

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Zelda D'Aprano**  
1928-  
Feminist and Political Activist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 5 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Zelda D'Aprano**

**Directors/Producers** Robin Hughes, Linda Kruger

**Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

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Also in Series 5: Charles Birch, Miriam Hyde, Ruby Langford Ginibi,  
Mungo MacCallum, Dame Margaret Scott, Tom Uren.

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## SYNOPSIS

Zelda D'Aprano has spent much of her working life fighting for women's rights and equal pay. As an active unionist and member of the Communist Party, she often found herself at odds with her male comrades in the struggle to better women's working conditions.

Zelda was born in Melbourne of poor Jewish migrant parents in 1928. Her childhood memories are of grinding working-class poverty and her mother's passionate sense of justice. A series of factory jobs after leaving school introduced her to the harsh inequities of women's working lives.

Married at 16, with a baby by the age of 17, her early adult years were lived on a housing commission estate, struggling to make ends meet. Her first political step was to form a women's discussion group, which led to an invitation to join the Communist Party.

By the mid-1950s Zelda had had enough of factory work. She obtained a job as a dental nurse in a psychiatric hospital, beginning 15 years of union activism on behalf of hospital workers.

In 1969 she went to work for the communist-dominated Meatworkers' Union, where she was surprised to encounter poor working conditions and discrimination against female workers. In that year the meat industry was being used as a test case for equal pay, and during Arbitration Court hearings Zelda's frustration came to a head as she watched men arguing with other men about what women were worth.

When the case failed to produce more than a token improvement, she took direct action in spectacular style—chaining herself to the doors of the Arbitration Court building. Soon afterwards she co-founded the militant Women's Action Committee, whose members refused to pay full fare on Melbourne's trams until such time as women were granted equal pay.

For her outspokenness, Zelda was dismissed from the union, the memory of which still causes her deep pain. She became intensely involved in the early years of the women's liberation movement and in 1977 wrote an autobiography, **Zelda: The Becoming of a Woman**.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Women's Studies, Australian Studies, Australian History, Politics, Industrial Relations, Studies of Society and Environment, English and Personal Development.

## EARLY YEARS

Zelda's childhood was typical of many immigrants in the 1930s. The Great Depression created poverty and Zelda's family lived with hardship like most working class people.

- What might be some effects on a child who felt 'an economic burden' on her parents?

According to Zelda, her mother was at first very 'religious', then questioned that religion with 'tremendous fervour' before finally becoming a 'very dogmatic communist'.

- Why was the Communist Party attractive to many working class people?
- What could be the significance of Zelda's relative silence about her father?

- Why might Zelda's parents have valued her learning the piano accordion above further education?

Zelda left school when she was 13 and entered the workforce. Her first positions were 'boring, dead-end jobs'.

- What are the repercussions for society as a whole when young people have so little opportunity for education?

■ Listen to the song behind the pictures of women going to work in the cannery. The lyrics begin 'I'm just the girl who makes the thing that holds the oil that oils the spring...' and it ends with 'that works the thing-a-me-bob'. List reasons this song may be seen to demean women. Do you think the song is intentionally ironic? Comment on its use in the program.

- Why do you think an intelligent woman like Zelda would lose herself 'totally in these cheap little tawdry romance magazines'? What could be a male equivalent of romance magazines?

- What possible short and long term results may occur because women were denied contraception advice?

Zelda and Charlie finally move into a Housing Commission house.

- Can you see indications that Zelda valued the welfare of families in her community even at this early stage in her life?

- How could 'living with relatives and in rooms' negatively affect people and their relationships?

## PROGRESS

Zelda went back to work as soon as her child went to school but she was still frustrated with her job.

- Can you explain her dissatisfaction?

- Why might Zelda have returned to the workforce as soon as she was able?

Zelda joined the Communist Party because of the injustice she saw. They encouraged her to try for a better job and when she became a dental nurse in the psychiatric hospital, her life changed.

- Why did Zelda believe the white uniform added to her sense of self worth and to her confidence?

- List factors that you believe can boost people's sense of themselves.

- Is it important for an individual's self worth to do work he/she sees as important and valuable?

In the 1950s, arguments and unrest among the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) and Catholic Action (CA – a lay Catholic anti-communist organisation) created a powder keg situation.

