

# Lesbian Politics

(This paper is an expanded version of one I wrote for an Oxford Companion to Australian Politics, to be published some time next year. Because there was a strict word limit of 1,000 words on the Oxford Companion entry, there was very little I could say, hence this extended version.)

At one time, during the early 1970s, there used to be two strands to lesbian politics, one that might be called ‘liberal pluralist’, and the other one more strictly speaking lesbian feminist although both were argued within feminism. The first asked for mainstream recognition and acceptance of lesbianism as a valid alternative lifestyle, the second claimed to pose a challenge and a threat to that mainstream, particularly to the norm of heterosexuality for women.

The two strands were not separated at the time and they did overlap. It is not possible, after all, to claim that lesbianism is a challenge to the heterosexual hegemony (as lesbian feminism did) if lesbianism continued to be hidden, derided or despised. So lesbian feminism also embraced liberal pluralist campaigns for mainstream recognition, that is, for lesbian visibility and ‘coming out’ and demands for an end to vilification or medicalisation (Clarke, 1975; Bebbington, 1975; Bebbington and Clark, 1978). But the two strands were also in conflict because claiming recognition and acceptance from the mainstream is incompatible with rejecting one of its central organising principles, i.e. heterosexuality.

What follows is focused mainly on lesbian feminism because it was the more overtly political of the two strands. Whereas the liberal pluralist demand for acceptance identified no particular structures of power responsible for silencing or condemning lesbianism, lesbian feminism explicitly identified the power relations of male supremacy.

There were very few published statements of the lesbian feminist position in Australia, and it was generally agreed that the clearest and least equivocal statements came from the US. As the *Scarlet Woman* collective found, ‘we had to look to American publications to provide a framework ... for our discussion’ because lesbian feminism was ‘seldom understood, discussed, or written about by Australian feminists’ (*Scarlet Woman Collective*, 1976: 3). Sources cited most often included Jill Johnston’s *Lesbian Nation*, the New York Radicalesbians’ paper, *Woman-Identified Woman*, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love’s book, *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*, the work of Charlotte Bunch and (somewhat later) Adrienne Rich’s article, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’. (See also: Myron and Bunch, 1975).

The New York Radicalesbians saw lesbianism as a ‘fundamental challenge to the female role’ and continued:

On one level, which is both personal and political, women may withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men, and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives. On a different political/psychological level, it must be understood that what is crucial is that women begin disengaging from male-defined response patterns. In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core. For irrespective of where our love and sexual energies flow, if we are male-identified in our heads, we cannot realize our autonomy as human beings (Radicalesbians (US), 1970: 20).

On this account, the politics of lesbian feminism was two-fold—to withdraw from heterosexuality in order to redirect the energy it consumed into more productive purposes; and to engage in a struggle within the self to divest oneself of those aspects of the oppressive society which had become engrained. But first and foremost, lesbian feminism was a commitment to women — ‘our energies must flow towards our sisters’ (p.21) — together with a stringent critique of heterosexuality — ‘when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a “woman” is to get fucked by men’ (p.18).

There were some Australian accounts although most of them were critical, that is, they set out the position only to disagree with it or find it flawed in some way. (See below). However, there were also some positive accounts, and not all of them were by lesbian feminists.

For example, Germaine Greer said: ‘Much lesbianism … may be understood as revolt against the limitations of the female role of passivity, hypocrisy and indirect action, as well as rejection of the brutality and mechanicalness of male sexual passion … [as long as it is chosen] in an honourable, clear-eyed fashion, rejecting shame and inferiority feelings’ (Greer, 1970: 293-4). (Since *The Female Eunuch* appeared in 1970, the notion of a special status for lesbians must have been around before that date). And Anne Summers said: ‘Lesbians are regarded as being even more subversive than male homosexuals because they are not sexually or emotionally dependent on men and their sexual preference is a living defiance of the patriarchal precept that men are superior to women and indispensable to women’s survival’ (Summers, 1975: 159).

