FIVE DECADES, FIVE FEMINISMS

The Sue Innes Memorial Lecture 2016

By Zoë Fairbairns

It’s a startling thing to see in the subject line of an email: the name of one of your friends, followed by the words ‘memorial lecture’.

Even when nearly 12 years have elapsed since the friend’s death, it is still at times hard to take in.

But you think, ‘Memorial lecture? Hey, that sounds interesting, I might go to that.’ Then you open the email and realise you’re not being invited to attend the lecture, you’re being asked to give it.

After the initial alarm, there comes a lifting of the spirits, a feeling of nostalgia, a sense of honour, of herstory and history, of continuity, and above all of feminism in its many forms.

So I begin by saying a special thank you to those of you who have done so much to keep Sue’s name and memory alive.

You’ve continued the work she and others began on compiling and publishing the Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women.¹
You’ve continued the work of the Scottish feminist organisation Engender for which Sue worked until shortly before her death.

You’ve maintained collections of her writings here at the Glasgow Women’s Library and at the National Library of Scotland.

And you’ve organised events such as this one, and done me the great honour of inviting me to speak to you today.

The theme of today’s conference is Feminisms: Histories, Ideas and Practice. ‘Feminism’ isn’t a word that you often hear in the plural, perhaps because it is so hard to get your tongue and lips round all those m’s and s’s. But there have been many feminisms, and I am going to talk about five of them.

On the first page of the first chapter of her book Making It Work\(^i\) Sue quotes a woman who says: **People who say things haven't changed must have very short memories.**

That woman was me.

I was responding to Sue telling me that a number of women she had talked to, didn’t think things had changed for women since the 1970s.

I thought those women were wrong. And if anyone is still saying or even thinking such a thing, I still think they are wrong. Before I move on to five of the feminisms that Sue lived through, and all of us here continue to live through, I plan to lift our spirits and confirm our confidence in ourselves with eight pieces of evidence that things do change, have changed.

(I haven’t brought them with me, but I hope you will take my word for it.)

**Exhibit A.** Job vacancy columns in newspapers in the 1950s and 60s. Separate columns for men’s jobs and women’s jobs. Sometimes the same job is offered to applicants of both genders but at different rates of pay. Sometimes the ads specify that female applicants must be “attractive.”

**Exhibit B.** Princess Anne. Second of the Queen’s children, she was only fourth in line to the throne because her siblings were all boys. I realise that the inheritance status of members of the royal family may not be of huge interest to this audience - indeed it is not of particular interest to me, except as a taxpayer. (I was and remain a
huge fan of the late MP for Fife Central, William Hamilton, whose response to the birth of a royal baby was “another mouth to feed.”) But the males-first succession rule had symbolic significance. One of the supposed-justifications for having a monarchy is that it unites the nation by embodying national values. One of the values this rule embodied was patriarchal privilege.

**Exhibit C.** Speaking of taxpayers, income tax returns in the 1960s bore the words “if you are a married woman, this form should be given to your husband and treated as if it were addressed to him.” A married woman was not normally permitted to deal with her own tax affairs. She had to tell her husband what she earned, so that he could include the information in his tax return. He did not have to tell her what he earned. Only he could sign the tax return. If she was entitled to a tax rebate, guess who got it.

**Exhibit D.** A prescription for the contraceptive pill, with my name on it, dated 1969. A private prescription. I was not a private patient, I was just an ordinary student using the NHS-funded Student Health Service at the University of St Andrews. But the doctor there told me that the only way he could legally give me the pill was if I signed on as a private patient and paid a private patient’s fee. So I did.

**Exhibit E.** A knitting needle. Instrument of choice for some back-street abortionists.

**Exhibit F.** A television. Or a washing machine, or any other consumer durable that you wanted to buy on hire-purchase. In many shops, this facility was not available to women unless you could provide a male guarantor.

**Exhibit G.** Another television, showing the BBC’s 1967 adaptation of John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga*. The scene is the one in which Soames Forsyte rapes his wife. This scene caused huge controversy. Such a thing had never been
shown on television before. In the public discussion that followed, it became clear that not only was it perfectly legal in Victorian times for a man to rape his wife, it was still legal in the 1960s.

