

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE0769

Follett, Rosemary

(1948 -)

Born 27 March, 1948, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Politician, Public servant

Summary

Rosemary Follett was born in Sydney in 1948 but is Canberra in her heart, describing herself as 'in lock step' with the city. (Interview) 'It's a peaceful, tolerant place' with a 'sense of spaciousness and community' she says. (*Interview*)

It is also the place where she, as the Australian Capital Territory's (ACT's) first chief minister, in 1989 became the first woman to lead an Australian state or territory government. As ALP leader, she presided over 3 ministries and remained in parliament until 1996 as the member of Molonglo. Her portfolio responsibilities included Social Justice, Treasury and Public Service, Attorney-General, Law Reform, Consumer Affairs, Police and Emergency Services.

Follett described herself as belonging to the Left faction of the ALP and came to power with a platform of open accountable government, social justice and a policy that half of all positions on government advisory boards and committees should be filled by women.

After leaving politics she served as the ACT Discrimination Commissioner from 1996 until 2004.

Details

Rosemary Follett came to Canberra in 1952 and was educated at the former Catholic Girls High School (now Merici College, where a wing is named after her). Her mother and father were both from the Canberra region (Cooma and Bungendore), met as members of the armed services before the start of the Second World War (father was in the army and mother in naval intelligence), married at the end of the war and moved to Sydney for work after the war. They were from very different backgrounds, and this was a source of tension, as it was for many couples in early twentieth century Australia who crossed the sectarian divide. Rosemary's mother's family were Catholic, intellectual and high achievers; her aunt was a doctor who, for a time, was the highest ranking woman in the navy. The Follett family, on the other hand, had no pedigree for education and were Anglican. Judith Lusby, a BA from the University of Sydney, and Aubrey Follett, a court reporter, married in a Catholic church in Sydney and the Follett family did not attend. The family moved to Canberra when Aubrey Follett obtained work as a Hansard reporter. While work brought them to Canberra, the promise of a house in Canberra was a key motivation. The housing crisis in Sydney was so acute, the Follett family decided they had been shown enough houses with dirt floors and took the plunge and headed towards a duplex in Yarralumla.

Rosemary's mother's family provided ample models of educated women demonstrating what could be achieved by women with a good education. The aforementioned aunt, an ancestor in the nineteenth century who nursed in the NSW Northern Rivers District, even Rosemary's mother, who battled her conservative husband for the right to enrol in a teaching degree at the Australian National University (ANU) when her daughters were at school, all presented Rosemary with models of women who combined work with family. Education was a priority for members of the Follett household. And because of her father's job, Follett received a unique perspective on political life. Dinner table conversations often revolved around the day's happenings in parliament, and the admirable qualities of the few women who sat. These conversations broadened into more general discussions about policies, and what differentiated the parties. As she grew older, she began to understand that the Labor Party was the party of reform.

Follett's education was a catholic one, and although she enjoyed primary school, where she excelled, the same could not be said of her experience of secondary school. She was young when she started and acknowledges that she was academically ready but socially and emotionally unprepared. The transition was difficult and it wasn't helped by the unevenness of the teaching in the catholic system for girls. 'Many of the nuns did not appear to be all that happy: they seemed to be 'the nuns that could be spared' by their orders.' (*Interview*) They terrified the girls with their stories of martyrdom and sacrifice, rather than inspire them with the stories of Mary McKillop or other nuns who worked for social justice in the church. If not for the encouragement of her mother and Mother Gonzaga, who allowed her to read whatever she wanted to read, surviving school would have been close to impossible.

After school, Follett earned an Advanced Diploma in Secretarial Studies and joined the public service. She left home at 18 and travelled with a friend to Darwin in 1966. Working for the Chief Geologist in a 'frontier' town was an eye opener, especially for the lack of a female presence in public spaces. After Darwin, she moved to Sydney where she worked for a mining company. While working in the mining industry, she began to develop a sense of the power of capital, and how poorly the existing Occupational Health and Safety Legislation protected working people and their families.

While in Sydney, she met someone (from Canberra) and got married. (In a strange twist, her sister married her husband's brother!) She came back to Canberra, got married and continued working as a secretary for some years, while her husband studied, although, as a married woman, she was no longer permitted to work for the public service. In 1973, she returned to study too, taking advantage of the free university education introduced by the Whitlam Government elected in December of 1972.

In the 1970s, Follett became increasingly interested in the variety of social movements that were bubbling along at the time. She found her sympathies generally aligned with Australian Labor Party (ALP) policies and, after the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975, joined Ginninderra branch of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 1975, becoming its president from 1983 to 1984. She admits that in the early days, she was very quiet at meetings. As someone who'd had a sheltered life and upbringing, she found the militancy of some other members very confronting. 'I thought my mother's modest way of making change was more appropriate'. (*Interview*) In 1984 she was elected women's co-ordinator for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) branch of the ALP and this gave her experience in the women's policy committee and the feminist caucus. From 1985 to 1986 she was a member of the ACT House of Assembly, and by 1987 was elected ALP ACT Branch president.