Even CAMP, whose preferred style was reformist and jocular rather than confrontational (Thompson, 1985), was prepared to allow that lesbianism might be revolutionary: ‘The female homosexual, because she chooses to live her life alone or with another female is contravening the strict rules society has laid down for women … self sufficiency and independence … in women are seen as a challenge to the basic structure of society’ (CAMP (N.S.W.), 1975a: 50).

There were brief statements by two groups of Australian lesbian feminists who called themselves ‘Radicalesbians’ after the New York group. The first appeared in a paper written by a Melbourne Radicalesbian for the first lesbian conference in Australia, at Sorrento outside Melbourne in 1973.

Barbara, the author of this paper, said: 'The radicalesbian is a woman who loves other women because they are women ... The love of the radicalesbian for other women surmounts all artificial boundaries because she knows, or is learning to understand, what all the shit is about ... The radicalesbian has rejected all forms of male defined political and psychological thinking and ... freed her own psyche from the oppressive demands of patriarchy ... The radicalesbian challenges the idea basic to a patriarchal society that women exist for men and that their sexuality can only be defined in terms of a response to a male's sexuality. (In this sense she is more of a threat to patriarchy than the male homosexual)' (Barbara, 1973).

The second came from the Sydney Radicalesbians who placed a notice in the *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* of January, 1974, telling Sydney feminists of their existence and explaining: 'Our aims are basically feminist ones. As women, and in particular, as lesbian women, we want to destroy the institutions of male culture which bind us and prevent us from finding and being ourselves. At the same time, we want to provide the alternatives to enable us to find and be ourselves and to counteract the male culture' (Radicalesbians (Sydney), 1974). (For later statements, see: Thompson, 1980; Sitka, 1989; Thompson, 1991a, 1991b; *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*).

Nowadays these statements would be dismissed out of hand as 'essentialist' (not to say naive). But such a dismissal takes no account of the strong need around at the time to counteract the seemingly endless falsehoods and deceptions feminism kept exposing. 'Finding and being ourselves' and 'freeing her own psyche' were simply variations on the theme of honesty: 'the only honest life style', 'we can only relate really when we are honest, open and warm', 'our honesty, our courage, our compassion'. The honesty in turn was a way of trying to avoid complicity with the lies (however difficult that might turn out to be in practice). The charge of 'essentialism' is too facile to do justice to the intensity and integrity with which such positions were held, their naivety notwithstanding.

But there were other objections to the radical lesbian feminist stance which were contemporary with it. The Editorial to the 'Lesbian Issue' of *Refractory Girl* thought that lesbian feminism was 'sexist', based as it was on a belief 'that lesbianism is the most radical position possible for a feminist to adopt'. This, they felt, was 'a form of sexual apartheid' because it excluded men and perhaps heterosexual women, too. The authors quoted Jill Johnston saying, 'Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution', interpreting Johnston's stance as 'the notion of a lesbian nation, tribal groupings of women giving each other psychic support and working in revolutionary struggle against our oppression'. This was an idea that was 'growing in popularity', the editors said, even though it was 'inherently sexist'. In the editors' view, 'sexism', the dividing of people into categories according to their sex, sex roles or sexual preferences, was the overarching problem uncovered by feminism (and not male supremacy or even women's oppression). The solution to that problem, therefore, was 'a diversity of sex preferences' or 'the utopian promise of polymorphous perversity' (*Refractory Girl*, 1974: 2) (and not an end to male supremacy). But although these authors

clearly disagreed with the lesbian feminist position, they did manage to convey the idea that some feminists at least (although not themselves) were making the startling claim that lesbianism was the most radical feminist position possible.

In an article in the same issue of *Refractory Girl*, Lesley Lynch said: 'we already hear people claiming the only honest life style for a feminist is that of the radical lesbian commune dweller'. Again this was not something she herself agreed with. It was being claimed by other people—in a footnote she added that, 'the only time I have personally heard this argued, it was being pushed by a heterosexual W.L. woman'. Nonetheless, she did note that 'a significant number of women' had changed their sexual orientation from heterosexual to lesbian (Lynch, 1974: 37-8).

