LEADING THE MOVEMENT

FIONA MACTAGGART

Plenary Speech

28th January 2019, **LONDON**

"When Shaks gave the challenge of sharing the lessons for women leaders today of women who have helped to change the world in the past, I was up for the challenge. Too many models of leadership are male. I wanted to reflect on whether women do it differently, and how can we use the lessons of the past to make an impact on the world today where women are still unequal.

We may have the vote, but fewer than 1 in 3 MPs are women. We may have the right to work, but despite equal pay legislation being introduced more than 50 years ago, women at the median are paid less 18.4% less than men. Every political party is committed to see equality, yet in some respects, the condition of women is going backwards. For example, despite the fact that more women have the confidence to report rape, with a 15% increase in police reports, the number of prosecutions for rape last year actually fell by 21% to a 10-year low.

There are positive developments. When I first stood for election 21 years ago, there were more MPs called John than women in Parliament. Now, women are only outnumbered 2:1. We have a declared feminist in the Royal family, we are on the second British woman Prime Minister and while only 37% of people describe themselves as feminist when they are reminded what feminism means: someone who advocates and supports equal opportunities for women. Most women and 49% of men are happy to describe themselves that way.

I was an active young feminist during the second wave of the women's liberation movement. I vividly remember Jo Richardson, the MP for Barking, who used to come along to almost all events. But when I was elected to Parliament 20 years ago, most of the young women I met tended to think that the struggle against discrimination was old hat and irrelevant to their lives; they weren't going to be victims of discrimination.

That changed. Today there is a growing enthusiasm for equality campaigns. Social media has democratised feminist activism, opening up participation to anyone with a Twitter account a desire to fight the patriarchy. It has led to campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls, when the girls of Chibok were kidnapped, and the hundreds of thousands of responses to #EverydaySexism and #MeToo of rape threats, body-shaming slurs, sexual assault and more crimes against women. The centenary year of the first women getting the right to vote celebrated women's leadership, from the campaign for a woman's statue in Westminster square to the Women's March London. This year, at the rather smaller Women's March, I talked to two young women who have just relaunched the South London Fawcett Society. Following a speech to their meeting from a representative of BPAS[1], they had drafted a letter calling for a buffer zone to protect women seeking abortion from praising protesters showing photographs of mangled foetuses. I encouraged them to send it to the council, and they were thrilled when, within days, the local Cabinet Member invited them to meet to discuss their plans. New to campaigning, they had assumed it would be much harder to get anywhere. I know that they won't stop now.

As an MP in 2015 I helped to bring into being the Women and Equalities select committee, a national echo of committees in local government which had been mocked in the national media 40 years earlier. By 2015 I even felt a bit like an echo of Jo when I encountered gatherings of young feminists campaigning on these issues.

So the enthusiasm for organisation of and by women can change in a relatively short time and to be honest I can identify no single lesson about women's leadership from past movements, every movement of women has been diverse in its approach. Even in the struggle for votes there was great difference between the quasi military approach of Emmeline Pankhurst who led her suffragettes into violent actions against the state and the steady research and polodding on of Millicent Fawcett, who first collected signature for the right of women to vote at the age of 19 and continued to build organisations for women's suffrage and lead campaigns until she finally saw equal voting rights in 1928 when she was 82. It's fantastic example of persistence which is an important quality in a leader.

Lots of people know about the differences between the suffragists and the suffragettes, in fact most of the time they worked together, jointly organising the first big public demonstration, which became known as the mud march because of the terrible weather. Any organisation of women needs to make the most of its allies, forging strong relationships and working together. The default response of the patriarchy is to depict women's organisations as eccentric or extreme and it is by joining together we can demonstrate that our demands are actually mainstream.

[1] British Pregnancy Advisory Service.