She completed her degree and rejoined the Australian Public Service (APS) through their graduate recruitment program. She became a highly active workplace delegate with the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association. It took her a while to find a position that she enjoyed and felt useful in, but she found it in the Office for Women's Affairs (OWA) when it was located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, working to establish the newly formed National Women's Advisory Council (NWAC). Working in this environment helped to develop her understanding of feminism and the feminist movement. Heavily influenced by Germaine Greer's 'The Female Eunuch', Follett learned more from the staff at the OWA, from impressive women such as Sara Dowse. She was committed to the feminist movement and felt for other women in the office forced to navigate the tension between feminism and bureaucracy on a daily basis.

Not long after the OWA was moved to the Department of Home Affairs, Follett changed areas and began working in the Cultural Heritage area, where she was encouraged to take part in the APS Executive Leadership Program. Climbing further through the ranks of the APS she came to the conclusion that being an executive public servant might not actually be as interesting as doing the hands on work of someone a couple of rungs down. At around the same time that she was forming

these conclusions, she was asked if she would be interested in filling a casual vacancy in the House of Assembly in the run up to self government. She accepted the invitation, was preselected and took on the role as the opposition (ALP) Member for Fraser.

Follett then took on the ACT ALP Presidency and became well known as a good negotiator who was able to consult with all the factions of the ALP, as well as the opposition parties; a very important skill to possess at a time when the goal of self-government in the A.C.T was still being worked towards. She was determined to ensure that the ALP could be viewed by the electorate as a viable alternative in government. She was clearly successful in her determination; in 1989, Rosemary Follett was elected first Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory which made her the first woman to lead an Australian state or territory government. In 1990 a *Canberra Times* – Datacol opinion poll put her popularity at a high 73 per cent.

Despite this, her first term was very short; she lost a vote of no confidence in 1990 after a year in office, returned in 1991 and then re-elected in 1992 into a much more stable political environment. In 1995 she was defeated by the Liberal Party of Australia under Kate Carnell. Follett resigned from the ACT Legislative Assembly in December 1996. After leaving politics, Follett was appointed the ACT Sex Discrimination Commission, a position she held until 2004.

That she was the first woman to lead a state or territory did not hit her hard until she attended her first commonwealth heads of governments grant commission meeting where she was the only woman. In fact, she says, ‘there wasn’t much positive publicity about it at the time. My opponent used to refer to my ministry as ‘a powder puff government’’. (*Interview*) She was surprised by the level of obsession that the public had with her appearance, and appalled by the sexism of some media coverage. In the A.C.T. the chief minister is also treasurer. A journalist had the gall to ask her how she was going to manage the budget! But as time went by, some things improved. In 1992, more women (Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence) were at the state and territory leaders meetings.

The scrutiny on her appearance and private life, however, did not abate. She was once told by a journalist that that they were relying upon her for two stories a day, which could have been useful if the focus was on policy and not her wardrobe. ‘There was consistent commentary about what I wore, rather than what I was doing,’ she says. (*Interview*). Which was a lot; Follett acknowledges that the amount of work was extraordinary and sometimes overwhelming, but she was determined to stay in charge as long as she could because there major policy areas she wanted to achieve, especially in the area of occupation health and safety legislations, consumer protection laws and pursuing feminist policy initiatives. Her hard work took its toll personally. She ‘can’t imagine how she would have done the job with children’ and admires women such as current (2013) Chief Minister Katy (*Interview*) She could not have achieved what she did without the support of excellent mentors in her party and the close, critical friendship of her two sisters.

Follett was always comfortable with leadership, saying that ‘she works best when she is in charge’. (*Interview*) While always comfortable with the responsibilities that come with leadership she found learning to accept the judgments that come with political leadership took longer. ‘All political careers end in defeat’, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t pursue them! (*Interview*) The personal satisfaction of achieving meaningful change for the good, and bringing people through with you, to reach consensus on an important policy matter, cannot be underestimated. Nor can the opportunities for further career development. Since leaving politics, Follett has been: deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Canberra; Chair of the Vocational Education and Training Authority; a member of the University of Canberra Council; member of the Sentence Administration Board and Chair of the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies. She led a trade mission to Japan and was instrumental in bringing about the ACT’s sister-city relationship with Nara and was a member of the Milk Authority of the ACT 1996 and the Canberra Labor Club, Canberra Tradesmen’s Club and the Fabian Society. ACT politics has provided Rosemary Follett with a rich and interesting life.

Which no doubt reinforces her enduring love for the city of Canberra. Speaking for herself, and countless others, she says ‘Eighteen year olds will always leave Canberra but they will always come back. Even retirees return!’ (*Interview*)

Events

1983 - 1984

President of the Australian Labor Party, Ginninderra Branch

2017 - 2017

Received for service to the Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly, particularly through influencing the development of self-government and as an inaugural Chief Minister, and to community development, human rights, and the advancement of women.

Published resources

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 2004, 2004

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book

No ordinary lives: pioneering women in Australian politics, Jenkins, Cathy, 2008

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Rosemary Follett interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Women and leadership in a century of Australian democracy oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Rosemary Follett, former Chief Minister of the ACT, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

Author Details

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Digital resources



Title: Portrait of Rosemary Follett

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