

RIDING THE NEW WAVE

Feminism and
the Labour party

Edited by Anya Pearson & Rosie Rogers

*With Ivana Bartoletti, Lisa Clarke, Zita Holbourne,
Natacha Kennedy, Lisa Nandy MP, Yas Nacati, Fiona
Mactaggart MP, Sue Marsh, Kirsty McNeill,
Anwen Muston & Stuart White*



**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

ABOUT THE FABIAN SOCIETY

The Fabian Society is Britain's oldest political think tank. Since 1884 the society has played a central role in developing political ideas and public policy on the left. It aims to promote greater equality of power and opportunity; the value of collective public action; a vibrant, tolerant and accountable democracy; citizenship, liberty and human rights; sustainable development; and multilateral international cooperation.

Through a wide range of publications and events the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis. Its programme offers a unique breadth, encompassing national conferences and expert seminars; periodicals, books, reports and digital communications; and commissioned and in-house research and comment.

The Society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation, with almost 7,000 members. Over time our membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour prime minister. Today we count over 200 parliamentarians in our number. The voluntary society includes 70 local societies, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

The society was one of the original founders of the Labour party and is constitutionally affiliated to the party. We are however editorially, organisationally and financially independent and work with a wide range of partners from all political persuasions and none.

Fabian Society
61 Petty France
London SW1H 9EU
www.fabians.org.uk

Editorial director: Ed Wallis
Assistant editor: Anya Pearson

First published October 2014

This report, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the Society but only the views of the author. This publication may not be reproduced without express permission of the Fabian Society.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	Anya Pearson and Rosie Rogers	
2	Labour meets the networks	4
	Stuart White	
3	Rising voices	8
	Lisa Nandy MP	
4	Women and Westminster: What's the problem?	11
	Kirsty McNeill	
5	Occupy Labour	15
	Ivana Bartoletti	
6	A campaign less ordinary	18
	Lisa Clarke	
7	First they ignore you...	21
	Sue Marsh	
8	Tell me what I need to know	24
	Yas Necati	
9	Transgender politicians	26
	Anwen Muston and Natacha Kennedy	
10	The invisible women	29
	Fiona Mactaggart MP	
11	Keeping on	32
	Zita Holbourne	

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Ivana Bartoletti, Lisa Clarke, Zita Holbourne, Natacha Kennedy, Lisa Nandy MP, Yas Nacati, Fiona Mactaggart MP, Sue Marsh, Kirsty McNeill, Anwen Muston and Stuart White for their contributions to this collection. In addition, we are grateful to our Compass and Fabian colleagues as well as Francesca Klug and Baroness Ruth Lister for their help and support.

About Compass

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

About the authors

Ivana Bartoletti is chair of the Fabian Women's Network and founder of its magazine *Fabiana*. She works for the NHS, is a Unison member and activist, and has campaigned for over 20 years for the Labour movement both in Britain and internationally.

Lisa Clarke is a member of the No More Page 3 campaign where she has campaigned to change the tabloid displays and advertising policy at the Co-operative. She is also a nurse with over 20 years experience and current Clinical Nurse Specialist at Nottingham University Hospitals. Lisa writes for the *Huffington Post* and *Metro* blogs.

Zita Holbourne is the co-founder and national co-chair of BARAC UK, elected to the PCS union National Executive Committee, TUC Race Relations Committee, Action for Southern Africa Executive Council & the Movement Against Xenophobia Steering Group. She is an activist, campaigner, poet, spoken word artist, visual artist, curator and writer.

Natacha Kennedy is trans and has identified as a girl since she was very young. A former primary school teacher, she is now an academic at Goldsmiths College and a trans activist. She is a long-standing member of the Labour party and is currently International Officer for the LGBT Labour, and is a founder member of Rainbow Rose; the LGBT Labour equivalent in Europe.

Lisa Nandy MP is the Labour member of parliament for Wigan. In 2013 she was appointed Shadow Minister for Civil Society. She previously served as Shadow Children's Minister. Prior to becoming an MP she worked for the Children's Society.

Yas Nacati is a feminist activist and campaigner living in London. She co-runs the Campaign4Consent, launched a campaign alongside the Telegraph for #BetterSexEducation and is editor at the US-based organisation Powered By Girl.

Fiona Mactaggart MP is the Labour member of parliament for Slough. She is secretary to the Commission for Older Women, chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party Women's Group, and founded and is now secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade. She was also Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities.

Sue Marsh is a writer and disability campaigner. She set up the blog *the Diary of a Benefit Scrounger* to raise public awareness of life with a chronic illness. She is a driving force behind the Spartacus grassroots movement that was set up to challenge the government's welfare reforms.

Kirsty McNeill is a strategy consultant to some of the world's leading campaigning organisations and a former Downing Street adviser. She trains hundreds of people for public life each year, with a specialism in developing the female commentators, candidates and campaign strategists of the future.

Anwen Muston is the Trans officer for LGBT Labour. She has been involved in different local community initiatives for over fifteen years since leaving the Army in 1996. She is also a trustee of a local heritage and restoration social enterprise project, as well as sitting on Labour's candidates panel for the 2015 local elections.

Anya Pearson is assistant editor at the Fabian Society. She edits the online Fabian Review and also edited the Fabian reports *All of our Business* and *How Labour can change Britain*. Anya has also worked on campaigns at the Runnymede Trust and National Union of Students.

Rosie Rogers is a political adviser at Greenpeace. Recently at Compass, she was national coordinator. She has also been involved in various feminist campaigns and is a lead organiser in UK Uncut.

Stuart White is director of the Public Policy Unit and an associate professor of politics at Jesus College, Oxford. He also is a member of the National Council of Catalyst, a political think-tank, and is on the Academic Advisory Team for the Social Policy group at the IPPR.

1 INTRODUCTION

Anya Pearson and Rosie Rogers

This year, spurred on by social media and the effects of the recession, a new wave of feminism is gathering strength at an impressive pace. Over 200,000 people have signed the No More Page 3 petition nationwide, lads' magazine Nuts finally pulled down its shutters, and groups like Daughters of Eve, who campaign against female genital mutilation, are gaining global attention.

As our formal political channels fall further into disrepute (a 2013 Ipsos MORI poll found that just 18 per cent of people trust politicians to tell the truth) and our political parties struggle to offer inspiring solutions to the challenges people face in their daily lives, this increasingly vibrant wave of feminism seems to be everything that party politics is not. It's dynamic and accessible; designed to encourage active instead of passive participation from supporters; and it's run by people from all walks of life. Most of all, it's autonomous, driven largely by single issues, with no party line to fall in with.

Labour is the party of social justice, equality and tolerance. As Lisa Nandy MP outlines in her chapter in this collection, it achieved a great deal for women while in office: a national minimum wage that brought a million women out of poverty, increased maternity and paternity provision, flexible working and Sure Start centres. It should therefore follow that the party is the staunch ally of feminism. But relations are currently cool at best, and every day, women prove they can address the issues that affect them without the help of MPs.

We might be forgiven for thinking that Labour is in danger of becoming an irrelevance for this generation of feminists who care passionately about inequality and social justice but do not identify with the party politics of yore. But this collection shows that Labour has much to learn from the feminist movement in countering political apathy – and that it can still be a vehicle for contemporary social activists to achieve lasting, systemic change in their fight for equality. The collection is about providing a platform for a diverse group of feminists - black and disabled feminists; transgender campaigners; women across generations; new and established voices - all of whom bring a fresh perspective to this challenge.

In his chapter at the start of this collection, Stuart White argues that grassroots groups create new spaces for political debate, and can act as a vital counterweight to vested corporate and elite interests that plague contemporary politics. The trick, as Colin Crouch wrote recently in the *Fabian Review*, is for the Labour party to embrace the "groundswell" caused by social movements which has led to "widespread pools of implicit support for social democratic values" while respecting – valuing, even – their autonomy and lack of partisan loyalty. This may be difficult for a party which is too often centralised and hierarchically rigid, but it is essential if the party is to become a genuine movement again.

So what can feminism teach Labour about political participation and engagement outside the mainstream? These activists and political thinkers have a variety of responses to this question, also reflecting on how feminism stands to benefit from a healthier relationship with the party in return. Indeed, in the age of neoliberalism and historic concentrations of power in the hands of the few, the transformative political action that feminist campaigners want must be routed through government by working collaboratively. Though the authors have very different takes on the problem, several key strands can be identified.

First, there is far more to do to get more women working in mainstream politics. Describing the harassment, bullying and other barriers currently faced on a regular basis by women MPs, Kirsty McNeill points out: “The real question is less ‘why won’t more women enter politics?’ and more ‘why would they?’” However, she writes that through ‘widening the pipeline’ into

“**LABOUR HAS MUCH TO LEARN FROM THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN COUNTERING POLITICAL APATHY**

politics, and offering protection and promotion to female MPs, these worn-in patterns of patriarchy can finally be challenged.

Elsewhere in the report, it is argued that widening the pipeline should also include supporting up-and-coming candidates from non-traditional backgrounds. Talented women may often be found in local campaign groups; transgender activists Anwen Muston and Natacha Kennedy write that Labour could do far more to “elevate talented individuals from minority groups by equipping them with the skills they need to win through structured training programmes.”

Second, Labour should take seriously the extent to which online campaigning is igniting the interest of thousands of women who did not previously consider themselves ‘political’ at all. It has helped women who feel alienated and excluded from mainstream and political structures find a voice and a support network. Lisa Clarke, a 40 year old nurse from Nottingham who started working for No More Page 3 after becoming involved with their campaigning, writes: “I see many women like me who on the back of their campaigning experience are entering into dialogue with politicians and attending meetings at Westminster”. Labour must become more adept at reaching out digitally if more feminist campaigners are to make that crucial journey from online activism to real life participation.