The campaigners for votes for women and women's liberation shared the most important characteristic required by an effective leader, which is to have faith in your beliefs. Strong commitment to the cause motivates others to commit. All these movements, suffragism, suffragettes, women's liberation were certain that the cause they were working for was right and true and their commitment was a big part of what attracted others to the cause. That commitment accompanied a clear vision of what they aim to achieve. Successful leaders need the skill to communicate their vision simply. The slogan was votes for women, not fair votes, or equal franchise. The logo of the 2nd wave women's liberation movement was the symbol for woman with a fist in it: a powerful but simple way to communicate that the ambition of the movement was to assert, then express and use the power of women.

The women's liberation movement started with 4 demands: equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand and free 24 hour nurseries, Its conference added financial and legal independence and a woman's right to define her sexuality. It wasn't until 1978 that freedom from male violence was added as a specific demand. I suspect that is because in the 70s the extent of male violence towards women wasn't talked about, it was the era of police treating violence in the home as 'just a domestic' and not prosecuting this criminal behaviour. But a large part of the power of women's movement has been based on naming the things that are not publicly named and talked about.

Janet Hadly in Micheline Wandors book about second wave feminism wrote

"they put into words things that made you say to yourself that's what I have always thought and felt and I've never been able to put my finger on it".

Feminist writings of that era surprised many women with this recognition of shared experiences.

This was a face of the new feminist belief the personal is political. And now in the days of new media: it's easier to campaign using real experience: Laura Bates set up the everyday sexism website with no backing or big publicity machine, when she realised that she didn't call out the petty harassments she faced as she went about her daily life/ Within a very short space of time thousands of women had used the platform to describe their own experiences, which did a lot to reveal how common these actions are in women's lives.

Laura faced a relentless backlash from men threatening her with rape, but she remains optimistic, another important characteristic of leader.

"In five years, I have learned that the problem is immense, but the will to fight it is greater still"

she says. Ironically, the women's liberation movement deliberately eschewed the concept of leadership. Their mission was to raise the consciousness of women to liberate themselves, working collaboratively in local groups. With no obvious leader there was no official representative. As a result, mavericks like Germaine Greer became spokespeople because the media need to identify a voice. The lesson from that is plan your communication, don't assume that just because you are doing good, all that will come across. If you are not available and ready, someone else who is probably younger, prettier and more media savvy will occupy the space you have made.

But the message of women's liberation – that by working together we can become more powerful – did have some very positive effects. While there was not a single clear national voice, women locally collaborated felt empowered and able to speak up. They made posters and pamphlets, organised locally based campaigns which resulted in setting up childcare centres, or refuges which more often than not were organised and run by the women themselves.

Local women's centres were set up providing services to women who needed a safe space not dominated by men. Some of these still exist, but may lose out to bigger organisations who can wrangle government grants yet whose services are less sensitive to the needs of women. It's led to housing associations running regues which can only be accessed from 9 to 5, and recently a justice minister wrote to the members of parliament for Brighton expecting to be praised for his investment in a women's centre there. They were furious because the existing women's centre had not received the money, but a generic support organisation had.

The message I take from this is that women-led organisations need to merge so that they can work at scale to compete with bigger voluntary organisations which are at the front of the queue for government resources. There is a fear that merger may dilute the authenticity and local connection, but well organised and respectfully led mergers would not make this inevitably and would put us in a better position to compete for resources. It's a challenge for women leaders in the voluntary sector.

The statue of Millicent Fawcett in Westminster Square shows her holding a banner

"COURAGE CALLS TO COURAGE EVERYWHERE".

And courage is an important quality of a leader. Women's movements have always had to be brave because they consistently challenge the status quo. The women who picketed the miss world pageant in the 60s, the South Asian women, led by Jayaben Desai, on strike at the Grunwick photo processing factory in the 1970s or even today Mary Beard when she speaks out about women's rights all face hostile abuse, name calling, threats and sometimes actual violence. It's striking that the MPs who face most abuse are connected by gender more than opinion. While Millicent as a suffragist rather than a suffragette grew critical of violent tactics adopted by the suffragettes when they turned to arson and violence, she admired the courage of those who were imprisoned after peaceful protests. And they were brave.

