

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5768

Bell, Virginia Margaret

(1951 -)

Born 19510307, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Barrister, Commissioner, Judge, Lawyer, Public defender, Senior Counsel

Summary

The Honourable Justice Virginia Bell AC is the fourth woman since 1901 to have been appointed to the High Court of Australia.

Details

The daughter of Mary and John, a naval officer, Virginia Bell was educated at Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School in Darlinghurst where she showed the makings of having a career in acting. She chose instead to pursue law at the University of Sydney; after graduating in 1976, she was admitted as a solicitor in New South Wales on 21 December 1977.

A volunteer who became a paid employee of the newly established Redfern Legal Service, it was here that Bell cut her teeth as a community lawyer on tenancy, criminal law and credit law, among other areas, and also earned a name for herself as a champion of the disadvantaged (her reputation was immortalised in the song 'Police Verbals' by Sydney punk band, Mutant Death).

In 1978 she participated in the first Sydney Mardi Gras. Years later when she was a judge she would rule that to describe someone as gay was not defamatory. During this period she was involved with Women behind Bars and the establishment of the Prisoners' Legal Service.

Admitted to the New South Wales Bar on 20 December 1984, Bell read with Dean Letcher (later QC). Between 1986 and 1989 she practised as a public defender. She returned to the private Bar and on 6 November 1997 she was appointed as senior counsel. She later became counsel assisting the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Force. On 25 March 1999, Bell was appointed to the Supreme Court of New South Wales. Between 2006 and 2008 she was president of the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration. In 2008, she was elevated to the Court of Appeal where she served until her appointment to the High Court of Australia, replacing the Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG on 3 February 2009. She retired from the High Court in 2021.

In 2012 Bell was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia 'for eminent service to the judiciary and to the law through leadership in criminal law reform and public policy development, to judicial administration, and as an advocate for the economically and socially disadvantaged.'

She has been awarded honorary degrees from the University of Wollongong and the University of Sydney. Bell hosted ABC Radio National program Late Night Live from 1990-1991.

In 2022, she conducted an inquiry for the Australian Government into the appointment of the former prime minister to administer multiple departments of state.

She was appointed Commissioner to lead the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion in January 2026.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

Resource Section

Speech at special sitting of the High Court of Australia to welcome the Hon Justice Virginia Bell, Canberra, McClelland, Robert and Australian Labor Party, 2009,
<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2FWATS6%22>

The Honourable Justice Virginia Bell AC, 2013,
<http://www.uow.edu.au/alumni/awards/honorary/doctorate/UOW174447.html>

A Reflection on Justice Virginia Bell, Rice, Simon, 2009,
http://lawstudents.society.anu.edu.au/documents/peppercorn_2009_1.pdf

Address on The Retirement of the Honourable Justice Virginia Bell, Spigelman, The Hon. J J, 2008,
http://www.supremecourt.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/spigelman_speeches_2008.pdf

Index to compilation of speeches delivered by The Hon. Justice V. Bell, Bell, The Hon. Justice V, 2008,
<http://www.supremecourt.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Speeches/Pre-2015%20Speeches/Assorted%20-%20A%20to%20K/be>

Law, Kerwin, Hollie and Rubenstein, Kim, 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0624b.htm>

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