

The SURVIVOR

Ita Buttrose has done it all in a trailblazing media career that began six decades ago. Now 83, and slowed only by her declining mobility, she remains as sharp and opinionated as ever. Just don't tell her that prejudice against women is a thing of the past.

STORY BY *Greg Callaghan* PHOTOGRAPH BY *Tim Bauer*

A colossal burst of rain is thrashing down on Ita Buttrose's apartment balcony, spilling onto the grassy courtyard below in this retirement complex in south-eastern Sydney. Sitting inside her airy, modern living room with her back to the view in a casual ensemble of blue jeans, turquoise jumper and a fetching grey faux-fur wrap (she's finding it "a bit nippy"), Buttrose appears oblivious to the biblical deluge outside, resting both hands - nails painted her trademark coral - in her lap, a picture of perfect composure. Over the course of our two-hour conversation, the first of two principal interviews, Buttrose reels off dates, events and names, some dating back 70 years, in a chapter-and-verse account of her long career. An email arrives from her a few days later correcting a date and clarifying a detail. Ita Buttrose, I conclude, has a mind like a steel trap.

At 83, she has done - and just about won - it all. Australian of the Year. Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). Australian Media Hall of Fame. Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). Three honorary doctorates. Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award at the Kennedy Awards for Excellence in Journalism. Age may have creased the distinctive angles of her famous face, but those wide-set blue eyes can still sparkle - or intimidate - in equal measure. Friends and foes alike call it "the Buttrose aura": the way she raises that



Buttrose on her first day at The Australian Women's Weekly in 1975. At 33, she was the magazine's youngest ever editor.

chin of hers, looks you directly in the eye. And the voice - of a woman in command - is as unmistakable as ever. She tells me that at the height of her fame, when she occasionally resorted to large Jackie O sunglasses and sunhats to hide her identity, it was her voice that betrayed her. "The moment I opened my mouth, they knew who I was," she says, breaking into a little laugh.

More recent years haven't been without their heartache, however. After finding it increasingly difficult to walk steadily without

pain, Buttrose had back surgery (a laminectomy and a spinal fusion) in 2021 and for a time was able to walk pain-free with a cane. But her recovery hit a wall when her feet started to freeze as she was about to take a step: it was as if her brain wasn't talking to her feet. The doctors were perplexed, but a merry-go-round of tests produced a diagnosis. "My specialist now calls it an isolated gait disorder as I haven't acquired any other symptoms; nobody seems to know exactly why I've developed it," she explains. "Originally, I was diagnosed as having frozen gait disorder, which is a symptom of Parkinson's, but I don't have Parkinson's."

Last year, after suffering 12 falls, her specialist strongly advised her not to walk without a chaperone and to use a wheelchair around the house. This meant Buttrose had to part ways with her much-loved split-level, two-bedroom apartment with city skyline views in Surry Hills earlier this year.

"I didn't want to push my luck any further," she says, sipping from a cup of strong tea. "I needed a safer place on one level. My old apartment had stairs I could no longer manage."

Buttrose's new digs come with 24-hour emergency care and an open-sesame front door she can open and shut with a press on a remote. She's also located closer to daughter Kate; the pair recently went out to buy her an electric wheelchair, which she's now road-testing in the complex's corridors. "I haven't had a fall since I've been here," she says.

"When I started, women didn't have a voice," says Buttrose. "I've always been intent on giving women that voice."



HAIR & MAKE-UP BY MICHELLE DUBE; PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ITA BUTTROSE

Never in her wildest dreams, she tells me, could she have envisaged the career she's had. She did, after all, come of age when women were expected to leave work after falling pregnant (and were sacked if they refused to quit), were forbidden from entering public bars (and relegated to "ladies' lounges"), and when divorce was a multi-step ordeal. "When I was a girl, it was assumed you'd get a job, work for a few years, get married, have children and go home to be a housewife," she says. "Well, I did all those things. I just didn't go home."

Buttrose has long described herself simply as a "journalist", but somehow a single word doesn't cover her enormous versatility as a communicator, much less the multiple glass ceilings she shattered in eras far less welcoming of women in top management roles. Buttrose cleared the path for at least two generations of women in the media, but her career never brought her the riches enjoyed by a handful of her high-profile successors. Even when she was one of the highest-paid female executives in Australia in the late 1970s, her bank turned her down for a housing loan because she was a single, divorced woman.