Third, Labour needs to get better at sharing power. Ivana Bartoletti writes: “Feminism means a radical transformation of the traditional allocation of power, whether that is in families, institutions, the media or the wider economy ... If Labour wants to engage with the new generation of feminists, it has to speak about the core issue of power.” If the party wants to win the trust of campaigning groups they can only do that by trusting people in return. In practice, this means making it far easier for people to gain access to political decision-makers and submit meaningful contributions to the policies that affect their lives. Taking part in feminist actions, online debates and protests makes people feel powerful again. Party politics too must encourage this empowerment.

Fourth, the autonomy of the feminist movement is its lifeblood, and feminist campaigners can be wary of politicians. As Zita Holbourne, co-founder of Black Activists Rising Against the Cuts (BARAC UK) states in her chapter: “The only time I ever see local councillors is when they are canvassing for votes ... [but] the party must be willing to support our grassroots campaigns

in the spaces we have created". With this in mind, the Labour party must make a more explicit commitment to welcoming the ideas, experiences, skills and talents women from all backgrounds, generations and walks of life. Collaborating means campaigning in partnership with them – not just in the meeting rooms of Portcullis House, but in the political spaces they have created in their towns and cities.

As Crouch warns, Labour should try to ally with but not control these movements. For such collaborations to work, local Labour parties also need to become more pluralistic and open. In the latter case that would mean, for example, committing to campaign on some of the issues that BARAC UK campaigns on, such as the multiple discriminations faced by young black people, while respecting that their strong anti-austerity stance does not comfortably align with Labour's public spending policies.

From Yas Nacati's campaigning for sexual consent to be taught in schools; Fiona Mactaggart MP's description of the constructive potential and social value of older women (which often goes unrecognised) in their families and communities; to disability campaigner Sue Marsh's work campaigning against government cuts, there is a wealth of energy and ideas radiating from the pages of this collection alone. Collaboration will not always be easy and political parties will forever be chasing the tail of a movement as fluid as feminism, but Labour needs to find ways to hang on and enjoy the ride.

2 LABOUR MEETS THE NETWORKS

Stuart White

Is a constructive relationship between the Labour party and new social movements possible? If so, on what terms can these grassroots groups create new spaces for political debate, and act as a counterweight to vested elite interests?

I am writing this article in the aftermath of the independence referendum in Scotland. On one side of the referendum debate stood the bulk of the Labour party, along with the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, committed to maintaining the union. On the other, along with the SNP and the official 'Yes' campaign we saw an array of civil society, campaigning groups on the left. The message from the social movement left was optimistic: we have confidence in ourselves to build a better Scotland. The message from Labour, as of the 'No' campaign in general, was that independence carries grave economic risks. Labour politicians emphasised the warnings about capital flight issued by big companies and banks.

This is an arresting point of departure for our discussion of how Labour should relate to non-party campaigns in civil society. Labour's self-image, of course, is that it is itself part of a wider social movement: the labour movement. But this seems a flattering description of the party today. Certainly, the party still has its link to the trade unions, and this remains immensely important. It is fair also to say that in the 1970s and after, people coming into the party from the 'new social movements' organising around issues of gender, race, peace and ecology replenished the party. But today? We see a flowering of internet-savvy networked activism: UK Feminista, Climate Camp, UK Uncut, Occupy, Spartacus, Disabled People Against Cuts, and, around the referendum in Scotland, Common Weal, the Radical Independence Campaign, and Women for Independence (to name but some). Many of the activists in these networks have little time for Labour. And often people in Labour have very little time for them.

In the language which Paul Mason has helped to familiarise in his book *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere* (2013), Labour is the 'hierarchy' and the civil society activists are the 'network'.¹ But must it be hierarchy versus network? Is a constructive relationship possible? On what terms?

Working on public opinion

One proposal sees the relationship as working something like this. On the one hand there are the parties, competing for votes, feeling quite constrained to work within the existing boundaries of public opinion. In this context, so the argument goes, civil society groups, including the kind of networked activism noted above, can address public opinion in more radical ways. Civil society campaigns become 'outriders', as Clifford Singer puts it, trying to shift the terms of public debate through imaginative campaigning and,

thereby, creating new spaces for the party politicians to move into.² Singer points to the way in which pressure groups on the right, such as the Taxpayers' Alliance, function as outriders by putting forward policy ideas that might initially be widely rejected but have the effect of slowly expanding and shifting the terms of public debate.

Occupy Wall Street offers an example of this outriding function. One recent study by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg argues that Occupy prompted discussions of inequality in the mainstream media in the US, leading to shifts in public opinion. This, in turn, enabled Barack Obama to address the inequality theme in his Presidential campaign. "Whether or not capitalism would be substantially reformed to the satisfaction of the Occupy protestors," Bennett and Segerberg write, "it is remarkable that they were able to change the economic conversation in such a short time, using such highly personalized network organizations".³ Singer emphasises the importance of finding the right 'frames' to express ideas. Occupy's 'We are the 99 per cent' is an example of an effective framing of an issue – in this case, economic inequality.

Changing politicians' incentives and perceptions

But will party politicians necessarily move into progressive political space when it is there to be occupied? One useful reference point here, I think, is Colin Crouch's analysis of contemporary politics in the UK, EU and USA as a form of 'post-democracy'. Crouch argues that the decline of the labour movement has been accompanied by a rise in the power of corporations to influence policy. "Behind this spectacle of the electoral game," he writes, "politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests".⁴

If this is so, then there is an important role for civil society campaigns to act as a counterweight. Such groups can change the political calculations of party politicians when they are in the room with elite interests. Putting this point more positively, such groups can give greater bargaining power to these politicians, enabling them to strike better deals with these interests.

One might ask: if party politics is so wrapped up with elite interests and compromises, why bother with it at all? Crouch argues that we need to work both through parties and on them. We "have to work on a party from outside by assisting those causes that will sustain pressure on it".⁵ But some of us also have to work through a party because of the access parties give to the state and its power, a power which can be harnessed to serve popular interests. It is interesting, in light of this comment, to consider the way the *indignadas* movement in Spain, which began as a protest against the party system, has in part evolved into Podemos, a new political party which contests elections.

The Spartacus example

One interesting – and inspiring – example of a civil society campaign working on the party system is that of the Spartacus network. This network of campaigners defends the rights of sick and disabled people to social security. Spartacus began to emerge in 2010 and 2011 aided by some powerful blogs. Two such blogs were Sue Marsh's (@suey2y) *the Diary of a Benefit Scrounger* (<http://diaryofabenefitscrounger.blogspot.co.uk/>) and Kaliya Franklin's (@Ben-

“ THE OUTRIDING SPIRIT, INSIGHT AND PRESSURE OFFERED BY SUCH CAMPAIGNS IS CRUCIAL

dygirl) *Benefit Scrounging Scum* (<http://benefitscroungingscum.blogspot.co.uk/>). In January 2012 the network launched a major report, *Responsible Reform*, colloquially known as the ‘Spartacus report’.⁶ This focused on the coalition government’s plans to replace disability living allowance.

Part of the report summarised the results of a Freedom of Information investigation into the Department of Work and Pension’s consultation on its plans. This indicated that the DWP had received far more critical feedback than it had seemed to suggest. In addition, the report tackled head-on the government’s rationale for reform. The report was launched with a Twitter campaign using the hashtag ‘I am Spartacus’ as a humorous (but serious) way of expressing solidarity in opposition to the government’s approach. The hashtag went viral and the report broke into the mainstream media (and the hashtag explains why the network is known as ‘Spartacus’). A few days later, the government lost a series of major votes in the House of Lords on its welfare reform plans. Although the government was able to ride roughshod over the Lords, and get the bulk of its ‘reforms’ through, this was a breakthrough for the network and for the place of sick and disabled people in policy debate. Members of the network subsequently lobbied hard, particularly in relation to Labour politicians, and have achieved some shift in Labour’s policy thinking.⁷

One should not exaggerate Spartacus’s achievement. What has been achieved has required exhausting effort. But Spartacus brought a new voice and perspective into the corridors of power. It disrupted a misinformed elite consensus about disability and social policy. It did this in part by educating party politicians, and party activists, but also by mobilising a section of public opinion through social media, changing the political calculus of party politicians. Speaking in 2012 of a speech that the then shadow secretary for work and pensions, Liam Byrne, had given, Marsh welcomed his willingness to learn from disabled people: “He did it because sick and disabled people have become organised, vocal and credible. He did it because, politically, it started to make sense.”⁸

A supporting role for party politics

As Marsh’s article indicates, the relationship between civil society campaigners and party politicians, even when constructive, will not always be harmonious. Nevertheless, the outriding spirit, insight and pressure offered by such campaigns is crucial if progressive party politics is to deliver. So party politicians should consider what they can do to facilitate the work of independent campaigns.

One issue concerns access to political structures. How can civil society groups, particularly those which reflect the self-organisation of groups such as sick and disabled people, have easier access to decision-makers? How can policy-making processes be restructured so that such groups can meaningfully intervene right from the start?

Second, civil society campaigning depends on robust civil freedoms and a public understanding of the vital role of protest in democratic politics, including non-violent civil disobedience. So another role for party politicians is to defend such freedoms. This means, for example, opposing public order laws and methods of policing and surveillance which undermine the effective right to public assembly and protest.

I started by pointing to the confrontation between Labour and movement activism in Scotland's independence referendum. If Labour wants to get onto a different footing with this kind of activism, then it could do a lot worse than start by committing itself to become a strong defender of our civil freedoms.

