

The relationship between liberal and feminist ideology has historically been a complex one. This introduction to this special issue of the *Journal*, by **Elizabeth Evans**, will consider the peaks and troughs of the relationship and assess to what extent the aims and objectives of feminism and liberalism are intertwined or mutually exclusive. While thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill have inspired generations of Liberal campaigners for the equal treatment of men and women, the party's position on the suffrage issue at the beginning of the twentieth century was often problematic. While modern Liberal Democrat manifestos do show a degree of commitment to women's issues, a failure to secure the election of more women MPs ensures that the party's commitment to feminist objectives remains uncertain.

CAN LIBERALISM EVER BE

EARLY FEMINIST ideas on extending the rights of men to women, set forth by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), were adopted and championed by a number of leading Liberals who argued that the refusal to accord women the same basic rights of equality and liberty was tyrannical.¹ J. S. Mill's detailed and important work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), provided a critical appraisal of women's oppression, applying the principles of justice, liberty and the right to choose to the condition of women's lives. However, liberalism and feminism have, at times, been diametrically opposed: for example in the early twentieth century the Liberals were divided on the issue of suffrage, leading many liberal feminists to desert the party to concentrate efforts on the newly formed Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). More recently, the use of equality guarantees or quotas to increase the number of women MPs has highlighted divisions in opinion

between the party and feminist organisations such as the Fawcett Society. This article will firstly consider some of the key areas of tension between feminism and liberalism before moving on to a chronological analysis of the extent to which Liberalism in practice can claim to be feminist.

It is important to deconstruct the terms 'liberalism' and 'feminism' in order to provide a more concise understanding of their distinct ideological approaches, thereby allowing us to identify shared ground or potential for hostility. Most commentators identify two distinct waves of feminism: first-wave feminism, typically contained within the period 1830–1920, is grounded in a classical liberal-rights perspective with women's enfranchisement and civil rights at the core of its agenda, while second-wave feminism emerged during the 1960s and relied heavily upon informal grassroots women's organisations. First-wave feminism concentrated on overturning legal obstacles to equality, and, following Mill's

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philosophy, liberal feminists campaigned for access to property ownership and the right to vote. What is evident is the disconnect between practical changes to legislation that would improve women's lives and a more strategic approach to challenging the underlying gendered norms and values of society. This is best exemplified by the fact that many liberal feminists saw no connection between legal equality and the need for wider societal social and cultural equality. Essentially their main objective was to secure equality and liberty within existing societal structures, and personal oppression within the family was not considered. The period between the end of first-wave feminism and the start of second-wave feminism, roughly from the 1920s to the 1960s, is generally considered to be a period of relative inactivity for feminists, which correlates neatly with the decline in the fortunes of the Liberal Party.

Second-wave feminists, such as Betty Friedan in *The Feminine*

Mystique (1963), focused their efforts on highlighting the more unseen elements of discrimination – challenging sexist stereotypes and created gendered identities. Taking as their starting point the failure of first-wave feminism to address the role of women in society, women were encouraged to believe that they could be more than just housewives. There was a convergence between the personal and the political which resulted in increased attention towards legislation surrounding issues such as divorce and abortion. The practical objectives of feminism and liberalism were once again in harmony, with David Steel, the former Liberal Leader, at the forefront of the campaign for women's rights to access abortion. In 1967, registered practitioners, and the free provision of medical aid for abortion through the NHS, were key components of his successful Private Member's Bill regulating abortion.

Current forms of feminism focus on the pluralistic nature of feminism, constructing it as

a multilayered ideology. Theorists write of 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism', and the recognition of this plurality is crucial.² During the 1970s the women's liberation movement underwent internal divisions as a result of accusations from non-white, non-middle-class women that the movement was only concerned with securing equality for a certain type of woman.³ This led to a widening of the feminist approach so as to incorporate views as wide ranging as black, eco, cyber and power feminism, all of which provide different perspectives on the feminist agenda. Despite the diverse number of feminist theories, we can assume that the underlying philosophy running through most contemporary feminist thought is the desire to eradicate the discrimination against women by challenging hegemonic patriarchy within society. This patriarchy manifests itself through cultural, institutional and structural discrimination that places women at a disadvantage in relation to

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male citizens. In some respects it is easier to define feminism by what it is against rather than trying to pull together the varying strands of feminist thought into a more detailed definition.