It's not too much of a stretch to say the story of Ita Buttrose is the story of Australia in the second half of the 20th century, with a bite out of the early 21st. It's a story of women entering the workforce, of the sexual revolution, the rise of the women's movement, the expansion of the middle class and the flight to the suburbs, of no-fault divorce, the AIDS epidemic, media celebrity, ageing Baby Boomers – in short, of an avalanche of social changes that, back in the sheltered-if-calcified 1950s, would have seemed as improbable as the trajectory of Buttrose's future career. As the post-World War II order dissolves, the story winds up with the collision of the old media rules with the new and with Buttrose's last major post as chair of the ABC, which was marked by conflict with government and (more on this later) heated controversy over the Antoinette Lattouf court case.

INK IN HER VEINS

A fit-looking, fluffy kookaburra swoops down on the lush green lawn in the mid-morning sun outside the tearooms at Vaucluse House. Buttrose is transfixed. "You don't often see a kooka just land on the ground like that. It looks very friendly." As I'm squinting at said kingfisher through myopic eyes, Buttrose explains that since cataract surgery last year, the cloud cover has lifted on her distance vision. Still gazing outside, she says that "people don't believe me when I tell them sheep used to graze around these grounds – they'd follow us kids around."

Buttrose and her three brothers – Julian, Will and Charlie – grew up in Parsley Bay, about 10 minutes' walk away, and came here to play and buy cheap orange juice and scones from these very tearooms when the grand Victorian home opposite was in a state of decay. The famous film director Peter Weir (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Gallipoli*), who grew up in the house next door to the Buttroses, would later describe his childhood here as a "kids' Camelot".

But this picture of a silver-tailed childhood isn't what it might appear. Buttrose's parents



"I grew up thinking we were all equal. I soon learnt otherwise."



Clockwise from left: with her children Kate and Ben in the 1970s; receiving the Companion of the Order of Australia from then governor-general David Hurley in 2019; with her three brothers, 1999.

into negotiating a man's world. "I couldn't beat my brothers at sport – they were bigger than me – but I could beat them at things like chess." Fiercely competitive from a young age, she asked a local chess champion to teach her a few crafty moves to checkmate her oldest brother Julian. "The boys said I owed everything to them," she laughs. "I grew up thinking we were all equal. I soon learnt otherwise."

Buttrose knew she wanted to be a journalist from the age of 11, when she'd eavesdrop from the top of the stairs whenever her parents had guests, usually journalists, photographers and artists. "They appeared to be lots of fun, with always something to say."

She received an early warning of how ruthless the industry could be when her father, then editor of *The Daily Mirror*, was suddenly demoted by newspaper proprietor Ezra Norton. When Norton demanded to know why the newspaper was late to the printer one day, Charles replied in frustration that they were short of sub-editors. "Oh, is that right?" Norton snapped back. "Well, you can become a sub-editor then."

Ita, then around 13, remembers the hushed tone at the dinner table that night, but her father would go on to a job with Australian Consolidated Press and later with the ABC, just as his daughter was starting out as a copy girl on *The Australian Women's Weekly*.

It sounds very much like you were a daddy's girl, I suggest. "We had a lot in common, and he always took an interest in my career," she says. Even after her parents' divorce, when her father married a woman 30 years his junior, they stayed on good terms. "I accepted my parents' decision to divorce and didn't take sides. I didn't judge either of them."

On the day of Ita's own wedding in 1963 her father warned her groom, Alasdair Macdonald, that he was marrying "a very independent woman". For a time Buttrose was the principal breadwinner while her British-born husband studied architecture, but she

will be forever grateful to the well-educated Macdonald for introducing her to music, literature and art. He was also ahead of his time in his support for her career. "When I was about 21, I realised I could probably go a lot further than I first thought."

How to sum up the milestone-studded six-decade career that followed? At 23, Buttrose was appointed the youngest editor of the women's pages of *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*. At 30, she launched the groundbreaking and wildly successful *Cleo*, a magazine that demonstrated a radical proposition when it was launched in 1972: that women have sexual desires just like men. A nude male centrefold! A sealed section! Initial marketing research predicted the magazine would bomb, but a young Kerry Packer took a gamble with his new editor, shoving said report to the bottom of his drawer, out of sight of his father, Sir Frank Packer, then chairman of ACP.

