

Feminism Down Under: Observations from Australia

by Maureen Baker

Within a supposedly free and independent Australia women are a colonized sex. They are denied freedom of movement, control of their bodies, economic independence and cultural potency. This oppressed state derives from the status of 'the family' in Australia and the responsibilities assigned to women within this institution. (Summers, 1975: 29)

So states Anne Summers in her controversial book Damned Whores And God's Police. Much has been said about the lower status of women in Australia compared to other industrialized western nations. (Dixon, 1976: 11) As a Canadian, I cannot help drawing parallels between the development of the Women's Movement in these two Commonwealth countries. Both countries were marked by isolation, battles with the elements, British imperialism and a shortage of

women. Indeed, unlike Canada, Australia began as a penal colony with a predominance of male transportees. A "frontier mentality" stressing physical strength, hard work and individuality was present in the development of both countries, but it was the large number of immigrant working class men in Australia that seemed to lead to the emphasis on "mateship" or male bonding, which has contributed to a male-dominated culture and a distrust for women.

The women's movement in both countries was influenced by the suffragettes in Great Britain and the suffragists in the United States but each country had its indigenous leaders. The Women's Rights Movement soon concentrated on the franchise, which was seen as the key to other social and legislative changes.

In Canada, the Women's Rights Movement began in 1876 with Dr. Emily Howard Stowe's Toronto Women's Literary Club, which later became the Toronto Women's Suffrage Association.

(MacLellan, 1971: 14) In Australia, women first organized to discuss their "rights" in 1884 with the Woman's Suffrage Society in Melbourne, followed by the formation of a social reform organization called the Dawn Club in Sydney in 1889. (Summers, 1975: 350) The founder of the Dawn Club, Louisa Lawson, had also founded a women's newspaper. Summers describes this paper as "abrasively feminist," and states that it fought for a number of social changes as well as the right for women to vote. (Summers, 1975: 350)

In Australia, women were granted the right to vote in 1902 in federal elections and between 1889 and 1906 in state elections. (Mercer, 1975: 373) Suffrage was advocated by upper and upper-middle class women who used their personal influence with parliamentarians to change legislation. It has been suggested that their relatively conservative tactics were not threatening to the males and therefore they were listened to. (Summers, 1975: 354) Also, Australia was a new nation in 1901 and there may have been some feeling that the country should be started off on a democratic footing. (Encel, MacKenzie and Tebbutt, 1974: 226) Perhaps because the vote came relatively easily to Australian women, the movement lost its momentum sooner than in Canada, where the fight went on to 1918 in federal elections and 1940 in provincial elections. (MacLellan, 1971: 16-18)

In both nations, the early women's movement emphasized the necessity of the vote and participation in political life in order to make social changes, the importance of higher education, equalization in cause for divorce, a married woman's right to have custody of her own children, property rights for married women and the opportunity for women to be gainfully employed outside the home without suffering discrimination in pay. Most of the women's rightists accepted the prevalent sex role ideology, especially the idea that women were morally superior to men and the importance of motherhood and women's traditional role in the nuclear family.

In both Canada and Australia, the movement declined with the beginning of the First World War and the achievement of the vote in North America and Britain. North American and British women were mobilized into the War effort, and their contribution was seen as one reason for gaining the franchise. But the Depression of the 1930's led to a retrenchment of women's roles, as men were perceived as more deserving of the few jobs available. However, the Second World War and the necessity for women's labour meant an ideological change about women's role in public life. Since that time, and with an exception of the post-war baby boom, there has been a gradual rise in the proportion of women employed outside the home and an expansion of definitions of "women's work."

The "Second Phase" of the Women's Movement began about four years earlier in Canada than Australia. In 1966, a number of women's rights groups were organized, calling for a Royal Commission into the status of women, which was appointed in 1967 before the movement in Australia got off the ground. At the same time there were women's liberation groups in Canada, which arose partly from such New Left groups as Students for Democratic Society (Teather, 1976: 322), and partly through the popularization of several feminist books such as Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) and the translation of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. (1953) Between 1968 and 1972, there were a number of regroupings, with splits between the Marxists who saw capitalism as the exploiter of people and the Feminists who saw patriarchal society as the exploiter of women.

A women's conference was held in Melbourne in 1970 (Mercer, 1975: 406) which seemed to mark the beginning of the "reawakening" in Australia. The following year, a national conference was held on "Women and Work: Women in the Trade Unions." (Mercer, 1976: 374) Since that time, the movement has regrouped into three major types of women's organizations--Women's Liberation, Women's Electoral Lobby and Women's Action Alliance. (The Age, Jan. 9-10, 1976)

Women's Liberation (WL) seems to be similar to the group using that name in

North America. It is structureless, leaderless, anti-hierarchy and has attracted mainly young, single and university or college women. Concentration is on individual change through consciousness-raising and the restructuring of society to abolish sex roles. They aim to widen the choices for women and make no assumption that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality. Some of the main concerns and activities of WL have been radical change through the development of a female sub-culture to counteract patriarchal society--half-way houses for women with problems, rape crisis centres, health collectives and women's studies. They feel that sexual segregation is a necessary phase that women's groups must go through to free themselves from male-dominated thinking. Many Australian women disagree with WL's emphasis on socialism and lesbianism and are more interested in Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL).

