

## **Is the “F Word” Becoming a Bad Word?**

**Laurier Brantford hosts the F Word Forum, a panel discussion about feminism in 2010.**

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The term “feminism” typically conjures up images of the 1960s. Feminists from that era worked in conjunction with the African American civil rights movement. They are often remembered as the angry bra burners who took to the streets for equality. This “second wave” feminism garnered many accomplishments from divorce law to the legalization of abortion in the 1970s. Women today are more represented in business and politics, thanks largely to their feminist sisters of yesteryear.

Due to these notable accomplishments it’s often believed that today we live in an era of “total equality.” Proponents of this worldview simply sight the most salient examples of progress: a black man is president and a women is secretary of state. One can almost see the typical proponent of this worldview shouting "equality has been achieved so go home feminists we don’t need you anymore," at a Tea Party rally on the Washington Mall. Unfortunately, this glib interpretation of our world is becoming increasingly mainstream. In fact feminism has experienced a backlash of sorts in recent years. The religious right has become an increasingly powerful force in American politics and the goal of repealing “Roe V. Wade” (the landmark case that made abortions legal in that country) is rather unsubtly being pursued by numerous Republican heavyweights. Here in Canada, the Conservative government, has made significant cuts to the funding of prominent women’s groups.

However, at least this backlash is being noticed. On November 18 Laurier Brantford hosted the F Word Forum a panel discussion that dealt with today’s brand of feminism and its opponents. The panel which convened in front of some 200 Laurier students featured guests from a variety of disciplines, including: broadcaster Lyla Miklos; WLU Waterloo student and president and CEO of WLU student publications Bryn Ossington; WLU Waterloo assistant professor of women and gender studies Margaret Toye; and Alicia Sayers a student enrolled at Laurier Brantford.

Simply by giving the conference the title of “f word” the growing uncomfortably with feminism was addressed. This vague yet provocative title was intended to highlight our societal discomfort with the term “feminism.”

A discomfort that seems to be echoed by Prime Minister Steven Harper. Under the Harper government 12 out of 16 regional offices of the Status of Women Canada were closed. In addition to closing these centres, the Harper government, changed the way in which NGOs were funded. Now, NGOs that are involved in advocacy or lobbying for law reform cannot be funded by the government. While, this may appear attractive in some instances, this also means that NGOs like women’s shelters are being shut down across the country; even if the “lobbying” performed by groups like these amounts to little more than advocating an end to violence against women.

Panellist Lyla Miklos summarized Harper’s rationale with palpable sarcasm. “We have achieved equality already didn’t you know that?” asked Miklos channelling the prime minister. “Everything is just fine with

you women and there's nothing left to fight for." Miklos was part of a protest in front of the Hamilton city council office. The protest occurred because Hamilton's satellite office of the Status of Women Canada was being closed as a direct result of this new government legislation.

According to feminist advocacy groups shutting down women's shelters isn't the only way the Harper government managed to turn back the clock on feminist achievements. The Conservatives are shooting down another fundamental principle of the feminist movement: pay equity. With no say from Parliament and no consultation with women's organizations, the Harper government rejected recommendations made by a federal task force to implement a "proactive pay equity system."

In the 2009 budget the Conservative government introduced the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. The law, which omitted any assurance of pay equity amongst the sexes, allows the public sector to consider market demand when determining compensation. Feminist groups argue that the language "market demand" is little more than a code word for allowing employers to pay men more. Currently, North American women make 77 cents for every dollar made by their male counterparts. Worse still, this measure was introduced in the 2009 budget, a document that was highly unlikely to be voted down by opposition parties fearful of an election.

Moderator, Professor Kate Rossiter, a professor at Laurier Brantford, alluded to these actions taken by the Conservative government as "one of the reasons for this conference."

Yet even after these increasingly salient examples of a feminist backlash were raised by the panel and talk of the future of feminist discourse was discussed, a disheartening reality was inadvertently raised by panellist Bryn Ossington. Ossington was the lone male panellist and a self described "feminist." However, without any hesitation Ossington candidly admitted that he doesn't feel comfortable discussing feminism with his own family. "When I'm out with my dad I don't want to have that debate," Ossington said. "I don't want to embarrass my dad in public." At no point during Ossington's unfortunate admission did the other panellists point out his clear and present hypocrisy. Here was an actual panellist present at a forum meant to demystify feminism and espouse its virtues, yet he cannot even discuss the emancipation of women with his own family. Furthermore when exactly did equality become something that would "embarrass your dad"?

This is the real challenge that today's brand of feminism faces. In 1968 it was perfectly acceptable for males to openly ridicule feminist ideals. In 2010, males that support of feminist ideals are afraid to admit it. When coupled with the grave misconception that we live in a world of "total equality," those males who remain quiet might as well be nailing up the boards on women's shelters themselves.