- During the 1940s and 50s, why did the ALP establish groups to fight against the militant communist factions in the more powerful unions?

- Research the 1955 'split' in the ALP. Make a timeline detailing the causes and subsequent results of Dr Evatt's actions.

- Trace the birth of the DLP in Victoria. What was their stance on the unions and how did it differ from the ALP's stance?

- Where did CA stand in these arguments?

The powers that controlled the unions saw Zelda as 'someone in their midst who was going to push them'.

- Who were these powers?
- Why did they bus in hundreds of people from 'all over the place' to attend union meetings?
- Why didn't they like Zelda's political affiliations?

## MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN

Zelda says her marriage to Charlie 'became very boring'.

- What may have prevented her from leaving him? Do you think the same reasons apply to some women today? Explain your reasoning.

Even though Zelda was organising large union meetings, and was seen as 'the enemy' by some very powerful people, she tells us that when her husband left she was 'very, very frightened as to how [she] was going to manage'.

- Do you think Zelda under-rated her abilities? Do you think women tend to underestimate themselves?
- Find examples of where women use a skill or ability in one area of their lives but which does not transfer to other areas of their lives. What happens to their view of themselves as a result?

## CAREER PROGRESSION

In 1969 Zelda committed herself to full-time union activities. She left the hospital and worked in the office at the Meatworkers' Union. She remembers so many staff complaints. She couldn't understand why they just spoke amongst themselves rather than going to the secretary or the executive of the union. She recalls that at first she didn't do anything either.

- Why was Zelda so able a union agitator at the hospital yet did nothing when initially working for the Meatworkers' Union?
- What events later spurred her to active involvement in demanding better conditions?

Later that year, supporting the Meatworkers' Union in their test case for equal pay for women, Zelda chained herself across the door of a commonwealth government building. Two other women committed to the cause (Bette Olle and Yvonne Smith) walked up and down with placards demanding equal wages.

- How would you describe their actions?
- Why do you think Zelda targeted a commonwealth government building?
- What do you learn about Zelda from her memory that she 'shook for several hours' after the police cut off her chains? Can you find other details in the program to reinforce your conclusions about her personal qualities?

With her protest, Zelda realised that if women were to get justice 'we had to do something outlandish and very unladylike'.

- What qualities are considered 'ladylike'? Discuss how this concept may have changed since the 1960s.
- Discuss whether a woman's preoccupation with 'a ladylike image' might hold back her actions, access to positions and good health.
- Do you believe most girls are brought up to be ladylike? If so, why do you think parents might try to instill this in their daughters?
- Do you believe that traditionally male-dominated environments such as business and politics have an impact on the way women in those spheres act or express themselves? If so, how?

When the result of the test case for women's equal pay was so disappointing, Zelda formed the Women's Action Committee.

- What was the result handed down by the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission over the Meatworkers' Union grievances?
- Why was Zelda's experience in the arbitration courts with the other women so crucial to her future activism? Support your answer with evidence.

- Research the history of male and female pay in Australia and find out whether women are paid equal money to men today.

The Women's Action Committee undertook many public events. One campaign that caught the public's attention involved activist women paying 75 per cent of the scheduled tram fare because their salary was only 75 per cent of male wages.

- What do you think would be the value of such action?
- Do you think the majority of people in the early 1970s saw the women's action as you do today? Might women have seen it in a similar way to men? Why?
- Do you believe an organisation has more power than an individual? Explain your ideas.

The Women's Action Committee was also involved with the organisation of the first abortion reform rally in Melbourne.

- Why was the committee thrilled that 500 women turned out to the rally?
- Why was abortion a taboo subject in the 70s? Was the women's rally threatening to anyone and if so, why?
- Why did the newspaper give so little coverage to the rally?
- List the benefits and the disadvantages of people banding together to bring public attention to their cause.
- Find out about abortion law in your state or territory.

Later in the program, Zelda states the Women's Action Committee sustained her through times of trouble and injustice.

- Why might this have been?
- Can you find any parallels in your own life whereby you are strengthened through your membership of a group? How is your example similar to or different from Zelda's experience?