Growing up the only girl with three knock-about brothers gave Buttrose an early insight

into negotiating a man's world. "I couldn't beat my brothers at sport – they were bigger than me – but I could beat them at things like chess." Fiercely competitive from a young age, she asked a local chess champion to teach her a few crafty moves to checkmate her oldest brother Julian. "The boys said I owed everything to them," she laughs. "I grew up thinking we were all equal. I soon learnt otherwise."

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In 1975, at the age of 33, Buttrose was appointed the youngest-ever editor of the venerable *Australian Women's Weekly*. She set about relaunching the magazine founded by Sir Frank back in 1933, giving it a fresh, glossy, newsstand-friendly format (it had previously been a newspaper-like tabloid). Circulation rose to one million a week, achieving the highest per capita sales of any women's magazine in the world, it was claimed. It was while she was at the *Weekly* that Buttrose became a household name, thanks to her appearance in weekly TV advertisements across all major networks.

At 36, Buttrose became editor-in-chief of both the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Daily Telegraph*: the first time a woman had been appointed to lead a metropolitan newspaper, and she subsequently joined the News Ltd (now News Corp) board. "News Ltd back then was the last bastion of male chauvinism," recalls Ainslie Cahill, Buttrose's personal assistant at the time. "Ita wasn't intimidated by anyone." If Buttrose could be tough on staff, she was also generous and loyal. "Ita didn't crack the whip so much as recognise talent in people and wheedle it out of them," notes Cahill. "If someone worked hard on a project, they'd receive a handwritten note and a gift. She was very generous."

By 1980, Buttrose had been voted the most admired woman in Australia, and even had a hit song recorded about her – *Ita*, by Cold Chisel. It's safe to say no other public figure at the time combined relatability with authority so seamlessly. During these years, she also managed to raise two children, Kate (born in 1967) and Ben (1972). "I loved being a mother, loved their company," she says. "I still do." Describing herself as a strict but protective mother, she kept them out of the limelight ("nobody knew what they looked like") and they were left in no doubt about the stark difference between their mum and Ita, the media persona. She laughs while recalling her cheeky teenage son Ben yelling out, "Hey Mum, Ita Buttrose is on TV!" (Ben is now a scientist with the CSIRO and has three of her five grandkids).

After an amicable divorce from Macdonald in 1976, Buttrose says she was determined her

Top: launching *Cleo* magazine with actor Jack Thompson, 1972. Below: at a fundraiser for AIDS research in 1989 with (from left) former NSW health minister Peter Collins, justice Michael Kirby, premier Nick Greiner.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN FRENCH; JACK AILEY; COURTESY OF ITA BUTTROSE



kids would have a good relationship with their father (Ita would remarry briefly years later). "See, you can be well known and still raise children successfully," she chuckles.

But with all this, Buttrose still cut a lonely figure at the top. Even by 1985, she was the only woman on the national Top 100 Senior Executives list. "There were no role models for women of my generation," Buttrose writes in her new book, *Unapologetically Ita*. "We had to blaze our own trails ... it is too easy to forget how much we did to advance women to where they are today, with a freedom and an earning capacity that no one would have thought possible to achieve back in the days when I started work."

By the end of that decade, trading on her high profile, Buttrose set up her own magazine company, Capricorn Publishing, and launched her namesake glossy, *Ita*, "the magazine for the woman who wasn't born yesterday", aimed squarely at middle-class women. At its peak, *Ita* reached a steady circulation of 70,000 a month, but Paul Keating's "recession we had to have" and a constant struggle for advertising dollars ("many of the advertising agencies seemed to be staffed by the sort of young men and women who believed growing older would never happen to them") made it a financial slog.

After six years, she'd "run out of puff" and "couldn't see any light at the end of the economic tunnel", and closed the magazine in August 1994. She didn't declare bankruptcy and paid her staff and freelancers their full entitlements; however, she spent several years afterwards discharging her personal tax bill, which she hadn't been able to pay off fully because of her company's erratic cash flow. "It's never been about the money for me, but the work," she

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says. "Dad used to give me lectures about being more money-conscious. I was never frivolous, but I'm not a greedy person."

For a magazine doyenne who'd enjoyed a run of ever-expanding success, the closure of *Ita* risked looking like her first public failure – and the media were ready to pounce. In an interview with *60 Minutes*, Buttrose faced a barrage of hardball questions from interviewer Tracey Curro, who put it to her that she was a failure. "Don't you feel old?" Curro asked. "What's old?" Buttrose responded with a zinging comeback. "To a 15-year-old, you would be old."

