Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1867

Keneally, Kristina Marie Kerscher

(1968 -)

Born	19681219, Las Vegas Nevada United States
Occupation	Parliamentarian, Premier, Teacher

Summary

Active in student, religious and union affairs since 1990, Kristina Keneally was the first American-born member of the New South Wales Parliament. In 2003 she was the Australian Labor Party candidate elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly seat of Heffron. She served in several ministries and became the State's first female Premier in 2009, replacing Nathan Rees as leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party. The Labor Government was defeated at the March 2011 election, she was replaced as leader by John Robertson and resigned from State Parliament on 29 June 2012.

She was a presenter for Sky TV News between 2014 and 2017, before contesting unsuccessfully the House of Representatives division of Bennelong in a by-election in December 2017. In January 2018 she was appointed to the Senate, filling a casual vacancy. She resigned from the Senate in order to contest the House of Representatives division of Fowler at the 2022 general election, but was unsuccessful. Since November 2022 she has been the Chief Executive Officer of the Sydney Children's Hospital Foundation.

A complete record of her State parliamentary service can be found on the New South Wales Parliament site, and the record of her service in the Senate, including a link to her first speech, can be found in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook (links below).

In the 2026 Australia Day Honours she was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) 'for distinguished service to the people and the Parliament of Australia, to the Parliament of New South Wales, particularly as Premier, and to the community.'

Details

Born on 19 December 1968 in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA, of an Australian mother and American father, Kristina Keneally grew up in Toledo, Ohio, where she attended high school at Notre Dame Academy. She graduated from the University of Dayton Ohio with Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in political science in 1991 and a Master of Arts (Hons) in 1995 in religious studies, specialising in feminist theology. She was involved in founding the National Association of Students at Catholic Colleges and Universities, serving as its president in 1990 and 1991. Following her graduation in 1991 she volunteered to work for a year as a primary school teacher at the Immaculate Conception School, Cuba, New Mexico, then worked as a graduate assistant in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton Ohio from 1991 to 1994.

A registered Democrat, she worked as an intern for the Lieutenant Governor of Ohio before emigrating to Australia in 1994, where she married Ben Keneally in 1996. The couple had two sons, Daniel and Brendon, but their only daughter, Caroline, died at birth in 1999. This loss inspired her to serve as Patron from 2010-18 of The Stillbirth Foundation of Australia, an organisation promoting awareness, understanding, support and research into stillbirth.

Following her arrival in Australia she worked for the NSW branch of the Society of St Vincent de Paul as State Youth Coordinator and briefly attended the Australian Catholic University in Strathfield, NSW. She became a naturalised Australian citizen in 2000 and joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP). She renounced her American citizenship in 2002 prior to her election to the seat of Heffron in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly in 2003. After being re-elected in the 2007 she became the Minister for Ageing and Disability Service, controversially initiating the rebuilding of outdated institutional residential facilities for people with a disability. In 2008, as Minister for Planning, she managed problems arising from the construction of the desalination pipeline works between Erskineville and Kurnell. She was the State Government's spokeswoman for World Youth Day in 2008 and in November 2009 was appointed Minister for Infrastructure.

By December 2009 she had become the preferred leadership candidate of the Labor Right faction and on 4 December 2009

was elected the 42nd Premier of NSW, becoming the State's first female premier. For the first time in Australian history both the Premier and the Deputy Premier (Carmel Tebbutt) were women. While Premier, Keneally oversaw the controversial development of the Barangaroo headlands and initiated the also controversial privatisation of the state's electricity assets. In December 2010, at Keneally's request, the NSW Governor, Marie Bashir, prorogued Parliament. There was a 16.5 percent two-party preferred statewide swing against her Government in the 2011 elections, the biggest swing in Australian political history. Keneally resigned as Premier and state Labor leader on election night and announced she would return to the backbench. She resigned from Parliament on 29 June 2012. Following the defeat of the Labor Government, in 2012 the Independent Commission into Corruption found Keneally ministers Obeid, Tripodi and Mc Donald had acted in a corrupt manner.