Footnotes

1 For a perspective from the pro-independence, social movement left, see Robin MacAlpine, 'Butterfly rebellion', *openDemocracy*, 14 September 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/robin-mcalpine/butterfly-rebellion>

2 Singer, Clifford, 'Taking back the centre: how the left in Britain can regain its voice', *openDemocracy*, 30 September 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/clifford-singer/taking-back-centre-how-left-in-britain-can-regain-its-voice>

3 Bennett, W. Lance, and Segerberg, Alexandra, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 191.

4 Crouch, Colin, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 2003), p. 4.

5 *ibid.*, pp. 111-112

6 Diary of a Benefit Scrounger; Dr S.J. Campbell BSc (Hons) PhD; Anon, Me; Sue Marsh BA (Hons); Kaliya Franklin LLB (Hons); Declan Gaffney; Anon; Mason Dixon, autistic; Leigh James; Sam Barnett-Cormack BSc MSc; Rhydian Fon-James BSc MSc; Dawn Willis; Anon, *Responsible Reform: A Report on the Proposed Changes to Disability Living Allowance*, 2012, http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/files/response_to_proposed_dla_reforms.pdf

7 Marsh, Sue, 'Disabled people have become a force to be reckoned with', *The Guardian*, 29 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/may/29/disabled-people-political-force>.

8 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jan/17/disability-spartacus-welfare-cuts-campaign-viral>

3 RISING VOICES

Lisa Nandy MP

Genuine gender equality can only be achieved through combining strong governmental leadership that prioritises women-centred policymaking, and wider political participation at local and regional levels

It's often said that David Cameron has a *women problem* but it might be fairer to say that women have a *David Cameron* problem. In the four short years since Cameron became prime minister his government's austerity programme has had disproportionate and devastating effects on many women, with ethnic minority, disabled and young women bearing the heaviest burden. In the 2010 Budget alone, The Fawcett Society found an astonishing £5.8bn of the £8bn 'savings' would come from women.

The coalition have allowed women in Britain to become the shock absorbers for their disastrous policies. And when you look at the numbers it's not hard to see how. Women are more likely to work in the public sector and rely on public services. They tend to earn lower wages, work part time and shoulder greater responsibility for childcare. For women in my Wigan constituency and across the north west the impact has been catastrophic. Women make up 75 per cent of local government workers and 80 per cent of adult social carers, so cuts to jobs, wages and pensions and the rise of zero hours contracts have been devastating.

90 per cent of lone parents are women, so cuts to child benefit and the introduction of charges to use the child support agency hurt children and their mothers. Women are less likely to have savings, so the introduction of a two week delay to paying jobseekers' allowance has harmed women the most. Above all, it is not a good time to be a young woman. Since the recession the number of young women out of work has nearly doubled in the north west.

This situation is not inevitable. A series of choices - cuts to domestic violence refuges, the Child Support Agency, carer's allowance, early years provision and pensions - is a result of deliberate gender-blindness, once a familiar feature of policy making, which the last government tried hard to stamp out.

Gender blindness

It's not hard to see where this leads. In 2012 the coalition introduced the Child Maintenance Scheme and introduced charges for parents wishing to use it. Since then, the number of new cases taken up by the agency has dropped from 30,000 to just 10,000. Does anyone seriously believe this is because suddenly the negotiations between separated partners have

dramatically improved, virtually overnight? Or is the reality is that thousands of lone parents cannot now afford to ask for help? A single parent who is unable to afford the charges for the Child Maintenance Service faces the prospect not just of poverty, but of injustice.

“ THE STATE ON ITS OWN IS NOT ENOUGH; IT’S ONLY AS STRONG AS THE NUMBER, RANGE AND DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE WHO CAN PARTICIPATE

Another devastating example is in the field of domestic violence, which appears to have increased during recession. In light of this, government cuts to the police force and domestic violence refuges have pushed a precarious situation into a dangerous one. With a range of policies, from marriage tax breaks aimed at ‘incentivising’ marriage to changes to the welfare system, it isn’t just women’s incomes that are threatened but their very independence.

The safety net has been hacked away, the plethora of small charities that act as a lifeline for women have watched their budgets shrink while demand for their services grows. Councils whose budgets have been slashed increasingly fund universal, non-specialist services, often inappropriate for women fleeing domestic violence, if they fund services at all.

It’s easy to forget just how recently many of the battles for equality were won. It was only in 1991, when I was 11 years old, that married women started to receive their own tax returns. In all sorts of ways this government has turned the clock back, slowing and at times undermining years of progress.

Women-centred policymaking

It doesn’t have to be like this. Take the Labour government of 1975, committed to gender equality, bravely using legislation to change social attitudes, rather than follow them. It’s why legislation like the Sex Discrimination Act was a game changer, fundamentally shifting power dynamics which had previously worked against women. But four decades after landmark legislation like this and the 1970 Equal Pay Act, women still earn just three-quarters of men’s salaries for doing the same job. It’s a shocking and striking demonstration of how good legislation can be undermined by a subsequent lack of commitment and focus on its delivery.

Partly this is because there are too few women as policymakers and shapers. It’s no accident that the only party that has made significant strides in getting more women into parliament is the Labour party, with more women MPs than all the other parties combined. Despite their controversy, it is clear that all-women shortlists were critical in achieving this. In towns like mine, no woman had ever been elected to parliament until an all-women shortlist was imposed in 2010.

Margaret Thatcher is a good demonstration that simply having women in positions of power is no guarantee that the situation for all women will be improved. But without diversity, it becomes virtually inevitable that some issues simply aren’t considered. With men still outnumbering women by four to one in parliament and to date only 37 women in the history of parliamentary democracy having ever served in the Cabinet, is it any wonder that issues affecting women are not on the agenda?

What’s more, over two-thirds of parliamentarians come from professional backgrounds which means working class women, like the formidable Bessie Braddock, a former shop girl who became the first woman MP for Liverpool Exchange, are still rare in British politics. Braddock brought

her experiences of life in slums of Liverpool right into the heart of Westminster. Now more than ever we need the voices of working women to be heard in parliament.

All political parties need to think how they open up opportunities beyond a narrow range of people, both as elected representatives and behind the scenes as advisers and officials. The same is true of parliament. As I walked into the Palace of Westminster in 2010 I was greeted by pictures of men, statues of men, and more men. Granted, some progress has been made. In 2010 the House voted that “at least one man and at least one woman shall be elected across the four posts of speaker and deputy speakers”. It’s a welcome move. But women are still woefully underrepresented in positions of influence. Of the 25 committees whose chairs are elected by the whole House only seven are women.

The history of Westminster politics is the history of slow, piecemeal reform. But in 2014, with women and girls still subjected to violence and discrimination online, in society and in the workplace, is slow, piecemeal reform enough? Just as Westminster needs to change, so too does society, to ensure women’s voices are heard much more loudly in the public debate. A 2012 report by Women in Journalism found that 75 per cent of ‘experts’ quoted in news stories were men, while 80 per cent of ‘victims’ quoted were women.

Opening up Westminster and the media is just the start. Men still dominate major charity and corporate boardrooms and change is slow. So we need to think too about women’s role in holding decision makers to account. That means a commitment to the widest possible participation at local, regional and national level. With Labour promising to push power outwards from Whitehall to communities after the next election, it is essential that women’s voices are heard. Stamping out exploitative zero hours contracts, raising the minimum wage and extending free childcare are all essential measures to ensure women can participate.

The actor Emma Watson pointed out recently that by playing up to gender stereotypes we are selling both women and men short, refusing to recognise the important role men play as carers, parents and in traditionally women dominated professions. It would mean issues like childcare becoming as important for men as for women, and both men and women taking responsibility in the fight for equality.

This cultural shift only comes with national leadership. One lesson from the New Labour years was that the state on its own is not enough; it’s only as strong as the number, range and diversity of people who can participate. But if the last four years have taught us anything, it’s that government cannot simply ‘get out of the way’, or the ‘David Cameron problem’ becomes a problem for us all.

4 WOMEN AND WESTMINSTER: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Kirsty McNeill

Patterns of political patriarchy in Westminster can be broken by widening access for aspiring female MPs, protecting them from workplace harassment, and promoting a diversity of talented politicians to the top table.

A company offers you a job with the following terms and conditions. You'll spend several nights away from your family every week and your kids might get bullied at school or even entrapped by a national newspaper. There are no working hours as such, just an expectation that you'll always be available to be in one building at wildly antisocial and unpredictable times, and that whenever you are out of the building you're fair game for invasions of privacy, harassment or worse. There is no transparency in promotion and no training or appraisals. Colleagues will drip anonymous poison to journalists and you'll be lucky if you make it through your first month without degrading public commentary on your appearance. And you'll be at risk of behaviour that would be seen as gross misconduct in any other workplace, but here more experienced colleagues explain that a colleague chanting about your breasts is just "one of those things".

This is the unseen life of Westminster. The real question is less "why won't more women enter politics?" and more "why would they?" Being a member of parliament is potentially one of the most rewarding - and certainly one of the most important - jobs in the United Kingdom. So why can't we design a politics that recruits and retains more female talent? I want to suggest three solutions: offering aspiring female MPs access to the pipeline, access to promotion and access to protection.

Widening the pipeline

The Centre for Women and Democracy's excellent *Sex and Power* 2013 report¹ details the gender makeup of the sectors from which MPs are traditionally drawn. It looks at the background of MPs, members of the Scottish and European parliaments and Welsh assembly and found that the majority of those politicians had been a councillor first. Since only 12.3 per cent of council leaders in England are women, and only a third of councillors as a whole, it is hardly surprising if the gender imbalances of town halls are replicated in the Commons chamber.