Far from being Buttrose's last stand, the close of the self-titled magazine ushered in a second career of speaking engagements and regular TV appearances (including as a panelist on *Beauty and the Beast*). Then, in 2011, the ABC screened the drama series *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo*, a ratings blockbuster that snared 1.2 million viewers and introduced a new generation to Buttrose – along with, in Asher Keddie's award-winning portrayal, an amplified version of her famous lisp. "They must have chosen every 's' word possible in the script," says Buttrose, smiling. "One day I was watching it and thought, 'Oh Christ, Asher, stop lisping!'"

In 2013, at the age of 71, Buttrose became the founding host of new morning chat show, *Studio 10*, which meant daily 5am starts and an opportunity to express her showbizzy side. "Ita was the first person in make-up every morning, scouring through the newspapers; there wasn't a misstep through two-and-a-half hours of television a day," says broadcaster Sarah Harris, co-host of *Studio 10* during those years. "She could do a serious interview with a politician one moment and then do a sketch with [comedian] Ash Williams recreating Mills & Boon covers."

But it was at a *Women's Weekly* lunch that Harris really witnessed how deeply ink coursed through Buttrose's veins. "She picked up a freshly printed copy, brought it right up to her face, took a deep breath and said 'I never tire of this' before popping it straight into her handbag."

FACING UP TO PREJUDICE

Under a shimmering chandelier at Admiralty House in Sydney's Kirribilli, Ita Buttrose is delivering an address for the Macular Disease Foundation Australia's annual research awards. She's been a patron of the Foundation for more than two decades, as well as for Dementia Australia, having witnessed the devastating impact both diseases had on her father, who died in 1999 just short of his 90th birthday. Buttrose's uncle Gerald, now in his late 90s, also suffers from macular degeneration. "This is still very personal for me," she says, "even though I've avoided the disease myself."

Some years ago, when she was between jobs, Buttrose consulted a headhunter, who quickly surveyed her CV and concluded that half the things she'd done – her advocacy work, some paid, some not – had been for "nothing". "I've never thought of it as something for nothing," she says. "I've thought of it as a reason for being."

This work began in earnest in 1984 when she took a call from Neal Blewett, the then minister for health, asking her to chair the National Advisory Committee on AIDS (NACAIDS) to address the public fear swirling around the disease, partly fuelled by media hysteria. Such was the stigma against HIV/AIDS that adman John Singleton warned Buttrose – not long

voted Australia's most admired woman – that it would be bad for her image. Why did she do it, then? “Why wouldn't I?” she shrugs. “When the government calls you to do something worthwhile, you don't hesitate.”

But Buttrose swiftly realised the scale of the task ahead as she held the hands of scared, ashen young men clinging to life in Ward 17 South, the AIDS ward at Sydney's St Vincent's hospital. Buttrose took the safe-sex message to elders in remote Aboriginal communities, to villages in Africa and to prisoners in jails, who were identified early as an at-risk group. “There wasn't anywhere she wouldn't go,” recalls Graeme Head, Buttrose's former executive assistant at NACAIDS. “What I really noticed was how much effort she put into really hearing people describe their own lived experience. She didn't try to understand people through briefing notes.”

Buttrose admits she underestimated how emotionally exhausting the experience would be. “It was a 24/7 job because of the wall of fear in the community,” she recalls. “It was a matter of constantly putting out fires – reassuring people that no, you can't catch HIV from mosquitoes, from swimming pools, teacups, or from shaking hands or kissing people. Even orthopaedic surgeons were worried.”

Buttrose went on to become a trustee of the AIDS Trust between 1991 and 1994, joining the then High Court Justice Michael Kirby. But Kirby says he was sceptical of her appointment at first because she was then editor-in-chief of *The Daily Telegraph*, in whose pages he'd regularly received a pasting for his progressive stance on private marijuana use. “I imagined she wasn't a friend to liberal accepting attitudes, including towards gay people. How wrong I was.” Buttrose was a rational counterpoint to the hysterical fear and apocalyptic statements about AIDS spreading like wildfire at the time, says Kirby. “We needed someone, preferably a woman, from the heterosexual community – but not a bleeding heart – who could speak in the language of the general community. This included communicating messages coming out of the United Nations and Geneva, and securing funds for AIDS organisations across the country.”