This negative definition of feminism is at odds with the idea of liberalism, which Conrad Russell described as a 'hurrah word', thereby signifying his interpretation of the philosophy as setting out a positive agenda for change.⁴ However, ambiguity and complexity of meaning are by no means absent from liberalism, especially in its twenty-first-century context. Just as we would distinguish between the different feminist approaches, so it is also necessary to consider the differing views within liberalism. Those who traditionally favour a social liberal approach, as espoused by Hobhouse, Keynes, Beveridge and Rawls, recognise the value and role that the state can play in bringing about social change and tackling inequality;⁵ whereas economic liberals, influenced more by the pre-New-Liberal Gladstonian tradition, set out their views in *The Orange Book* and see a more limited role for the state in changing society.⁶ They tend to favour greater private sector intervention in the delivery of public services.

These two approaches at times seem to present quite a dramatic divergence of opinion, although, as David Howarth argues, it would be simplistic to present these approaches as warring factions and the two beliefs do not prohibit convergence of opinion on much of the contemporary Liberal Democrat policy platform.⁷ J. S. Mill's focus on equality, freedom and what we now call civil liberties is what drives much of the thinking behind twentieth-century and contemporary liberal thinking, and it is these core themes that this article will take as the base understanding of liberalism. This principle is articulated neatly in the opening preamble

to the Constitution of the Liberal Democrats which states that the party 'exists to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.'⁸

Perhaps of most interest when considering the relationship between feminism and liberalism is the tension within the party over the importance of equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity.⁹ Whilst feminism in general emphasises the importance of equality of opportunity, it is equality of outcome that is now the more significant feature of feminist writing, particularly in support of direct intervention to increase the number of women MPs through all-women shortlists (AWS).¹⁰ Gender equality and freedom from discrimination is now a core part of the social justice agenda espoused by all three political parties.¹¹ Because this equality of opportunity has now become part of a common-sense rhetoric, evident in speeches given by party leaders, surrounding women's numerical representation in Parliament, feminist attention is now firmly directed towards equality of outcomes, and this is where liberalism and feminism part company.

This divergence has occurred because many feminists believe an equality of opportunity approach is not sufficiently radical to overcome the institutional sexism within political parties which currently helps prevent greater numbers of women from being selected, particularly in winnable seats.¹² The Liberal Democrats' refusal to introduce AWS for the selection of their parliamentary candidates has resulted in criticism from women's pressure groups such as the Fawcett Society.¹³ The philosophy behind much of the opposition to AWS was

grounded in liberalism's commitment to equality of opportunity and the idea that the 'best' candidate should be selected regardless of gender. Additionally, many women in the party have highlighted the patronising nature of positive discrimination and the importance of avoiding tokenism.¹⁴

A commitment to meritocracy in the selection of parliamentary candidates led to the establishment of the party-funded Gender Balance Task Force (now Campaign for Gender Balance, CGB) which has the remit of encouraging, supporting and training potential women candidates. Yet whilst the majority of Liberal Democrats view positive action and discrimination as a curtailment of the freedom of the individual, as highlighted in the 2001 conference decision not to adopt AWS, many feminists argue that this is the only way to ensure parity of representation, and so criticise the incremental liberal approach.

The criticisms leveled at liberalism by feminism are that the former fails to properly consider women as a group, albeit a diverse one, and as such the liberal approach to equality overlaps with non-feminist analysis of social life, couched within a commitment to equality for all. Despite legislative successes brought about through the introduction of legal reforms to improve opportunities for women, most notably in education and employment, the existence of liberal feminism as part of the initial foundations of feminist theory has to some extent become redundant. To be sure, liberal feminism is distinct from Marxist and radical feminism, with their emphasis on power relations and sexual politics, but for a contemporary understanding of feminism the inclusion of a distinct liberal strand requires a far-reaching definition of feminism that could prove to be of limited political use. Those

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more comfortable with the discourse and ideas of liberal feminism have embraced the social justice agenda and the discourse of diversity with a firm emphasis on equality of opportunity and a belief in meritocracy based upon an existing system.

