Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5664

Beazley, Margaret Joan

(1951 -)

Born	19510101, Hurstville New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Barrister, Judge, Lawyer, Queen's Counsel

Summary

The Hon. Margaret Joan Beazley AO, AC was an Australian judge. She was both the first woman to sit as a Judge of Appeal on the New South Wales Court of Appeal in 1996, and the first woman to occupy the position of President of that Court in 2013. She retired from that court in 2019.

She has been described as a “fierce advocate for women in the legal profession”, and in 2006 was designated an Officer of the Order of Australia for her “service to the judiciary and the law, particularly through contributions to professional and ethical standards, to the advancement of women in the legal profession and the community.”

She was sworn in as Governor of New South Wales in May 2019, and made a companion (AC) in the general division of the Order of Australia on Australia Day, 2020 for her eminent service to the people of New South Wales, particularly through leadership roles in the judiciary, and as a mentor of young women lawyers.

Go to ‘Details’ below to read an essay written by Margaret Beazley for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Margaret Beazley and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

Born in 1951, Margaret Beazley grew up in Hurstville in the St George area. She was the middle child of Gordon and Lorna Beazley. Neither of her parents had the education that she did – growing up during the Great Depression and WWII, “their opportunity to become educated in the formal sense irrevocably slipped by.” Her father worked as a milkman to support his five children. Nonetheless, both of Beazley’s parents were very supportive of education, and worked to ensure their children were provided with the opportunities not available to them.

Beazley attended St Declan’s Primary School, Penshurst, before moving to St Joseph’s Girls High School, Kogarah for junior high school and Mount St Joseph, Milperra for senior high school. The latter two schools were run by “Brown” Josephite Sisters, named after the brown habits that they wore.

The two years that Beazley spent at Milperra were particularly formative. She was taught by a number of inspiring women, including Associate Professor Patricia Malone, who was known to her as Sister Jude, and Nora Finnucane, known as Sister Stanislaus. Beazley has described these woman as having “immense intellects and… extraordinary vision, particularly regarding what women could do and should be doing.” The ethos of the school was that the girls could and should be encouraged to pursue tertiary education, and to follow the career path of their choosing. Beazley demonstrated leadership from these early days, being elected captain of both her junior and senior high school.

Beazley commenced reading for a Bachelor of Laws at Sydney University Law School in 1970. That year also coincided with the publication of Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch, and is often regarded as a turning point in the feminist movement. Women remained a minority at law school, although Beazley’s class contained an unusually high number of women, many of whom went on to build very successful careers. Other notable alumni from Beazley’s graduating class include Professor Margaret Somerville and Irene Moss. Beazley graduated with Honours in 1973.

After graduating, Beazley completed her articles with the law firm Winter & Sharp. She was admitted as a Solicitor of the Supreme Court in February 1975, although had but the briefest career as a solicitor, being called to the Bar in March of the same year. Life at the Bar commenced for Beazley on the ninth floor of Selbourne Chambers. She read with Murray Tobias, who would later become one of her colleagues on the Court of Appeal. Beazley was the only female on her floor at that time. She has recalled the difficulty

of this “peer deprivation” in her professional life, but developed a close camaraderie with members of the Bar and with her instructing solicitors. In particular, Beazley formed a friendship with the Honourable Justice Jane Matthews AO, the first woman to serve as a Crown Prosecutor, to be appointed as a Judge of the District Court of NSW and to be appointed as a Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW.

As one of the pioneering women at the Bar, other difficulties which Beazley was required to contend with included the difficulty persuading male solicitors to brief a female barrister, and the pervasive attitude that women at the Bar should only work in Family Law. However, Beazley built a flourishing practice in equity, commercial and administrative law, and was appointed as Queen’s Counsel in 1989 – colloquially known as ‘taking silk’. In 1991, Beazley moved to the sixth floor of Selbourne Chambers. One barrister who appeared against her described her as “a friendly, co-operative, but also tenacious and formidable forensic opponent.”

Whilst still at the Bar, Beazley gained a taste of judicial life. From 1984 to 1988, she served as a judicial member of the New South Wales Equal Opportunity Tribunal. In 1990 and 1991, she served as an Acting Judge of the District Court of New South Wales. In 1991 and 1992, she served as an Assistant Commissioner of the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption.

