

Beatrice Faust



100
YEARS OF WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE
1908-2008



Reflection and Celebration





Beatrice Faust



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& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Beatrice Faust

Interviewed by: Diana White and Cara Jeffrey

Interview of Beatrice Faust edited by Diana White

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I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality

Sarah Costanzo



Introduction

The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007



The complexity of women and feminism is overlooked

One of the fallacies is that any woman is likely to be a feminist and equally any feminist is likely to be a woman. Now, that immediately handicaps you because there are a lot of women who want to get on in the world or want to broaden their experience and they had no feminist consciousness. It's very individualistic and this failure to demarcate what their allegiances are, and their motives, means that you're weakening your political movement. I used to try and categorise people; you know, what is your state of consciousness and how can we work together? Within feminism there are plenty of feminists who are not really concerned with a range of women, or all women, or most women, and you have to say, 'Look this is a good middle-class goal'. Equal pay for neuro-surgeons is a good goal but it doesn't affect a great number of women. This fallacy is really a form of stereotyping that all women are the same and all feminists are the same; and pretty much women are feminists and feminists are women. Is just not so. The complexity of women and feminism is overlooked.

I think in reality it is becoming less complex as feminism becomes absorbed into bigger political movements like party politics. When you had an outfit like the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) or an outfit like the Women's Liberation Movement and you had specific group goals, the specific groups reflected the parts of the complexity. I feel the more women get involved with say the Australian Labor Party or the Greens



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or the Liberal Party and the Coalition, the more the complexity is overlooked.

Once women move into politics

Women can't buck the party system and it's very rare that you'll get a woman introducing herself in terms of being a feminist or seeking feminist goals or looking after women's issues. This doesn't mean they will vote in a hostile way if a woman's issue comes up but it does mean that you can't rely on women to promote women's issues. You have to lobby the women politicians the same as you have to lobby the men. Demanding more of governments

I was shocked when I realised how weakened feminism had become with the first Enterprise Bargaining. If you looked at those first 10 000, you would find that almost none of those bargains had anything specific for women. Maybe 5 per cent or maybe 10 per cent had one or two things, but none of them had a full range that feminism had demanded on behalf of women. Clearly what was happening was that the Enterprise Bargaining System was run by male-dominated bosses and male -dominated unions and I don't see that the Australian Workplace Agreements are any improvement. It's been going downhill now for 20 years or more in terms of women's capacity to influence the workplace and wages and conditions. An illustration of this was the enormous fight Prue Goward had over parental leave. She stuck with it and she did promote it

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and it was seen as something terribly radical, yet Sweden had it for 80 years. That would have been one of the items expected to be covered in the old Enterprise Bargain or the new work place agreement had women made as much progress as one hoped. The way I see it, 30 years of feminism has been undone in this development towards individual relationships between workers and bosses. Whatever you call it, whether you call it an Enterprise Bargain or Workplace Agreement, I was startled that there wasn't more outrage. People weren't marching in the streets. I think it's going to be something that happens more gradually because of the way that people have negotiated deals under the old system, and it's only going to be in the next three years that women start to realise the implications of the new system.

Progress

When someone like Germaine Greer gets up and says there's been very little progress, she's missing out on the progress that has happened, and again treating women as a stereotype: that all women are the same and they all have the same problems and proceed at the same rate. They don't. One of the difficulties that I see now of course is that a lot of women have extreme responsibilities although they have succeeded. Some of my friend's daughters are working from eight to eight. That doesn't leave much time for a social life or a political life. They're lucky if they can get their shoes polished or their knickers washed with that amount of responsibility in their jobs. They



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would of course say: 'Oh, we're doing fine, we are doing very well', which of course they are compared with other groups. These are professional women with experiences of finances and experiences of management and so on. Those women have come a long way in one way, but in other ways they're losing out a bit because they are working like men but they don't have wives. The man can get a wife to take up the slack for him and look after him but women can't get wives.