Away from the contentious issue of positive discrimination for the selection of parliamentary candidates, the basic contemporary values of feminism and liberalism clearly chime. On the broader themes of equality, such as women's right to vote, to be educated, and to work for equal pay, liberalism and feminism are in accord. However, within Western twenty-first-century politics these are ideas that are matters of consensus rather than controversial feminist demands, and none of the mainstream political ideologies would be at odds with feminism on such issues. In order to analyse this relationship more closely we need to look beyond a simplistic understanding of equality to assess to what extent liberalism is a champion of gender equality.

Part of the criticism levelled at liberalism by feminists has been that whilst they claim to consider men and women equal, several liberal philosophers have used essentialist language and ideas. For example, Mill describes women as intuitive, which signifies an element of reductivist biologism in his thoughts on women, and plays into the construction of a romanticised notion of womanhood.¹⁵ Of course it is important to consider the historical context when analysing nineteenth-century texts, and Mill's work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) highlights an early and progressive discussion within liberalism on the need to improve the quality of women's lives. Considering the need for changes to legislation and societal attitudes towards women Mill called for a 'morality of justice' and the creation of an equal society between

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men and women.¹⁶ Mill's work is the only substantial text within liberalism which seeks to provide a philosophical discussion about the inequality between the sexes. However, in arguing that women should receive equal treatment to men, it is suggesting that the assumed male norms governing society should also be applied to women, an area of significant contention within feminism.

Although not perhaps writing with gender in mind, the importance of equality or equal rights is emphasised by Rawls, who writes, 'each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others'.¹⁷ Feminists would argue that if the rules and laws governing a society have been created by men, then women will never be able to take an equal part because of the inherent cultural and institutional bias against both women and femininity that exist within the fabric of society. Feminism not only stresses the importance of difference between women, but also the differences between men and women which have to be taken into account when considering how a truly fair and equal society could be created. Tinkering with legislation will not be enough to create equality between the sexes because men have created the basis of a liberal, free and fair society. Rather, what is needed is a more fundamental revolution in the way in which society and culture operate in order to allow men and women *together* to create the rules governing their society, free from existing gender stereotypes.

Feminist critics have also argued that the liberal emphasis on the individual is too cerebral and that the division of society into public and private compounds the idea that public space is codified as male, and the private home as female. As Valerie Bryson observes, 'Male values and interests are also said to be

behind liberalism's traditional distinction between public and private life and its insistence that the latter cannot be a matter of political concern'.¹⁸ By viewing the private sphere as a distinct space free from state intervention, the traditional liberal view essentially isolates women and women's issues from the public agenda, reinforcing cultural traditions surrounding women's roles within society and the sexual division of labour. However, thinkers within the Liberal Democrats have recently begun to grapple with the need for the party to provide detailed policies regarding the family, and to debate the role that the state can play in safeguarding childhood.¹⁹ Whilst this goes some way to allaying feminist concerns vis-à-vis liberalism's unwillingness to interfere too heavily in the private sphere, a feminist liberal approach must be willing positively to embrace the idea that intervention is crucial in improving the lives of children, and helping the poorest and most vulnerable women in society.

Looking in further detail at the trajectory of liberal thought and activity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can see that, on the question of suffrage, feminists and the majority of liberals were clearly divided, leading many to join the newly formed Labour Party. Whilst the issue of suffrage was of significant importance, it is also vital to acknowledge that during this period issues of Home Rule and splits over leadership were also key to the decline of the Liberals. So what evidence is there for any commitment to feminism on behalf of the party? Indeed, is it possible to find such a consensus within a philosophy which values the individual over a sense of collective identity?