## DEVASTATION

When management of the Meatworkers' Union didn't have a Christmas drink with the staff, Zelda couldn't believe the lack of acknowledgement for the women's work. She wrote a castigating letter to secretary George Seelaf and she was subsequently sacked.

- What emotions do you think Zelda feels as she recalls her sacking by the union? Justify your ideas.
- In the interview, why doesn't she apologise for crying?
- Do you think her own dismissal helped her understand earlier encounters with workers who were too scared to approach the boss with their grievances?
- Do you believe her experiences dented her idealism? Support your answer with evidence.

Complete the table on the following page and add any other appropriate ideas.

Reason for Zelda's amazement/anger at her treatment	What might she have expected?	What in fact occurred
<p>She felt the union secretariat were so intelligent and had so much to offer</p> <p>Her own party (the Communist Party) deserted her</p> <p>She wanted to learn and be part of forward thinking</p> <p>The Communist Party withheld their support because she was a woman</p> <p>She had unshakable faith in these people whom she believed had the answers to help the workers.</p>	<p>Rational behaviour. A progressive organisation.</p> <p>Good leadership</p> <p>Reward for her honesty and hard work.</p>	<p>They sacked her because she dared to criticise them.</p> <p>No pressure exerted from Trades Hall to help her.</p>

## MAIL SORTER

When Zelda finally found employment, it was with the government-owned forerunner to Australia Post.

- Why did the job of mail sorter suit her?
- Could the stress of her activities for the women's movement have contributed to her ill-health? Were there any other factors which could have added to her health problems?

When the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) found that a 'women's liberation leader' was working in a mail exchange, Zelda's life once again became difficult.

- What functions does ASIO fulfill?
  - Why might the government be alarmed at the situation?
- The then Attorney-General suggested that Zelda 'should be got rid of, even by promotion to some minor post office'.
- Why would promotion be an answer?
  - What is the Attorney-General's role in the government?

Zelda could not face her situation. During the 70s, many Australians were fearful of agitators who might be communist spies. Zelda feared for her life. She was superannuated.

- What does 'superannuated' mean?

## CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUPS

The women's liberation movement ran groups where women talked intimately about issues that affected them.

- Why were these groups empowering for women?

## ORDER OF AUSTRALIA

In 2004 (almost a decade after the making of the **Australian Biography** program) Zelda D'Aprano was awarded the Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in recognition for service as a pioneer and advocate for the rights of women in the workplace, including equal pay and employment opportunity.

## CONCLUSION

Zelda D'Aprano says she wrote her autobiography so that the women of today would have something to build on—a way forward to keep changing the world.

- What place do individual life stories have in the telling of history?
- Are there any inequalities left for women to address in Australia? If so, suggest examples.
- What does Zelda mean by 'our pain is political'? Why does she insist women must tell their stories to the world?
- How would you summarise Zelda's life achievements? Write a biographical profile suitable for publication.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

ASIO [www.asio.gov.au](http://www.asio.gov.au)

Australian Government—Department of Employment and Workplace Relations <https://www.employment.gov.au/workplace-relations>

Australian Government—Department of Family and Community Services—Office for Women <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/>

Australian Industrial Relations Commission [www.airc.gov.au](http://www.airc.gov.au)

Barbara Caine (ed), **Australian Feminism: A Companion**. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998

Communist Party Australia [www.cpa.org.au](http://www.cpa.org.au)

Zelda D'Aprano, **Zelda: The Becoming of a Woman**. Z D'Aprano, North Carlton, 1977 (Republished by Spinifex Press as **Zelda** in 1995 with a lengthy afterword)

Zelda D'Aprano, Kath Williams: **The Unions and the Fight for Equal Pay**. Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2001

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [www.hreoc.gov.au](http://www.hreoc.gov.au)

OzLeft: A History of the Australian Labor Party by Peter Conrick <http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Conrick.html>

**Perspective on World History and Current Events**

The DLP. An Oral History [www.pwhce.org/dlp.html](http://www.pwhce.org/dlp.html)

History of Labor Splits (Talk by Robert Murray) [www.pwhce.org/textmurr.html](http://www.pwhce.org/textmurr.html)

Women's Web: <http://www.womensweb.com.au/> Includes 'stories' from Zelda D'Aprano and Yvonne Smith