In another article in the same issue of *Refractory Girl* Bev Kingston also rejected the lesbian feminist claim (or her own interpretation of it). 'Lesbians have acquired a special status, or so it would seem', she said, 'their experience of the fabled "sisterhood" ... places them in a position to become, if not heroines of oppression, then at least high priestesses of the new way of life in which men are some lesser and mostly unnecessary species'. This claim was, she felt, 'inappropriate and improper' and proposed 'a new orthodoxy' that was 'quite incompatible with the original objectives of the women's movement, viz. as wide as possible a set of choices and lifestyles for women as well as men to express themselves and fulfill their personal needs' (Kingston, 1974).

In support of her interpretation of what lesbian feminism was supposedly saying, Kingston cited the Melbourne Radicalesbians' publication, *Melbourne Feminist Collection 1* (Radicalesbians (Melbourne), 1973). However, there is nothing in that publication that can be interpreted in this way. And to the extent that there was any claim to a special status for lesbianism, it was mentioned (once) only to be rejected. That mention occurred in an article by Jenny who said that 'a lot of feminists' felt that 'feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice', and that 'a popular question is, "Do you think all women should become lesbians?"' Jenny disagreed because it was not possible for a woman simply to decide to be a lesbian, and 'lesbianism in itself isn't the answer', she said (Jenny, 1973). Moreover, none of the other articles in the collection even hinted that it might be. So wherever Kingston found her evidence for the claims she made on behalf of lesbian feminism, it was not in this collection. Still, wherever she heard it, and in whatever form, once again lesbian feminism was clearly saying something startling.

The notion that lesbianism was vitally important to feminism (even if it was a wrongheaded notion) was commonly conveyed by its critics in the very act of criticising it. To give another example, in a paper written for the second of CAMP's 'Female Homosexuality' seminars,<sup>1</sup> Joyce Stevens disagreed with the lesbian feminist position for a number of reasons. She could not see that unconscious desire could be changed; she did not believe 'that the feminist revolution ... is going to be won by women and men living in totally separate groups'; she was worried that lesbian feminism was making new

impositions on people, just when 'we are struggling hard to break out of boxes and restrictions imposed by present attitudes and sexuality'; and she wanted 'much more *fundamental changes*' than just in her sexual relationships. She agreed that there was a close connection between lesbianism and feminism, but she saw that influence operating the other way round from that asserted by lesbian feminism. Rather than lesbianism being vital to feminism, she saw feminism as significant for lesbianism because feminism 'attacks the power base which promotes the discriminations against homosexuality', that is, the family. At the same time, however, she interpreted the lesbian feminist claim as 'a view in the women's movement that lesbianism is the ultimate form of liberation for any woman'. She was even prepared to acknowledge that that might be true, because radical lesbianism had 'brought about big changes in my life, how I viewed myself as a woman and my understanding of things that had happened in the past', and had enabled her to see potentialities in herself that she had not previously recognised (Stevens, 1975).

Julie Earney, also writing for the CAMP seminar, was more dismissive of lesbian feminism than Stevens was, but she did quote Abbott and Love (1973) saying that lesbians were the "most liberated women", the "natural leaders" of the women's movement and its "most revolutionary vanguard", as well as being in 'rebellion against having to play a role that has been specified by our biological sex'. Like Stevens, she gave a number of reasons why claims like these were misguided. Being a lesbian, she said, was often even more oppressive than being heterosexual; feminism is not just about removing sex role stereotyping and allowing free choice of sexual behaviour, and anyway, removing sex role stereotyping for women also meant removing it for men; the need for women to take control over their own bodies is not peculiar to lesbianism; lesbianism is not possible for all women; 'the aim of a man-free society is unfeasible'; lesbianism involves role playing too; and lesbianism is just about living the way we want to live and 'this just happens to be apparently similar to feminist theory' (Earney, 1975). All this may be true (although possibly irrelevant in some cases). But these objections show little awareness of the reasons why Abbott and Love (or lesbian feminists more generally) might have made such startling statements.