Whilst feminism certainly finds fault with certain aspects of liberal ideology, looking at liberalism in practice may provide

us with examples of where the two agendas have both clashed and dovetailed. The narrative of the suffrage movement is irrevocably bound to the Liberal government and its subsequent demise. As early as 1902 the Liberal MP Herbert Samuel wrote in his work *Liberalism* that the arguments in favour of women's suffrage were part of a powerful backdrop regarding citizenship. Despite the patronising assumption that women had less responsibility than men, Samuel highlights that having the vote will engender citizenship and a feeling of self-worth amongst women, 'despite their lives being narrower than those of men, and their responsibilities less, all the greater is their need of the stimulus of citizenship and the larger advantage they would derive from it.'²⁰ However, he lacked the confidence to come out in favour of women's suffrage, and his conclusion states that, whilst opinion is so bitterly divided about the issue within the Liberal Party, it can 'neither be denied discussion in its counsels nor find a place in its immediate programme.'²¹ This reticent attitude towards women's suffrage is symptomatic of the Liberal Party's hesitant approach to what would be one of the most important political issues of the early twentieth century. When the Liberal W. H. Dickinson introduced his Bill to enfranchise unmarried women householders, Campbell-Bannerman said that the government would give it no time and that he could not support it because it would only enfranchise 'well-to-do single women' and not impact upon working-class men and women. The Bill was eventually talked out.

In his work on women's movements in Britain, Martin Pugh notes that Liberal politicians had often championed women's causes. This connection was briefly reborn in 1918, when prominent Liberals campaigned on equal pay.

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However, following this brief period most radicals switched to Labour and the party failed to capitalise on the issue.²² Pugh considers two different categories of women involved in the party. Firstly there were leading feminists such as Margaret Wintringham and Margery Corbett Ashby, and secondly, there were party loyalists with deep family connections in the party such as Violet Bonham Carter and Megan Lloyd George, who showed no obvious sign of interest in women's issues. Pugh credits Wintringham's success to the fact that she was a feminist who 'epitomised the WI image of the motherly woman' and was thus able to champion women's causes and break down prejudices surrounding women's involvement in politics.²³ The existence of feminists in the Liberal Party at this point was crucial to the party's ability to attract feminist voters and campaigners.

The 1942 publication of the Beveridge Report marked a dramatic shift in social reform, and his commitment to improving the lives of the poorest citizens, particularly through the provision of family allowances and widow's pensions, explicitly recognised the fact that women were disproportionately disadvantaged by the system.²⁴ Beveridge undoubtedly made a conscious decision to redress many of the gendered economic inequalities evident within society, arguing that married women should be entitled to economic support from their husbands, as he viewed women's unpaid role within the home as crucial. Whilst many women welcomed the proposals in the scheme, the Women's Freedom League was critical of the support the plan gave to the dominant view of women's dependent status, a view taken up again by second-wave feminists in the 1970s. However it would be unfair to suggest that Beveridge had willingly attempted

to maintain women's position within society, he was aware of the drudgery of housework and his scheme was a significant move forward in terms of provision for women in society.

Whilst Beveridge is important as regards an analysis of the substantive Liberal and Liberal Democrat commitment to women's issues, a feminist appraisal of party election manifestos will allow us to trace the extent to which such issues have been prioritised by the party. Of course, when looking at manifestos, it is vital to remember the historical context and the extent to which the Liberals were struggling for survival.

The first explicit mention of women in post-war manifestos produced by the British Liberal Party came in 1964's *Think for Yourself*, with its recognition of the economic inequalities facing women. The manifesto included a commitment to introduce equal pay and enhance legal rights in marriage, and an emphasis on part-time working opportunities to allow women to return to work.²⁵ This inclusion of a specific policy designed to appeal to women was developed in the 1966 election manifesto, where the party called for a new system of allowances to provide more funds for widows with children and again stressed the importance of helping married women with children to return to work if they wished to.²⁶

The 1970 manifesto did not build on 1964 and 1966. It made no mention of women despite having sections entitled 'The Old', 'The Young' and 'The Independent Trader' amongst others. The February 1974 election manifesto, *Change the Face of Britain*, saw the return of a small section concerning women's equality, this time under the heading 'The Status of Women', which advocated the establishment of a Sex Discrimination Board to ensure that legislation surrounding equal pay and

opportunity was adhered to. Again, it stressed the importance of allowing women to work, 'Our aim is to provide the opportunity for women who so wish freely to seek satisfying goals other than a lifetime of childbearing.'²⁷ Despite the progressive nature of some of these proposals there is no mention of the need for a wider shift in society with regards women's roles, as proposed a century before by Mill. Moreover, there was no discussion of childcare alternatives which would allow women to go back to work, and such an omission undermines the commitment to ensuring a nation of all the talents.

