BIG VISIONS
AND BUREAUCRATIC
STRAIGHTJACKETS

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The response of the state and its instrumentalities to the demands of radical movements always involves an attempt to co-opt, constrain and thereby contain them. At the stage when political parties and governments develop policies and draft legislation there has already been considerable watering down of those radical demands and a translation of them into the currency of reforms. These policies may or may not be acted upon and the laws selectively enforced, or not at all.

A large part of the development and implementation of government policy and the ways in which government legislation is administered falls to the bureaucracy. And, just as the labour movement has sought to influence industry and government by worker participation in decision making, so the broad women's movement has sought participation in, among other agencies, government and bureaucracy.

While the Women's Liberation part of the women's movement has always been much more wary and ambivalent about direct involvement at the core of government than the WEL part, there has, overall, been a great deal of effort expended in this kind of activity. Some parts of the movement have stayed outside, hammering away, submission writing, protesting and getting only as close as participation on advisory boards. Another part has taken a deep breath and dived in, taking jobs in the bureaucracy in the main in order to try to hold off the processes of containment of the demands of the movement.

Bureaucratic straitjacket

The second route to trying to achieve the goals of the movement is undoubtedly extremely difficult for the individuals who try it and partly because one of the methods of containment is to try to keep individuals, individuals. You only have to look at the short periods of time that Liz Reid, Sarah Dowse and Anne Summers have been able to stay in the various forms that particular jobs have taken.

The pressures of the bureaucracy to conform to its view of the extent to which change is desirable and achievable, to conform to its mode of achieving change, are extraordinarily strong. More often than not, these pressures succeed by a combination of socialisation, overwork, frustration and, probably most importantly of all, isolation from the movement whose goals you sought to further by taking the job in the first place. For those who do not become isolated from their movement, two sets of pressures apply which lead, as one woman has put it, to problems of "balancing credibilities": if you are to be effective in the bureaucracy you have to develop and retain credibility there — and if you succeed in that, you are likely to put in jeopardy your credibility in the movement and become isolated from it.

One aspect of maintaining this credibility is the pressure which requires that skills learnt in the movements be utilised to produce units or projects within the bureaucracy that reflect feminist concerns. The positive aspects of this are often offset by a subsequent lack of concern for maintaining and giving support to the autonomous groups that made it all possible.

Funding, for example, for community projects, is all but non-existent, excepting for some CEP grants. These grants, however, are quite unsuitable for such groups, most of which have no other full-time workers. These circumstances also create very frustrating experiences for those employed under these grants. The imperatives of the bureaucracy, whatever the intentions, tend to take over.

Part of the process of socialisation into the bureaucracy is somewhat paradoxical. From the perspective of the activist outside it demanding to be told what's going on, the slogan "knowledge is power" rings true. Trying to work within the bureaucracy, knowledge can, at times, seem disabling. In an interview with Michelle Grattan of The Age (11.1.86), Anne Summers summed it up:
When you are a student you are not interested in constraints, only in the big visions. When you're involved in the system you become involved in the constraints and you have to work your way around them.

All this is by way of introduction to the question of affirmative action and acknowledgment that the position that femocrats are in is not an easy one, and still to say that I believe that there is scope within legislation — the black letter law — to make some headway, but that it is being put in a bureaucratic straitjacket.

Problems

There are problems with the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Act and its Equal Employment Opportunity provisions. One of the biggest problems is the assumption that no matter what differences there are in the current positions of women, Aboriginal people, the physically disabled and minorities from a large number of different ethnic backgrounds, no matter what differences there are in the historical conditions which have led to these current different positions, no matter the differences in the absolute numbers and proportions of the total population they comprise — no matter these and other differences, the employment problems of all these groups can be solved by the same mechanism. Basically, that mechanism is this — that if you treat everybody as if they were physically able, intellectually unimpaired, white Anglo-Saxon heterosexual males, everything will be fine.

Given those and other problems with the legislation, we've got it and we have to try to use it in whatever ways we can. If you look at Part IXA of the New South Wales Act, which contains the affirmative action provisions, the wording is sufficiently vague for a whole host of things to be done in its name. At the moment, it applies to New South Wales government departments and statutory authorities, universities and colleges of advanced education. What that part of the legislation requires is that those organisations — in order to achieve the purposes of the legislation — have to draw up and implement equal employment opportunity management plans for their own organisations.

The management plan shall include:
- policies and programs and provisions for communicating those throughout the organisation;
- the collection and recording of appropriate information;
- the review of personnel practices and policies within the organisation;
- a statement of goals or targets where these are reasonable;
- statement of the means of evaluation of the programs developed.

Much of what goes on in an organisation can be looked at under these provisions which are minimum not maximum requirements: what is "appropriate information" for example. That can be widely defined, as can the boundaries of any review of personnel practices and policies.

Questioning work values

The review could involved and, I would argue, should involve a systematic analysis of the ways in which the work that women do and the skills which they bring to an organisation are undervalued, and what efforts to shift the balance of values can be made, rather than the development of "strategies" for getting women up the career ladder. It could and should involve a questioning of the values attaching to particular kinds of work behaviour.

For example, I've spent time over the last six months following the job evaluation officers at Macquarie University around while they interviewed members of the general staff about whether or not the work they're doing warrants the position they occupy being upgraded. The job evaluation system does not allow for any element of personal merit and the major criterion for upgrading is whether the responsibilities and duties of the job — not the volume of work done — have increased over time.

The job evaluation officers can't actually articulate how they determine whether responsibilities have increased. One of the criteria being applied is that of supervision of others within a fairly strict hierarchical notion of supervision: and supervision of others is rewarded by upgrading.

One of the sections under review consisted of several women. When two of the more highly graded of them were interviewed, they were asked whether they supervised the others in the day-to-day sense of work allocation, approval of leave and flexitime, and so on. Good heavens, no, we all work it out together, we do the work that has to be done and we just make sure that we're not all away at the same time. No supervision, no upgrading.

Better approach

Now, it seems to me that you can approach the problem which that encompasses in several ways: one way would be to send some of those women off to assertiveness and supervision training courses and have them learn how to behave in an organisationally correct fashion. Another would be to try to change the system of values at work which penalises co-operative work relations rather than rewards them.

The black letter law, the working of the legislation, does not prevent either of these approaches, or others, from being adopted. The bureaucracy that is administering that law pushes for the first option — it's quicker and it leaves the notion of organisational hierarchy not simply intact, but strengthened because some of those who were previously excluded from getting up in it are given a stake in its maintenance.

From the point of view of somebody out in an organisation, my problem is not with the written law (nor yet with the organisation), but with the bureaucracy which is trying to constrain a broad interpretation of the legislation by insisting on uniformity of approach from vastly different sorts of organisations, by an obsession with quantitative over qualitative changes, by an insistence on doing it yesterday (which inevitably means doing it superficially) and doing it their way.