The socialist feminist *Scarlet Woman* collective interpreted lesbian feminist politics as 'a political critique of the institution and ideology of heterosexuality as a cornerstone of male supremacy' (*Scarlet Woman Collective*, 1976: 3). 'As a strategy', they said, 'lesbian-feminists see themselves as having a particular strength because lesbians don't have a stake in the patriarchy, and their existence challenges its continuation'. The collective had two main objections to this. First, heterosexual women did not need lesbians to tell them that the so-called 'privileges' of heterosexuality were no such thing, but rather 'myths which women search for but no-one attains' (p.4); and second, lesbian feminists were showing no signs of organising themselves into a movement for social change. 'In the Australian movement, there hasn't been a coherent move by lesbian-feminists to withdraw their ... economic, social, cultural, and political ... involvement', they said. Instead of couching discussions of lesbianism and feminism 'within a conception of movement theory or politics', the collective said,

lesbian feminists tend to deal with the issues 'as personal dilemmas, fears and uncertainties'.

But once again, these objections ignored certain key features of the lesbian feminist position. In the first place, it was not the case that lesbian feminists were telling heterosexual women what they already knew. It is true that feminist awareness of the centrality of heterosexuality to the feminist political struggle was not confined to lesbians. But lesbian feminism was saying more than the *Scarlet Woman* collective alleged. It was saying not only that heterosexuality held out false hope to women, but that it was central to women's oppression because it was implicated in the violent subjugation of women (Onlywomen Press, 1981. For an extension of the argument that heterosexuality is centrality to male supremacy, see: Thompson, 1991a: chapter 2). Lesbian feminism was also saying that heterosexuality was unnecessary because so many feminists had found they could leave it behind without sacrificing sexual pleasure. And while it is true that much lesbian feminist writing and discussion focused on relationships (see below), the reason for that was a political one. It was an attempt to put into practice the new feminist insight that the personal was political, and to live in accordance with revolutionary ideals now, rather than waiting for some post-revolutionary future. Moreover, it was simply not true that there had been no move on the part of lesbian feminists 'to withdraw their economic, social, cultural, and political involvement'. On the contrary, that was exactly what separatism (see below) was all about.

Other examples of criticisms that conveyed the idea of lesbian feminism's importance while disagreeing with it include the following:

The whole argument that the Lesbian is the "vanguard" of the women's movement puts women into categories within the movement, and divides women, not unites them ... the basis of the problem ... is the sexism in the women's movement (Gaby, 1974: 17).

The "them and us" concept of lesbian/straight women within the movement is often reinforced by heterosexual women feeling that lesbians believe lesbian-feminism to be a more pure philosophy and that "straights haven't made it yet" (Hovey, 1976: 30).

"I fear the concept that I'm no longer a feminist unless I'm a lesbian ... [and] the pressure which sometimes happens when [lesbians] ... presume that what they are on about is right and others aren't 'there' yet" (*Scarlet Woman* Collective, 1976: 1).

All these statements are saying that lesbian feminism was 'divisive', but they make no attempt to come to grips with what it was saying. If it really was saying that lesbianism was 'the vanguard of the women's movement', that it was 'right' and 'a more pure philosophy', that no one could be a feminist unless she was a lesbian, then (once again) these claims are too startling to be dismissed so easily.

The central strategy of lesbian feminism was separatism. By and large, this meant a literal disengagement from men—having nothing to do with men to the fullest extent possible, certainly sexually, but also in other ways—the ‘separation of the sexes organizationally, politically and personally’ (Valeska, 1975: 8). It was a logical extension of the feminist critique of heterosexuality as ‘a cornerstone of male supremacy’ (p.10) to the extent that lesbian feminism was seen to be ‘the only available institutional and ideological alternative’ to heterosexuality (p.12). There was a realisation that this separation could never be absolute, not only because ‘men are everywhere’ (p.8), but also because survival depended on some engagement at least with the existing social structures—‘you cannot cut yourself off from all sources of power and survive’ (Valeska, 1975: 12); ‘few of us, if any, are in a position to survive should the systems of men collapse tomorrow’ (Sheila Anne, 1992: 7). However, such engagements could be kept to a minimum: ‘we separate ourselves from male domination, from activities that are destructive to ourselves and each other, male serving behaviors and addictions’ (Sheila Anne, 1992: 7).

