The Women and Labour History Conference was held at Sydney's Macquarie University in May 1978. More than 60 papers were presented on the themes — The Experience of Work; Australian Feminism; The Politics of Sexuality; Popular Culture; Religion and Methodology.

Here, seven of the 2,000 participants discuss their impressions of the conference. The group includes communist party and non-communist party women. They are: Rosemary Pringle, Lesley Lynch, Sue Wills (non-communist party) and Eva Bacon, Pat Ranald, Carmel Shute, Joyce Stevens (CPA).

R: It was the best women's conference I've been to - but I don't think we should be too self-congratulatory about it because it was very clearly a beginning rather than any sort of a triumph. It was good because it was non-sectarian in ways that previous conferences have not been — instead of setting ourselves up to defend positions we were, for the first time, trying to come to terms with the present crisis and we were looking largely to historical material to do that. In a hesitant way we were trying to talk about real problems. It was both exciting and depressing to feel that the women's
movement is still so fucked, that we've got a hell of a lot to do to organise politically. Some were still thinking in terms of individual actions and that the women's movement or a conference is the place to discuss what they were doing, rather than a place where the movement itself could get politically organised. But the frustration was that, at times, we almost started to jump the hurdle to get to that stage, to start talking about organisation.

L: I think it was the most interesting part of the conference, and a lot of that had to do with the historical nature of it; also the interesting tensions in the structure of it as people tried to cope with what has been variously described as 1,000 or 2,000 people over the three days. That sometimes worked, it was never a disaster and it sometimes worked quite well.

P: I'd like to take up the point about was it a women's movement conference. Rosemary was saying that it almost got to the point of being a conference of the women's movement to discuss the political organisation of the women's movement. I think the reason it didn't get there was because it was trying to do both things. It was trying to be both a conference at which academic historians could discuss their work on women's history and also a conference about ordinary women talking about their experiences in a non-academic sense.

Because it was both these things, there were conflicts and the biggest conflict and contradiction still there is between people doing that kind of theoretical and academic work and activists or non-academic women. But what impressed me about the conference was that, even though those conflicts are still there, we've got further in tackling that kind of dichotomy between theory and practice and the dichotomy between intellectuals and activists and non-intellectuals than in other left movements that I've been involved with. I don't know of any other conference where you'd have so many non-academic people giving papers about their own experiences and such an attempt as was made by academics to speak plainly so that they could be understood by non-academics, even though people still complained about this problem. That's the direction in which we should be working — a situation in which everyone's an activist and a theorist, and I think that in the women's movement we're getting there, although we've still got a long way to go — people still aren't conscious enough about it.

R: It was impressive that there was a lot less theory bashing this time, and the occasions when there was a bit of theory bashing or academic bashing, it was totally justified by confused presentation of papers, particularly in the Problems of Feminism session.

J: One of the reasons why that happened was because the conference didn't attempt to separate off theoreticians from activists. If you structure a conference that's deliberately pointed towards theory, many activists select themselves off; they stay away because they don't see themselves as theoreticians and they don't see that they can take part in that process. I thought it was very interesting how women who obviously hadn't thought very much at all about a large number of the questions that people were writing papers and developing theory about became so involved in the process of developing and putting to a test those ideas. In that respect, too, it was non-sectarian. That was an important feature of the conference — it had breadth and yet the politics were quite radical.

C: That was the most important thing about the conference. It did bring together the theorists and what some people call the practitioners, and that was the real strength of the conference and we've all gained from that. There were some women in Melbourne who were really worried that the conference wasn't going to be academic enough and we had a debate about this and someone suggested that the theoreticians ought to be separated out because there wouldn't be enough common ground, and maybe the practitioners would feel oppressed by them. Others argued that there would be some conflict but we could all learn from it.

R: I don't like this distinction between the theorists and the activists.

C: No.

R: One reason it was good was that a lot of the people giving theoretical stuff are activists and were addressing their work to specific problems that they've been facing in the practice of the movement, particularly on unemployment.
C: But I think there's a whole lot of women working on theoretical work to do with women who have never been part of the women's movement. That really struck me at a conference on women's studies in Melbourne two week-ends ago. It really does affect the theoretical work they do and the way they teach women's studies courses.