**Exhibit H.** A baby. A small human being. Before 1974, a woman could be dismissed from her job for having one of these. Even if she was kept on, she had no legal entitlement to maternity leave or maternity pay.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I, like many girls and women, was aware of the injustices that I’ve just listed.

I worried about them, but only in a personal way. They seemed embarrassing, like being flat-chested or having spots or not having a boyfriend.

With hindsight, and thanks to feminist scholarship, I know now that feminist struggles were going on at this time.

Women trade unionists and MPs were fighting for an Equal Pay Act, and campaigning organisations such as the Edinburgh Women Citizens’ Association and the London-based Fawcett Society, were encouraging women to use their votes to improve women’s rights and social conditions.

But it was no part of my formal education, or that of many girls, to be aware of these things.

The history we studied was men’s history. The current affairs we were encouraged to take an interest in, were men’s current affairs. I think of the gender politics of the 1960s as the *problem that had no name.* (You may recognise the phrase from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* which was first published in 1965. It was about American housewives, not British teenagers, but we too had problems that had not yet been properly named.)
To me one of the greatest achievements of the feminism of the next decade – the 1970s, the women’s liberation movement – was that it called things by their name. It used terms like **patriarchy, sexism, sexual politics, domestic labour, domestic violence**.

We’re here today to talk about feminisms, plural. What marked out the feminism of the 70s is that it said what we wanted.

- Equal pay for equal work
- Equal education and equal opportunities
- Free contraception and abortion on demand
- Free 24-hour child care
- Legal and financial independence for women
- An end to discrimination against lesbians
- Freedom for all women from the threat or use of male violence. An end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women.

The first four of those demands were formulated at the first-ever British Women’s Liberation Conference which was held at Ruskin College Oxford in 1970. The other three demands were added at conferences in 1975 and 1978. Also in 1978, an initial assertion was added – **the Women’s Liberation Movement asserts a woman’s right to define her own sexuality**.

The demands were not without controversy, even within the movement that made them. At a meeting in May 1978, the St Andrews Women’s Liberation group dismissed the demands as **an all-out plot to plug women cosily into capitalism**. They declared that we don’t want equal education, we want to abolish education – **your equal opportunity to a slice of shit**.

Even so, the 1970s were a time when as feminists we said what we wanted. And sometimes we got it.
In 1974, free contraception became available to all who needed it, on the NHS. (Though it’s worth noting that Aberdeen had been providing this service since 1967, making it, in the words of Roger Davidson and Gayle Davisvi “the most progressive city in Scotland, indeed Britain” on birth control.)

Other feminist gains in the 1970s included the Equal Pay Act of 1970, and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. In 1976, Child Benefits were introduced, payable to mothers – in many cases, their only independent income. Also in 1976, rape victims and complainants were given the right not to be named in court.

It was in the 1970s that I first met Sue Innes, or Susie as I knew her. She arrived at St Andrews University at the time when Stephanie Norris and I became the first female editors of the student newspaper Aien.

Stephanie and I had lots of ideas about student journalism and about feminism, but we knew very little about newspaper design. So when Susie, a former art student, offered her services as art editor, we were relieved and delighted.

And so began a period during which, according to at least one male commentator of the time, St Andrews, led by its student newspaper, became “a veritable hotbed of feminism.” vii

Actually Aien wasn’t a hotbed of anything; it was just a student newspaper that had noticed that half of its readers weren’t male.

We had noticed that there was a power struggle going on between the genders, and we paid serious attention to this.

We reported on sexism in the curriculum. Discrimination at the Appointments Board. Unequal pay in the students’ union. Sexual harassment in the street.

And we criticised the Charities Queen Competition – a beauty contest for first year female students.

In 1971, Sue Innes herself went in for this – as a protest candidate. In support of her entry, she provided a deliberately non-glamorous photograph of herself, and wrote a manifesto in which she pointed out that as she was neither more nor less beautiful than any other woman in the university, she would, if chosen, devote herself to campaigning to abolish beauty contests everywhere. She did not win.
Speaking of winning and not winning...