In that sense, separatism was also a withdrawal from the institutions and practices, meanings and values, of male supremacy. As Sarah Lucia Hoagland put it, ‘To withdraw or separate is to refuse to act according to the system’s rules and framework and thereby to refuse to validate its basic values’ (Hoagland, 1988b: 4). It was a different kind of political activism, ‘one which has a different function than that involved in choosing to challenge the system from within’ (p.3. See also: Hoagland, 1988a).

But separatism was not only a movement away from men, it was also a movement towards women. ‘Lesbian Separatism’, said Sheila Anne, ‘is a principle of moving towards Lesbian, life-loving reality’ (Sheila Anne, 1992: 7). Although it was easier for lesbian feminists to see what it was they were separating from rather than what they were moving towards, still the hope was that ‘by connecting with other Lesbian Separatists of shared Dyke-loving values we can create a space to share our wildest dreams and to make them happen’ (p.8). This was ‘the most important aspect of separatism’, the ‘focus on lesbians (or women) and a creation of lesbian meaning, lesbian reality’ (Hoagland, 1988b: 10. See also: Hoagland and Penelope, eds, 1988).

One of the issues preoccupying the early lesbian feminists was the question of relationships. In conventional political terms this preoccupation might seem to be the antithesis of political, as indeed it was seen by the socialist feminists on the *Scarlet Woman* collective when they said that lesbian feminists treated lesbianism as a matter of ‘personal dilemmas, fears and uncertainties’. But one of feminism’s crucial insights was to perceive that ‘the personal is political’, that personal life is permeated with relations of power which therefore could be resisted on that level too. There was an attempt on the part of lesbian feminists to avoid the exclusivity, jealousy and possessiveness they saw as characteristic of heterosexual relationships. The chief strategy for doing that was what was sometimes called ‘non-monogamy’, a determination not to have exclusive two-woman sexual

relationships, but to have sexual relationships with many women at once (or at least, with more than one other woman). As Lyndel put it: 'it was considered very wrong to be a couple there for a while' (quoted in Sitka, 1989: 19).

The reason for this was an attempt to introduce equality among women, or at least among lesbian feminists, based on a sense that all women should be treated equally, and that no one should be singled out as more special or more important than anyone else. As Chris Sitka put it: 'We were trying to foster a sense of sisterhood, the individual within the group ... Couples were seen to be isolating for other women' (Sitka, 1989: 19). Not surprisingly, this was on the whole not a workable option for lesbian sexual relationships (although there were some lesbians who succeeded for a time). As Sue Jackson put it: 'What I think we were predominantly trying to do then was to live the post-revolution before we'd even figured out anything about what was even the structure of what we were living in, and how you might actually go about changing it' (quoted in Sitka, 1989: 23).

Another issue of importance during the 1970s concerned the way in which the courts were dealing with custody cases involving lesbian mothers. Campaigns in support of lesbian mothers were not, strictly speaking, lesbian feminist because they were not asking for anything very radical, simply recognition from the mainstream (the courts) that lesbian mothers were like any other mothers. But the issue was important because many lesbian feminists were also mothers and some were in acrimonious dispute with their former husbands about custody of the children.

During the 1970s, eleven custody cases involving lesbian mothers were heard in Australian courts (Harrison, 1979),<sup>2</sup> of whom four had lost custody. The courts denied that the mother's lesbianism was the sole, or even the main, reason for the decision, and in two of those cases there were clearly other reasons. (In one case, the mother's female lover had assaulted her and one of the children and had failed to obey an injunction not to approach them. In this case the children were taken into care since the father was not a competent parent either. In the other case, the children had wanted to live with their father).