It is important to note that the pipeline is different for each political party. Recent research from the *Guardian*² highlights that Conservative candidates in winnable seats are more regularly drawn from business and the military, while Labour candidates are much more likely to have worked in Westminster in some capacity. Even so, each of these sectors has a long way to go to

gender parity. It took until June 2014 for the FTSE to finally be free of all-male boards, and the Counting Women In coalition advises that there are “currently no women at all at the very highest ranks of any (armed) service in the UK”.³

The picture in the Westminster bubble is more mixed. Around 40 per cent of Coalition special advisers are female (compared to just over a third under the last Labour government).⁴ However, strategy at the highest level seems, once again, to be shaping up to be a battle of the boys with endless column inches devoted to the likes of Lynton Crosby, Jim Messina, David Axelrod, Spencer Livermore and Ryan Coatzee.⁵ Of the main national parties, only the Liberal Democrats brief about a serious female strategist, in the form of Olly Grender. There is no centralised data collection on how women fare in think tanks, but the winner in every single category of the 2014 Prospect Think Tank of the Year Awards was an organization headed by a man.⁶

Promoting the right talent

For those women who do make it through the clogged-up pipeline, the statistics around promotion are not encouraging. British politics has a terrible habit of allowing ‘first’ to become ‘only’ - as in the case of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, Margaret Beckett as foreign secretary and Valerie Amos as the first black woman in the cabinet. We are yet to see a single female chancellor or secretary of state for defence.

“**THE REAL QUESTION IS LESS ‘WHY WON’T MORE WOMEN ENTER POLITICS?’ AND MORE ‘WHY WOULD THEY?’**

Reshuffles are delicate balances of regional, factional and electoral considerations alongside whether contenders have shown any aptitude for policy innovation and delivery, or a particular expertise in the work of a department. So pity the poor prime minister trying to build the perfect top team when they are precluded from advertising or headhunting to recruit outside talent.

But the peculiarities of the British constitution should not prevent us from demanding much greater diversity - of all sorts - around Britain’s top table. Fixing the problem starts with understanding its real nature, and I would suggest there are two main aspects of workplace culture that are stopping women moving from the back to front benches.

The first is the way in which norms of leadership replicate themselves: if those who lead organisations all share the same characteristics (in this case being white, straight, able-bodied, wealthy men), then they will tend to ‘read across’ their own qualities to being those which ‘make’ a leader. Theresa May is reportedly subjected to eye-rolling and funny faces when she speaks in cabinet simply because, in the words of a fellow senior Conservative: “She’s not a bloke and she didn’t go to Eton.”⁷

The second is the extent to which women are excluded from the factional power bases that exercise their influence during reshuffles. Senior politicians promote protégés, a form of patronage which is harder to secure if you come to politics later in life (as female MPs,⁸ particularly those who have children tend to)⁹ or have less time available to cultivate powerful networks in and around Westminster. Feminists have long talked about ‘the second shift’ that women put in at home after work, but all too often politics requires a ‘third shift’ too. How many politicians with caring responsibilities do you think are to be found pontificating on conference panels at a weekend or propping up the bar at the Carlton Club of an evening?

Dignity at work

The final major deterrent to aspiring female MPs is Westminster's collective inability to offer them protection from discrimination. First, there is an absence of recourse for women suffering sexual harassment; the End Violence Against Women coalition had the sexual harassment policies of the three main parties reviewed by Queen's Counsel who surmised that they "simply do not seem to understand their legal obligations."¹⁰ Bear in mind we are not discussing the vile, sexually violent and threatening tweets and blog comments female politicians receive from strangers, but the inability of their workplaces to protect them from groping and denigration by colleagues.

The second issue is the sloppily sexist way in which female politicians can be appraised by the media. It would be easy for a Fabian reader to conclude this is primarily a problem in the tabloid press, or in right-of-centre newspapers. Not so. Take this from the *Guardian* on Theresa May in September 2013: "As she expounded her tough stance on immigration she stood in shoes worthy of the front row at Paris fashion week".¹¹ Or the summation by the *Times* of Margaret Thatcher as "a better politician than wife and mother."¹² Or how the *Mirror* proclaimed the arrival of "the Mili-babes". These are the nice ones: have a read of a sketch column or the bottom half of the internet and then consider why high-flying women are deciding they'll stick with being headteachers or partners in businesses or chief executives of charities after all.

Practical politics

These are the structures of political patriarchy - and we all have a role in determining whether they are to be replicated or resisted. And by all, I mean men too. Here are some practical things you can do to help:

1. **Widen the pipeline** by joining organisations which train and support women entering political life. For Fabian readers that is likely to be Labour Women's Network and the Fabian Women's Network, but other parties have their equivalents too.
2. **Name and note the problem** by logging examples of media or other sexism at @everydaysexism and alerting @panelwatch to all-male panels. Join End Violence Against Women's efforts to improve sexual harassment policies across the parties.
3. **Invest in the infrastructure** which monitors promotion figures by supporting organisations like the Centre for Women and Democracy and the Fawcett Society.
4. **Audit your echo chamber** by working out your tweek.com score to test how often you amplify the twitter voices of men rather than women, and get the scores for our political, media and thinktank leaders too.
5. **Defend the proven solution** by sticking up for all-women shortlists. Each of the problems detailed above is rooted in wider patterns of sexism in society. We can't fix all of them at once, but we can do the only thing we know works when it comes to getting more women in to politics.

Footnotes

- 1 <http://www.cfwd.org.uk/uploads/Sex%20and%20Power%202013%20FINALv2%20%20pdf.pdf>
- 2 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/17/labour-candidates-marginal-seats-westminster-insiders>
- 3 <http://www.countingwomenin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sex-and-Power-2013-FINALv2.-pdf.pdf>
- 4 <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2013/07/08/diverse-solutions/#.UdrJKYT596s.twitter>
- 5 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/19/election-strategists-britain-david-axelrod-lynton-crosby>
- 6 <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/think-tank-awards-2014-the-results>
- 7 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/10/theresa-may-michael-gove-tories-leadership>
- 8 The Centre for Women and Democracy, figures accessed July 2014.
- 9 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-rosie-campbell/women-in-politics_b_4608418.html
- 10 <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/news/150/evaw-reveals-main-political-parties-sexual-harassment-policies-hopelessly-inadequate>
- 11 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/30/theresa-may-tory-conference-catwalk>, cited in *Everyday Sexism* by Laura Bates (2014)
- 12 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article3055430.ece>
- 13 <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/meet-the-mili-babes-156804>

5 OCCUPY LABOUR

Ivana Bartoletti

Feminism is inextricably linked to socialism, but the challenge for Labour is to rediscover the common roots of both movements through engaging with working class women and transforming the distribution of power in society

One of the most encouraging things I have seen in happening in the past few years is that younger women approaching political and public life are fearlessly calling themselves feminists. This is very important; until a few years ago, many would have declared the movement dead. The younger ones of my generation thought everything was achieved and that there was nothing else to fight for in terms of gender equality.

History has proven us wrong. With women aged 15-44 more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria (according to World Bank data) and with younger women thriving in education but then finding the glass ceiling in the world of work has yet to be smashed, it's clear that parity is yet to be achieved.

My experiences, not just in Britain but further afield, tell me that although this younger generation feel disenfranchised from traditional politics, they are nonetheless undeniably political and very opinionated. On the other hand, as politics itself becomes increasingly disconnected from what is happening in society, what we are seeing is 'social movements' growing outside of the traditional political space. However, I do feel that those movements will not be able to generate real social change unless they occupy traditional spaces like the Labour party, and reform them.

Feminism and socialism

I am not convinced you can be feminist and on the right as the feminist cause is inextricably linked to the values of equality, fairness and emancipation which belong to the labour movement. The two movements have always mutually influenced one another, but we are now at a pivotal moment where this generation of feminists could have a great impact on the direction of socialism now and in decades to come.

The female emancipation movement has flourished alongside the demand for equality and fairness; it has also often nourished the wider liberation movement, fighting with other movements, including those for LGBT and BME rights. Equally, the trade union movement exemplifies how female workers' rights go hand in hand with unionism, the fight against inequality and social progress. The demand for equal pay is both a trade union and true feminist cause.

Labour has always embraced women's rights and nurtured them through legislation and an aspiration to parity at every level of its structure and in parliament. Parties on the left (and the women in those parties, sometimes

in isolation) have led on many feminist campaigns and introduced the most women-friendly legislation, including on self-determination, divorce and representation.

Transforming politics and society

Even as we have seen women gaining rights over the past decades, in the UK as well as globally, we have also seen a decline of the role of politics, replaced by massive corporations and financial institutions. A core issue of modern society is about where political parties stand in a world dominated by vested interests. It is the question which speaks of disenfranchisement, of the dark side of globalisation, which has brought great benefits but has also lead to rising inequality and more wealth concentration, as Thomas Piketty has highlighted in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

Feminism has never only been about women. Like the leftwing progressive movement, it has always been about transformation of society. And as it gathers further strength, it has galvanised a younger generation. Such campaigns are territories of action for younger people, often independent of traditional political parties, instead effected through individual spending choices and the use of social media.

In response to this, political parties must change, too, to try and adapt to the new circumstances, forms of communications and action. Ed Miliband hits the nail on the head when he says that the question nowadays is how to restore dignity to the political process so that people feel it matters to them. As the Labour movement is about transformation of society, the Labour party is correct in setting out plans to reform society radically, and not in the margins.

The next step for the party is to finally embrace feminism in mainstream politics, and not just in terms of equality. Over the past few years, global changes have deeply changed the nature of society and our national economy, while technological advancement is destroying many low skilled jobs.

However, a gendered impact assessment of how, for example, we rethink of our industrial strategy has never been cohesively attempted. For instance, the Blue Labour school of thought has attempted to shape a narrative to respond to these changes with an emphasis focused solely on the loss of identity of primarily working class men. Their starting point is that globalisation has produced great levels of inequality and a sense of disenfranchisement as people feel they no longer have a stake in society, thus leading to the rise of UKIP and the sense of apathy towards politics. These global dynamics have happened outside politics, and gone alongside the erosion of power and influence of the trade unions. And the Blue Labour contribution emphasises it is working class men who have mostly experienced this loss of identity. Its leading thinkers focus on the role of communities, families and churches in nurturing a sense of belonging and harnessing grassroots change.