In 2011 Keneally became the director of Souths Care, the nominated charity of the South Sydney Rabbitohs and its chair 2016-18. She chaired Basketball Australia's board 2011-12 and became its CEO from 2012-14. From 2012-18 she was Ambassador of Opportunity International, a microfinance service for the poor in several Asian countries, and from 2015-17 she held the positions of Director of Gender Inclusion, Adjunct Professor at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management and a member of the Referendum Council on Constitutional Recognition.

Keneally regularly contributed to the Guardian Australia between December 2014 and June 2019 on a range of issues such as religion in politics, same-sex marriage and asylum seeking. In May 2014 she began her career as a media presenter, filling in for Ita Buttrose for a week on panel show Studio 10. In July she joined Sky News Australia as co-host of the weekly panel program The Contrarians with Ross Cameron until they were given the own self-titled program Keneally and Cameron. When this program was terminated in April 2015, she joined Peter van Onselen as co-host of the Sky News daytime program To the Point on 1 June 2015. She also became a regular presenter of primetime programs The Cabinet and Credlin & Keneally. Keneally took leave from Sky News on 14 November 2017, the day she announced her intention to stand for the Commonwealth Parliament.

Keneally unsuccessfully stood as ALP candidate for the seat of Bennelong in the by-election on 16 December 2017, but on 30 January 2018 the ALP announced she would fill the casual vacancy caused by the resignation of New South Wales senator Sam Dastyari. She was sworn in on 15 February 2018.

In June 2018 she controversially opposed mandatory reporting for Catholic priests informed of child sexual abuse in confession. She also attended the Rambam Israel Fellowship in Israel, sponsored by the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council, a lobby group that covered the costs of her visit.

Following the 2019 federal election, Labor's new leader Anthony Albanese, expressed his intention to bring Keneally onto the front bench, despite opposition from the NSW Right faction. On 29 May Ed Husic announced his resignation from the front bench and endorsed Keneally as his replacement. On 30 May, Labor's Deputy Leader in the Senate, Don Farrell, announced his resignation from the position to make way for a gender-balanced leadership team and Keneally became the new Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Shadow Minister for Home Affairs, and Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship in the Shadow Cabinet.

Keneally resigned from the Senate on 13 April 2022 in order to contest the NSW House of Representatives seat of Fowler in the 2022 general election, vacated by the retiring MP Chris Hayes and she moved home from the northern beaches to the Fowler electorate, a safe Labor seat that included suburbs such as Cabramatta and Liverpool. The advisability of appointing an American-born woman to a safe Labor seat primarily populated by people of Asian or Middle Eastern background, including a large proportion of migrants and refugees, was contested by Labor MPs such as Anne Aly and Peter Khalil but she had the support of former prime minister Paul Keating. Keneally was defeated at the election by Independent candidate Dai Le, a lawyer, a former Liberal Party councillor and Vietnamese refugee who was endorsed by previous incumbent Hayes as his preferred candidate, due to her ability to represent the multiculturalism of the area and her strong links to the community. This was one of only two Labor losses at the 2022 federal election.

In November 2022 Keneally was appointed CEO of the Sydney Children's Hospitals Foundation. She was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in the Australia Day Honours 2026 for 'distinguished service to the people and the Parliament of Australia, to the Parliament of New South Wales, particularly as Premier, and to the community'.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Putting Skirts on the Sacred Benches: Women Candidates for the New South Wales Parliament, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2006,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/pssb/home.html

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
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Article
Brawler who never played like a girl, Snow, Deborah and Davies, Anne, 2009,
http://www.smh.com.au/national/brawler-who-never-played-like-a-girl-20091203-k8uo.html

Kristina Keneally: Wikipedia entry,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristina_Keneally

Website
The Hon. Kristina Kerscher Keneally,
https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/formermembers/Pages/former-member-details.aspx?pk=2171

Book
Keneally, the Hon. Kristina Kerscher AO,
https://handbook.aph.gov.au/parliamentarians/LNW

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