In the other two cases, however, the mother's lesbianism was the deciding factor, disclaimers notwithstanding. In the case of Spry and Spry, not only did the mother lose custody, the judge imposed conditions on the children's access visits—there were to be no displays of sexual affection between the mother and her lover in front of the children, and the progress of the access arrangements was to be monitored for six months by a welfare officer who would report to the court. The judge said that other factors were more important than the mother's lesbianism. The father could provide better accommodation and the children were already familiar with it, and his arrangements for their care (a housekeeper and their maternal grandmother who disapproved of her daughter's lesbianism) were more stable in the eyes of the court than the mother's lesbian relationship. But the judge worried about possible peer pressure and spiteful comments the children might be subjected

to, and was concerned that the two girls might be influenced by their mother and her lover towards 'deviant' behaviour themselves.

In the case of P.C. and P.R., the court took a dislike to the mother's lover. The judge perceived her as aggressive and overly possessive of both the mother and the child. He also considered there might be some risk in the child (a 4-year-old boy) being raised in a 'homosexual' environment.

But even in the cases where the mother was granted custody the courts grossly interfered with the private lives of these women by imposing unwarranted restrictions.

In the case of Campbell the judge granted custody to the mother only on condition that she not sleep overnight with her lover nor engage in 'acts of a sexual nature' either in front of the children or in front of anyone who might tell the children. He also made custody conditional on the children being taken to see a child psychiatrist once a year. The judge also asked for details of the mother's sexual activities.

In the case of Cartwright and Cartwright, the judge took it for granted that lesbianism was something that should be hidden from the children, commenting that it was 'something of an affliction'. (Since the mother was inclined to agree with him, clearly she was not a lesbian feminist). He awarded her custody because the children wanted to live with their mother. However, he imposed the condition that she refrain from any word or act that would suggest to any of her children that she or any friend of hers was a lesbian.

In other cases the judge awarded custody to the mother without imposing conditions. But the fact of the mother's lesbianism was discussed in negative terms by the court, sometimes in great detail. In the case of Powell, the judge commented that 'the community in general is still sufficiently old-fashioned to view with disfavour and even with abhorrence, unnatural sexual acts'. In the case of O'Reilly, the court gave lengthy and detailed consideration to the mother's lesbianism and whether or not it should influence the decision, despite the fact that the father was an alcoholic and unable to care for the children. In the case of Brooke and Brooke, the judge considered the possibility of requiring the mother either to discontinue her lesbian relationship altogether or to undertake to keep her lover away from her children, as a condition of granting her custody. But he decided not to impose these conditions on the grounds that it would be illogical given the lack of any evidence that the relationship was detrimental to the children. He also felt that imposing conditions might have a negative effect on her parenting abilities.

Finally, there was one case (Schmidt and Schmidt) where the judge took into account only the people and the circumstances involved, and was not swayed by prejudices or stereotypes about lesbianism. The 14-year-old girl, who had been living with her father, wanted to live with her mother. The court

examined the circumstances of the mother's lesbian relationship, but only because the father was alleging that it would be detrimental to the girl. The court found, however, that it would not, and commented: 'It would be a mistake to regard a person's sexual proclivities as the dominating trait of their personality as if it was something that occupied their sole attention and thoughts. The difficult task always confronting the Family Court is that of searching for the quality of relationships and in assessing the personality and character of persons concerned in custody and access matters'. As Kate Harrison, the author of the source quoted here, said: 'This remark by Evatt is really an excellent outline of the approach which the courts should take to the assessment of an application for custody ... assessing the people involved, regardless of their sexuality'.