P: I agree with you — I want to work towards ending that division but I think it's still there, I've particularly noticed it in the ways Carmel talked about it. Women's studies have become very popular and there are a lot of women involved, both from the teaching and learning aspect if you want to divide it up that way, who haven't had much contact with the women's liberation movement. I think the conference was very good for them in that respect because so many of the sessions honed in on bringing the two together. I met several women who told me that they'd never been to a conference before, never been in the women's movement and the conference was really encouraging for them. A lot of conferences aren't like that, they intimidate new people rather than encourage them.

C: For a lot of Melbourne women the conference was a bridging ground to the women's movement. Just being with 1,500 or 2,000 women has allowed them to become part of the women's movement in a non-threatening way and this will affect the way in which they work politically. We have women from Melbourne, say, who have been working in their community setting up day care centres and learning exchanges for women in the suburbs, and for those women particularly I think it has been really important.

S: I have a very distorted vision of the conference — I wasn't in any session for longer than two minutes. (Sue was taking photos of the conference.)

E: Having sat through many conferences in the course of my life, I must say this has been probably the most exciting one and it had some outstanding features. Of course, it wasn't a conference towards action, there were no resolutions taken, which meant that there was no need to polarise thoughts.

Thinking back to the beginning of its organisation it did look like being a very helpful and important exercise in academia. But that there was such a huge response to it proves that it filled a very vital need in the women's movement. I think everybody must have changed in the course of it. From that point of view, it must take the women's movement forward.

If I have any criticism it is that quite often it did get stuck in academic contemplation of the past without any evident endeavour to draw the lessons for today which to me seems to be the importance of history. I think one other very fundamental lesson that has been learnt, or can be learnt by those who want to learn it, is that a conference can be spontaneous and free-flowing and democratic despite the fact that it has a certain structure. The absolute tyranny of structurelessness and endless arguments of what we should discuss and who should talk first was totally absent and the very spirit in which the sessions took place indicated a coming of age. From one who is very close to the age of saying, well, this is it for me, it's a tremendously reassuring thing to have experienced.

S: From the experience of going around to each session, my impression is something similar to yours. The courtesy which people extended to each other in just listening in silence and allowing people to get up from the floor. There weren't, as far as I could see, any bun fights, political or otherwise.

J: Very few, anyhow — there were a couple of places where you got it, but it didn't develop very much and there was a reaction against it, too, whenever it happened.

C: In one way it was a pity the conference grew so big because the sessions were so large, particularly the three that were going on simultaneously in the main theatres. But on the other hand it would have been a pity to split up sometimes because just being together was an enriching experience. You gained a whole lot of strength from being with that huge number of people, and just listening.

J: There were a couple of times when I felt sessions should have broken up. In the first sessions when Carmel and Margaret Power gave their papers, for example. I was trying to follow through the discussion on
unemployment, and the traditional explanations for women's unemployment and that discussion got bogged down in that first session. There was no way to discuss both papers in that large group of people. It wasn't a perfect conference, if there is such a thing.

L: I would like to come in and say that I disagree with Carmel. There is a tension between the desire to sit and glorify all the numbers of people and feel good about it and the cost — a much greater cost — of discussions not being able to get anywhere. I found it particularly frustrating at this conference that we did have the organisational capacity to break those meetings down and the times we did it were just much, much better. People didn't sit there feeling deprived of what was going on in the other three smaller sessions they were missing. I think we've gone a step further. This conference did it better than any other huge conference I've been at, but occasionally it broke down. That is perhaps as close to an ideal structure as you can get. That is, you get your 4-500 people together for about an hour, then they can go off into small sessions for a further hour and a half. In the discussion on Jan Aitken's paper on prostitution the room was packed, people in the aisles, people couldn't even get to the microphones, and you could sense, as Jan sensed, that there was enormous resistance to what she was saying, and then there was confusion about it. But there was no way that Jan's paper could have been properly discussed, nor was Marian Simm's paper on Conservative Feminism in Australia treated in the way it should have been.