WEL was established in 1972 as an offshoot from WL. (Mercer, 1975: 396) It is a national organization with state and local branches and has attracted a large membership in the past few years. Essentially comprised of middle class married women who feel that women's position should be improved through lobbying for legislative change, they are committed to working within the system for reform. They stress social justice and equal opportunity to men. WEL has been criticized for lacking a "feminist vision," (Mercer, 1975: 425)

as it seems to have no clear idea what its ultimate goal is other than improving the status quo.

Another conservative women's group exists in Australia called the Women's Action Alliance. This group seeks to improve women's position by raising the status of housework and motherhood and generally giving greater value to "women's work." WAA also uses lobbying strategy and disapproves of the WL's more radical tactics and life-styles. They feel that women should not be pushed into the labour force, but should be given a viable choice by improving women's position in the home. It is not surprising that the Women's Action Alliance is comprised primarily of older married women.

The women's movement in Australia seems to lack cohesion and appears to be on the verge of another split on the issue of lesbianism. At a Melbourne Conference on Feminism and Sexuality (October 1976), there was open conflict between lesbian and heterosexual women, between Black women and White women and implicit conflict between socialist women and those who saw sexism and patriarchy as more problematic than capitalism. Perhaps this conflict could be compared to the factionalism in the Women's Liberation Movement in Toronto in 1969, which produced the New Feminists formed by Bonnie Kreps. (Matheson, 1976: 332) It may be necessary for the movement to go through various stages of regrouping before it will crystallize its main

strategy and appeal to a wider audience.

The women's movement in Australia appears to be several years behind the movement in Canada (which is several years behind activities in the United States) in its public acceptance and the types of issues it is publicizing. There has been no abortion caravan in Australia, no Murdoch case, no Morgentaler case and no Jeanette Lavelle case. These court cases seemed to arouse public support in Canada for women's issues, and unite the movement. Women's studies is new in most universities (initiated at the Australian National University in 1975 and Macquarie University in 1976) and absent from many.

The concept of the nuclear family as the normal living arrangement is still very strong in Australia, as is the concept of mateship. The sexes are segregated socially to a greater extent than I perceived in Canada, with men and women standing at opposite ends of the room at parties, women being expected to bring a casserole to most gatherings. There is a male-oriented pub culture, grey-hound and horse-racing and "footie" as favourite past-times for men. Miriam Dixson, in her controversial book The Real Matilda (1976: 11) states:

". . . I propose that Australian women, women in the land of mateship, 'the Ocker,' keg-culture, come pretty close to top rating

as the 'Doormats of the Western World.'"

Dixon is criticized for blaming the position of women in Australia on the historically low status of convict women, the dominant influence of men among the casual poor and the resulting lack of female role models. (Murnane, 1976) But this could have been a contributing factor to their low status, as well as the isolation from more radical women's groups in Britain and the United States. The moralistic stereotypes that were placed upon women from the convict days--damned whores and God's police--were allowed to develop in isolation.

Although Australia was influenced by the British suffragettes and the American women's rights movement, Canada was closer and more conveniently in the path of visiting lecturers. Even now, there seems to be a considerable time before the more "radical" ideas reach Australia. For example, Susan Brownmiller's much publicized book on rape, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape, which was published in the United States in 1975, was not publicized in Australia until November 1976. Although most of the women's literature from North America does eventually come to Australia, much of its impact is lost due to cultural distance, a time lag, and lack of press coverage. Because Canada is so close to the United States, which has been the country of origin of many of the recent feminist writings, the social

impact of these ideas seems greater.

Although differences between the women's movements in Canada and Australia are readily apparent, women in both countries face similar unresolved issues. The relation between feminism and socialism, the place of lesbianism in the women's movement, whether the concept of sisterhood is a realistic one considering class divisions and ideological differences among groups of women, the danger of reformism and co-optation of the movement and the role of the nuclear family in the oppression of women--these are all issues common to the movement in both countries. At opposite ends of the world, feminists are struggling with the same basic problems: how to develop a female sub-culture to counteract patriarchal society, how to co-ordinate the efforts of the various factions within the movement to have the greatest impact on society and how to give the women's movement a theoretical base without increasing factionalism. Only time will tell whether these issues can be resolved before the movement subsides into what I see as its inevitable cyclical downswing, which seems to be already beginning.

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