In January 1993, Beazley was appointed a Judge of the Federal Court of Australia, the first female appointment to sit solely as a judge of that Court. Whilst on the Federal Court bench, she was a member of its Finance, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Court Liaison and Gender Awareness Committees. In 1994, she was also commissioned as an additional judge of the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court and the Industrial Relations Court of Australia.

From 1994 to 1995, Beazley was a consultant to the Australian Law Reform Commission, assisting with the reference on “Gender Bias and the Law”. This reference resulted in a substantial, two-part report addressing the failures of the law to deal effectively with violence perpetrated by men on women, and the specific laws and practices of the legal system that contribute to women’s inequality.

On 29 April 1996, Beazley was sworn in as a Judge of Appeal on the NSW Court of Appeal, the first woman to be appointed to such a position. As she joked at her swearing in, she would be sitting alongside a “Chief Justice and eight wise men.” This would remain the situation until the swearing in of the Honourable Justice Ruth McColl AO in 2006.

In 2006, Beazley chaired the advisory committee of the Judicial Commission of New South Wales which prepared the “Equality Before the Law Bench Book”, intended to enhance the ability of the courts to deliver equal justice according to law. Recognising that equality before the law will not always be achieved through treating everybody equivalently, the Bench Book provided guidance to judicial officers on taking into account different backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles and socioeconomic disadvantages.

Beazley’s abilities as a jurist and leadership within the Court of Appeal recommended her for the position of President of the Court of Appeal. She was sworn in as President in March 2013, again making legal history by being the first woman to hold this position.

In addition to her rich judicial career, Beazley has contributed to the development of the law through her involvement in academic activities. She is the Chair of the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Administrative Law, and the author of many articles on diverse areas of the law. In May 2008, she was awarded Doctor of Laws honoris causa (Hon LLD) by the University of Sydney. She is a co-author of the book “Appeals and Appellate Courts in Australia and New Zealand” (LexisNexis, 2014) with Dr Paul Vout and Sally Fitzgerald, and a contributor to Sappideen and Vines (eds), “Fleming’s The Law of Torts” (Lawbook Co, 2011, 10th ed).

Beazley has maintained strong involvement in the community, including through her positions of member of the Advisory Board of the Centenary Institute, patron of the Toongabbie Legal Centre and President of the Arts Law Centre of Australia. In October 2013, Beazley was awarded Life Membership of the NSW Bar Association for exceptional service to the Bar Association and to the profession of the law.

Beazley has used her influence to improve the number and status of women in the law. She has set a strong example through her own career progression, becoming one of the most senior women judges in the country. She has mentored and inspired many women to become barristers, regaling them with her own tales of battling what was an unshakable old boys club, and backing them to do it successfully even if that means precariously juggling family and life commitments. In 2012, Beazley was named one of the Australian Financial Review’s “100 Women of Influence” in the category of “diversity”, recognising women who have dedicated themselves to advocating for a more diverse workforce and who have helped make the change happen. In 2013, Beazley was the recipient of the Women Lawyers of NSW Lifetime Achievement award.

For leisure, she relishes the company of her family including her two daughters and son, with whom she enjoys theatre, music and any form of sport (except boxing).

Events

1996 -
Judge of Appeal of the New South Wales Court of Appeal

2013 -
President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal

1974 - 1974
Graduated in law, with honours, from the University of Sydney in 1974

1984 - 1988
Judicial Member of the Equal Opportunity Tribunal

1990 - 1991
Acting District Court Judge

1991 - 1992
Assistant Commissioner of the Independent Commission Against Corruption

1993 - 1996
Judge of the Federal Court of Australia

1994 - 1996
Judge of the Industrial Relations Court of Australia from 1994–96

1994 - 1997
Judge of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory

Published resources

Resource Section
Margaret Beazley Biography, Brodsky, Juliette, 2011,
http://www.nswbar.asn.au/the-bar-association/oral-history#/margaretBeazley

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

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Her Honour Margaret Beazley (with Kathleen Heath)

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