R: But Marian was so arrogant in her presentation that she gave all academics a bad name.

L: That paper needed a detailed response that you couldn't make in that structure even if it had been delivered in an accessible fashion.

E: A lot of what was discussed was more or less by chance inasmuch as discussion was confined to what people brought forward in papers. There are some very cardinal points which didn't come forward because the people who have either the pertinent questions or the answers were not those who prepared papers or could physically be there. That brings me to the forty dollar questions, the perennial question of how to reach to the majority of women, the working class women, the uncommitted women, those who will have to change it in the long run, and women in a position to influence important actions. I'm thinking specifically of people like Alice Hughes who is right in the hub of a very important union struggle — and no way could she take the time off to write a paper, or have the physical energy to come to this conference — and there must be lots of others. From that point of view, despite the number of activists there, it was still somewhat removed from many vital centres of action or potential action. But that was unavoidable and does not in any way detract from the phenomenal value of the conference.

C: In Melbourne we made strenuous efforts to reach as wide a number of women as possible. We sent letters to all women's organisations, to all the trade unions and chased up individuals we knew in unions, and publicised the conference through three CR groups. Our group has been meeting since August, and we actually got a large number of trade union women to come to the conference. The Australian Insurance Employees Union sent two reps from the eastern states and representatives from each of the others, the MOA sent two reps, the teachers' unions sent reps, the food preservers — still that's just a drop in the bucket and as we are organising a conference in Melbourne in 1980, we'll make much more effort to get women from the trade unions, and also women in the wider community to be involved. One way you can do this is via the learning exchanges — we've got about a dozen in Melbourne and that's one way to get women from the suburbs involved. However, unfortunately you can't have a conference that will do all your political work for you. It's unreal to expect that a conference can reach all women.

R: I'd like to take up the question of why the women's movement is getting into history — whether it's something that we can call a new history, that's drastically different from the old history. I'd like to suggest that part of the problem is that the new history isn't as drastically different from the old as we're inclined to think, despite our new emphasis on oral history, social history and so on. I'm a bit worried that we find history the most attractive of the disciplines precisely because
it's the least theoretical, the least threatening. Possibly the new history's simply a new version of fact grabbing or will remain that way unless we can inject more theory into it than we've done so far.

L: What do you mean, the new history? Do you just mean new interests in history? That is, that people are going back and looking at women.

R: I think, for instance, that the oral history is really important and I'm sorry I missed that session which I was told was very good. Obviously, we do need to do that sort of work if we're going to have any understanding of the past because we're dealing with the various parts that haven't been adequately recorded. At the same time, there's a real danger of just finding new heroines, for instance, rather than getting into theorising what the past was about.

P: I can see that danger, but probably coming from a politics background in the sense of a university discipline, I've had the opposite sort of frustration. In the area that I've worked there's been a lot of theoretical work done about, say, women and class, and what women's oppression is about, what are the origins of it, with very little empirical exploration of those theories. So, although there is a very strong emphasis on facts and not on theory, in the academic tradition of history, it's good that there are so many concrete studies being done and most of them seem to be informed by a fairly explicit theoretical viewpoint. They're either testing out specific things about feminism or class or the nature of women's oppression, but even if they're not we can still use them for that purpose, question them in that way. It's a good development in terms of political analysis to be looking at the experiences of the women's movement in the past, but I'd agree that you don't want to get stuck in that nor use it as a refuge from the real political problems or the real analytical problems of today.

R: Do you think there were problems in the presentation of the historical papers — that the issues weren't really drawn out very clearly? And of course it's hard to present historical stuff without getting into a wealth of detail immediately.

L: Yes, one of the problems with the history papers was that people weren't able to summarise them. They weren't able to deliver them in a 10-minute synopsis and that said two clear things. It said, on the one hand, that's what history's about — history's full of detail. But it also revealed that people didn't know what they were doing with their papers which is why they couldn't summarise them. So, time after time, you sat there while people who were giving historical papers and had 10 minutes, simply treated that as meaning "I'm going to go real fast through as much of my paper as I can, and when I get near the end of the 10 minutes I'm going to say the last paragraph of it". Now, that's a heritage of empirical history.