There's also unfinished business

One of the big motivations in WEL was shaking the 'pollies' up. I spent a lot of my childhood and adolescence being frustrated at the dinner table because my family had an expectation of certain changes happening. The 'pollies' never seemed to notice; they'd always get elected. Menzies particularly, but Bolte also, they'd get elected year after year or election after election, and you had the feeling that they were just not listening to social change, not listening to everyone. I think now they do listen a lot more but they try to spin it, make it look as if your friendly representative is listening to you, then they go away and don't do anything. One of the things I find now is that some of the parties have really good policies if you read them. The policies on paper are wonderful but the politicians are not implementing those policies. I feel that WEL certainly smartened them up for some years but then other people learned to do the

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same thing. Lobbying became a lot more sophisticated and widespread. The particular policies WEL originally divided up were a range of things that were relevant to women. Some of those are pretty well fulfilled, education equality for example. Making education available to women so they can really make a choice: do they really want to be a hairdresser, do they want to go on and do literature and write the great Australian novel or become a surgeon or whatever? I think we have long established that girls can do as well in education and they should have all the opportunities that boys have. On say the reproductive front, which was my particular area of interest Victoria still has abortion as an offence in criminal law and you might say well that law hasn't been enforced for many years and we had a de facto change. The change doesn't mean that the system is working for all women in all areas. You get this terrible discrimination against rural women and women of a non- English speaking background who often don't realise what their rights are. You can say the de facto reform in the matter of abortion, contraception, family planning and choice is not yet won. It's very uneven, very unfair and some women, not the majority, but a significant number of women are still suffering. When I look at how WEL started, and where we are today in 2007. I think we've had great successes but there's also unfinished business.

The original WEL campaign was to lobby for childcare, and it was a women's liberation goal. Now we've got the conflation of different groups. A lot of those women who want-



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ed community -controlled childcare, they didn't hang in there after their own kids went to high school. I don't hold that against them because women do what women need to do, but in terms of realising the childcare issue it fizzled out quite quickly. There were other ways of delivering childcare, as in having childcare in the work place, and it looked for a little while as if the Enterprise Bargaining would bring some more childcare to the work place but it didn't. Childcare increases the efficiency of the workforce and it makes tremendous improvements to the morale and the willingness to work the hours and so on, of the female workforce, but mostly it's apathy. It needs people to push it and in the absence of a strong union movement pushing it, or a strong feminist movement pushing it, then it doesn't happen. WEL also had an interest in Aboriginal women. We had ten areas of interest that we researched for the first questionnaire to the members the year Whitlam got in. At that time the Indigenous women wanted to stand by their man; they didn't want this feminist business confusing the issue... We felt, though, that we could ask those questions, at least to energise the candidates and the people who got elected, the members of parliament. WEL didn't have a driving influence, but it had some, and it had some recognition. By 1992 we had Aboriginal women actually joining WEL. They'd realised that there are things that women can do with women that women can't do with men. I thought that was a lovely development, Aboriginal women fronting up to the WEL National Conference.

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The strength of indigenous women

Well, some people hear about it all the time and others don't hear about it at all. It's pretty evident if you look at the criminality and drunkenness that has been around for a long time. The Aboriginal women were holding the communities together long ago. It's not a new development. There has been some anthropology that has looked at the roles of women in a general social way and one observer pointed out that men have really only two jobs if you look at many societies and many cultures. They have religion and war. Neither of those will fill your belly. Women, however, can be responsible for building houses, keeping the houses clean and maintained; or, if they are nomads, they can be responsible for packing and carrying the home. Women are responsible for bearing and rearing children, looking after the sick and the elderly. They may be responsible for agriculture; the whole of African agriculture is dependent on women, and as such they are contributing to the economy of their community but also to the health. That line of thinking is terribly important, that women have a very constructive input into human culture. It's not at all surprising to me that we are now seeing Aboriginal women on the front page of the papers and on the television, that people have at last woken up, that these women are punching above their weight.



