

Friend or Betтина Arndt

When the time came for men to be heard, little did we know that a woman's voice — Bettina Arndt's — would be leading the rallying cries for a fair go for blokes. Is Bettina for the men's movement what J. S. Mill was for the fledgling women's movement? Or is her back-peddalling brand of social inquiry merely a good marketing tool, asks Tracey Young.

Undoubtedly, the rise and rise of feminisms has made gender politics a hell of a lot more interesting than the blinkered black and white version predominant for centuries.

The complexity of the enquiry opened up by feminism is posing vexing questions for women and men alike: sociologically, politically, culturally. Curiously, it is the cause of masculinity and the current masculine identity crisis prompted by feminism which Arndt has taken up as her cause célèbre.

Arndt began her career in the early 1970s in Sydney, when, as Clyde Packer suggested, "...Australia was terribly repressed. In the sense of mores, it was a second-class provincial Irish bog".¹ *Forum* was the vehicle for her no-nonsense approach to issues of sexuality — here was a woman not afraid to call a clitoris a clitoris. Fresh out of university, with a Master's thesis

examining masturbation as a means for women to overcome orgasmic problems, Arndt was appointed consultant editor and therapist at the magazine's sex clinic. In a meteoric rise to the ranks of celebrity, she became a well-known radio and television personality. So controversial was she that in 1973, the Broadcasting Control Board banned her from live radio and television work, judging her frank discussion of sexual problems to be "totally unsuitable for broadcasting" and offensive to some segments of the audience.²

At its peak in the late seventies, *Forum* attracted a readership of 38-39,000.³ In 1981, the magazine was revamped to boost flagging circulation figures, and its title changed to *Issue*.

The Australian Journal of Lifestyles and Relations: The journal closed in mid 1982 amid debts and falling readership. People wanted more than matter-of-fact discussion about sex — and the proliferation of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan* provided the titillation the repressed Australian public wanted to pay for. The demise of the journal was lamented by the popular press, but *Issue*... simply couldn't compete with the glut of publications crowding the niche originally filled by *Forum*.

Said Arndt at the time, "People had to be serious about sex to want to read us. We tried to answer people's questions, but we were never particularly titillating."⁴

Then the greed-is-good, me-decade hit. The corporate excesses of the 1980s provided fertile ground for the rise of the New Right and



CARTOON BY BILL LEAK

saw the advent of AIDS and moral conservatism. The morality of the decade was personified by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, economic rationalism prevailed and yuppies and power dressing went hand in hand. And suddenly, selected people started issuing retractions — "I had it all wrong!" — and in rethinking their politics they shrewdly extended the longevity of their public life. Civil libertarians such as Richard Neville claimed society had gone too far, feminists such as Betty Friedan issued revisionist texts saying women were too confrontational, and the woman at the helm of the sexual revolution, Germaine Greer, recanted the ideology of sexual freedom and instead, "championed arranged marriages, chastity and the chador".⁵ Arndt was also not immune to similarly inspired backlash retractions.

With the dexterity of a Madonna-like virgin/whore quick change, she metamorphosed from a ground-breaking social commentator to an apologist for the vagaries of patriarchy.

With a cool head and media polish she turned fiery tirades against women's independence into measured pseudo-scientific critiques of the tyranny of emasculation, and in so doing, made backlash politics palatable for public consumption.

Her treatises on the increasingly powerless position of men in society have appeared recently in that most conservative of outlets, *The Australian*, under such titles as:

- 'The Fallacy of Male Dominance' 7/12/91. This article asserts that women are setting the agenda in the private realm and dismantled patriarchy.

- 'Why Boys Will Be Boys' 27/6/92. Mothers are demonised and given sole responsibility for perpetuation of the sexual division of labour.

- 'When No Means Maybe' 7/8/93. The politics of consensual sex. She tells us that sometimes women really do ask for it.

Arndt's trademark of gender detente is lynchpinned by the politics of blame. "Women," according to Arndt, "have taken control of men's personal lives and are determining how they act as fathers, husbands and lovers" — and if that's not enough — "...from adolescence onwards, men are forced to grovel for sexual favours and, again and again, deal with the possibility of being rejected".⁶

Life really is tough at the top.

Suddenly, women had come too far, too soon. They'd learned how to orgasm, they'd realised they could be financially independent and they'd found a voice with which to express dissatisfaction with their relationships, their sex lives and their workplaces. And frankly, men were just a wee bit, well, uncertain about where they were supposed to fit in the scheme of things.

And who could blame them?

Reminism is about changing the order of things, it's about unlearning entrenched exploitative behaviours, it's asking questions about

equality not only before the law, but in the workplace, in the street, in the bedroom and at the dinner table.

For Arndt, these questions are not really there to be answered — they are rooted in the rhetoric she has finely honed as her brand of adversarial justice, designating victims (always, without exception, men) and generously appointing blame (various configurations of feminism, academia, and that convenient catch-all of 'the politically correct'). Genuine exchange is not the object, and her outcome precludes the possibility of dialogue between the sexes.

In doing so she walks to the drum-beat of the New Right and the "pro-family semantics trap".⁷ In her article 'Men Under Siege'⁸ she writes "anyone who promotes the importance of fathers in children's lives, who dares to suggest there is something wrong with women raising children on their own, is met by a howl of protest."

In this international year of the family "the importance of the family", according to prominent social commentator Richard Glover, is a statement being logged once every 12 seconds.⁹ Indeed, as Glover points out, conservatives have now decided it is Very, Very Important for fathers to be involved in child-rearing.

Of course, both Bettina Arndt and they didn't think it was Very, Very important 20 years ago when the women's movement first suggested the idea. But whenever the conversation turns to single mothers and women divorcing their husbands, they find they believe it Very strongly indeed.¹⁰

From progressive libertine to sophisticated reactionary, Arndt has moved with the times and used her revisionism as a clever marketing tool. Legitimised by the mainstream media she has become one of the presentable faces of post-1970s conservatism. In her tell-it-like-it-is style, she paints an all-too-grim scenario of the state of play between the sexes and the changes brought by feminism. ■

1 Hope, D. 'Bettina Arndt: Of Human Bondage', *Good Weekend* 2 Horwitz, T. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Bettina Arndt', 24/8/85

3 O'Shea, K. *Australian Financial Review*. 'There's more to life than sex according to Forum staffers' 23/10/81.

4 Chidiac, C. *Sunday Telegraph*, 'Swansong for a Sex Expert', 18/7/82

5 Faludi, S. Backlash: *The Undeclared War Against Women*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1991.

6 Backhouse, M. *The Age* 'It's time for men to be heard, says Arndt', 4/12/91

7 Faludi, S. *ibid.* p. 358

8 Arndt, B. *The Australian*, 22/5/93

This piece well and truly oured her conservative connections and was based on a paper given at the right-wing think-tank, the Sydney Institute.

9 Glover, R. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 'Family Law or Love?' 19/3/94

10 *ibid.*