the days and weeks following the speech, in which the Prime Minister accused Tony Abbott of misogyny and sexism in the federal parliament.

'It had me dancing in my car, prancing down the corridors with glee, and fist-pumping in the office whenever the video was played on the news.....I watched the full 15 minute speech twice yesterday, and again first thing this morning. I woke up with a smile on my face.'

So said a gushing Mia Freedman, editor of *Daily Life's* rival women's website, *Mamamia*, about the speech, echoing the sentiment of many feminists across Australia. Their jubilation over a speech which appropriated feminist rhetoric for a singular political end is perplexing. Many political observers—both male and female—saw through Gillard's thundering oratory and recognised the speech for what it was: a political tactic in response to a crisis of the Prime Minister's own making.

The refusal of many feminists to acknowledge that Gillard's speech could have been more politics than passion has helped shield the Prime Minister from legitimate criticism about her handling of the Peter Slipper affair. After all, it takes some serious selective application of righteous feminist outrage to rail against one man's supposed sexism and misogyny while speaking in favour of keeping another man with known sexist views in the Speaker's Chair.

Why, then, do the feminist commentariat remain so enamoured with the Prime Minister? Why must all criticism of Gillard be shouted down as sexism and misogyny (apparently one and the same thing now), while important questions about the policy outcomes of her government remain unasked?

The answer lies in modern feminism's absorption of leftist tenets into its core ideals. Most notable Australian feminists today are openly hostile to the ideas of limited government and free markets. Much of what passes today for feminist commentary takes as a given that bigger government is the best way to achieve better outcomes for women.

The visceral dislike of Tony Abbott provides a neat illustration of this mindset. Many feminists say they dislike Tony Abbott because of his socially conservative views. But their distaste for the economic liberalism Abbott and the Liberal Party espouse is now implicit in their modern feminist brand.

To be fair, not all women who identify as feminists hold these anti-capitalist views. But you'd be hard pressed to find a capitalist sympathiser amongst the most vocal feminists— those with syndicated columns, regular television appearances, publishing deals or academic postings in the gender studies departments of the arts faculties in Australian universities.

Take the ever offensive commentator Catherine Deveny, who refers to one of Melbourne's largest shopping malls, Chadstone Shopping Centre, as a 'metastasised tumour of offensive proportions' full of 'dead-eyed wage slaves', 'lemmings' and 'walking cadavers', as she bemoans the fact that people dare to purchase things with money they have earned to enhance their quality of life.

Or Jane Caro, a former advertising director and social commentator, who filmed a video for the government's bizarre *MoneySmart* website saying that '...the point of a society is to have as many people living good and satisfying lives as possible. If a large percentage of the population are not good at managing their money, are easily tempted into buying things that compound their financial difficulty, well we're not achieving that as a society are we?'

Another example is 'ethicist' Leslie Cannold, who once wrote that some people experience the 'vast freedoms and the accompanying panoply of choices' that have been born of humanity's transcendence from the drudgery of survival as 'distinctly unliberating'. She goes on to say that 'it doesn't have to be this way,' and that we can 'break free of the boundaries and limits of material possessions, career and money.'

And of course, towering above them all is Germaine Greer. Her book *The Female Eunuch* argues that consumerism oppresses women. Her deep and abiding hatred of capitalism is neatly summed up in one small quip: 'I didn't fight to get women out from behind vacuum cleaners to get them onto the board of Hoover.'

Feminism's focus on the boardroom is itself telling. Long seen as the domain of white businessmen enjoying the excesses of capitalism, unlike Ms Greer, many feminists are today

fixated on ‘hacking down the phallus squad that dominates boardrooms’ (credit to *Crikey* for that charming phrase). This fixation conveniently ignores the fact that big business only employs 30 per cent of Australians, the remaining 70 per cent being employed by small and medium-sized enterprises. And research has shown that women today are starting small businesses at twice the rate men are. The success story of female entrepreneurs is largely ignored in the debate about female employment participation.

There are a few exceptions to the dominant feminist mantra. American economist Deidre McCloskey calls herself a ‘free market feminist,’ and writes that the label ‘means simply that you do not think treating women as human beings is necessarily an anti-capitalist project.’ She is joined by a handful of other female economists who see no incompatibility between economic growth and female progress.

And the evidence backs them up. Where countries are economically free, women prosper. When a country has economic growth stifled, women suffer. One need only compare the Heritage Foundation’s Economic Freedom Index with the United Nations’ Gender Inequality Index to see that countries that rate on top of one Index are invariably on top of the other, and same goes for the bottom feeders.