The AIDS crisis drove homosexual and bisexual sex out of the shadows; Buttrose hadn't been squeamish about discussing sexual issues since her days at *Cleo*, which made her a perfect fit for the job. But she was shocked by the level of hate and prejudice levelled at gay men at the time. She recalls receiving heartless letters about “God's revenge” from people calling themselves “concerned Christians”. She remains a patron of the original AIDS charity, the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, and Qtopia, a centre of queer history and culture in Sydney's Darlinghurst. Why does she continue to support the LGBTQ community? “Because they're my friends,” she says simply.

CAPTAIN'S PICK

Stifling humidity pressed down on the small group of guests milling outside the National Arboretum in Canberra for the Australian of the Year Awards in January 2019. While sipping wine with her son Ben and daughter-in-law Arianne, Buttrose was summoned into a private meeting with then prime minister Scott Morrison, who – after the usual exchange of small talk in the air-conditioned

“Scott Morrison ... obviously didn't know Ita. She would never do the government's bidding.”

cool – cut to the chase. He wanted the then 77-year-old to be chair of the ABC. For someone who was passionate about the importance of the public broadcaster, and whose dad had spent 17 years working his way up to be assistant general manager in 1974, it was a memorable moment. But, in her trademark fashion, she waited two days before accepting the offer.

Morrison triumphantly announced his high-profile appointment to the press as a “captain's pick”, bypassing an independent selection panel. To critics, the appointment appeared politically opportunistic – former chairman Justin Milne had resigned under a cloud of allegations he'd bowed to political pressure by asking for journalists Andrew Probyn and Emma Alberici to be sacked (which he denied) – and Morrison was set to announce the date of the federal election. Other pundits applauded the appointment, however, arguing Buttrose was one of the most qualified chairs to date. “She's not a former business associate of the prime minister; she's not a well-known climate change denier like Maurice Newman; she's not a strident culture warrior like Keith Windschuttle, Ron Brunton and Janet Albrechtsen, with whom [former PM John] Howard stacked the ABC board,” the University of Melbourne's Dr Denis Muller opined in *The Conversation* at the time.

In any event, the honeymoon was short-lived as Buttrose took the helm of what some describe as the toughest, most thankless job in media in Australia. Her first big test, she recalls, came only four months after she started, when the Australian Federal Police (AFP) raided the ABC's Ultimo headquarters over stories by two investigative journalists, Dan Oakes and Sam Clark, that revealed allegations of unlawful killings and misconduct by Australian special forces in Afghanistan. The principal source of the “Afghan Files” was hundreds of pages of secret Defence documents leaked to the ABC by a whistleblower. After eight hours of trawling, the AFP marched out with two thumb drives and a stash of documents. Buttrose came out all guns blazing: “I will fight any attempts to muzzle the national broadcaster or interfere with its obligations to the Australian public,” she announced in a press statement. “Independence is not exercised by degrees. It is absolute.”

The slamming statement, penned by the chair herself, was a “high watermark in her leadership”, notes Kirstin Ferguson, who was Buttrose's deputy until the end of 2020 and acting chair for seven

months between Milne's departure and Buttrose's start. “It wasn't one of those safe, manufactured statements written by committee and approved by the board. I think Scott Morrison totally underestimated her. He probably imagined he was going to get some celebrity patsy who would be a ‘good girl’. But he obviously didn't know Ita. She would never do the government's bidding.”

Ferguson, a *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist ranked by Thinkers50 in 2023 as one of the top 50 management thinkers on the planet, describes Buttrose as a “forthright, uncompromising and decisive” leader. These qualities were sorely needed, she notes, in the wake of the destabilising conflict between former managing director Michelle Guthrie, who was sacked (and later received a total payout of \$1.64 million for wrongful dismissal) and Justin Milne, who resigned only two days later. “It had been a tumultuous time, and Ita was refreshingly direct. She was fearless.”

For her part, Buttrose says she was blindsided by the raid, despite the Coalition's record of public attacks on the ABC. She had what she calls a “frank” conversation with Paul Fletcher, the communications minister. “I don't believe it happened without the government's knowledge,” Buttrose says briskly. “I don't think even the AFP would raid the national broadcaster without someone in government knowing that it was going to happen. I love the ABC. I don't think Morrison knew that about me.”

Buttrose was outraged when military lawyer David McBride, the whistleblower who leaked the classified Afghan Files to the ABC, was sentenced to five years and eight months imprisonment in 2024 (he lost an appeal in May). “People protest about all sorts of issues, but where was the big protest about that? If we're ever going to disclose wrongdoings, whistleblowers have to be protected, not sent to jail.”