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Role of women's groups

I think anything that brings women together is helpful because women network. They're often cut off from say the sort of mateship networks or professional networks that men have. I see fantastic energy at things that bring women together. I used to ask myself why is it that churches are run by men but most of the parishes are women. If you look at the women you see it's part of networking. It brings them out of the home and it brings them in contact with other people and especially other women. Anything that brings women together whatever the excuse is positive.

What's in a name?

There are many feminisms and some of them are very judgmental and some of them are very ideological. One of the beauties of some of the movements is that they don't push an ideology. They don't ask you to sign a statement of support for whatever the ideology is and WEL had that. We were very low on ideology. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) asked Eve Mahlab, who was part of WEL, and Ann Jackson to join the board. Ann said, 'I don't think that would be quite appropriate because I'm an atheist and Eve's a Jew'; and the woman said 'don't tell anyone'. So they went on and joined. I think that's a way of doing feminism where you're inclusive whereas some of the feminisms we have are exclusive. I think a lot of young women react against that exclusiveness they don't want to give up being sexy and shaving their

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armpits or whatever they may want to shave, and they don't want to become Marxist or Maoist or Fidelists. They feel that all feminism is a bit of a burden, a bit drab, and in fact their attitudes are very feminist and they network like feminist but they wouldn't call themselves that.

What's in a name?

I think it's also good to look in the past and have something historical to remind people that we have come a long way. One of the things that perhaps we need to be reminded of is that Victoria got the suffrage later than the rest of Australia. It was still ahead of England and the United States. If you look at why that happened it was really because men were frightened of women's political power. The right wing men thought that the women would all vote left and the left wing men thought that the women would all vote right wing. They didn't actually bother to ask the women. What happened was the women tended to vote according to their own class interests and their own background's interests. The majority of women vote according to the same class interests as their husbands but in specific areas women do vote independently. This is called gender gap voting. There's a lot of gender gap research that goes into just how women are different from men and how you can appeal to women and, in contrast, how you can get women to vote for particular politicians. Emily's List, which is the ALP Women's political support group, has a specific area where they do gender gap research.



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Why the interest in political issues?

If you talk about gender equality my main interest is reproductive; and it not just contraception and abortion, because the more you look at that, the more you realise there are a whole group of attitudes around that area. You need sex education. It's no use throwing contraceptives around unless you've got sex education. Then you realise that you need to think about media and the messages being put out...and people's attitudes. Many feminists argue that for me to be mixing in pornography was distasteful, anti-feminist, discriminatory and sexist; but pornography is one of the ways that people educate themselves in the absence of other stuff. And of course it's a pleasure as well. One of the differences that I can see now is that women take it or leave it. If you look at the sexpos which now happen roughly every year somewhere or other, the bulk of people going there are couples; and the women are making the choice to go with it or not go with it. So what we've had I think is a general liberalisation over, say, 50 years. My first experiences of personal censorship when I wrote a little article for the Melbourne University newspaper 'Farrago' on what you do for sex at university. You either don't have it or you do have it. If you don't have it you don't have any problems. If you do have it you've got to consider VD and pregnancy, and we were sued for that article and had to get up in court and prove that we weren't corrupting society and leading people astray. Darling Professor Maxwell got up and said he hadn't noticed anyone copulating in the bushes on the day that 'Farrago' came out. We won,

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and the State appealed. The State thought we shouldn't have been acquitted and it then became a 12-month good behaviour bond. This sort of thing was happening in 1960. We now have a far different attitude to sexual information that is partly to do with gender equality. I sometimes see girls in the supermarket in the chemist buying condoms and I think, 'Right on sister!'. Take charge, don't let anyone get away with saying they don't have a condom, because you've got some. This again was something taught in Sweden certainly by the end of World War Two - girls should carry condoms. This is part of gender equality that I feel quite thrilled with. It's an achievement when you look at recent studies. There were three articles in 'The Age' a little while ago about being 15 and 60 per cent of the 15 year olds profiled were using condoms. It used to be that 5 per cent were using condoms so that's a real improvement. That means fewer pregnancies, less disease, more girls finishing school, because failing to finish school is one of the biggest predictors of poverty. It has an enormous ongoing impact on girls' lives, women's lives.

