

International Women's Day 2024: The Contradictions of Modern Feminism: The Triumph of Machine Politics Over Feminism. John Pilger

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In 1963, a senior Australian government official, A.R. Taysom, deliberated on the wisdom of deploying women as trade representatives. "Such an appointee would not stay young and attractive forever [because] a spinster lady can, and very often does, turn into something of a battleaxe with the passing years [whereas] a man usually mellows."

On International Women's Day 2012, such primitive views are worth recalling; but what has happened to modern feminism? Why is it so bereft of its political, indeed socialist roots that any woman who "achieves" within an immoral system is to be admired? Take the rise of Julia Gillard as Australia's first female prime minister, so celebrated by leading feminists such as writer Anne Summers and Germaine Greer. Both are unstinting in their applause of Gillard, the "remarkable woman" who on 27 February saw off a challenge from Kevin Rudd, the former Labor prime minister she deposed in a secretive, essentially macho backroom coup in 2010.

On 3 March, Greer wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that she "fell in love with" the "matter-of-fact" Gillard long ago. Omitting entirely Gillard's politics, she asked, "What's not to like? That she's a woman, that's what. An unmarried, middle-aged woman in power - any man's and many women's nightmare".

That Gillard might be a nightmare to the Aboriginal women, men and children whom this quintessential machine politician has abused and blamed for their impoverishment, while implementing punitive and racist measures against their communities in defiance of international law, is apparently not relevant. That Gillard might be a nightmare to refugees detained behind razor wire, children included, in places that are "a huge generator of mental illness", according to Australia's ombudsman, is of no interest.

That Gillard has pledged to keep Australian soldiers in Afghanistan indefinitely and that the overwhelming majority of those killed or wounded has happened during her period as prime minister, is beside the point. Gillard's feminist distinction, perversely, is her removal of gender discrimination in combat roles in the Australian army. Thanks to her, women are now liberated to kill Afghans and others who offer no threat to Australia, just like their comrades in "hunter-killer" units currently accused of massacring civilians. In ending the "cultural and other taboos that have kept women from combat roles in the past", wrote Summers, Gillard has ensured that "Australia will again lead the world in a major reform".

The devotion of this new “feminist icon” to imperial war is impressive, if strange. Referring to the dispatch of Australian colonial troops to Sudan in 1885 to avenge a popular uprising against the British, she described the forgotten farce as “not only a test of wartime courage, but a test of character that has helped define our nation and create the sense of who we are”. Invariably flanked by flags, she makes her point well.

And the point is that celebration of this kind of politician, regardless of gender, has nothing to do with feminism. On the contrary, it is complicity in some of the wickedest crimes of our age. It was Margaret Thatcher who ordered the sinking of the *Belgrano*, with the loss of 323 young Argentinean conscripts, and rejoiced. It was the outspoken British feminist MP Harriet Harman, along with other Labour feminists known as “Blair’s Babes”, who supported the invasion of Iraq and stood cheering one of its principal war criminals.

In the west, “glass ceilings” remain the issue-of-choice of bourgeois feminism. How many women who “make it” in politics speak out against the machine, reaching down to women left behind? How many resist the addiction of vanity to power and the media? How many use their platforms, to analyse and expose the psychopathic militarism and its industries of death and lies that contaminate our political, cultural and media life and are the source of so much violence against women in stricken, faraway countries, if not against women at home? Who spoke out against Julia Gillard’s junket to Israel in the wake of the massacre of 1400 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, and her unctuous support for their killers? Where in the coverage of politics are the principled voices of women such as Medea Benjamin, Arundhati Roy and the bravehearts of the Rawa women in Afghanistan?

Hillary Clinton was applauded by famous feminists for her support for the west’s invasion of Afghanistan to “liberate women from the Taliban”. No matter that this was never the reason; no matter that tens of thousands were killed and maimed as a consequence. In her 2008 campaign for the White House, Clinton, supported by feminists such as Anne Summers, boasted that she was prepared to “annihilate” Iran.

Here in Australia familiar distractions apply: the same insidious corporate PR aimed mostly at women and the young that says personal identity is the limit of politics; the same organised forgetting of people’s history and any notion of class and our servitude to an undemocratic elite.

Yet, Australian feminism has an especially proud past. With New Zealanders, Australian women led the world in winning the vote. During the slaughter of the first world war, Australian women mounted a uniquely successful campaign against a vote for conscription. A poster declared illegal in several states was headed “The Blood Vote” and showed a defiant woman placing her vote in the ballot-box rather than, “that I doomed a man to death”.

On polling day all but one of Australia’s political leaders urged a “yes” vote. They lost. A majority followed the women. Such is true feminism.

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