Lady Constance Lytton was imprisoned for suffragette activities in 1909, but she was treated as an aristocrat, kept in the first division of prisons and when her health was checked, they found a heart defect and she was released. She felt this was unfair so she disguised herself as a working woman was jailed again, in the third division with no health checks and force fed 8 times. Her health was permanently damaged and she died young in 1923.

Good leaders have to be prepared to make hard choices, preferably not risking their health but in most leadership roles it means trying things which seem impossible, taking a risk, being willing to be unpopular.

This example illustrates another important characteristic of all the movements of women. It's a refusal to allow the status quo to determine the momentum of what you will do. The first suffragists started at a time when women did not generally have access to education, they couldn't go to university, they didn't even have a right to their children, that was their husbands.

But they refused to allow these restrictions to limit their ambition, and it was not long before they had achieved change in all these arenas. I felt that about 20 years ago there was a growing sense that women had achieved most of what they were going to and that it wasn't possible to reset the clock. Well it was, and it's good to see a new sense of the importance of feminism today.

The suffragettes were not originally as effective as they eventually became. The involvement of Mr and Mrs Pethick Lawrence were key to providing sound organisation. He brought in money and logistical planning and she organised volunteers and edited a regular newsletter. It's an important reminder that however talented a leader is, you need to get your organisation working well, do the research to make sure that you are on top of detail and have the systems in place to deliver your ambition.

And the Pethick Laurences helped with Branding: Most of us can recognised the suffragette colours of violet green and white, there are not many brands which have lasted for over 120 years. Emmeline Pethick-Laurence, wrote,

'Purple as everyone knows is the royal colour, it stands for the royal blood that flows in the veins of every suffragette, the instinct of freedom and dignity...white stands for purity in private and public life... green is the colour of hope and the emblem of spring.'

They also stood for Give (green) Women (white) Votes (violet).

One aspect of the militant campaign which I regard as an especially valuable lesson for those of you leading organisations which use volunteers is the wonderful way in which the volunteer suffragettes were acknowledged and thanked. Women effectively volunteered for prison which usually involved forced feeding if they went on hunger strike. On their release they would be met by a carriage full of fellow campaigners. I read that one Scottish suffragette was met by colleagues all dressed in Tartan. They were then given a special breakfast, a commemorative medal and a special brooch.These volunteers didn't just get a perfunctory thank you it was a real celebration and valuable memento of their struggle. It's an example of a particularly important aspect of leadership.

VALUE YOUR PEOPLE, THEY ARE WHAT WILL DELIVER SUCCESS.

But did violent tactics produce equal franchise? In fact they did not. The final trigger for women's votes was the First World War. It was not just that during the war women had men's jobs, but that because so many men had been overseas fighting there was a need to amend voting registration or the fighting men would have been disenfranchised. The campaigns that had raged before the war, which meant that almost every year there was a petition or a private members bill before Parliament as well as the dramatic and sometimes violent campaign techniques meant that the reform would have to include women. And in some ways this was also an example for almost anyone who aspires to lead a campaign - be an opportunist. To exclude women, who during the war had shown their ability to step up, would have been unpopular and seen as unfair.

The blurb for this talk promised I would answer the question of how to build the women's movement of tomorrow, and I haven't. I think it is not possible or sensible for one person to produce a blueprint. The lessons from the past tell me our enthusiasm for a fair society in which women and men have equal rights and respect is key. We need to have the courage of our foremothers and we need to collaborate more effectively.

Perhaps this event can help women who lead in voluntary organisations to take these steps thereafter we can reach out to others who aren't here, academics and groups like women running the WasPi pensions campaign to think about how we can brand and build a new women's movement. There's lots left to do: 2 women are murdered each week, usually by men they have loved, local authorities in which women members are outnumbered 2 to 1 have stopped focusing on the specific needs of women, women on our television screens are almost always younger and more beautiful than the men. Do you all think you could do something to change these inequalities and all the others that still affect women today? Let's talk about how in the sessions today.

”

Fiona Mactaggart

Leading The Movement

28th January 2019, London

rosa COMIC RELIEF Esmée Fairbairn FOUNDATION The Pilgrim Trust