Buttrose faced down the Coalition government again after the airing of the *Four Corners* episode “Inside the Canberra Bubble” in November 2020, which investigated the sexual peccadilloes of top government ministers, including then attorney-general Christian Porter, minister Alan Tudge and leader of the National Party Barnaby Joyce, and the toxic atmosphere for junior female staff in particular. She locked horns again with Paul Fletcher,

who demanded she respond to 15 questions about the program, claiming it was biased against Coalition politicians. What incensed Buttrose, who had watched the program prior to airing, is that Fletcher posted the letter on Twitter (now X)

before she had a chance to respond. “It's not until you're actually in the heart of it that you get a better understanding of the pressure that is sometimes applied to the national broadcaster,” she says. “The ABC is held accountable like no other public or private institution.”

Buttrose again pulled no punches in 2021 when she pushed back against a Senate inquiry, spearheaded by NSW Liberal Andrew Bragg, into the ABC's complaints procedure, when an external independent review commissioned by the ABC was already underway. “This is an act of political interference designed to intimidate the ABC and mute its role as this country's most trusted source of

Right: Buttrose leaves the Federal Court in Sydney after giving evidence in the Antoinette Lattouf unfair dismissal case. Below: with then ABC managing director David Anderson.



public interest journalism,” she said in a statement.

When Buttrose announced in August 2023 she wouldn't be seeking a second term as chair, the then Labor communications minister, Michelle Rowland, thanked her for her “formidable” leadership which had been marked by “speaking truth to power”.

Why did she decide not to renew? “Well, as a woman of a certain age, I had to be realistic.” (Buttrose would have been 87 by the end of her second term.)

Just over four months later, on the home stretch to finishing her tenure at the ABC, Buttrose faced one of the most potentially damaging controversies of her career.

On Monday December 18, broadcaster Antoinette Lattouf began a five-day stint with the ABC as a fill-in host for Sarah Macdonald on its *Sydney Mornings* radio program. Three days into her gig, the then 40-year-old was taken off-air; she was told it was because she'd breached the ABC's impartiality rules by sharing a Human Rights Watch post on social media, with the caption, “HRW reporting starvation as a tool of war in Gaza.” Lattouf filed an unlawful termination claim in the Federal Court of Australia.

After an 18-month legal saga, Federal Court judge Darryl Rangiiah brought down his findings. He ruled that in terminating Lattouf's employment, the ABC breached two sections of the Fair Work Act: the first protects employees from discrimination due to their personal opinions; the second entitles them to due process when facing termination.

While Justice Rangiiah later ruled that Buttrose didn't materially contribute to Lattouf's sacking – as chair, she didn't have the power to sack employees or request their sacking – the question was whether she directly or indirectly put pressure on content chief Chris Oliver-Taylor. Buttrose, Oliver-Taylor and then managing director David Anderson exchanged a flurry of emails in the days leading up to Lattouf's termination on December 20. “Has Antoinette been replaced? I'm over getting emails about her,” Buttrose wrote in one. “Why can't she come down with flu? Or COVID. Or a stomach upset.”

What came out in court was that 10 weeks after Hamas launched its surprise attack on Israel, a coordinated campaign by pro-Israel lobbying group, Lawyers for Israel, senior members of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, and a group calling itself “J.E.W.I.S.H creatives and academics” sent a volley of complaints to the ABC about Lattouf's appointment.

For her part, Buttrose is adamant: “I didn't cave in to the lobby group. I didn't cave in to anybody. I had a procedure that I followed with complaints, and these were constant because most people had an opinion one way or the other about the ABC. I would acknowledge

major complaints and send them on to David Anderson. This was the procedure for every complaint, whatever its nature, but this time David had told me to forward all complaints on to Chris Oliver-Taylor. Chris was relatively new at the ABC, so perhaps he didn't know the ABC's guidelines about issu-

ing warnings and giving Antoinette a chance to defend herself.” Did she want Lattouf sacked? “I didn't think it was necessary,” she tells me. In any case, she believes the ABC could have saved itself (and taxpayers) a fortune in legal fees had they accepted an offer a year earlier by Lattouf to settle.

