

Ita Buttrose AC OBE

Chair, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Calli Tsipidis, Legal Counsel at Foxtel and Chair of the CAMLA Young Lawyers Committee, sits down with **Ita Buttrose AC OBE** to discuss Ita's thoughts on International Women's Day in 2022 and Ita's legendary career in Australian media. Ita is an Australian journalist, businesswoman, television personality and author. Ita is currently the Chair of the ABC. She was women's editor of the *Telegraph* at 23 years old, and was the founding editor of *Cleo*. At *Cleo*, Ita pioneered a high-circulation magazine aimed at young women that was frank about sexuality and famously was the first to feature nude male centrefolds. Ita also became the editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly* and was appointed Publisher of ACP's Women's Division from 1978-81. Thereafter, Ita became the Editor-in-Chief at the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, making her the first female editor of a major metropolitan newspaper in Australia. Ita was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1979, an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1988. In 2003, she was awarded the Centenary Medal and was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 2019. In 2017, Ita was recognised for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement at the Kennedy Awards for Excellence in Journalism, and was the 2013 Australian of the Year. She holds multiple honorary doctorates, including for her distinguished service to various health causes and for being an inspirational role model to aspiring women in business.

CALLI TSIPIDIS: You undoubtedly have a wealth of experience in Australian media, could you please tell us what drew you to media at the young age of fifteen, and what has inspired you to stay in the industry?

ITA BUTTROSE: I knew at 11 that I wanted to be a journalist and it's a decision I have never regretted. All the good things in my career have happened through journalism. I followed in my father's footsteps - he was a journalist, editor and author and his influence on me was strong. As a schoolgirl I used to discuss the news of the day with him. What I most love about journalism is its unpredictability. You never know what the day will bring. Journalism ticks all the boxes for me. I am proud to be a journalist. Journalists are truth seekers; we inform people and provide information that helps them make decisions. We expose corruption and corrupt people and most importantly, we give people a voice. As a journalist there have been times when I have been able to make a difference and journalism offers that same opportunity to people wherever they live. Journalism plays a crucial role in safeguarding democracy. The current hostilities between Russian and Ukraine are a reminder that journalists are fearless in reporting truth and information.

CALLI: Over the course of your career, what would you consider to be the most significant development in the Australian media and communications industry and why?

ITA: Without doubt the introduction of the Internet. It removed communication barriers and swept away our isolation. When I started work in 1958 it used to take two days to fly (by Qantas of course) colour film for use in *The Australian Women's Weekly* from the UK to Australia. The Internet allowed us to transmit colour photographs in minutes. Suddenly, knowledge and information easily made their way across the world. The Internet transformed the way we published, for the better.

CALLI: You have been a true trailblazer for women in the media industry, and have paved the way for women in leadership positions in this industry. While we have made progress, there are and have historically been, very few female leaders of major Australian media entities. Why do you think that is? Is change happening at a satisfactory pace? What, if anything, should be done differently?

ITA: Female representation in leadership is changing but it is slow. Many leadership decisions and appointments are still made by male dominated boards and corporate decision-makers. Media employs a great many women, probably more than many other industries, and gradually women are being appointed to senior roles. Gender balanced leadership leads to better decision making. It's encouraging that mastheads like *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* have women in senior editorial roles. The hours that come with top media positions are often challenging for women with children, especially small children. Flexible hours are essential. I am hopeful that COVID with its lockdowns and working from home will remove some of the barriers that have hindered women's rise to the top. Reports show that productivity did not falter when people worked from home. This knowledge might help advance women's progress. Women in media are not alone however. Chief Executive Women research reveals that women hold only six per cent of leadership roles in Australia's top companies.

CALLI: If there is one thing you would celebrate about International Women's Day in the Australian media industry, what would it be?

ITA: The better recognition of women's contribution - women are now seen and heard in the news media as leaders, experts, commentators and opinion makers. The ABC is proud to be a part of the global BBC initiative, the 50:50 Equality Project, which has increased the contribution of women as expert talent across our programming. I am pleased to report the ABC is regularly



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Courtesy of the ABC

hitting that 50:50 target for representation of women and we have successfully piloted expanding the project to focus on increasing representation of Indigenous and culturally diverse Australians, and people with disability.

CALLI: What's the best professional advice you have ever received?

ITA: "Don't pussyfoot Ita." The Finance Controller at Australian Consolidated Press was encouraging me to close a deal. In other words, don't be afraid to make decisions. By all means think things through but then stop procrastinating and act.

CALLI: One of the 2022 International Women's Day campaign themes is #BreakTheBias. What does this mean to you and how would you suggest this is implemented in our readers' work and personal lives?

ITA: We can break the bias by consistently challenging it in the workplace and personally. Over the years women have learned from each other by sharing their stories. We must continue to do that, like brave Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins who refused to be silenced and spoke publicly about their experiences of sexual violence and abuse. Their stories are unforgettable; their leadership inspiring. Women need to share experiences of bias and collectively need to vocally challenge such discrimination. Together women can bring about change. We owe it to ourselves and the women who will follow in our footsteps to continue to make our voices heard.

CALLI: Finally, what advice would you give to the next generation of female leaders in the industry?

ITA: Believe in yourself. Don't let the blinkers of others stop you from going after your goals. Believe in the future of the media, particularly journalism. There always will be a need for professional, factual journalism delivered by skilled journalists. Don't be frightened of change; it offers opportunities. Opportunity is often unexpected; you need to be able to grab it. Journalism has given me myriad opportunities for which I always shall be grateful. I've enjoyed them all.