Feminism quiet phase

If you look at women's history it goes in waves. There's no doubt that you get certain goals that are public and very attractive and women will rally around. One of those goals was the vote and that took a long time, but it was a single issue. Other goals were alcohol and abstinence and getting control of liquor outlets and if possible get-



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ting total abstinence, prohibition. After that it would appear that women went underground. Feminism went underground; but if you look at the history you'll find what I'm describing from current feminism happened with the grandmother's generation. Certainly once the vote was won, once prohibition was seen to be a bad idea, it looked as if feminism was fizzled out but it wasn't. It was still going in a quiet way, a less public way. I think that we are now into the quiet phase and feminism will flare up again in the foreseeable future.

There are people who want to fan, not a crusade, but a resistance to what is perceived as Islamic repression of women. Maybe that's a bad way of formulating it. Maybe we should say that there are cultures as well as religions that are not giving women a fair deal and they have to be dragged into the 21st century, and you get these wonderful women like Waris Dirie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji and who are themselves from a Muslim background. Two of them are from Somali backgrounds. They're writing their own books and they're leading the charge for saying Islam has to modernise, and the Koran doesn't actually say you have to repress women, and that the men have to read the Koran better and get with it. I think this might be the next wave and I've heard of a number of books that are currently being written, researched and written by men who are taking the side of women which is an interesting thing too, that the men are getting stirred up. In my own observation, Australian women certainly have been

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very reluctant to speak out of turn as with the Indigenous women. The belief was that you should let them speak for themselves. We can't speak for them. You know, shut up Anglo white feminists. Now what's happening is the ethnic women are speaking for themselves and I think they will get support from the Anglo feminists.

1840 saw the first organised feminism, so I guess I have to say: nothing happens quickly. Having lived through it, very few things happen quickly.



Final Notes

Curriculum Vitae

Beatrice Faust was born in 1939 and was bored stiff for most of her early life. Improvement occurred between 1953 and 1956 when Faust attended MacRobertsons Girls High School where she had the opportunity to be on the Student Representative Council, to act, debate and to edit the school magazine. Faust equaled top of the state in Matriculation English Literature. She won a Major Resident Scholarship to University Women's College and a Commonwealth Scholarship. Faust was an unruly student and gained her first and second degrees at Melbourne University.

Faust married and divorced young. Finding her feet by 1965, she co-founded the Victorian Council for Civil Liberties, largely to protest against censorship. Faust was one of the first three women to lobby for reform of prohibition of abortion and restrictions on contraception.

In 1972 Faust founded the Women's Electoral Lobby which was a dominant arm of political feminism in Australia for almost a generation. Faust was president of the Abortion Law Repeal Association in 1974. From 1990-2003, Faust was an Educational Designer in the Centre of Learning and Teaching Support at the Monash, Gippsland Campus.

Faust has authored three books, countless articles on social/feminist issues and was a columnist in 'Focus' (*The Australian*) from 1993 to 1997. Faust was sacked following a defamation action by Jeff Kennett. In 2004 Faust was appointed Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia and awarded the degree of LLD Honoris Causa, Monash University in 2005. Faust is currently writing memoirs and trying hard to avoid any more writs for defamation.

PUBLICATIONS

Women, Sex and Pornography, hardback editions released by Melbourne House, London, 1980 and Macmillan, New York, January 1981; paperback editions released by Penguin Australia, and Penguin UK, 1982

Apprenticeship in Liberty: Sex, Feminism and Sociobiology, Collins/Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991.

Benzo Junkie: More Than a Case History, Penguin, Ringwood (Victoria), 1993.

Backlash? Balderdash! Where Feminism is Going Right, University of N S W Press, Sydney, 1994.

In addition, Beatrice has written regularly for newspapers, magazines and anthologies.



