

The Faux Neutrality of Decriminalisation

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I keep waiting for the overwhelming evidence of why full, unadulterated decriminalisation will 'solve' all of the problems implicit in prostitution. Other than the 'evidence' that a small minority of very loud, politicised prostitutes, pimps and punters want it. Notwithstanding, the general head scratching fantasticality of wanting to deal with a problem by enabling it to expand. But I am being obtuse here, aren't I?

Because as a parliamentary hearing of [Brooke Magnanti and Paris Lees demonstrated](#), the proponents of this hell-bent mission, have no desire to eradicate the problems implicit in prostitution. They are quite happy for it to expand. And why wouldn't they? As Lees herself states, quite without humility, it helped her forge a media career! Stop the presses radical feminists!! Prostitution is a good route to getting on Question Time!! What Ho! Magnanti of course, also managed to exploit a small window of opportunity wherein public prurience met with the genesis of the Internet, to squelch her prostitutional experience into a fairly generic beach read for bored housewives. They are, of course, very representative of the blubbery yolk of the industry. I kid you not.

But they are journalists and former prostitutes so I have no real snub with them getting to air their views on what the legal status of prostitution should be in this country. Although I take [Julie Bindel's](#) point that just having been a prostitute once, or now, or in the future, does not necessarily mean that you will be able to come up with the best legislation that will benefit society in the long term. As opposed to just what you think best suits your individual needs, wants, interests, vision of yourself and so forth. Indeed, if anything, the fact that you are in some ways, emotionally involved in something, is as much a hamper to reaching anything like an objective reality, as it is a benefit, vis-à-vis your personal requirements. What would happen if you asked most 19th female victims of spousal battery, what laws they think should be in place in relation to their victimhood? One

wonders.

But the sex-workers' movement also hinges on an ideological conviction — the belief that the criminal law should not be used here as an instrument of punishment or shame, because sex work isn't inherently immoral or demeaning
Emily Bazelon, NYT Magazine

What frustrates me, however, is the way in which the pro industry debate manipulatively tries to hinge its arguments from a faux position of neutrality, or transcendental amorality. Like as though they were fucking Buddhists. As though you can even be a political Buddhist. [Or politically neutral.](#)

But in her much [cited recent article, which only thinly veils its lack of neutrality, even Emily Bazelon](#) had to admit that the sex worker's 'rights' movement is ideological and moral in its bent. That full decriminalisation and its sister blister the 'Rights Not Rescue' movement, has much more to do with believing that prostitution is an acceptable form of commodification, and that the burgeoning industrialisation of women-for-sale is a perfectly acceptable offshoot of contemporary hyper-capitalism. Where it will lead, what will the long term consequences will be, who knows? Who cares! There are people's self images at stake for goodness sake!

Of course when talking to Joanne Public they tend to shift their focus onto 'safety' debates, arguing that decriminalisation will save prostitutes from rape and murder and such. In this they depend on Joanne's lack of interest in the industries workings or the purported evidence that they brandish to support their claims. [Note: it hasn't actually stopped the murders.](#)

In Bindel's article, she cites a government report to demonstrate that little has materially been changed as a result of decriminalisation. And it, funnily enough, isn't just her who is suggesting that. As Bazelon goes on to say, "To Amnesty, the lesson is that decriminalization isn't like flipping a switch — it takes time for attitudes to shift. There are signs that this has begun: In the 2008 New Zealand survey, 40 percent of sex workers also said they felt a sense of camaraderie and belonging, suggesting that their

relationships with one another may provide an antidote to stigma.”
40 percent??! 40 percent??! That isn't even a majority! That is all you've achieved since 2003? And the rest of all of it's marvelousness is just around the corner, and we are supposed to wait in faith? Run down the gravel path with you in this strange and potentially dangerous social experiment? And what about the other 60 percent, while we are at it?

But the key here is the word 'stigma'. Or 'taboo'. Why does camaraderie alter wider social values on prostitution? Is there a causality there? Note again: when I was working in illegal brothels in this country (UK) I got a strong sense of sisterhood amongst some my hooker peers. Some women hated each other and were emotionally trammelled by the inherent competition of prostitution, and others of us bunged together for support. It didn't alter, either way, what outsiders thought of us.

Now, I don't have time here to historicise on the long story of the misogyny that catapults women who have sex into social pariah-dom, or why it is the case that the women who sleep with married men get the blame. It is long, it is endemic, it is built into the very soft furnishings of our society. Flipping your decriminalisation switch will not alter the taboo of women who sell sex. It may alter the taboo of men who buy it, as men's sexualities are taken as a given and women's are, at best, an afterthought. Not that prostitution is an expression of female sexuality, and that is entirely the point. The taboo surrounding men who buy sex is paper thin and arrived out of feminism; prior to that, Victorian mores considered the women themselves as the problem, the social ill, the sirens luring helpless male sailors onto the rocks. It goes deep into our social psyche and ennobling the sex industry will not change that.

Misogynistic punters will still go on to hate the women they pay to fuck, the wives of husbands who do this will still blame the prostitutes for destroying their marriages and religious conservatives will still see prostitutes as an infliction upon the earth. If you think you are going to change that via decriminalisation, you are fecklessly and recklessly naïve. And you deserve as much scrutiny for your egocentricity and your blind faith in decriminalisation, as anyone else. Hooker, or not.