P: I don't think it was just that.

L: No, I don't think it was just that, but I think that was one of the things that was happening.

P: I know that the reason why I decided to summarise the content or give an outline of the content of my paper was because I knew people hadn't read it. So if I had simply talked about the theoretical aspects of it, all the questions would have been about 'but what do you base this on', so what I tried to do was give a summary of the historical events.

L: I would except your paper from what I said because you began, if I remember, with quite a coherent statement of what it was about. I know that you were trying to do some empirical work to put into a framework. And I don't think it was that some people didn't know that they only had 10 minutes. I'm saying that with some of those papers even if people had sat down and tried to make a synopsis, they would have found it very difficult. We do have this empirical heritage in history, and it is coming up again and again. So much so that often the new history doesn't mean anything more than people writing about women in the same fashion that they've written all their other history. That's a real danger in the academic women's history that I've encountered.

J: But there was another trend which I think is just as dangerous in that people adopt a political analysis and then try to reconstruct history in a way that simply justifies it. There were a number of papers which I thought did that. Now, I don't mean that you can't use history if it justifies a certain political position, but neither do I think that you can be selective about what you are going to observe in the past as a justification
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R: I thought Lesley was saying that if you don’t have a clear perspective and you get bogged down in empiricism, you’re doing something fairly reactionary.

L: So many of our historians have been trained in this extraordinarily barren empirical method. I was trained as a historian and came out of the Sydney history department completely barren of theory.

As I entered the women’s movement and the political left I’ve had a reaction similar to Joyce from the other side, that is, that the theory I read was so ahistorical that I had to reject much of it. Often, it was nothing other than complicated sets of rules or complicated theories with no historical substance and therefore meant nothing to me. I found my own intellectual position a very difficult one — on the one hand there are political theorists in the women’s movement from the left in general who aren’t historical and therefore are probably quite simply wrong or certainly not to be trusted, and on the other hand, historians who are so simplistic, for example, the Rickard book is so simplistic in its analysis of class, yet it’s the big book because history in Australia has no theory. And we aren’t outside that.

R: The thing that came across most strongly to me was the importance of not seeing theory as a static body of knowledge but something that has to be constantly developed and is developed in the process of attempting to apply it.

C: I agree with Lesley and it’s not just a matter, either, of developing a theoretical perspective that’s been totally lacking in our training, but also the language in which you write. I find that I either write journalistic stuff or academic stuff, but I can’t get a middle ground which is more accessible and it’s very hard, particularly when you have to write theses. You do have to write in a language which is acceptable to academia. One of the problems for historians who write about women is that to prove our point and to get our message accepted we have to be doubly academic, we have to prove everything ten times over, otherwise it won’t get accepted. That danger is very hard to escape and then there’s all the unconscious training going on as you progress through the university and you’re not really aware of it.

L: Actually I think that this is the way into the question of how we use history. Do we look at our history to give us answers for now, or do we look at it for contemplation. The answer is more in terms of a general thing about informing theory. I don’t ever have in my head the question “am I looking at the late 19th century to get answers about now?” — it just seems to me a totally unreal question. I’d come back and say I’m concerned about now but I also have a fear about theory being ahistorical and somewhere there’s a ceiling. But I never ask that question and I’d never try to answer it.

E: I wonder to what extent those of us who are communist party women adopting an historical and dialectical attitude towards our own party. I find it quite hurtful on occasions, particularly as occurred over the weekend, when communist women find it necessary, for what reasons I don’t know, perhaps to prove their own superiority, to talk about our party and communist men in a very destructive way. I don’t think that we need to be protective or stick up for the party, come what may, but the criticism seems based on the assumption that communist men should have always known better, totally forgetting that even those of us who are the keenest feminists lacked any insight or knowledge of sexism and were unable to play our part within the party to overcome sexist practices as they existed. We weren’t able to fight our own battle, so I don’t see why we have to berate men for the very efforts that were made to develop women within the party and as leaders within the women’s movement. Sexist and all as the practices were, I don’t think that any other political party has ever set out to develop women, to have a policy on women, to have women’s committees however faulty and inadequate and so on.