Yet it is now, more than ever, that we need to explore how such global changes have impacted on working-class women, their children and their socio-economic positions. All across the world, women have been at the sharp end of the economic divide. Years of austerity in Europe have pushed women's wages down, while public spending cuts have eroded social protection and services. Connecting the dots between feminist theory and the lived experiences of these women has never so crucial. How we upskill thousands

of more traditionally female jobs and, equally importantly, how we encourage young women to take up scientific careers are key economic issues of our times but they too often fall off the Labour party's radar.

Feminism and power

So what are 'feminist' policies? Labour has put childcare at the heart of its manifesto for 2015, which is absolutely the right thing to do. However, although it impacts on the lives of many women, childcare should not be seen as a 'feminist' policy. After all, not all women are parents and not all parents are women. Instead, this policy area more broadly relates to Labour's values of equality, fairness and social mobility.

To me, feminist policy in modern times is about *power*. In its own terms, feminism means a radical transformation of the traditional allocation of power, whether that is in families, institutions, the media or the wider economy. It has many parallels with the left's ambition to reform the distribution of power, be it economic, cultural or political, by giving far more of it to the people.

“ IF LABOUR WANTS TO ENGAGE WITH THE NEW GENERATION OF FEMINISTS, IT HAS TO SPEAK ABOUT THE CORE ISSUE OF POWER

And more than anything, power means presence – in workplaces, in politics and in society. Power means upskilling those thousands of people – a lot of women too – who have been hit by the growing impact of technology, so that they win back their place in the market. Having more women in company boardrooms is not just about recognising that 52 per cent of the population is female. It is about embracing a new culture of corporate governance, less focused on risk and more orientated towards long-term stability and sustainable growth. Having more women in politics, likewise, is about changing the way we do things and the way we run our institutions.

Furthermore, feminist theory needs to find its place in international relationships, too. Feminism is, by its own nature, internationalist. This is because in any conflict – whether regional or global – women's freedoms often become a bargaining tool between old and new nationalisms and radicalisms. One of the most exciting things we are seeing recently is the increase in numbers of women in international affairs, and that needs to go alongside a new internationalism in the labour movement - particularly at a time where there is a dichotomy between the global dynamics entrenched with our everyday life and the lack of ability politics has to govern them.

Finally, power means control over women's bodies. The party should work with campaigners to put a stop to the hyper-sexualisation of our society, which has gone from liberation to the new and modern forms of slavery we are all entrenched in, and at a very young age. It is not by chance that the issue of power over our own bodies is exactly the topic which has most galvanised younger generations of women.

If Labour wants to engage with the new generation of feminists, it has to speak about the core issue of power, and what that entails – from rights at work to violence against women and, most importantly, it has to continue to get those issues right at the heart of the movement, not as an appendix to the equality chapter of the manifesto. The party can, and should, embrace the radicalism of the feminist movement by allowing its vibrancy and energy to transform mainstream politics in Britain.

6

A CAMPAIGN LESS ORDINARY

Lisa Clarke

No More Page 3 has inspired women who have never been involved in politics to become passionate feminist campaigners. But how can fledgling activists make the leap from online campaigning to national party politics, and what lessons can politicians learn from them about political engagement?

I want to start by making a confession. You see, I am not an academic, I am not a politician, I'm not even a writer. I am in fact just a very ordinary 40 year old nurse and mother of two living and working in Nottingham. I've been a member of the No More Page 3 Campaign team for just over 18 months. Prior to joining the team, I had absolutely no experience of campaigning and had been pretty much completely disengaged from politics, apart from voting, for most of the last 10 years.

This grassroots movement has motivated the activist in me and, increasingly, the potential politician as well. I am not alone. At a time when activism has reached unprecedented levels and feminist activism in particular is riding an energetic new wave, what is there to be learnt by mainstream political campaigns who are, in contrast, struggling to engage the masses?

No More Page 3 is a campaign which was founded by actor and author Lucy Anne Holmes in the summer of 2012. It is a single issue campaign asking for a voluntary withdrawal of the page three feature by the editor of The Sun newspaper. The premise is simple - women should be represented in news media in the same way that men are - for the contributions they make to national affairs, rather than being depicted as side-show décor for the sexual consumption of men. Our petition now boasts close to 200,000 signatures but the campaign has also attracted the support of over 65 groups, charities and organisations representing many more, from women's groups working to end violence and support the vulnerable, to trade unions representing teachers, nurses and the public sector. More than 35 universities to date have chosen to boycott the Sun on campus following campaigns, often headed up by the newly invigorated and lively femsocs, and over 150 cross party MPs have signed an open letter to *The Sun* editor David Dinsmore in support of the campaign.

A central player in the new wave of feminism, No More Page 3 has run alongside successful battles to 'lose the lads' mags', keep a woman's face on our currency, widen the awareness of Everyday Sexism and tackle the issue of female genital mutilation, to name but a few. The social media revolution has made activism easier and more accessible than ever; for the most part these campaigns have been managed and run through social media and online petition websites. Whilst many women are still using Facebook to post jokes and memes others are sharing feminist literature, articles and news stories. The tools to build our knowledge and understanding of what is really going on in the world are available at the click of a mouse. And when you

are truly riled about something you can immediately respond by playing an active part in protest and raising awareness.

Just a very short time ago, to protest would have required the ability and confidence to, at the very least, write to an MP or newspaper, organise a demonstration or attend a meeting. Instead Twitter has made it possible to voice your opinion in less than 140 characters in two minutes of your lunch hour. You can join hundreds or even thousands of people tweeting disgust at T-shirts depicting rape as a joke, lambasting the sexism of a newspaper or lobbying a supermarket to remove Halloween costumes trivialising and stereotyping those suffering with mental health issues. Not only is this activism ridiculously easy, it can be massively and instantaneously powerful. So much so that companies have withdrawn items from sale and had to apologise in a matter of hours, leaving newspapers unable to keep up and reporting the incident in the past tense the following day. Ordinary women and men worldwide have played an active role in this change - without having to arrange childcare, get dressed or even brush their hair if they don't want to.

There is certainly a world of difference between this instantly gratifying form of political engagement and the systems and processes of local or constituency Labour party meetings. After the excitement of this fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants activism, any engagement in the far slower process of national party politics could so easily seem dull in comparison - so how do we help people to make the leap?

Well, some already are. I see many women like me who on the back of their campaigning experience are entering into dialogue with politicians and attending meetings at Westminster. Some political figures are realising the power of these groups - and the public they engage with - and are supporting and listening to them.

“ I SEE MANY WOMEN LIKE ME WHO ON THE BACK OF THEIR CAMPAIGNING EXPERIENCE ARE ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE WITH POLITICIANS

But equally, if social media is where people are carrying out political campaigning then politicians must step into this world and communicate with these people right there where they are. Those who ignore this do so at their peril. I welcome the fact that there are Labour groups currently engaging with people online, but it needs to be done in the right way. A simple search brings up several local accounts and pages where groups or individuals are sharing articles and promoting events. It's a good start, but there is little interaction on these pages and it would seem that those who really need to be reached are not to be found here.

I imagine any MPs would know that in a local constituency if you really want to know what people are thinking you need to pay attention not just to what is raised at meetings and surgeries but at local events, in the local pub or at the bus stop. Similarly, when it comes to social media you need to take a step outside the comfort of your own page. What are the current hashtags, what are people talking about, how can you engage in that debate, contribute to it, and learn from it? In this way not you reach thousands of potential voters. If more politicians begin to engage and listen in this way then the online activists will make the links between the issues they feel passionate about and the power of their MP or local councillors to effect change.

Clearly, face to face meetings in person should remain a vital part of interaction between any MP and her constituents or between members of the party at local level. But what about virtual meetings for those for whom getting out in the evenings is prohibited by jobs or childcare? When canvass-

ing opinion or passing motions in your area, what about the ability of online discussion and voting? Ultimately I think more of the general public would engage in the democratic process if voting in a local or general election could be done online.

Another clue to the popularity of the grassroots movements lies in the teams or individuals fronting them. In sharp contrast to the male face of mainstream politics, who in 2014 still predominantly wears a suit and tie, has an upper or middle class background and a public school education, campaigns have a far more diverse appearance. At national feminist meetings I have sat in awe listening to the inspirational voices of young teenagers; petitions have succeeded in the hands of young Asian women wearing the hijab; working class voices are a-plenty. And there are women! Lots and lots of women!

Representation of women at the ballot box, in our houses of parliament and in the cabinet (despite recent reshuffling) remains woefully inadequate. To achieve lasting difference to the women of this country we need more women in power. We must start by building the confidence of these passionate and articulate female activists at the stage where they are now so that they are encouraged to take part in mainstream national politics in the future.

There is a world of difference between the stuffy, jeering debates amongst men in suits that I see in parliament and the lively, informed debate I see going on out there in the rest of the UK. If we are to create and sustain a democracy with real diversity that represents and involves the people, then we need these voices echoing in every room where decisions are made that affect the society we live in. We have to show people that those in power can be and should be just as ordinary as they are.

7 FIRST THEY IGNORE YOU...

Sue Marsh

Sidelined by political parties, women with disabilities are using social media to engage politically, organise themselves and challenge the narrative of austerity. In doing so, they are carving a new place in traditional political structures

I started my blog, *the Diary of a Benefit Scrounger*, in 2010 after two years of trying to engage with the Labour party - *my* Labour party - with absolutely no success at all. In fact, it was the then Labour minister for disabilities, Jonathan Shaw, who turned me into a campaigner in the first place.

