

Whither fem nism

What was once a great struggle is now
a petty quarrel, writes **Elle Hardy**.

Whither Feminism

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Julie Bishop recently stated that she did not consider herself a feminist as she didn't find the term meaningful today. Bishop was roundly criticised by feminists who found it disappointing that Bishop didn't understand how important feminism is. After all, 'feminism is about equality,' argues Greens Senator Larissa Waters, who made the statement without specifying whether she meant equality of opportunity, or equality of outcome— two vastly different positions.

It's undoubtable that the backlash against popular feminism is gaining momentum. The proposition is simple: you can support self-ownership and women's rights and choose not to identify as a feminist. The reason for the zeitgeist is that the proponents of feminism almost exclusively share the same political persuasion, automatically rankling those of us on the right. Feminism's manifestation in popular culture is equally divisive: one of perpetual offence, limited to Western culture and within itself, home of the semantic and the petty.

Feminism has always stirred the passions because it began as an assertion of what ought to be natural. But when Mary Wollstonecraft stood up during the Enlightenment to show that we



possess all the faculties of men and deserve to be educated accordingly, did she expect her rational arguments to devolve into articles such as 'how accepting leggings as pants made me a better feminist' and the decrying 'the gender politics of pockets', because women's pockets are smaller and therefore struggle to fit the iPhone 6?

Did the producers of the Declaration of Sentiments from the Seneca Falls convention in 1848—the first women's rights conference—foresee that their quest for natural rights for all people would lead to a form of censorship, with some US universities modifying their curricula to 'be aware of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression'?

When the second wave of feminism in the 60s and 70s fought to dismantle wage and reproductive discrimination, did these feminists anticipate that only decades later the movement would refuse to embrace the greatest defender of female reproductive rights of our age, Ayaan Hirsi Ali? The third wave of feminism, while noble in its intentions to bring feminism to women of colour and other minorities (albeit mostly within Western society, not outside of it), lacks foundation, so it has resorted to left-wing ideology.

Problems for women remain—namely domestic violence and the wage gap (but even the latter is often misinterpreted as earning 17 per cent less for doing the same work, rather than the reality that we tend to take less work and lower-paid jobs to take care of children and parents).

But these problems are not the exclusive preserve of feminists and are equally tackled by medical, welfare, and economic campaigners. None of the values one can espouse as libertarian or humanist are anti-female, yet many of feminism's values are divisive, such as preferencing equality over opportunity and choice, and the idea that legislation brings liberation.

It is this third wave of feminism that marks the point at which feminism went from a movement to an argument.

Edmund Burke noted that once the reductionism starts, it never stops. The great feminism debate has embarrassingly come to a head recently with women taking pictures holding paper signs arguing with other women taking pictures holding paper signs.

We know that the greatest reducer of poverty is the education of women, and Western women are using their wealth and education to conduct a shouting match by way of Rosetta stone.

Many problems have come from the attempt at inclusion—conscription—of everyone to the cause. From Tony Abbott to Beyonce, everyone is declaring their allegiance to feminism without considering what it has become. When almost everyone is inside the tent, the enemy invariably becomes abstract. 'The patriarchy' becomes everything from capitalism to democratic institutions to sport. Patriarchal oppression becomes that thing you don't like.

When reality is presented, the feminist movement has been unable to return to first principles. One need look no further than the revelations of the organised and established sexual exploitation

of young women and girls in the English city of Rotherham in the weeks before the annual 'Slutwalk' march to protest rape culture. Such a protest would surely be the right place to condemn such a large scale example of actual rape culture and show solidarity with the victims.

Instead, the banners stuck to the abstract, 'By definition you can't ask for rape', and 'Because we've had enough'. British feminist Suzanne Moore concluded that Rotherham resulted from 'an economic caste system' and 'powerful men'. At around the same time, Hollywood actress Jennifer Lawrence was hacked and had naked photos posted online.

Two prominent Australian feminists had columns in mainstream media outlets on how viewing the photos perpetuated Lawrence's violation, yet couldn't muster an inch of column rage for the tragedy in Rotherham where up to 1100 girls were raped and the authorities, aware of the situation, had done nothing to protect them.

And it's here that the political and the cultural intersect, and the abstract helps to avoid the awkward. The modern left has proven itself to be incapable of criticising non-Anglospheric cultures. Fears of imperialism have erased the opportunities of globalisation. In his 2009 article *Still looking for the Western Feminists*, Clive James highlighted the contradiction:

Many Western feminists are still convinced that the social stereotyping of the west is the product of fundamental flaws within liberal democracy itself, they have a tendency to believe that undemocratic societies are somehow valuable in the opposition they offer to the free countries which the feminists are so keen to characterise as not free enough.

It plays into the old stereotype that women are fragile, that we don't have the gumption to go global and criticise Confucian or Islamic cultures, which are expressly patriarchal. Feminist politics, not female characteristics, are working to our detriment.

But for all feminism's political failings, it is clear that it has settled in the cultural realm, becoming little more than a critique of media and pop culture. It struggles to address areas of policy prone to gender bias, such as taxation, family benefits, and childcare regulation. Instead it focuses on why you shouldn't change your last name on marriage and the evils of photo shopping.

The cultural aspect is also detrimental to other fields of enquiry. Equal does not mean the same. The movement has moved toward being anti-scientific and anti-intellectual, with humanities graduates critiquing psychology and biology. Australian writer and psychologist Claire Lehmann has written of how postmodern assumptions about gender are physically harming women, with the recent discovery that women have been overdosing on medications due to 'a deeply ingrained false assumption—that males and females are the same in matters of biology.' As Bertrand Russell said of science, it is 'ethically neutral: it assures men they can perform wonders, but does not tell them what wonders to perform.' Mired in the language of privilege, the sense of moral superiority calls into question the movement's desire for equality.

The focus on identity politics goes against the fight for self-ownership; the modern incarnation of feminism seeks female exceptionalism, not exceptional females. Lacking a coherent base,



feminism has become a war of anecdotes where many feminist figures believe they are leaders by grappling with their personal trauma on the page.

Progressive movements will always struggle with their existential reality, and success will usually betray survival. When the European Space Agency's landing of a space probe on a comet became the subject of intense outrage due to the eccentric chief scientist's (female-designed) shirt featuring scantily clad women, we need more than just a reaction to show that modern feminism does not speak for all women.

We must actively fight against the inherent contradictions and hypocrisy of its proponents. But it also affirms to me that feminism is dead: the great struggle for liberation has become a petty quarrel.