Attempts to make women part of the forces that would change society were always there in the history of our party — that they were inadequate is as much our fault as it was anyone else’s. Very many, myself above all, very happily accepted the role that flowed out of our conditioning, and the broad society. Why should we think that communist men should have been less hung up than the rest of society? It was as much an historic phenomenon as the fault of the men — it was the fault of the whole ideology.
Simplistically, call it stalinism — when we all, even the most rebellious of communist women, sincerely believed that equality would come with socialism. We didn’t see the fight for women, for equality, through feminism.

C: One of the things that struck me was that the most articulate women, particularly among the older women were in fact communist party women or ex-communist party women and where they had got their political training and their ability to speak, etc. was, in fact, in the communist party.

L: Do you mean they were the most articulate women or the most politically articulate women? I would very much query that they were the most articulate — perhaps the most politically articulate — there was a mass of articulate women.

C: Particularly among older women — I thought the number who had been through the communist party was quite stunning.

J: I think that you’ve got to look further than the communist party to see why that was so. For example, Audrey Blake talked about the part that the youth movement played particularly in developing young women, and many women developed through the women’s movement.

I think it’s true that quite often criticism of the communist party is not put into an historical perspective — people judge the CP simply from today’s standards but I don’t quite agree with the way you put it Eva, that women are as much to blame as the men. I think that misses the point of what sexism is and how and why it is reproduced in the CP. Then there are women, including my own mother, who didn’t fit the stereotype and in fact moved outside the constrictions of male dominated leaderships and were pushed out, or into positions that narrowed their ability to fight for a different way of seeing women in the party. I know that didn’t happen to everybody, but the men held the power in the party and the dominant ideology was, and is, patriarchal — that held back feminist struggle or the development of feminist ideas in the party. You say that the victim is as much to blame as the oppressor. When I first came into the party, feminism was a dirty word. When you talked about working class and middle class, which was also a dirty word, one of the things that was said to be identical with middle class was feminism.

That sort of attitude in the party suited men in the leadership and rank and file more than it did the women because it served male privilege. You heard rumbles among the women for instance about how they couldn’t go to meetings because their husbands were always out but there was no way they could come out strongly or change the situation. Sexism is not just wrong ideology, it also comes from male privilege and that did, and still does, exist.

P: I was amazed that so much of the discussion revolved around the communist party. I thing it reflects the role of communist women in the women’s movement and the importance of experiences in the communist party even for women who left it. Partly it was accidental — it just so happened that in all of those sessions some of the women who presented historical material were either communist or ex-communist and the example of the political organisation of women was the communist party. In that sense we got too much of the limelight, because the sort of problems we were discussing really are the problems women have in any political party to some degree. And I agree with what Eva was saying in the sense that about half of those sessions were devoted to people saying, well, my life began when I left the communist party, and how dreadful it all was. And yet there was a contradiction which was expressed by Audrey Blake who got up at the end and said, look, I want to say that while I have all these criticisms, the period that I was in the communist party was one of the most exciting periods of my life, it was when I learnt a whole lot of things and it gave me an education — and that needed to be said. At one point I felt that the party was being put on trial — and I was tempted to say why I joined the party from the women’s movement, because all these women were saying why they left it as if it was still the same, and I don’t think I should have felt that, and I don’t think that session should have been all about the communist Party.

L: This is all quite interesting because I sat through some of those sessions and, yes, I knew that they were communist or ex-communist women, and I knew most of the women who spoke and, yes, come to think of it, the references were to the communist party, but my impression was that it was
totally different. I would have said, off the top of my head — the communist party, no, it wasn’t discussed at those sessions. I think that all you’re doing is reflecting, I guess, how I’d feel if (but I’ve never belonged to an institution like that, I’ve never belonged to a party, so I can’t think of an example off the top of my head), but I think that you’re just all reflecting that your organisation, past or present, came up a few times. And yet I agree with you the thing about the communist women is a different thing, like the catholic women there.

P: I guess what I’m asking is where were the Labor Party women, where were the other ....

C: The Labor Party was mentioned once.