As the October election of 1974 was mainly fought on the economy, economic inequality dominated this manifesto, but no links were made between the disproportionate impact that poverty had (and still has) on women. Instead, it was in the 1979 manifesto that the party first considered the impact of inequalities, other than economic, with a discussion of gender inequalities and ethnic minority rights. Moreover, there was a discussion of men and women in relation to family needs, thereby recognising that, in order for women to take a full part in society, men have to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by women.²⁸

The two elections fought by the Liberal-SDP Alliance, 1983 and 1987, resulted in the development of specific monetary policies of benefit to women. For example, in the 1983 manifesto, there was a pledge to increase child benefit by £1.50 per week, with a supplementary benefit of £1.50 per week for one-parent families. It also pledged to enforce sex and race equality through positive action in employment policies.²⁹ The 1987 manifesto provided a more in-depth consideration of women's issues, ranging from equal opportunities in education and training to a

commitment to equal representation on appointed bodies and improved maternity benefits.³⁰ Given the strong tradition of gender equality and women's groups within the Labour Party, we would expect to and indeed can identify the greater emphasis on women's issues that the SDP introduced into Alliance manifestos. The newly created SDP had been clear about its commitment to gender equality and both the numerical and the substantive (acting on behalf of women) representation of women was a core part of their belief and narrative.³¹

The Liberal Democrats in their 1992 manifesto failed to build on or develop ideas from previous manifestos, but did introduce a policy for a citizen's pension which explicitly recognised that women are disproportionately discriminated against in old age due to a lifetime of poorly paid work and childcare.³² The 1997 manifesto mirrored the 1987 coverage of women's issues detailing a range of specific proposals aimed at women such as ensuring equality of treatment in the health service and providing greater resources for domestic violence refuges. What is notable is that despite repeated pledges in this and previous manifestos to a commitment to parity in terms of appointments to public bodies, the party did not offer any internal suggestions as to how to increase the numbers of women MPs on their own benches. Rather, they focused on reforming the facilities of the House of Commons to make it more appealing to women.³³ Whilst the 1992 and 1997 general election manifestos may have been disappointing, the party was aware of the importance of women's issues and women's votes, with specific leaflets and press conferences designed to promote the party's willingness to be seen as a pro-women party.

However it is the 2001 and 2005 elections that saw a

significant increase in the party's engagement with women's issues, with policies ranging from ideas to strengthen UK discrimination laws through an Equality Act in *Freedom, Justice and Honesty* (2001) and the production of a specific manifesto for women in both 2001 and 2005.³⁴ Again, the decision to produce a separate manifesto for women is a key indication that, whilst the party stresses the importance of the individual, it also recognises the electoral importance of appealing to women voters and showing that, despite the low numbers of women MPs on its benches, it is concerned with women's issues. The 2005 manifesto for women highlighted the party's top five policies for women, juxtaposing traditional women's policies such as increased maternity pay with the importance of scrapping tuition fees to make university education affordable for all. The way in which the party made this link between a high-profile national policy and women's issues is both striking and a clear change of approach towards the established idea of women's issues, leading commentators to highlight the progressive nature of their policies for women despite the numerical under-representation of women MPs.³⁵

So, having considered the relative strengths and weaknesses of Liberalism's commitment to feminist principles it is clear that the party has attempted to engage with women's issues on a policy level in their manifestos. Of course the debate on women's representation is a key part of understanding the current relationship between feminism and Liberal Democrats. Despite the undeniable success of the 'zipping' process adopted for the 1999 European elections (alternating women and men on the regional lists of candidates, which ensured that half the Lib Dem MEPs elected were women), it is the 2001 debate on

