

Impressions of the third Women and Labour conference

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Impressions of the Third Women and Labour Conference, June 1982

[Added 2003: I think this was published in *Lesbian Network*, although I'm not sure. Anyway, it's an historical document of some interest. I do know that I didn't submit a paper to this third Women and Labour conference because of what happened in response to my paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice', at the second Women and Labour conference two years before in Melbourne. (The paper is in UNSWorks)]

My overall impression of this conference is that it was the best Women and Labour Conference yet, for the simple reason that there did not appear to me to be any of the stale old fights going on (although there were some 'new' ones—more of that later). Their absence, I decided, was due to the women's movement having reached some kind of accommodation on the issues (although I would be the last to suggest that the problems have gone away, *or* had been resolved). Those issues as I see them, and as they relate to my particular interests, are four in number: what has been called the 'lesbian/straight split'; the academic/non-academic split; the problem of men; and the Marxist (or socialist) feminist/radical feminist argument.

I must admit that to refer to the first of these issues as a 'lesbian/straight split' is to misrepresent the debate somewhat (but I have used it as a convenient shorthand way into discussion). The arguments have rarely been between lesbians and heterosexual feminists, and increasingly less so as time went on, but between *lesbians* and *lesbians* about the relevance of lesbianism to the WLM. On one side was the Jill Johnston argument to the effect that lesbianism was the only true path to the feminist revolution—'Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution', as she put it in *Lesbian Nation*. The reason she gave for that assertion was that 'Feminists who still sleep with men are delivering their most vital energies to the oppressor'. By doing so, they were crippling themselves in the fight, and also betraying their sisters. On the other side were those lesbian feminists who were

Third Women and Labour conference—*Denise Thompson*

uncomfortable with an argument which implied that heterosexual feminists were unreliable allies and potential traitors to the cause, an argument which threatened to divide the movement into 'self-congratulatory "woman-identified-women", and defensive or scornful heterosexuals still bound by ties of love, loyalty, passion or convenience to situations they saw only too clearly as the source of their personal subservience' (as I put it in my paper at the second Women and Labour Conference—of which more later).

As I said above, I don't think the issue has been resolved (at least not within the terms of the original argument), but much of the heat has gone out of the debate (which might indicate a resolution of sorts has been achieved). At this third conference there were a number of workshops devoted to various aspects of lesbianism. (I seem to have misplaced my conference program so I can't tell you how many, or what the topics were). These workshops were run concurrently, and were followed by a Lesbian Plenary. At the plenary some objections were raised to the fact that all the workshops were on at the same time. Women said that they would have liked to discuss a number of the topics listed, but had had to confine themselves to one only. However, one of the organisers of the lesbian workshops said that they had made a deliberate decision to run them that way. (I think the reason she gave was to do with the size of the groups—to run them all at one time meant that each group could be kept to a manageable size, i.e. between 20 and 25). Hence, implicit suggestions that the conference organisers had made the arrangement in order to restrict the scope of the debate about lesbianism (however inadvertently) were unfounded.

The second issue mentioned above—the academic/non-academic split—is of particular interest to me because I have on occasion been accused of being 'too academic', and in particular, in relation to the paper I gave at the last Women and Labour Conference in Melbourne in 1980, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice'. There were many women who said that the paper was meaningless or incomprehensible. The *Refractory Girl* collective commented on it thus: [See: 'Lesbianism as political practice: discussion' (in UNSWorks)] (In my own defence, I must say that I said 'heavy' theory, not 'high' theory, and I had already apologised to women for not having assimilated the theories well enough to make them comprehensible to those

Third Women and Labour conference—*Denise Thompson*

who were not acquainted with them, or even to those who *were*, since they were among my fiercest critics). All this was something of a shock because what I said was crystal clear to *me*. Nevertheless, these reactions gave me a salutary, if agonising, lesson.

At the Adelaide conference, the organisers had set aside a session on the last day for discussing 'Academic Feminists and the Women's Movement'. They pointed out that they had done this because of the criticisms of the last conference, among which they mentioned the *Refractory Girl* discussion. However, as one woman pointed out, no such criticisms had been leveled at this conference, and hence it would appear that the problem of incomprehensible, trivial, boring or elitist academic papers was not at issue this time. Whether the academic feminists had mended their ways, or whether the rest of the movement had 'caught up', there was obviously a great deal of common meeting ground. (No, I didn't give a paper, so I have yet to find out if I've learned my lesson).

The third issue which has been a source of strife in the past, i.e. the presence of men at the conference, was no issue at all this time. There *were* some men there, but women did not come to harsh words about their presence, as happened at the last conference. On that occasion a number of women, including the convenor of the session, had walked out of one session when other women demanded that the men in the hall be excluded from the discussion on sexuality. At the final plenary of the conference this year, one woman moved a motion that men be excluded altogether from the next Women and Labour Conference. There was no dissent, and her motion became a resolution to be passed on to the organisers of the next conference.