P: I think you’re over-reacting to our over-reaction, because people who weren’t in the party said to me afterwards that the discussion had focussed entirely on the communist party and why are we talking about the communist party in this way.

L: Well, that might have been the session that I missed.

E: Doesn’t this in some way almost prove the point that communist women and the communist party were involved when other parties weren’t.

J: Everybody knows that — it’s what sort of sense you make of what the communist party did. But it is interesting that in those sessions on women in political movements that there was virtually no discussion on the Labor Party.

R: Sue Ryan was in the session on government policy and she was bloody good and my only other experience of the Labor Party being mentioned I felt rather antagonistic towards because they were naively saying, look, we’re here, come and tell us what you want and we’ll do what we can.

L: Yes, it came up during the constitution session in that way.

P: I was talking more in terms of analysis of women’s experiences of the Labor Party.

S: In terms of the papers submitted — were most of the papers in that area by CP women and not ALP women.

C: Yes, and that’s why it came out in the conference. The ALP had been notified and we had women from the ALP State Committee coming along and I thought that the Melbourne Women’s Committee was to do a paper. There was one complaint about a paper from Melbourne ALP women that they said was sent but never arrived.

L: Yes, there were a few papers that went astray.

When Rosemary made her introductory remarks on the conference she pointed out that maybe one of the reasons it was so delightfully free of sectarian upheavals was because it was also singularly free of where are we going to go, of explicit confrontation of the situation at the moment. In fact, the only session that I was in that attempted to pose things to do was the prostitution one and that was where you could just feel the extraordinary division of opinion. So maybe that brings us back to the general question of what the conference was about or does the conference show us the way forward, where to or whatever.

C: That also came out in the problems of feminism session, because, as someone said, we don’t really want to face the problems.

L: But also the notion of what the problems are are radically different. The notion of what the problems were from some people’s points of view were very much at the personal level and they were the priorities and there were other people who saw the lack of theory, that the women’s movement has no coherent broad politics in the old meaning of the word.

P: I think it’s a bit unrealistic to expect that at a conference of that kind you’d be able to draw out those strategic implications and have a political discussion in that sense, but I think that it’s extremely difficult to both look in a worthwhile way at historical experiences and draw out the political implications and have a decent discussion about them in three days. I thought that maybe we’d formulate some questions at this conference for maybe another conference about strategy, and I know that’s a schematic way of looking at it, but I think that I didn’t expect very much. It’s true that inevitably, as soon as we start to discuss strategies, then the differences in approach come out more and some of those are expressed in a sectarian way and some aren’t.
But although the women’s movement does shy away from expressing differences, and at other times expresses them too sectarianly, it’s better than any other left movement that I’ve been in. It’s impossible to have a conference — a political conference — where all the different left tendencies come along — without actually falling into physical fights at times, whereas in the women’s movement it is possible. We have done it, and have had actual discussions on strategy where there was a minimal amount of sectarianism.

L: I agree — I wasn’t opening it up as a criticism of the conference, I was simply reminding us of what the limitations were and what would seem to be one of the prerequisites for that conference to function the way it did. I don’t know whether it’s worth speculating on the difference between this one and the feminism and socialism one, and even the feminism and anarchism one — they were very, very different sorts of conferences.

J: But that was because they were about political strategies.

L: Yes, and the first one, the huge feminism-socialism conference in Melbourne, was an absolute disaster.

R: Although we set up the question, was it a political conference of the women’s movement or a history conference, it seems to me that we’ve got further in starting to talk about political strategies via this sort of conference than the Melbourne one.

C: They’ll get the magic solution.

E: To me the great value of the conference was that there is so much material for us to work on.

R: I would think the important thing for the women’s movement to do is to decide on some priorities, and have some focus. The thing that concerns me is that we’re spread out all over the place and part of the disappointments with conferences is that people do expect that to be the refuge, the source of strength and stimulation for them to go out and fight their own separate battles. Surely what we’ve got to do is to decide the central issues over the next couple of years and focus our energies much more on those — what seems to come out quite clearly are unemployment and child care and the connections between them and working out what sort of strategies could challenge the sexual division of labor.