In fact, of the 20 countries that scored the highest on the Gender Inequality Index, 15 ranked as ‘free’ or ‘mostly free’ on Heritage’s Economic Freedom Index. Meanwhile, of the bottom 20 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, 17 were ranked as ‘mostly unfree’ or ‘repressed’ on the Economic Freedom Index (two out of the three countries that didn’t fall into those two categories were Afghanistan and Sudan—unrated due to unreliable data, but known to be dangerous places for women).

Feminism and free markets are not incompatible. As Bill Flax of *Forbes* points out, feminism has much to thank capitalism for—it was the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the explosion of material progress in the 18th Century that allowed all manner of intellectual movements, including feminism, to develop and thrive.

And indeed, technological advances made possible by capitalism have made a huge difference in the lives of women, from the contraceptive pill to infant formula. The invisible hand has long been prompting the creation of products and services designed to make life better for women.

It makes great sense that the economic structure that has lifted millions of people from poverty and delivered unrivalled liberty across the globe would also help break down barriers faced by women. If you’re sceptical, ask yourself this: Where else but in a developed country that has embraced capitalism can women access high quality healthcare and education? Where else will she find workplaces that can provide flexible work hours to suit her chosen lifestyle? Where else will she be able to buy products and services that improve her quality of life (no, I’m not talking about Prada handbags, I’m talking about affordable feminine hygiene products and cervical cancer vaccines)? And more fundamentally, where else will she be in a position to make choices about any of the above?

Free markets and free societies don't just offer women a better life— they offer women choice. In unfree societies the world over, women don't just suffer the indignity of poverty, nor do they only lack a route out of poverty. They also lack the choices and control over one's own life that only prosperity can bring.

Last year the newly appointed President and CEO of Yahoo and mother of one, Marissa Mayer, said in an interview that she did not consider herself a feminist. 'I certainly believe in equal rights,' she said, 'but I don't have... the militant drive and the chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that.'

Mayer's views are shared by many younger women, who are instinctively uncomfortable with the tenor of feminist rhetoric, caught up as it often is in anti-capitalist sentiment. In October last year, a survey of visitors to Britain's largest women's website found that just one in seven respondents consider themselves a feminist. Australia's own women's website, *Mamamia*, bemoans the fact that surveys consistently reveal only 30 per cent of women in our own country identify as feminists.

Perhaps this is because many women are capable of recognising that much of the reason that they have had more opportunities than their mothers and grandmothers before them boils down to the liberal political and economic institutions that flourish in their home country. This is not to diminish the role of the suffragettes and other feminist movements whose work has helped shift social attitudes towards women. But it does highlight that institutions and movements do not exist independently of each other and shouldn't be viewed as such. The great genius of liberal democracy is that it allows ideas to develop and intellectual debate to inform society's progress.

Interestingly, more than two-thirds of the 1,300 respondents of the British survey said the biggest challenge for modern women will be to reinstate the value of motherhood, and a majority said feminism should be about ensuring women have 'real choice over their family, career and life'.





Jane Caro.

The emphasis on choice is a revealing one, and goes some way to explaining feminism's lack of popularity amongst women today. Too often, feminists are guilty of playing identity politics, turning women who don't conform to the group identity into pariahs. Nothing illustrates this attitude better than American Law Professor Linda Hirshman's declaration that women who leave the workplace to have children are 'letting down the team'.

According to Hirshman and her ilk, a woman exercising her own free will and choosing to embrace motherhood is betraying the sisterhood and ceding the workplace to males. In this warped worldview, motherhood is somehow an inferior choice, and an individual's choice doesn't matter anyway—their will should be sacrificed to some higher feminist cause.

In a similar vein, veteran second wave feminists are particularly aghast at the choice many young women are now making to return to the traditional wedding ceremony—to wear white and be walked down the aisle by their father. In 2010 *The Age's Sunday Life Magazine* published an article by a mother who had just recently endured her own daughter's white wedding. 'For ageing feminists like me, our daughters' decision to go for the full 'froth-and-flowers' function can be baffling—even something of a betrayal,' she wrote. She then lamented how a generation of young people had been persuaded by a successful industry to pay an average of \$50,000 to act out 'ancient inequalities'.

Too many feminists despair when women, through their own choices, stray from some arbitrary notion of the ideal feminist path. Feminists claim to seek the liberation of women from oppression, yet when women make choices—of their own freewill—of which feminists disapprove, they are pilloried as 'letting down the team' or accused of 'betrayal'. Until feminists can learn to embrace and accept the plethora of choices now available to women in advanced societies, the feminist label will remain unappealing to the majority of women.