In an almost unlikely twist, he came to my always-neglected constituency Labour party of West Worthing to give a talk on the new employment and support allowance, the benefit that Labour were introducing to replace incapacity benefit (IB). With lifelong Crohn's disease, I myself had been forced to claim IB since 2000 as work had become impossible and dangerous for me.

Shaw assured the room that "virtually everyone should be on a direct pathway to work," and in a half hour speech, did not mention people with long-term conditions or mental health issues once. An out of work benefit is primarily a sickness benefit, so this struck me as not just odd, but sinister. At the end of the Q&A session I finally got to ask the question I was burning to ask.

"You seem to think that only people in wheelchairs or people with guide dogs are disabled. What if someone is ill? What if they're too ill to work, what happens to them?" Like a rabbit in the headlights he stuttered and froze. It was clear the thought had never occurred to him. Or if it had, then it was a question he didn't want me to ask.

I knew Labour was getting it wrong on health, disability and social security, and as a Labour member and lifelong political geek obsessed with psephology and electioneering I believed I had unique insights that the party - and the rest of the country - would be keen to hear. When I look back, I realise this was naïve. I attended Labour conference that year (2009) and tried to speak to as many relevant Labour ministers as I could. I emailed, I researched, I phoned disability groups. I even met with Mr Shaw. But nothing ever came of it.

Traditional routes failed me when I experienced poor patient care and just couldn't get anyone to hear the whistles I blew as hard as I could. They failed me when I couldn't get any support with my illness at all, whether through the benefit system, the care system, or simple counselling to deal with it all. And they failed me when my voice was discounted in the echo chambers of Westminster and Wapping.

I think that most women dealing with the current crises caused by rampant, macho austerity measures are quickly reaching the same conclusion that I did: "These structures in my world are run by powerful men for men and they allow me no voice and even less power." But feeling powerless is the

“ I HAVE CREATED A NEW SPACE WITHIN POLITICS BY USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO HELP CHALLENGE A UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED NARRATIVE

one thing we refuse to accept. With a chronic illness, you are by definition powerless much of the time. So you learn to build power creatively. You learn that you can wield it from a bed. You learn that power can come from deep thought more easily than unfocused energy. You learn to think differently, and overcome problems in ways that healthy people never need to.

And so, like thousands of other sick and disabled people, I began to look for other ways to engage and gradually learnt that social media could open the door to everything I felt I was barred from. I set up my blog one Sunday afternoon not really even knowing what a blog was. I just knew that it was somewhere I could write to the world. For nearly a year, I hit the mysterious "Tweet" button at the bottom of the posts I wrote and hardly knew what Twitter was or where they went.

But something phenomenal was happening. First hundreds of people answered me, then thousands, then so many I couldn't keep up. They replied: "That is my life you wrote about today. No one has ever written about my life before. No one has ever listened to what I say."

Overwhelmingly these voices were female - though not exclusively by any means, and I must make it clear that many of my supporters are men. These women also felt alienated and excluded from the healthcare, support and political structures. It's no coincidence that my female supporters have a whole host of long term health conditions that have all too often be dismissed by male doctors as "all in the head". Or diminished as something they should "snap out of". Male patients with the same conditions seldom experience such pre-judgement.

Since 2010, as the coalition formed and George Osborne announced his first £6bn of cuts just a month later, sick and disabled people were clearly to be one of his prime scapegoats. In those first few months, cut after cut was announced under the guise of reform. The support disabled people rely on to get about, the support we rely on in our homes to get out of bed or to get dressed, the support we use to cover the extra costs of being disabled, the support we need if we become unable to work - nothing was left untouched. Even our very homes were threatened by the bedroom tax.

If Welfare Reform Bill 2010 was passed the resulting social crises would be almost unthinkable. But traditionally male political structures felt closed to us. Mainstream media were supportive of the reforms and dismissed disabled voices unanimously. Every main political party broadly supported welfare reform and were unwilling to scrutinise the Bill or listen to our concerns. Even disability charities were put on the back foot by the coalition's proposals, and at first they struggled to turn from ally to critic.

Forming alliances and finding our voice on social media had been a positive experience pre-austerity, but very much more was needed now. In those early months a transformative political force was formed. First the Broken of Britain, then DPAC, Black Triangle and my own blog, then the Spartacus Network and the WOW petition sparked into life. We were dynamic, able to react to new stories or false claims in hours rather than days. We could check transcripts of Hansard and pore over every newly released report or impact assessments from the department for work and pensions.

Though many of us have still never met face to face, we became the opposition. And we did it far better than those crumbling, male dominated political structures we had so tired of. We lobbied peers directly; encouraged people to start a relationship with their own MP; live-tweeted debates; and produced

new research and uncovered stories that put think tanks and journalists to shame, opening up democracy to ordinary people in an entirely new way.

At the bottom of every blog post I write this quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." Now mainstream journalists write about welfare reform chaos daily, and social media has given disabled activists like me an increasingly powerful voice that it is hard for Labour to disregard. Although shadow ministers may first have ignored me, I have had the most incredible support from every corner of the Labour party: grassroots supporters, bloggers, campaigners, influential party members who use their platform to make sure I am heard, and in the end, famous names right at the very top.

Today, I have carved a unique new place in that political structure that once rejected and diminished me. As a very unwell, very female, very working class benefit claimant, I have created a new space within politics by using social media to help challenge a universally accepted narrative and by being the woman that I am. That space is there for anyone with the passion and experience to fill it. We may not quite believe it yet, but I don't think that politics will ever be the same again.

8

TELL ME WHAT I NEED TO KNOW

Yas Necati

In an age of an increasingly sexualised media, sexting and internet porn, taking steps to modernise sex and relationships education is long overdue

I left school feeling unprepared for sex and relationships. In fact, I spent the majority of my school life feeling unprepared. That's why I helped start the Campaign4Consent, and later, a petition to make aspects of digital media a part of the UK's sex and relationships education (SRE) curriculum. I'm Yas Necati, I'm 18, and I stand for young people everywhere who are getting too little information in the classroom and finding the wrong information online.

“ IF LABOUR MAKES GOVERNMENT IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS, THEY CAN WORK WITH FEMINIST CAMPAIGNS LIKE MINE

Sex and relationships education has always been important for young people, and in an age of an increasingly sexualised media, sexting and internet porn, it is perhaps more vital than ever. I am by no means suggesting that we ban any of the images that young people are consuming on a daily basis. However, I am standing for a better – statutory – SRE curriculum that will counter these images by showing relationships positively, realistically, and with a purpose to inform rather than sell products or entertain an audience.

We have become shy about openly discussing sex and relationships as a society, yet sexual content has become increasingly accessible over the past decade. Young people are rapidly consuming warped and potentially dangerous ideas about sex, yet schools are failing to offer an alternative, more accurate picture.

But I don't blame the schools, and I certainly don't blame the teachers. I blame the government who give the impression that they couldn't care less.

One in five women is sexually assaulted in her lifetime. Schools are the most common setting for sexual harassment and coercion and young people from the ages of 16-25 are at the biggest risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Taking all this into consideration, is it not time we challenged misconceptions about gender roles, power and dominance in the media, for the sake of our young women, but also for the sake of society as a whole?

Earlier this year, my petition to consider aspects of digital media in the curriculum was a success and new guidance was written. But guidance isn't enough. The extremely important issue of FGM has entered onto the national curriculum, but when the truth remains that only half our schools are obliged to follow the national curriculum anyway, we are leaving behind tens of thousands of children and young people to continue being misinformed. Gay marriage is recognised in this country, and yet our SRE doesn't even seem to acknowledge that gay relationships exist. And the issue that I feel is most important in any relationship – consent – was earlier this year voted against in the House of Lords and is therefore still not a part of young people's learn-

ing and understanding.

If Labour makes government in the next elections, they can work with feminist campaigns like mine to change all of this. They can start by making SRE statutory, so that no young person is left alone. Then they can consider the R – relationships - and what it stands for. We receive an influx of information about the biology of intercourse and STIs, what we need now is information about the social side of sex. That means different types of relationships, how the media informs them, and also the negative aspects and what to do if things go wrong. Please, Labour, don't leave us misinformed. Don't us down.

9

TRANSGENDER POLITICIANS

Anwen Muston and Natacha Kennedy

At present there are no openly transgender elected representatives in the UK, but there is a vibrant activist movement gaining ground on key campaigns. Encouraging more Labour trans candidates would harness the energy of trans activism and further the fight for equality

Transgender people are persecuted in many countries in the world, sometimes by the state but more often by individuals and vigilantes as a direct result of discrimination and social exclusion. The most effective way to tackle this is to encourage more trans politicians to stand for election and fight for equality.

There are still precious few elected transgender people around the world but a diverse group of countries do have trans representatives. The world's first openly transgender politician was Georgina Beyer, who was elected to the New Zealand parliament in 1999. She was followed by Vladimir Luxuria, who became the first trans MP in Europe, serving for a short period in the Italian parliament between 2006-2008; Anna Grodzka is currently a Polish MP and Adela Hernandez became the first transgender person to be elected, as a local councillor, in Cuba in 2012, which demonstrates how far Mariela Castro's support for trans people has enabled them to progress there.

“ WHY DO WE HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO OPENLY TRANS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN THE UK? ”

The most notable trans politician currently in power is Aya Kamikawa, Tokyo assembly member for Setagaya ward in central Tokyo, who has twice won re-election since 2003. The Tokyo metropolitan area has a population of 13 million and it also serves as the hub for a conurbation of more than 35 million. That someone like Aya can be an important democratically elected representative campaigning for rights and protection for sexual minorities within a country as profoundly conservative as Japan suggests that trans people are not necessarily the 'high-risk' candidates some parties might perceive them to be.