C: And also abortion — that’s still crucial.

R: I’m not saying we should exclude other things, but as a movement we need much more focus than we’ve got.

Next year is the United Nations Year of the Child — already reaction is using that to get at women. The time is ripe for us to start an alternative campaign in terms of what children need. I was disappointed that we couldn’t even start getting interested in that together.

L: I don’t think a conference of 1500 people is the place to do that if you’re going to have the sort of conference that we had. If you’re going to have a convention with 2,000 people in a hall and super amplification and people getting up the front, well, that’s the sort of place you can play that sort of game, but I don’t think you’d have had 1500 women from the women’s movement there if you’d done that.

J: I think that a women’s movement conference is needed — not next week — but we should work towards a women’s movement conference towards the end of the year.

R: I’d like to see another research oriented conference, where people take up particular aspects, where we have planning meetings and people go off and divide up the work so we have much more concrete stuff to deal with.
J: That’s true — even in terms of women’s health, child care, you name it, and if you start talking about how the women’s movement can go forward you’ve got to start concretely at where we’ve got to, and what we’ve done, how are we working around and where does it go from here; and how does it connect up with the virtual organisational collapse of the women’s liberation movement.

The only other thing that I heard talked about specifically at the conference was the organisation position of the women’s movement. People saying that they felt really isolated and how marvellous the conference is and it’s going to give them a lot of enthusiasm — but they don’t know how they’re going to use it. One woman talked about trying to work with women in her own locality where she’s found that it’s like a long-range ten-year plan of how you even talk to the women in your own street. What does a conference like that mean to that woman in terms of working as a feminist in her own community.

C: This conference has been especially important in bringing together a whole lot of women who are usually not part of the women’s movement. The other thing is a lot of women, us as well as older women, are gradually coming to some recognition of themselves as historical actors — of movers in our society. I think it’s been the most important thing about the conference.

R: I was very concerned that a decision was taken to give the feminist bookshop the complete monopoly on selling things at the conference — that left newspapers, etc. were banned. I wasn’t satisfied with the explanation that was given. It seemed completely unnecessary to ban those sorts of stalls that traditionally appear at conferences of this type. It was a decision taken by the organising collective and I believe ratified very quickly at the introductory session which most people didn’t know took place. I thought that it was a serious political question and was very freaked by people’s unwillingness to even hear out what the Sparts had to say about it. They were booted down and it seemed to be a confusion between a dislike of the Sparts and the underlying issue.

L: I think I was at the meeting that decided this and all I want to say about it is that if we made that decision I think we made a mistake. I thought we made the opposite decision, except that the Feminist Bookshop was going to have a stall, and that anyone else could sell other materials.

J: Outside.

L: I thought anywhere.

J: As I remember there was a ban on people setting up stalls in an area that was provided for people to come to have coffee. The Feminist Bookstall was to be the only group to set up a bookstall, if others wanted to negotiate with the Feminist Bookshop about having publications that were otherwise inaccessible, that they could do so.

L: The Feminist Bookshop just said no.

J: The only other things that could be sold in there were women’s movement publications and they couldn’t set up big tables all over the place, but they could have a chair or a small table. Just from a practical point of view, you couldn’t have had Intervention, the SWP, IS, etc. setting up tables in that area.

R: Are you saying that they were free to set up tables outside?

J: Yes.

L: People claim that they were stopped from setting up outside and stopped from setting up tables. It seems that there was more to it than that the Sparts were thrown out but I don’t think we should make an issue of it — I think that there are things to talk about — you couldn’t possibly talk about them in that last session, it wasn’t that sort of session — the combination of no microphone and Sparts would have been chaos. I think the people down the front did the right thing in getting off that. I agree it was a bit unpleasant, but I’m glad we got off it. But I think we did make a mistake, I think with all the best intentions in the world in terms of space, in retrospect, I’m sorry we made that decision.

R: I was worried about the hysteria when the issue was raised at the final meeting.

L: I think that means nothing at all, people reacted to the Sparts — and a lot didn’t know why people were angry about it — we don’t seem to have the facts, but it will be discussed and I don’t think now we can say much more about it.