Prejudice against lesbian mothers is by no means a thing of the past. On Monday 31 May 2004, an episode of the ABC children's television program, *Play School*, featured two lesbian mothers and their daughter. The episode created a furore. 'Play School's lesbian tale sparks outrage', trumpeted the *Sydney Morning Herald* (4.6.'04). 'Parents watching Play School with their infants were shocked', the *Herald-Sun* reported, and 'family groups' were 'angered' (3.6.'04). The Prime Minister accused the ABC of 'running an agenda' and being 'politically correct' because lesbians are 'a very, very small number'; while in a flurry of mixed metaphor the Deputy Prime Minister said, 'This is a very serious example of putting the indulgences and the particular wheelbarrows of adults before children' (*Herald-Sun*, 7.6.'04). Taxpayers were invoked (by a spokesman for the Australian Family Association), with their 'right to know their two or three-year-old kids can turn on *Play School* and get some basic learning skills without political indoctrination being rammed down their throats'. And veteran right-winger, Babette Francis, currently (it would seem) national co-ordinator of family lobby group called 'Endeavour Forum', was reported to have voiced concern for those 'unsuspecting parents' who allowed their children to watch *Play School* because they thought, 'Oh this is a children's program. It's not going to have anything to do with sex or violence' (*Herald-Sun*, 3.6.'04)

As, of course, it didn't. The episode in question was remarkably innocent. As reported in the newspapers, the story involved

'a girl called Brenna going to a fair with her two mummies. "I'm Brenna. That's me in the blue. My mums are taking me and my friend Melyn to an amusement park," the little girl says over images of her two mums smiling and waving while she and her friend played on a merry-go-round' (Melbourne *Herald-Sun* 2.6.'04; Adelaide *The Advertiser* 8.6.'04).

Clearly there is nothing either sexual or violent about two women waving to a small girl, even if they are lesbians (a word that was not used). Why is this 'an agenda'? Lesbians exist, after all, and even if their numbers are small, they are much greater than the number of their appearances on *Play School* to date (a single instance). And why is a small number reason for suppression? Prime

Ministers are small in number, too, but they get a great deal of media attention, and in the case of some Prime Ministers at least, rather more than some of us would like. Facetiousness aside, the reaction to the 'Lesbian Mothers' segment of Play School was wildly out of proportion, indicating that the struggle for acceptance is not yet won.

As far as the public, published face of feminism is concerned, lesbian feminism would seem to have disappeared. The liberal pluralist position is now dominant, as indeed it has been all along, if only because it is more easily understood and immediately recognisable. Initially, it simply called for a change of public attitudes towards lesbianism, away 'from discrimination and oppression' and towards 'acceptance of female homosexuality as a valid alternative lifestyle' (CAMP (N.S.W.), 1975a: 2). Lesbians had the same kinds of feelings as heterosexuals did, and similar lives. As one American lesbian put it: 'Our kind of love is as valid as anyone else's' (Shelley, 1969: 348).

Subsequently the liberal pluralist position was to become much more confrontational, embracing a libertarian 'Queer Theory' which brooked no criticism of sexual desire and activity whatsoever in the interests of 'fluidity', 'indeterminacy', anti-'essentialism' and inclusiveness (Baird, 1998: 202-3; Jeffreys, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Lesbian politics became 'lesbian and gay', or even 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender' (LGBT) (although the Coalition of Activist Lesbians ([www.coal.org.au](http://www.coal.org.au)) remains focused on lesbian issues). Within such a tolerant milieu, the space available for any critique of sexuality vanished. And yet another attempt to live the good life (in the ethical, not the material, sense) once again retreated into the private sphere and out of the realm of politics. Nonetheless, lesbian feminism was saying something important.

What that 'something' was can be separated into two parts — an analysis of the social problem and a suggested solution. The analysis did not differ greatly from what feminism in general was saying, that is, that the central social problem identified by feminism was male supremacy, and that heterosexuality was crucially implicated in this.<sup>4</sup> But lesbian feminism seemed to offer a solution because so many women were becoming lesbians under the influence of feminism. It appeared to be a practical alternative whereby women could avoid some of the worst of the personal consequences of male supremacy. It would seem that feminism led automatically to lesbianism. There were practical arguments against that. Feminism didn't always lead to lesbianism — not every feminist became a lesbian; and it certainly didn't happen the other way around — not every lesbian was a feminist. Moreover, it was not an alternative that was available to every woman. Nonetheless, the very existence of lesbian feminism meant that there *was* an alternative and brought into question the naturalness and absoluteness of heterosexuality for women. It also provided a community for women, in contrast to the isolation from other women normally imposed by heterosexual arrangements.