The heartening, if slow progress of trans politicians overseas raises the question: why do we have absolutely no openly trans elected representatives in the UK at present? To our knowledge there have never been any trans persons elected to parliament or any appointed to the House of Lords, although there has been some success at a local level. In 2002 Liberal Democrat Jenny Bailey became a Cambridge city councillor, becoming the first transgender mayor in the country in 2007-2008. The last openly trans elected representative in the UK was also a Cambridge Lib Dem named Sarah Brown, who served as councillor from 2010 to 2014.

Transgender candidates within Labour

Finding trans role models has been difficult because of the cultural exclusion and historical erasure of trans people, and in particular the fetishisation

of trans women. Political figures from any minority community are seen as positive role models, so why not the transgender community? For example, journalist and broadcaster Paris Lees is probably the most well-known trans person in the UK and may, in the future, be a wise recruit to the Labour party as she is known to be sympathetic with Labour policies. Encouraging more trans candidates to stand would demonstrate that transgender individuals are normal members of society going about their daily lives in the same way as everyone else. This could also encourage other trans individuals to develop an interest in politics and in the welfare of their neighbourhoods.

The Labour party has always been the party of social justice and even though that has not always been implemented perfectly by the party, it is the only one that has made significant improvements in equality and equality of opportunity. This year Labour had three openly transgender candidates who put themselves forward in local elections. Two were selected; one of the authors of this chapter, Anwen Muston in Wolverhampton and Anna May Booth in Trafford. The other person was not selected by her ward as she was seen as a 'high risk' candidate by grassroots members because she was transgender. Especially in close-run elections like 2015 selection panels will choose 'low risk' candidates most likely to appeal to the highest number of voters. Because trans people are a relatively unknown quantity this means we are less likely to be selected or to be selected late. Mainstream media that harasses and intrudes upon trans people also has a part to play in this issue. However, despite concerns about trans candidates being 'high risk', the experiences campaigning on the doorstep of both candidates in Wolverhampton and Trafford were very positive. Local residents were accepting of them as openly transgender people, and Anna May Booth has been asked to stand again by her local members in 2015 while Anwen Muston has already been selected by her ward members for the 2015 local elections in Wolverhampton.

Generally speaking, Labour could do a lot more to encourage transgender people to stand for public office. At the moment trans people can be put off by a lack of trust in politicians; the risk of discrimination; perceived cliques and narrow-mindedness of politicians towards minorities; negative media coverage and unfavourable experiences of other trans people who do engage with mainstream politics. We understand that the proposed Labour Diversity Fund would develop talented individuals from under-represented groups (such as non-white, female and disabled candidates), and provide grants to people unable to sustain the costs of candidacy for parliamentary elections. However, this should also include transgender candidates who are far more underrepresented in Westminster than any other group and face significant financial barriers as many are unemployed. The very low number of trans men standing for election in any party, and lack of candidates who are clearly non-binary (i.e they don't fit within the accepted genders of male and female) should also be addressed.

Obviously, candidate selections should not be an equality tick box exercise, but should be based on merit, knowledge and ability to do the job effectively. Even so, Labour could elevate talented individuals from minority groups by equipping them with the skills they need to win through structured training programmes.

Having all-women shortlists is a positive move in the right direction, but common sense must prevail for it to work - it can be a detrimental strategy where there are not enough female candidates to allow shortlisting and selection panels to take place. Certainly, this was the situation in Wolverhampton earlier this year, where Anwen Muston was selected via an all-women short-

list very late to contest an incumbent candidate in a ward that is traditionally a Tory stronghold and lost by just 36 votes. Let's not forget that a candidate who is up for re-election can start campaigning early, so timely selections are important.

Whether policy or legislation, politicians at all levels make choices that affect our daily lives. Other minority groups have already benefited from engaging with the political system, so if trans people were more engaged with party political movements then they could help politicians make informed decisions that take into account the experiences of ordinary people from all sections of society. Probably the most high-profile policy issue for trans people is that of equal marriage. We are also campaigning against the 'spousal veto' in which someone married to a trans person can effectively prevent their full legal transition until after divorce. The issue of NHS trans-related healthcare is also huge and there is a permanent backlog and a significant funding gap for gender reassignment. Finally, the new Labour party policy that expects all 18-22 year-olds to live at home, whilst representing positive intentions, will have a harmful effect on young trans people who can suffer from bullying from their parents and local communities.

There is already an energetic trans activist movement here in the UK, with organisations like www.gires.org.uk and www.uktrans.info. All About Trans and Trans Media Watch campaign to change the way trans people are represented in the media. A more robust system of media responsibility is crucial to ending discrimination. Meanwhile, other groups organise political actions on a more ad-hoc basis via social media. There have been demonstrations outside the Guardian offices about Julie Burchill's transphobic article; outside a Stonewall awards ceremony due to the gay campaigning group's inclusion of a transphobic journalist; and outside the Danish Embassy in support of a Guatemalan refugee who was about to be deported from Copenhagen to certain death in Tegucigalpa.

Many trans women are also feminists and there is some crossover between trans and feminist activism. The majority of feminists are happy recognising trans women as women, and trans women have been invited to take part in women-only events such as Dyke March and Slutwalk as well as feminist conferences. However, the relationship between trans people and feminist organisations has not always been constructive and a small group of people known as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) are quite antagonistic towards trans people in general and trans women in particular.

Conclusion

A few years ago trans people could not have imagined that trans candidates would ever be elected to government; that a trans woman would play in a World Cup qualifier; that a trans TV star would be on the cover of Time magazine; that a trans woman would become well-known for inventing the new single computer chip at IBM; or that a trans woman would become celebrated around the world for exposing the abuses of the US secret service.

We've come so far already, but activism has most success when people have the opportunity to speak directly to those in power. If some of the energy of transgender campaigning could be harnessed in Westminster, Ed Miliband would already be prime minister. Granted, this is technically impossible until the general election next year, but trans people are used to doing several impossible things every day before breakfast.

10 THE INVISIBLE WOMEN

Fiona Mactaggart MP

The women who broke glass ceilings and fought for equal pay are getting older and now many are being ignored in the public sphere, their vast contribution as carers taken for granted. But they should be enabled to combine work and care, and empowered to become active citizens once again

At a meeting I held in my constituency of Slough back in 2011, a woman in her 50s told me: “I am first in the queue for redundancy, and the last in the queue for a job”. In my many discussions with older women - from all walks of life - about the support and policy changes they would like to see, they told me they feel they are disappearing from the public sphere. Indeed, women over 50 have been treated as an irrelevance for too long. They disappear from our television screens, they are retired early because of caring responsibilities or regarded as too close to retirement to matter in the workplace, and their contribution to family care is taken for granted.

We launched the Commission on Older Women, chaired by Harriet Harman MP, at the end of 2012 to continue this work and investigate the experiences of women over 50 in three critical areas – in the workplace, in their caring responsibilities and in public life. The response has shown that older women have a lot to contribute but they want their needs to be understood. Older women up and down the country, in and out of work, have shown that they will stand up for policies which help them manage the challenges they face, and drive the changes they need, to let them balance their complex lives.

But since the launch of the Commission there is a real momentum gathering and Labour is in the front, leading the way. Following our interim report in September 2013, there have been several reports examining the specific experience of women: the TUC produced *Age Immaterial*; UNISON produced *Women Deserve Better*; Grandparents Plus produced *Time to Care - Balancing Work and Care in Later Life: An Agenda for Change*; and Carers UK published *The Case for Care Leave*. At the end of the year the Commission will publish its final report, outlining its vision for a better deal for women over 50 – in the workplace, in their caring responsibilities and in public life.

The government too have focused on older workers, making the case for people to keep working rather than be dependent in older age. But the Department for Work and Pensions *Fuller Working Lives* report published this June is entirely gender blind, ignoring the specific needs of women. For example, many men and women work after retirement age, and the number has grown since the recession even taking into account the swift increase in pension age for women. However, two thirds of men who work beyond normal retirement age are paid at the top of the scale for their sector of employment, while in contrast two thirds of women working beyond retirement age are in low

“**OLDER WOMEN ARE ALREADY SOCIAL AGENTS; THEY DON'T GENERALLY NEED BIG GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS**”

paid jobs. Women work longer to help pay the bills and because they have less pension, while men continue because they are enjoying their work. The government report also ignores the fact that older women are most likely to be carers – not just for partners, but for parents, other elderly relatives and for grandchildren.

The coalition know they have a woman problem. The appointment of Ros Altman, an established campaigner for the needs of older people, as the new business champion for older workers is good news. There is a chance she'll put women in the picture. But it is obvious that the government doesn't get the 'gender agenda' and, although it has made much of new women cabinet members, with the line-up at DWP and Health unchanged, I would be surprised to see any substantial efforts address the real inequalities faced by older women. For Labour to create a winning coalition we must offer solutions based on the real experience of diverse groups, especially those who, like older women, can easily be overlooked.

What older women want

1. Older women want, and need, to work.

Changes to the state pension age mean that women need to work longer to pay the bills today and continue to save for their retirement. The UK has a 43 per cent gap between pensions received by men and women - the third highest level in the EU after Luxembourg and Germany. Only 40 per cent of women, compared to 49 per cent of men, have adequate retirement incomes and a shocking 37 per cent of women have no pension at all. In particular, women prioritise supporting their children - including as adults - over retirement savings, and many women expect to rely on their partner's retirement income, leaving them vulnerable in the case of separation.

However, unemployment amongst women aged 50 to 64 rose by 45 per cent between the general election and its peak in the third quarter of 2013, although improved employment in the March-May 2014 quarter reduced the increase to about 36 per cent. In the general population unemployment has fallen since the election. Older women are paid less too. The average full-time salary for women over 50 is just over £15,000. For most adults, the average full-time gender pay differential is measured in pence per hour worked, but after the age of 40 it is measured in pounds, peaking at a £2.62 difference every hour for those aged 50-59. The majority of older women working part time – which many of them do – earn on average less than £10,000 a year, too low to benefit from recent changes to tax thresholds. A Labour government would prioritise closing the pay gap and tackling low pay by increasing the national minimum wage and ending the exploitative use of zero hours contracts.