The last issue I want to mention, the marxist feminist v. radical feminist argument which was so hotly debated after Mary Daly's visit here in August last year, simply did not arise. Whether this was because women were shying away from it, and hence no one was willing to put herself on the line by bringing it up, or whether the issue has for the moment been talked out and we're all adopting a 'wait and see', 'live and let live' stance, I don't know.

There *was* one issue which I found rather disturbing, and which I think might qualify as a 'new' fight, and that was the practice of locking women out. This happened at

the first workshop on 'Patriarchy' (there were two); and at the cabaret on Friday night. I felt that on the first occasion it was entirely unnecessary, as indeed it turned out to be at the second 'Patriarchy' session when no one was locked out and the discussion was as good as, if not better than, the first session. But then I did not protest at the time, so I'm not really the one to cast the first stone. The convenors of the sessions, six women from the ANU Women's Studies Group, said they wanted to keep the sessions small because they wanted to do intensive work on the topic with women at the conference. But I think (I didn't actually ask them) that they were as worried by the implications of excluding women as I was.

The second occasion, the cabaret, or rather the speeches before the cabaret started, was different. As far as I could gather, the venue, the Adelaide Town Hall, was too small for the numbers of women who arrived (according to the security men who have inside information about such important matters as fire regulations). When I arrived—late—women were being told that we couldn't go into the main body of the hall, but had to go upstairs to the gallery, where we had to behave sedately—no smoking or drinking—and listen to the speeches. I stood it as long as I could, and then adjourned to the 'Ladies', where I found a number of women having a party and taking advantage of the wonderful acoustics by singing songs. I joined them (I know *all* the words to Judy Small's FOL [Festival of Light] song), and as far as I was concerned, it was the high point of the evening, much higher than the speeches, and even higher than the cabaret. (I couldn't hear Mary-Jane anyway). What the organisers could have done in such a situation I don't know, but things got a bit ridiculous at one stage, with one woman barring the door against the invaders with her strong right arm, and in consequence keeping those *inside* from getting out, either to go to the loo or to escape the speeches.

Leaving such frivolous matters aside, I would like to return to the question of 'new' fights. One of the most interesting was the fracas at the final plenary about meeting procedure. I *am* aware that this is one of the oldest fights in the WLM—between the 'efficient' (read 'male') procedures of resolutions, voting, and using the rules to cut off debate; and the collective, consensual, every-voice-being-heard procedures of feminism. But I had thought that the fight had been resolved long ago in favour of the latter. That the issue should have arisen once again is interesting, as is the fact

that it was very quickly resolved, although not without some bitterness. As far as I can reproduce the debate, it went something like this: one woman (who shall remain nameless because she sees me as espousing views diametrically opposed to her own, which is both true and not true at exactly the same time, and would most likely disagree with my interpretation)—this woman, as I say, stood up and objected to the conference passing resolutions on a majority vote without allowing space for dissenting women's voices, or even discussion of the issues. (To do the conference collective justice, time was very limited—more security men). After some acrimonious to-ing and fro-ing, another woman suggested a way out of the impasse—that resolutions to which there were *no* objections should be passed as coming from the whole conference, while those to which any woman at all objected should lapse. This was received with relief by all concerned—or nearly all. Another woman got up and objected to this solution, on the ground that those who had initially objected to standard meeting procedure (the original objector had the support of a number of women around her) would use their power of veto to sabotage the conference resolutions. At this, the woman who had made the initial objection rose to her feet, pointed out in no uncertain terms that any woman who could suggest that sisters would stoop to such tactics had forgotten her herstory, and stormed out of the hall. The meeting proceeded, and all fears proved groundless. Most of the resolutions were passed, and those that were not were cogently argued against by the dissenters. The lesson which *I* derived from this series of events was that the WLM is now strong enough to return to old battle grounds and reassert the continuing relevance of victories already won.

The last of the 'new' fights which I want to mention is that of racism. I still don't know what to say about the accusation that the women's movement is racist. To me, such an accusation is meaningless. But on the other hand, I am only too well aware of the infinite variety and the multiplicity of forms assumed by ruling class power relationships, and the continuing need to keep moving in the process of divesting ourselves of our own implication in institutions of oppression. I refuse to engage in breast-beating about my Anglo-Saxon ancestry. I refuse to be the inheritor of racial distinctions I find abhorrent. The only way I can cope with such vile divisions is to treat them as personally non-existent, unless, or rather until, I am faced starkly with specific manifestations of their continuing relevance. I know that that is a grossly

inadequate response, but then I find myself inadequate in the face of the enormity of the problem.