In 1979, the Conservatives won the general election, and Margaret Thatcher became the UK’s first woman Prime Minister.

Embarrassing or what? A decade of Women's Liberation and we end up with a woman in the top job who shows no sign of supporting women’s liberation.

It’s worth noting that during the Thatcher era her party never had a majority of seats in Scotland, but even so the Conservatives got enough votes UK-wide to allow her, as their leader, to enjoy three terms of office as Prime Minister. Well, two and a bit.

So what does that say about the feminism of the 1980s?

One of the things it says can be heard in these quotations. These are women talking about the stationing of American nuclear missiles at Greenham Common in Berkshire, and the women’s peace camp which was set up in 1981 as a protest.

Here’s one.
I think (the Greenham Common women) are marvellous, I really do, because they believe in something and they've gone out and stood up for it. We've all got the right to do that... Before Greenham Common I didn't realise that the Americans had got their missiles here. What a cheek! It was the fuss the Greenham Common women made that made me realise.

And here's another one:

I admire the Greenham Common women because they've made people think. I admire any woman who risks being attacked, sticking to her guns in the face of a hostile reaction. A man wouldn't be attacked in the same way. viii

Both these comments come from Conservative women. The idea of Conservative women sharing some ideas and attitudes with feminists isn't so surprising now, but it was then.

Almost as surprising as the idea of feminists taking up private enterprise – another feature of the 80s - and turning out to be rather good at it.

By 1987, there were at least seven self-identified feminist book-publishers in the UK: Stramullion in Scotland, Honno in Wales, the Falling Wall Press in Bristol, Onlywomen, Virago, The Women’s Press and Sheba in London. And some mainstream presses – Methuen, Routledge - had feminist lists.

There were feminist magazines, such as Spare Rib, Everywoman and Outwrite, and feminist bookshops: Silver Moon, Sisterwrite, Virago in London, Womanzone and West & Wilde in Edinburgh.

There was a feminist literary prize – the Fawcett Prize. There were Feminist Book Clubs – the Women’s Press book club, and Letterbox.

The high street chains were in on it too. Many devoted entire shelves to gender politics. And for one glorious week in the summer of 1984, every branch of WH
Smith in the country had in its window the word FEMINIST. It was Feminist Book Week.

So what had brought this on, this sudden conversion to feminism in the book trade?

A situation about which Eileen Fairweather wrote in *Cosmopolitan* in 1984 “The catchphrase at the Frankfurt Book Fair was that the only two growth areas in the industry were floppy disks and feminism.”

And about which *The Bookseller* carried a cartoon showing a surprised looking male publisher from an outfit called Token Books, exclaiming, “suddenly they’re selling like hot cakes.”

What had brought it on? Firstly and most obviously, it was a triumph of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Feminists and our friends are thinking people, which often means people who read and buy books. Gender politics were in the air. People wanted to talk about them and read about them, in factual books, in fiction, in polemic and political theory, in poetry and drama. Feminism was part of the zeitgeist in the 1980s. Hence the huge increase in demand for feminist books.

And hence the Feminist Book Fair, Book Week and subsequent Feminist Book Fortnights which continued throughout the 80s and into the 90s.

So was this a genuinely radical movement, or was it just capitalism spotting a gap in the market and muscling in?

It was both. Here’s what Lilian Mohin – founder of the radical lesbian press Onlywomen – told me when I interviewed her for *Everywoman* magazine in 1990.

It’s a terrific promotion for us. We were feminist publishers long before there was a Feminist Book Fortnight, and our raison d’être has always been ideological rather than commercial. The Feminist Book Fortnight is a commercial book trade promotion. But I am very conscious that we need commerce to survive, and to publish the more radical politics that we espouse.\^{ix}
Carole Spedding, one of the Feminist Book Fortnight (FBF) organisers, told me that sometimes, when organising events in libraries, she was asked by librarians to tone down the name of the event to “Women’s book fortnight” in order to reassure senior management that it was safe to participate.

I encountered a similar attitude. As a writer participating in FBF in the mid-80s, I was once invited to speak at something called a Women’s Activity Day.

