The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE24071296

Henderson, Robyn Lyn

(1947 -)

Born	19470123, Bathurst New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Administrator, Parliamentarian, Women's rights activist

Summary

Robyn Henderson is a feminist activist, former politician and public sector manager who has devoted many years to reducing inequalities in Australian society through her work in both non-government and government agencies. She was elected to the ACT House of Assembly in 1979 as Robyn Walmsley, serving until 1985, and was very active in the development of abortion counselling, family planning and women’s refuge services in the ACT. She has worked in many areas of social policy and public administration in the NSW State and Commonwealth governments, and on aid projects in Solomon Islands and Timor Leste.

Details

Robyn Henderson was born in Bathurst, daughter of William and Laurel Henderson (née Sutton). Soon after, the family moved to Queanbeyan, near Canberra, and then to Canberra where Robyn completed her schooling at the Canberra Church of England Girls Grammar School in 1963. There were many discussions about politics and ideas over the dinner table as she grew up, helping shape her determination to work to expose and eliminate discrimination against women and other disadvantaged members of society.

Robyn's first degree was a Bachelor of Science (Australian National University 1968) and she initially worked as a biochemist in Canberra and Sydney. She subsequently studied political science, women's studies and law, and holds a Bachelor of Arts Honours (ANU 1980), Diploma of Labour Studies (University of Adelaide 1991), Master of Letters in Cultural Studies (University of Central Queensland 1996) and a Bachelor of Laws Honours (University of London 2011).

On her marriage in 1969 to barrister (later judge) Stephen Walmsley Robyn changed her surname to Walmsley. They had two children, Claudia and Joshua. Robyn resumed her family name of Henderson when her children completed primary school. In 1993 she married Geoffrey Evans, a soil scientist, farmer and political activist.

Robyn's early interest in social justice grew rapidly and purposefully as the feminist movement burgeoned in the early 1970s. She joined the just-emerging Women's Electoral Lobby in the lead-up to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, and remained an active long-time member. She joined the Australian Labor Party in 1985.

In the early 1970s, Robyn became very active in the creation of the Abortion Counselling Service in Canberra, and was vice-president of the ACT Family Planning Association, a member of Women Against Rape, and a Board member of the East and South East Asia and Oceania Region of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. This was not without risk, as she received at least one death threat. Nevertheless, Robyn was an initiator and early supporter of Beryl, Canberra's first women's refuge (1975–1979) and the women seeking its help. She went on to work as the administrator of the Canberra Women's Refuge in 1981–1982, and in 1981 was elected vice-president of the ACT Council of Social Service.

Robyn (then Walmsley) won election in 1979 to the ACT House of Assembly as a Labor member for the Division of Canberra and was re-elected in 1982. She then served briefly as acting leader of the Party until Maurene Horder was elected leader. Robyn resigned from the Assembly in 1985 and was replaced by Rosemary Follett. During her tenure, Robyn chaired the Assembly's Social Welfare Committee and was closely involved in the development of health, welfare and housing policies at both ACT and national levels.

Robyn moved to Sydney in 1985, spending the next twenty years working in both non-government and State government sectors, predominantly on social policies in areas ranging from women's development and well-being to childcare, housing, aged care, local government, mental health, and industry and labour force issues. Her roles included:

NSW State Secretary for Community Aid Abroad (1985–1986)

Director of the NSW Council of Social Services (1986–1989)

Executive Director of the National Council and the NSW Division of the (then Royal) Institute of Public Administration (1990–1995)

Chief of Staff to Faye Lo Po, NSW Minister for Women, and Fair Trading (1995–1998)

Director-General of the NSW Department of Women (1998–2004).

Common threads in her positions were extensive organisational change and cultural transformations as well as the development of new standards and approaches to improving social justice outcomes. Sometimes to her personal cost in highly politicised environments, Robyn consolidated a reputation for integrity and fearlessness as an adviser and advocate for policy based explicitly on progressive principles of fairness, equity, social inclusion and the democratic advancement of a civil society.

Robyn left Australia to join the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) as advisor to the Solomon Islands' Prime Minister and Head of the Cabinet Office (2004–2006). She worked with senior politicians and public sector officials to reassert basic principles of good public sector governance after a period of violent civil unrest. Robyn re-engineered the Cabinet Office and developed new processes to better coordinate policy across the Solomon Islands Government. She subsequently worked on capacity-building in the Timor-Leste Police Development Program in Dili, Timor Leste (2008).

From the late 2000s Robyn has undertaken several consultancies and then senior posts in the Commonwealth Public Service responsible for strategic intelligence reports, policy papers and program evaluations in agencies including the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and the federal departments of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, the Treasury, and Employment and Workplace Relations.

Robyn was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2024 for her significant service to public administration and to social welfare.

Published resources

Book
Our Mothers, Henderson, Robbie (ed.), 2022

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