Because of this sense that there was a solution (partial and limited though it might be) the lesbian

feminist analysis tended to be less equivocal and more adamant than feminism more generally. It was this no-holds-barred approach that distinguished it, a difference of emphasis rather than content. It was a refusal to give ground in the face of concerted attempts to silence the feminist message, attempts that have been largely successful. (See the conference described in the footnote). But however unsuccessful it has been in practice, the (lesbian) feminist analysis is still relevant. It has not been overtaken by events — male supremacy still exists, after all. Nor has it been superseded by any improvements in theory — the original feminist insight into the nature and existence of male supremacy, far from being developed and expanded, has been trivialised, derided, bowdlerised and, as far as the public, published face of 'feminism' is concerned, obliterated. Nonetheless, what 'second wave' (lesbian) feminism had to say about male domination is still vitally important for understanding current social arrangements.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> There were two of these seminars, held at Sydney University in March and May/June, 1975. They were organised by CAMP (N.S.W.) and funded by a \$4,000 grant from the National Advisory Committee for International Women's Year (CAMP (N.S.W.), 1975a, 1975b).

<sup>2</sup> The unpublished source cited here discussed 12 cases, but one involved a gay father. Ten of the cases (the other was still under appeal) were referenced as: Campbell (1974) 9 S.A.S.R. 25; Powell (unreported), 22 March 1976, Supreme Court of Victoria; Spry and Spry (1977) FLC 90-271; N and N (1977) FLC 90-208; Cartwright and Cartwright (1977) FLC 90-302; O'Reilly (1977) FLC 90-300; Brooke and Brooke (1977) FLC 90-325; Kitchener and Kitchener (1978) FLC 90-436; Schmidt and Schmidt (unreported) April 1979; and P.C. and P.R. (1979) Family Law Service 352.

<sup>3</sup> Citing these two publications in the same breath is misleading. Although both document the process referred to in the text, Baird is neutral towards it while Jeffreys is critical of the way in which lesbianism has been depoliticised by the libertarian influence. I agree with Jeffreys (Thompson, 1991a).

<sup>4</sup> As argued in, for example, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* and Kate Milet's *Sexual Politics*. This is a feminism that is unrecognisable nowadays. 'Feminism' no longer means the struggle against male domination, it just means something to do with women, and simply reiterating the word 'women' seems to be a sufficient demonstration of feminist political commitment. Take, for example, the themes in feminist conferences these days. Typical is a conference to be held in December 2004, called 'Australian and International Feminisms' (note the plural), where the following topics have been suggested to potential presenters, to 'reflect the diversity of 30 years of feminism and women's achievement':

- \* Women in Sport, Leisure, Hospitality & Tourism
- \* Women & The Law (state, international, including refugee issues)
- \* Women, Power & Politics (gender, feminists, OWA's, politicians)
- \* Women & Indigeneity (Aboriginal and worldwide first nation agendas)
- \* Women & Global Survival (War, ecology, environmental issues)
- \* Women & Health (medicine, alternative, community, disability, fertility)
- \* Women & Sexuality (the family, lesbian issues, sex workers, transexuality)
- \* Women & Creativity (visual arts, literature, media, performance, fashion, film)
- \* Women & Business (IT, manufacturing, publishing, arts management)
- \* Women & the Academy (research, teaching secondary/tertiary, training, library)
- \* Women & Spirituality (traditional, tribal, Eastern, Western, mystical).

Not a single mention of male domination, or of the more extreme of its manifestations such as violence against women. In fact, the radical feminist standpoint is explicitly excluded when the male-demanded industry, prostitution, is referred to by the neutral-sounding term, 'sex workers'. Not only is its status as violence against women denied, the responsibility of the men who desire the sex is utterly elided. So much for diversity!