The organisers explained that they didn’t want to use the word “feminist” as it was too scary for what they called ordinary women. “Ordinary women don’t like extreme, aggressive feminists,” they told me, “so we decided to invite you instead.” I didn’t know whether to be flattered or offended.

So if the feminism of the 70s was about saying what we want, and the feminism of the 80s was about Conservative women and feminists stealing each other’s clothes, what about the 90s?

A lot of it was about making it work, which is the title of a book by Sue Innes, first published in 1995. The full title is Making It Work: Women, Change and Challenge in the 90s.

It’s a big book in every sense – its purpose was to survey what had and had not been achieved for and by women in the previous 30-odd years.

I’ve been re-reading it in preparation for today, and Sue’s voice comes through loud and clear.

I should say her many voices.

Sue was a journalist and she used her journalistic skills to track down the facts and go to the top.

She was a scholar, and she used her scholarly skills to interrogate the facts, to set them in context, to check and verify.
She was a feminist who knew what questions to ask when dealing with gender politics.
At least, she did some of the time. We were friends, but we had our disagreements.
Here’s one example.

In Chapter 2, she described how an interview with Harriet Harman, then Shadow Minister for Education, was cut short because a message arrived from the school of one of Harman’s children, saying that the child was ill.
Despite the inconvenience to Sue, who had travelled a long way for this interview, and who had her own childcare arrangements to deal with, Sue wrote:

I could only sympathise because it had happened to me. For the first time in the history of government in Britain someone who has personally experienced the conflicts that more than quarter of the workforce also faces, is in a position to influence, and likely to be in a position to make, employment policy. At a time when more mothers with young children are employed than (probably) at any time this century, it is extremely apposite – and itself a marker of change.

I agreed, but I wished that Sue had asked about the role of fathers. Did Harriet Harman’s partner, who was at the time a senior official of a trade union, also get called away from his work to attend to the children?
If yes, fair enough.
If no – if childcare is acknowledged as being the responsibility of the mother rather than the father, even when that mother is a Shadow Minister, surely we have surrendered before we start.
This was an ongoing debate between me and Sue. I told her about something that had happened in a women’s writing course that I was teaching. There was a crèche but it was full so a student turned up with a three-year-old child. The child was mobile, noisy, charming – and a major distraction from the work of the class. I suggested to the woman that in future weeks the child could be left with his father.
“That’s not possible,” said the woman. “His father is at work.”

I pointed out that I too was at work, teaching the class, and all the students were working hard at their writing, or trying to. One student said that for her the class represented a hard-earned break from childcare, and she would not have enrolled if she had known that there would be children in the classroom.

The woman with the child withdrew from the class.

When I told Sue about this, she made it clear that she didn’t agree with the way I had handled the situation.

She agreed that fathers should, in theory, do equal childcare with mothers. But she thought that we had to face the fact that most of them don’t.

She felt that it was my responsibility, as a feminist teaching an explicitly women’s course, to find a way of accommodating this woman’s childcare needs – even though this might have involved distracting me from my work, and the students from theirs, in order that the child’s father should not be distracted from his.

It’s a debate I remember whenever I see childcare presented – as it still often is – as an issue for employed mothers, rather than for mothers and fathers equally.

Sue’s book is still relevant. With its testimony from mothers on benefits and media stars, shopping queues and the money markets, it’s a book that blurs the false distinctions that are sometimes made between the personal and the political, between the scholarly and the anecdotal, between testimony and chit-chat and networking and gossip and history.

And her conclusion?

The clue is in the title – Making It Work - and in Sue’s disconcertingly optimistic final paragraph.

I say “disconcertingly” because, unlike her but like everyone here, I know now what lay in wait for Sue: her illness and early death.

We also know about some of the things that lay in wait for the world in the early part of the 21st century. But she didn’t know these things when she wrote this:

About three-quarters of the way through writing this book I realised that what the women I’d talked to had in common was that they are making it work. It was as true of women living ‘ordinary’ lives at home with young children or as carers trapped in their homes but not in their ideas, as it was of women on the
public stages of media, the arts, politics. They are making it work, with creativity and imagination and commitment, with perseverance and humour and strength. If we go on doing so, we will make a better world for everyone.