Lattouf's legal team convincingly accused the ABC of double standards because other high-profile presenters, such as Patricia Karvelas and Laura Tingle, had expressed their opinions on social media without being sanctioned (Tingle was counselled over criticisms she made of then federal opposition leader Peter Dutton). Lattouf was awarded \$70,000 in compensation by the court for non-economic loss (the ABC had paid her for the two days she didn't work). Last month, Justice Rangiiah ordered the national broadcaster to pay her a further \$150,000 to ensure the ABC learnt its lesson. It's said the ABC spent an estimated \$2 million defending the case – Lattouf had offered to settle the case last year for \$85,000. The broadcaster has publicly apologised to Lattouf, saying it also failed its staff and audiences.

Buttrose was annoyed that some news stories following the verdict made it sound like she'd left the ABC in the wake of the case, when a simple check of the timeline showed she'd announced her departure months before Lattouf's on-air stint even began. But when I press a point, it's clear discussion of the subject is over. “Time to move on,” she says.

ONGOING STRUGGLE

For most of us, our later years mean mounting losses: of those we love, of friends, of health, of career. Such is the march of time that one minute a woman is a dynamic young editor at the peak of her powers, the next she's dealing with late-life challenges she could never have envisaged in her youth. Within six months of leaving the ABC last year, Buttrose's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Buttrose (who was married to her brother Will), passed away. Ita had been particularly close to Will, who died of bowel cancer in 2006; she has only one brother left now, Charlie, 73, Julian having died three

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PODCAST



To hear Ita Buttrose talk about her early days in testosterone-fuelled newspaper offices, scan this QR code or go to your podcast app.



years ago from motor neurone disease. “I miss my brothers,” she says.

The mobility challenges are a daily trial. Buttrose admits to having her dark moments, but then tells herself, “Come on, pick yourself up. No one else is going to pick you up.” She also deeply misses close friends who've died, and long daily walks with her dogs. After having canines since childhood, Buttrose's dog days are no longer practicable and has now settled for a rescue cat named Saffi (a Greek word meaning “wise”). “I'm comfortable but don't live in the lap of luxury,” she says. “I've never been a greedy person: I don't need more and more.”

Maintaining a positive attitude matters, she says – a lot. “Admittedly, nobody knows what's going to happen to me long-term. But apart from that, I'm perfectly healthy. I passed my driving test – I can still get around.” Echoes her friend, Ainslie Cahill: “She still cooks, still socialises, goes to the ballet and the opera. She's a fighter. She doesn't give in to adversity.”

I ask Buttrose whether, as a young woman, she ever fretted about what people thought of her. Self-doubt has never plagued her in any inhibiting way, she explains, but she's noticed it a lot in young women. “That's why it's important to remind them, ‘Do you know how good you are?’ You can never say that often enough. There's still prejudice against women. We're still battling on.”

Buttrose has been a proud feminist all her life. While editing *Cleo*, she and a couple of her colleagues went to hear Germaine Greer speak. “Feminism caught on in Australia because it was middle-class women who embraced it wholeheartedly. *Cleo* reached that middle-class woman.”

Buttrose has held firm in calling herself a feminist, even when the word itself fell out of vogue between the late '90s and early 2000s (*Is Feminism Dead?* the cover of *Time* magazine asked in 1998). Nowhere is the gender gap more glaring than in the boardrooms of Australia's companies, Buttrose insists. She agrees with the frequently cited criticism of company boards in Australia – they're pale, male and stale – and cites studies indicating that increasing the numbers of women on boards leads to a lower incidence of fraud.

She found the verbal assaults on former prime minister Julia Gillard – “deliberately barren” (former Liberal senator Bill Heffernan), “put her in a chaff bag and throw her out to sea” (former broadcaster Alan Jones) – one of the lowest moments in Australian public life. “‘Barren Julia’ – we'd never say that about men,” she fumes. “Look how dignified Gillard is. Unlike so many of these male former PMs, she hasn't come back to haunt the electorate. Why don't they just go away? They've had their go.”

When I ask what she regards as her single biggest accomplishment, Buttrose answers without hesitation. “When I started, women didn't have a voice. I've always been intent on giving women that voice.”

Nor is she ready to quieten her own voice. Buttrose is still patron of a host of organisations, including the Animal Welfare League Queensland, and is constantly being offered speaking engagements and television spots. “I've had a very full life,” she says. “I've had a lot of fun as well. I enjoy being me.” ■

Unapologetically Ita by Ita Buttrose (Simon and Schuster, \$50) is out next week.

