

A bequest of painstaking passion

A DEAR FRIEND and colleague, Gail Kelly, died about 18 months ago. I am off to the United States and Canada on a lecture tour in a couple of weeks' time, the main purpose of which is to give an inaugural memorial lecture in her honour. I feel deeply honoured and, at the same time, rather in trepidation of the event, given the sad circumstances.

Gail's bequest to us is awesome indeed. She was a superb academic with an enormous, breathtaking array of scholarship. Her interests and publications range from the theory and practice of comparative education through detailed empirical investigations of education in Vietnam, elsewhere in South-East Asia and several countries in Africa including Zaire and Nigeria, to studies of US education policy and to her specific feminist perspective on women's education.

She was not only an assiduous and careful researcher in these diverse issues of comparative education, but also an academic leader in such areas of scholarship: president of the Comparative and International Education Society, chair of her department, a prolific editor of books and a board member of several international academic journals.

I have been reflecting on how to do justice to this scholarly legacy in one comparatively short lecture. Clearly, it is simply impossible to convey anything more than a flavour of a sadly curtailed lifetime's passionate endeavour. For the hallmarks of Gail's work are passion



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and commitment to socialism and feminism in equal measure. All of her studies were devoted to pinpointing social injustice and discrimination and yet also trying to detail appropriate remedies in carefully measured terms.

In the latter years of her relatively short life, Gail became an impassioned critic of American education policy and its trends away from social justice and equity. She carefully documented these trends in a series of essays, and together with other colleagues at the State University of New York in Buffalo, compiled a number of edited volumes of criticism, as well as regularly editing an international journal, *Educational Policy*.

She was in the process of putting together one such collection of essays,

to which I was a contributor, when she died. *Emergent Issues in Education* locates the changes in American education policy in a broad, international economic and political context. It points to the particular political trends towards free market economies and their effects on education, among other public and social policies. Gail herself contributed an essay on trends in women's schooling throughout the world, illustrating the contradiction between women's greater involvement at all levels of the education system and their continued limited and relatively poor levels of paid employment. She argued that this contradiction could be accounted for, at the very least, by governments' lack of interest in dealing with how women's family responsibilities limit their working lives. In some cases, especially those with a right-wing political administration, governments deliberately restrict women's access to paid work.

Gail's essays are carefully crafted scholarly investigations from a socialist-feminist perspective. During the summer, I have been trying to locate her scholarship in a broader perspective. Her arguments can be endorsed by more polemical and less academic accounts. Susan Faludi, for instance in *Backlash: the undeclared war against American women* has written an even more impassioned feminist critique, from a journalistic point of view, of how the US government, among other agencies and groups on the right, has deliberately sought to restrict women's

occupational involvement and equal opportunities.

Faludi reviews the ways in which a variety of New Right groups and individuals – from politicians to academics to media, film and religious personalities – in the 1980s began to develop arguments and strategies against women's opportunities and involvements in public, social and economic life. Her evidence ranges over a variety of different groups. It includes not only men who have reasserted the centrality of sexual difference to social and economic organisation but also key right-wing women, especially those in religious organisations.

Unfortunately, Faludi's understanding of the breadth of feminist theories and academic scholarship is limited. She asserts that a number of scholars, who would consider themselves to be feminists, have contributed to the "backlash". She fails to identify the subtleties in the theories of sexual difference developed by such scholars as Carol Gilligan, or those with socialist feminist leanings, such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett. It was these rather more sophisticated theories with which Gail was trying to grapple at the time of her death.

I recently came across a strong feminist account of the "backlash" in Britain, particularly as it applies to women's education which also confirms the changing and negative political context for feminist scholarship. Jane Miller's essay "More has meant women: the feminisation of schooling", in *The Lon-*

don File from the University of London Institute of Education, a provocative paper in which Miller argues that, because the majority of state education and virtually all schooling for young children, public or private, in both Britain and America is provided by women, criticisms of education practice and education reforms constitute veiled attacks on women as educators.

In particular, Miller points to what she calls "paranoid sexism" or "paroxysms of defensive suspicion of women" in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period in which a woman was dominant as political leader. She adds that this has led to a frenzy of revision and legislation as a response to the feminisation of education. But it has been a covert rather than overt attack.

Miller's speculative essay includes a review of the history of education in the United States by way of comparison and contrast with Britain. It, too, serves as a timely confirmation of the kinds of arguments that Gail was at pains to develop. Despite the apparent increases in opportunities for women's involvements in education and economic life, women's actual lives remain sharply differentiated from those of men.

Women, on the whole, remain confined to poor jobs, poor homes, poor lives and on the occasions when they do not, governments – especially on the right – seek to reverse the tide. Gail was at the forefront of feminist academics struggling valiantly, but thus far vainly, for social justice.