Workable feminism. It doesn’t have all the answers, but it knows what to do with the answers it has. It knows to call things by their names. Refuse to accept things the way they are. Refuse to choose between options when we want both. Or all. Aim high. Enjoy. All those things. Well, let’s hope so, but in the meantime the 90s became the Noughties.

In the 60s we had had the problem with no name.
In the 70s, we said what we wanted.
In the 80s, some of us stole some of the Tories’ clothes – and some of them stole ours.
In the 90s, Sue Innes and others urged us to make it work.
What about the Noughties? Did they bring with them another feminism to add to the list?
Perhaps not a new one. But they added to the urgency and complexity of themes that had been there all along.

The destruction of New York’s Twin Towers by Al Qaeda suicide bombers in 2001 didn’t just herald the so-called war on terror.
It led to the realisation – among those of us who perhaps had not fully realised it before – that some adherents of the patriarchal Islamic religion were murderously opposed to anyone who did not see things their way.
This forced feminists and other progressive thinkers to ask ourselves the question which side are we on?
At first glance the answer seems simple enough. If we define terrorism as random attacks on civilians, intended to kill, injure, disable and terrify, why would any progressive or humane thinker support that?

But some on the left took the line that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. The attack on the Twin Towers was seen as an attack on the imperialism (financial, cultural and military) of the USA, and its allies. In some quarters it was defended and supported as such.

But “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” only goes so far. What if my enemy’s enemy bears a strong resemblance to our worst nightmares of patriarchy on the march? What if my so-called friend is an abductor, oppressor, killer and torturer of women, an opponent of women’s personal autonomy, of women’s education? What if the enemy of my enemy is open about its ambition to establish a worldwide caliphate based on patriarchal religion, compulsory heterosexuality and male control? Whose side are we on then?

One of the features of the feminism of the Noughties was the way secularist feminism took these issues on.

In 2003, Women Against Fundamentalism, along with millions of other women and men, marched against the so-called “war on terror”, which, they said in their leaflet, “is unleashing state terror on populations and communities.”

But the leaflet goes on to state specifically that in this case “the enemy of my enemy is not my friend.”

“While condemning the war on terror which is fuelling anti-Muslim racism and criminalisation of certain Muslims,” the leaflet said, “we oppose the fundamentalists in the USA, in Iraq and across the world, who are using the opportunity to promote reactionary, violent, discriminatory and divisive politics under the banner of religion.”

The leaflet identifies fundamentalism as “modern political movements which use the imposition of one supposedly ‘authentic’ version of a religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control... at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women’s minds and bodies.”

These are complex and troubling issues, made no easier by the apparent enthusiasm with which some women – including those who identify as feminists - embrace patriarchal religion and religious practices. Self-defined Muslim feminist Zainab bint Younus says this:
To me, niqab is a very feminist statement. By covering my face, by obscuring my physical features from those around me, I am saying: “I alone own my body, and you have no right to me.” My words, my actions, and my mind take precedence over my body, and no one can coerce me otherwise. Wearing niqab does not erase me from society. Rather, it gives me the freedom to engage in it on my own terms, without being bound by others’ demands.

That sort of thing takes me straight back to the 70s when Susie and I and others like us saw it as part of our feminism to dress exactly as we pleased. We heard all the jokes and sneers and criticisms about dungarees and burning bras, Doc Martins and hairy legs, but we stuck to the principle that what we wore and how we looked were our business and no-one else’s.

I’m not saying it’s the same. It isn’t. Feminist styles of dress were not, in the 70s or at any other time, dictated by religion, or imposed by men. And although they might sometimes have been about camouflaging the shape of our bodies in order to discourage predatory male attention, they did not involve hiding our faces, making ourselves anonymous.

But the feminist defiance - “I alone own my body, and you have no right to me” – is familiar.

We’re coming close to our finishing time, so let’s sum up some aspects of the feminisms of the last five decades.

In the 60s we had the problem with no name.

In the 70s, some feminists were brave enough to start naming names, and saying what we wanted.