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AWS which best sums up the differing approaches to women's representation. Interviews undertaken with women who were involved with the party at the time of the 2001 conference debate examined their recollections, their stance on the issue and the roles of critical feminist actors in the campaign for the adoption of the mechanism. All of those who had witnessed or participated in the debate highlighted the acrimonious nature of the discussion:

I've never seen anything like the 2001 debate. There were a group of young women wearing T-shirts saying 'I'm not a token female', and I still think there were interests in the party who manipulated them. (MP)

It was a bloody affair in 2001 and divided the women hugely. We were all disgusted with the women in T-shirts. It was a real drive against all-women shortlists by women themselves, and I think it was a great pity. I think they thought they were being assertive but they didn't realise what they were doing. (Peer)

I think there was immense sadness on my part and the part of a few others about the way in which people had conducted themselves. (Peer)

The vitriolic atmosphere described by the interviewees was in part due to the nature of the debate, which struck at the heart of traditional liberal assumptions regarding approaches to any form of discrimination. The use of tight fitting pink T-shirts as part of the campaign against AWS was a particular sticking point for many of the women angry at the lack of awareness shown by the young women as to how it would be perceived. As Russell and Fieldhouse quite rightly note, there was an evident generational divide between those

in favour of and those against introducing quotas.³⁶

I was angry and upset when it didn't go through conference. I felt like going up to them and saying if I was young, attractive and in my 20s I'd be there with them with the T-shirt on, but I'm in my 40s and I want to make a success of my career in politics. They could wait for ten elections, I could wait for two. I haven't got time. (Prospective Parliamentary Candidate)

In that one decision they ruled out a whole generation of women. There are a few like me who managed to get through the system, but I feel sad about all those women who worked so hard and never got the chance to become members of Parliament. (MP)

Those younger women who had campaigned against AWS argued that they were part of a new generation of women who had not experienced any form of sex discrimination.³⁷ This attitude rankled the older women in the party who were all too aware of the continued existence of sex discrimination. Moreover, the debate on AWS came within the context of an interim report highlighting evidence of covert discrimination within the party.³⁸ Many of the older women in the party subsequently walked away from the issue of women's representation. Again the issue of women's numerical representation has caused feminists to view the Liberal Democrats with a certain degree of mistrust.

In his consideration of the limitations that liberalism presents to feminist objectives, Kymlicka argues for gendered inequalities to be recast and situated within the traditional liberal discourse of oppression: 'We need to reconceptualise sexual inequality as a problem, not of arbitrary discrimination, but of

domination'.³⁹ For liberals the repositioning of the debate on discrimination against women as one of oppression would be key to galvanising a greater sense of urgency towards tackling the inherent gendered assumptions and structures in society. A key element of Liberalism is the fight for equality in the face of injustices and oppression, so by shifting the discourse surrounding women's inequalities to the more pressing language of oppression, a more determined and strategic approach towards countering systemic sex bias would perhaps come about.

Whether or not Liberalism's ideals and objectives can ever be congruent with feminism is a complicated question. From a contemporary perspective, the underlying ideology remains based upon the writings of a group of male writers whose political philosophies, whilst dealing with issues of equality and liberty, are not, on the whole, concerned with women and achieving equality for women. As such, it would be difficult to argue that a philosophy based upon male values could ever truly be feminist. To be sure, Mill's work is an important contribution to bringing the condition of women's lives to a more mainstream audience; however, from a contemporary feminist perspective there are elements of his work that are problematic. Feminism's criticism of the liberal focus on the sanctity of the private sphere is driven by a belief that, by protecting the home from state intervention, this essentially enforces the division between public and private. This division mirrors the gendered construction of society, which sees the public sphere as male and the private home as female – so protecting the private from legislation effectively cuts women adrift from the legislative process.

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commitment to women's issues, and research has also shown that support for the Liberal Democrats is higher amongst women than men.⁴⁰ This clearly indicates both a willingness and a need for the party to engage in women's issues. However, a failure to secure the election of more women MPs ensures that the party's commitment to feminist objectives remains uncertain.

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