

The Sydney Morning Herald

Fearless activist, journalist and teacher influenced many

By Wendy Bacon
August 25, 2020



LIZ FELL: 1940 – 2020

Liz Fell was an Australian feminist, journalist, public intellectual, teacher and activist. She campaigned and protested on behalf of women, Indigenous rights and the rights of those in custody.

Elizabeth Deneley Fell was born in 1940, the second child of John and Margaret Fell (Grant). Her childhood on Sydney's upper north shore was a privileged one: she attended Abbotsleigh and later, Frensham boarding school.

In 1955, she enrolled in arts at Sydney University where she majored in psychology and won the prize for best student in her final year. For the next five years, she tutored in psychology on courses taught by John Maze, whose work was influenced by realist philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis. He was a Sydney Libertarian and – through Maze and others – she became a member of the Sydney Push, an intellectual movement caricatured by writer Frank Moorhouse as a club for "talking, drinking and fornicating".

The Sydney Libertarian notions of critical inquiry, independence and a rejection of patriotism, conformity and other social conventions including marriage, struck a chord with Fell and were powerful influences for the rest of her life.

Liz Fell her radical social critique to grassroots struggles of her time.

Always drawn to the notion that “the personal” should be analysed in relation to “the social”, Fell began teaching at the new sociology department at UNSW. From 1969 onwards, she applied her radical social critique to grassroots struggles of her time.

She moved into a small cottage in Paddington that became her haven for the rest of her life. Friends who were homeless, poverty-stricken or simply needing to finish a major project, were housed in her spare bedroom. Students were invited there for seminars and discussions, and her home even served as an editorial office for underground newspapers.

Fell was a major player in the anti-censorship battles of the early 1970s. She wrote stories, protested at court in a nun’s costume, gave evidence as a sociology expert in a censorship trial and spoke at rallies. In 1971, a more priggish time, she conceived of a radical sex education manual for UNSW students called SEX. It was filled with basic information about contraception, abortion, orgasms, sexual health and frank accounts of early sexual experiences. On the back were the words in large letters, “Now go and get f*****”. It was a massive hit with students, though not the authorities. Fell also wrote the speeches delivered by Clyde Packer (brother of Kerry) when he blocked a draconian censorship bill in the Upper House of the NSW Parliament.

Fell’s support for the Gurindji land rights campaign in 1970 began her life-long support for Aboriginal self-determination. Aboriginal activist, academic Gary Foley, a close friend, described her as a confidante of Black Power leaders in Sydney. She was involved in the drive to establish Aboriginal broadcasting in central Australia.

From 1970, as the Women’s Liberation movement took off, Fell developed her social analysis to focus more on gender. Never one to avoid a conflict, she gave a paper about “sexism in the Push” at a Sydney Libertarian conference and this radicalised younger Push women. Though it led to arguments with old friends, characteristically, the friendships survived.



Liz Fell with (from left) Jim Staples, Leon Fink and Bob Ellis at a party in 1996. CREDIT: FAIRFAX

Fell was involved in educational programs at Parramatta and Long Bay prisons. She mobilised opposition to the notorious Katingal Maximum Security jail unit describing it as an “electronic zoo”. Appealing to doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers to boycott it, she wrote that the block was “a perfect example of how to combine physical isolation with general sensory deprivation.” Katingal was eventually closed under public pressure that she helped to engender.

Fell was a founding member of both the radical Prisoners Action Group (1973) and Women Behind Bars (1975). She strongly encouraged current and ex-prisoners to join the loosely structured groups. She delighted in joining a group outside Mulawa Women’s prison on Christmas Eve to sing specially written Christmas carols.

Also, during this time, she was involved in resident action groups that supported the Builders Labourers Federation’s Green Bans and was arrested for squatting in Victoria Street, Kings Cross to stop development there.

After researching a number of groundbreaking programs on sexuality for commercial television, in 1974 Fell joined the ABC’s late evening program, *Lateline*.

Along with Julie Rigg and others, she was determined that the ABC’s contribution to the International Year of Women in 1975 would be more than a token. The result was the weekly *Coming Out* show, a program produced by women for women that lasted for 23 years and trained many women journalists. In a book she co-edited, Fell documented the internal struggles around the show, naming those who resisted women’s progress. She wrote with relish about the large contingent of ABC “typists, clerks, librarians, secretaries, TV and radio producers” who donned ABC *Coming Out* Show t-shirts and, armed with sound recorders, gathered “actuality” for the first show later that day.

Fell believed in the transformative power of education and learning through practice. She never sought to climb the academic ladder.

Fell authored a major report on Equal Opportunity in the ABC and was a founder and driving force in the Media Women Workers group.

She was a leader in a 1975 occupation of the *Canberra Times* during a large “Women and Politics” conference attended by 1000 women. More than 200 women occupied the newspaper offices in protest against an editorial which Fell described as epitomising the “trivialisation, ridicule, and male stereotyping of women”. She co-drafted an editorial in response. When it was not published in full, she and a co-author immediately published the full version in *The New Journalist*.

She was a strong unionist and was elected to committees of the Australian Journalists’ Association and ABC Staff Association. She played a key role in pushing the union to organise freelance journalists who she felt were being ignored.



*Fell with (from left) J.P. Robertson, General Manager of the NSW Totalisator Agency Board and Norman May in 1984 while making the TV show, *The Needy and The Greedy*. CREDIT:ABC*

Through her involvement in all these radical movements, Fell became acutely aware of the problems stemming from concentrations of power and lack of diversity in Australian media.

She reinvented herself as a specialist communications journalist in 1982 and became a leader in this field in the next 30 years. She did weekly broadcasts for ABC Radio National, contributed to seminars and wrote submissions critical of government policies. She was a regular contributor to a number of specialist publications. She was elected a Distinguished Fellow of the Telecommunications Society of Australia in 2003 for her notable and enduring contributions to Australian telecommunications.

She won the George Munster Award for Freelance Journalism in 1986. The judges selected Fell's series of radio spots on ABC Radio National about developments in the media for "being independent in stance, providing new information regularly and often breaking stories – for example, the Packer Fiji TV deal..."and for her "combination of intelligence, persistence, restraint, and tough-mindedness".

Through all her years in the media, Fell continued teaching. She taught at UNSW, University of Sydney, UTS, Macquarie University and TAFE, often at more than one institution at the same time. She covered the fields of sociology, psychology, politics, women's studies, communications policy and journalism. Fell believed in the transformative power of education and learning through practice. She never sought to climb the academic ladder. One ex-student remembers how students were encouraged to organise seminars in their own homes and when it was Fell's own turn, she took them to a strip joint for what was a startling but genuine learning experience.

After she died, scores of ex-students many of whom became leading journalists, posted on social media recognising her influence on their lives.

Fell was as comfortable participating in a Rape In War protest on Anzac Day as interviewing judges and senior executives. She cut to the nub of issues and was a formidable opponent in argument. Perhaps because of her family background, Fell was not intimidated by power and privilege though she rejected it for herself.

Fell continued to teach and produce journalism until she was 73. She died on August 13, after a long illness, aged 80. She is survived by her sister Eleanor, niece Phoebe, nephews Patrick and Henry, and hundreds of friends.

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