

CONFERENCE REPORT

The FPA debate 2011: do we live in a sexualised society?

The audience gathered for this year's Family Planning Association Debate, held at the University of Westminster, London, UK on 15 September 2011, might have been forgiven for thinking that the answer to the title question was obvious. Yes, of course we live in a sexualised society. Done, dusted, let's go home.

The event itself, however, proved much more far-reaching – and fascinating – than that knee-jerk reaction. The host, Matthew Wright, whose TV presenter title belied his facilitation skills, guided us through a maze of issues surrounding the question – not only whether the correct answer is 'Yes' but also whether, if so, that is a problem.

Sadly, *Times* columnist David Aaronovitch was absent through illness. So we began with Feeon Attwood, Professor of Sex, Communications and Culture at Sheffield Hallam University, who skilfully argued that much of the evidence of sexualisation is anecdotal and unproven, not to mention sensationalised to such a degree that it is impossible to tell whether the reality is harmful or innocent.

Feeon was followed by Kathryn Hoyle, founder and MD of Sh! Women's Emporium, who tracked sex through the

centuries to point out that the seemingly prudish Victorian era was – with its high rates of prostitution and low rates of sexual health – arguably as sexualised as our own age and much less resourced to cope.

So far, and not too many horrified gasps. Enter, however, Dr Julia Long, writer and feminist activist, whose focus on the current rise of pornography turned the tide in a more harrowing and pessimistic direction. The rise in misogynistic and violent pornography, which she graphically illustrated by citing the increase in female porn stars who now need medical treatment after filming, surely shows, she suggested, that our current sexualised society is toxic.

Initial presentations over, Matthew Wright questioned each speaker in turn on a variety of issues. "What action on this issue", he asked Feeon, "would she ask of Number 10 Downing Street?" Answer: "Please listen to those people whose voices are never heard". "How does British sexualisation compare", he asked Kathryn, "with other countries?" Answer: (which may surprise Journal readers) "We are more progressive in our attitudes". "Will there", Matthew asked Julia, "be a backlash against sexualisation?" Answer: "If so, then it is likely to impact on women's freedoms as much as on those guilty of harm".

The final section of the debate was an open floor for the audience. The questions flew thick and fast.

The sexualisation of adult-child relationships were argued to be good for protecting against child abusers, bad for discouraging innocent displays of affection particularly from men. The presence of lads' mags in WH-Smith raised the issue of whether, if men can have their masturbatory aids on sale, why the store does not also sell vibrators. Finally, from your intrepid columnist, a challenge of whether the panel still feel that sex is a "good thing" brought forth two 'Yeses' and one guarded 'Maybe'.

The FPA debate has for the past several years been a highlight of the annual calendar; this one was no exception. We were stimulated, challenged, and most of all inspired. What more can one ask of an event?

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