2. Older women want, and need, to care for their family.

But as a consequence of caring, many older women have taken a financial hit by giving up work or cutting down their hours. Women make up six in every ten carers, and by the time a woman reaches the age of 59 there is a fifty-fifty chance that she will have had at least one period of substantial caring responsibilities. And when caring ends, often because a partner or

parent has died, women struggle to return to work. A Labour government should help older women to combine work and care, with a right to leave to help them adjust to changes in caring responsibilities and support to return to work when caring responsibilities lessen or end.

3. Older women want, and need, to be visible in public life.

It's vitally important for older women to be an active and engaged part of society in order to drive the change they wish to see. They need to be represented in the media far more and their voices heard in public life and civil society organisations. Rather than see them as objects of pity, there is so much to celebrate and learn from their wisdom and experience. The fact that the phrase: "You don't look that old!" is still regarded as a compliment demonstrates more vividly than statistics the disrespect that is the norm for older women. A Labour government would implement the double discrimination provisions of the Equality Act 2010 – which the coalition government failed to do – to prevent older women experiencing combined age and gender discrimination.

Members of the Commission on Older Women have talked with women around the country, at work, in neighbourhood centres, nurseries and shops. We have listened to people who are directly affected, and learnt from them and found solutions which could work for them. That helps people to see politics does have a point and after all that has to be the big project.

The research of the Commission has revealed the potential for a new paradigm of smarter politics, which makes relatively simple and modest adjustments to deliver material change. Older women are already social agents; they don't generally need big government solutions because they are often the problem solvers in their families and neighbourhoods. But they do need a government which notices the barriers which prevent them from immersing themselves in a role which, ultimately, works well for their families, their employers and their sense of fulfilment and wellbeing.

The women who fought for equal pay, broke glass ceilings in the workplace and campaigned for childcare and flexible employment rights are getting older. They are demanding a better deal and Labour must deliver it. It's clear that the Conservatives don't have a clue how.

If we get this right we will empower older women, who are willing to work longer and to balance work and care across the generations, to operate from the centre of our families and communities providing the glue to keep it all together.

11 KEEPING ON

Zita Holbourne

Black women can often fall between the gaps between feminist groups and the labour movement, but groups such as BARAC and Southall Black Sisters are campaigning and organising on their own terms, sharing knowledge, tools and resources to overcome barriers to participation

Black women - defined as people from the African and Asian diasporas - face a double whammy of race and gender discrimination in the labour market, are often held back in the lowest grades on the lowest pay and are disproportionately targeted when it comes to job cuts. Yet they are grossly underrepresented in the formal structures of civil society and the labour movement, encountering multiple barriers to their participation in trade unions, political parties and campaigning organisations – including feminist groups.

Before the financial crisis, many black women were already primary carers holding down two or three jobs just to make ends meet, typically low paid or under zero hours contracts. But austerity measures are amplifying both racism and sexism in Britain. Because the public sector is the biggest employer of black women, we have had to contend with job cuts impacting disproportionately on both gender and race. In one London borough, black women made up five per cent of the workforce but 23 per cent of the redundancies. Frozen and capped pay and increased pensions contributions has meant a pay cut in real terms. At least one in five Caribbean women is unemployed compared to one in 14 white women, and research has shown that black people stay unemployed for longer than their white counterparts.

Black people live in the most deprived geographical areas, and many of these areas have had the deepest cuts to valuable local services, from play schemes, libraries and youth centres to interpretation services, training centres, women's refuges and race monitoring units. Meanwhile, the scrapping of the educational maintenance allowance (EMA) has led to more financial hardship for black families and the tripling of university tuition fees has put up further obstacles to higher education. This is all against the backdrop of anti-migrant scaremongering by not just the likes of UKIP but the mainstream political parties too.

So there are many incentives for black women to organise, but the problem is that feminist organisations and women's groups have never felt very inclusive and can be dominated by white women who are not interested in black women's concerns. We fall between the gaps, as some feminists assume we can be involved in the black organisations that white women can't, or else we're expected to separate being black and a woman to be involved. If we want to take up a place on a women's committee and a black members' committee we are perceived to be 'greedy' – few people recognise that we want to be involved in both because we need to have a voice in both structures in

order to counter the double discrimination we face.

However, black women have always been and will always be survivors, and we have formed our own informal and formal networks and campaigns. Organisations like Southall Black Sisters have worked for decades to challenge domestic and gender-related violence; Black Women in the Arts promotes creative black women; Black Feminists provides a space for black women to come together and campaign; and there are many other groups that are founded by and run by black women like singing group My Heart Sings, which provides a space for women of any colour to come together, and UK Black Pride which was founded and is led by black women.

I co-founded Black Activists Rising Against Cuts (BARAC UK), a coalition of black, public and voluntary sector workers, trade unionists, community organisations, service users and individuals, because I knew that austerity measures that were to come under the Tory and Lib Dem coalition would have devastating consequences for black communities and workers. From the beginning, we placed a particular focus on the double impact of the impending government cuts on black women and young black people.

“ LABOUR NEEDS TO OPEN UP A DIALOGUE WITH BLACK GROUPS AND COMMIT TO ADDRESSING SOME OF THE ISSUES THAT THEY CAMPAIGN ON

Black women are also at the forefront of campaigning against the multiple discrimination and disadvantage experienced by black men. BARAC supports many family justice campaigns, which are predominantly led by black women family members who have been forced to put their own lives on hold as they fight for justice for those who have been killed at the hands of the police or state. Many of these women did not set out to be activists but were forced to become activists in order to pursue justice.

The Labour party could learn much about community engagement from organisations like BARAC and others, but at the moment there is a clear disconnect. BARAC does have individual Labour MPs who work with us and have supported our campaigns, but we are not currently involved with any Labour groups. A number of BARAC activists have stood as candidates in local elections but not for Labour or any of the main parties. In order to try and bridge the gap, Labour needs to open up a dialogue with black groups and commit to addressing some of the issues that they campaign on. Party representatives need to be visible in local communities, not just when there is an election on. The only time I ever see local councillors is when they are canvassing for votes! For black women to be attracted to Labour party activism, the party must be willing to support our grassroots campaigns in the spaces we have created too.

If it is hard for a black woman to be involved in women's organisations, then it is even more difficult to be involved in the wider labour movement. For black women who are busy providing for their families is it any wonder that there is no time let alone energy left in the day to then go and battle with the white, straight and male dominated labour movement? It's essential that labour (and feminist) organisations acknowledge the discrimination and disadvantage black women experience and welcome the ideas, experiences, skills and talents we bring.

We know from the trade union movement that people are more likely to engage if they see others like them who are involved. The first step is to identify why black women are not participating in their groups or movements and then to put in place an action plan. This may involve taking these organisations to the communities that black women live and work in; campaigning in partnership with black (women's) organisations on local issues; produc-

ing literature aimed at black women and published in different languages; running training programmes on equality awareness for unions and other organisations; or allowing for flexible schedules that take into account work, religious and family commitments.

I am also in favour of taking positive action such as ringfencing positions to ensure places are taken up in the labour movement by underrepresented groups (although it doesn't protect people against the backlash which inevitably comes with positive action and is not a magic cure for underrepresentation, especially in leadership roles). For example, the TUC Race Relations Committee has an election category just for black women with four seats. This doesn't mean that black women can't stand in the general category but it ensures a minimum number of black women. Ringfencing could be accompanied by advertising vacancies and positions in the black press and on websites accessed by black women, and providing speakers to come and talk to black women's organisations about these opportunities. Our experience is that often people don't put themselves forward because they were not asked. Simply being invited and encouraged can give confidence to black women and help generate interest.

There seems to be an unwritten expectation on black activists that they must work twice as hard and achieve twice as much as their white counterparts to be supported to stand for leadership positions, so one of the things I do is encourage other black women (and men) to stand up and put themselves forward. A few years ago I designed a workshop for black trade union members titled 'participating in elections and policy making'. The aim of it was to provide black members with the knowledge, support, tools and resources to empower them to stand for election with confidence and to influence union policy by submitting motions. Knowledge is power – and when we empower ourselves we give empowerment to others.

I'm inspired every day by my sisters who fight oppression, sexism, racism, injustice and threats to our human rights here in the UK and globally. Throughout history there have been black women leading the way, from Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad, to Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement, Claudia Jones, Mary Prince and many more. Along with a group of other campaigners, I recently succeeded in keeping Mary Seacole on the national curriculum when Michael Gove sought to remove her and others and replace them with more white male historical figures. Despite the odds stacked up against us, these 'herstories' give us inspiration and empower us to keep on keeping on.

RIDING THE NEW WAVE |

FEMINISM AND THE LABOUR PARTY

Edited by Anya Pearson and Rosie Rogers

Spurred on by social media and the effects of the recession, a new wave of feminism is gathering strength at an impressive pace. Meanwhile, our political parties struggle to offer inspiring solutions to the challenges people face in their daily lives. Is Labour in danger of becoming an irrelevance for this generation of feminists?

From Yas Nacati's campaign for better sex education and disability activist Sue Marsh's work fighting against government cuts to Lisa Clarke's experience working for No More Page 3, this collection shows that Labour has much to learn from the feminist movement in countering political apathy.

Labour can work with contemporary social activists to achieve lasting, systemic change in their fight for equality - if the party can find ways to hang on and enjoy the ride.

With contributions from:

Ivana Bartoletti

Lisa Clarke

Zita Holbourne

Natacha Kennedy

Lisa Nandy MP

Yas Nacati

Fiona Mactaggart MP

Sue Marsh

Kirsty McNeill

Anwen Muston

Stuart White