One of the things we wanted was equal opportunities. In the 80s, one woman achieved the equal opportunity to be prime minister.

She turned out to be not quite what we had in mind.

But maybe we learned a few things from her, and maybe some women in her party learned from us.

In the 90s we found more ways of making feminism work.
In the noughties, the work got harder, with the resurgence of patriarchal religion, resistance to it, and woman-hating on both sides.

What have we got now?

We’ve got a woman prime minister who, while running for office, had it said about her that she wasn’t suitable because she had no children.

Public opinion on all sides rose up in anger against this example of ignorance and prejudice against women’s individual lifestyles, and she got the job.

We’ve got a woman first minister of Scotland, and an out-lesbian as leader of the Scottish Conservative Party.

Please let’s not fall into the trap of claiming that since these women may sometimes do and say things that we disagree with, their appointments don’t count as feminist gains.

Women get things wrong sometimes. It’s allowed. I would rather have a clear path open to the top for those women who want to get there, even if I don’t always like what they do when they are there.
What else have we got, here, now, in the second decade of the 21st century? We’ve got radical critiques of gender itself, promoting more flexible thinking and openness, and respect for the human rights of all. Though I still haven’t heard an answer to the question posed by a friend of mine: “If ‘woman’ is not a fixed category, what does it mean to have a women’s liberation movement?”

We’ve got equal marriage so that people in same-sex relationships can avoid paying inheritance tax on the same basis as mixed couples have been able to.

We’ve got a Women’s Equality Party And we’ve got Maria Miller, Conservative Chair of the Women & Equalities Select Committee, pointing out that the gender pay gap will never close until women’s education includes motivating and encouraging girls to go for well-paid senior positions, and until men take equal responsibility for domesticity.

Anyone would think she was one of us.

I began my talk today by listing some of the gender-based injustices that were commonplace at the time when I first became a feminist. The things which appear to have been forgotten about by people who say nothing has changed.

Things have changed. Every one of the practices I listed - from overt sex discrimination in employment, to rape in marriage - is now illegal.

(I’m not saying they don’t happen. I’m saying that if they do happen, there are legal remedies, which there often weren’t in the past because no-one in power saw anything wrong with them.)

These are all huge steps forward. Some of them would have been beyond our wildest dreams in the early 1970s, when even a very modest Sex Discrimination Act was again and again rejected by the House of Commons – not through voting, which would at least have been democratic, but though filibustering and male laughter.

I’m not saying that all our problems are solved.

I’m not speaking in the spirit of a character in my novel Closing whose attitude is ‘the battle is over now, and women have won.’

It isn’t and we haven’t.

The gender pay gap is still with us, fuelled by unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities in the home.

Male violence against women continues.

The sexual abuse of children continues.
The internet, for all its benefits, has brought dangers undreamed of a few decades ago – of cyber bullying, of financial abuse and loss of privacy, and of woman-hating pornography beaming into our homes, brought there sometimes by the men we live with, or even by young children.

But we have won some things. I've set out to outline some of them today.

Feminism has not always been very good at patting itself on the back, but sometimes I think we should.

We should look at our gains and, return to the title of the book written by Sue Innes, whom it has been my privilege to commemorate this afternoon. Let's go on making it work.

This is an edited and slightly expanded version of the Sue Innes Memorial Lecture given by Zoë Fairbairns on September 9th 2016 at the Women's History Scotland annual conference.

Tayside Women’s Liberation Newsletter, Summer 1978

For more on this, see *Saying What We Want: Women’s Demands in the Feminist Seventies and Now* by Zoe Fairbairns and others. Available here


Sarah Browne: *A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism*

Both quotations are from Beatrix Campbell: *Iron Ladies – Why do Women Vote Tory?* (Virago 1987) pp 126 and 129

Zoe Fairbairns: “It’s a feminist fortnight” in *Everywoman* magazine, June 1990

Sue Innes: *Making It Work* Chatto & Windus 1995 p 42


Zainab Bint Younus: *For Me, Niqab is a Feminist Statement*

For more on this, go to Women’s Equality Party