

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5706

Branson, Catherine Margaret

(1948 -)

Born 1 January, 1948

Occupation Academic, Barrister, Commissioner, Crown Solicitor, Judge, Lawyer, Public servant, Queen's Counsel

Summary

The Hon. Catherine Branson QC grew up in rural South Australia and went on to have a distinguished career in the law. The first woman in Australia (and probably in the common law world) to be appointed Crown Solicitor, she was also the first woman to be appointed permanent head of a government department in South Australia. Called to the South Australian Bar in 1989, Branson took silk in 1992. An appointment to the Federal Court of Australia followed in 1994; she served on the bench until 2008. In 2008, Branson became President of the Australian Human Rights Commission and in 2009 she was appointed Human Rights Commissioner.

Since retiring from the Commission in 2012, Branson has continued to work in the area of human rights at a number of organisations, including the University of Adelaide Law School, where she is Adjunct Professor, and the Melbourne-based Human Rights Law Centre, of which she is Director.

Catherine Branson was interviewed by Kim Rubenstein for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

The Hon. Catherine Branson QC was raised on a farm near Hallett in the mid-north of South Australia. Her parents, Max and Barbara Rayner, brought her up to be resilient, independent and community-minded [Wright]. She was educated at Presbyterian Girls' College (now Seymour College) and the University of Adelaide, graduating with a Bachelor of Laws and later, a Bachelor of Arts. As a young woman, she was inspired by Roma Mitchell, who had recently become the first woman in Australia to be appointed to the judiciary, and by Mary Gaudron, who was Solicitor-General New South Wales and would later become the first woman to serve on the bench of the High Court of Australia [Lawyers Weekly].

In 1972, following a stint in which she tutored at the University of Adelaide's Law School, Branson travelled to the United States and undertook voluntary legal aid work in Pontiac, Michigan. This experience, which brought her face-to-face with extreme social disadvantage borne by her mostly African-American clients, sparked what would be a lasting interest in human rights [Adelaidean].

Returning to Australia in 1973, Branson began articles of clerkship and completed her arts degree. In 1977 she entered the Department of Legal Services in South Australia, taking up a role as research assistant with the then Solicitor-General, Brian Cox QC.

A year later, Branson, practising as a solicitor, joined the Crown Solicitor's Office. Interested in gender and equal opportunity, she became a member of the National Women's Advisory Council, advising the Prime Minister on matters concerning women. In 1984, Branson made history when a dual appointment saw her become the first woman in Australia to be appointed Crown Solicitor and the first woman to be appointed as permanent head of a government department in South Australia. She had not expected to be made the offer, and now sees it as transformative in terms of her later career [Lawyers Weekly]. Branson was called to the South Australian Bar in Adelaide in 1989; in her practice she specialised in administrative law, including discrimination law, and commercial law. In 1992, she took silk.

An appointment to the Federal Court of Australia followed in 1994. During her time on the bench, Branson presided over a number of significant cases, which included the Yorta Yorta appeal for a native title claim and the Wilderness Society's appeal on Gunns' pulp mill in Tasmania. Branson also delivered many papers addressing equality and gender issues, and the under-representation of women in positions of power.

Branson served as President of the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration between 1998-2000. Her interest in judicial administration and education resulted in her travelling to a number of developing countries, including the Palestinian Territories, Indonesia and Pakistan [Trove] to work with local judges. Branson retired from the Federal Court in 2008. In 2008 Branson was appointed President of the Australian Human Rights Commission. The following year she was appointed Human Rights commissioner. In her capacity as commissioner she expressed her support for a federal charter of rights and was signatory to the Australian Council of Human Rights Agencies support for civil marriage for same-sex couples; she also appealed for mandatory detention and offshore processing on Christmas Island to cease [Pelly; HRC; On Line Opinion].

Branson's involvement with the Human Rights Commission saw her participation in human rights matters in the broader Asia region. During her presidency she travelled to Vietnam to attend an Australia-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue and to the Philippines to deliver the keynote address at the Australia-Philippines Policy Forum on Human Rights [Philippines Embassy].

Branson has been a strong voice for those who suffer due to discrimination or disability, among them asylum seekers, children in mandatory immigration detention and Indigenous Australians. She has spoken out on the subject of violence against women and the under-representation of women in positions of power in Australia. In recognition of her tireless work as an advocate for equality, Branson was awarded a Distinguished Alumni Award by the University of Adelaide for her contribution to Australian Law and Human Rights in 2011 [Adelaidean – Award].

Branson retired as president of the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2012. Her dedication to human rights in Australian society continues to find expression in a number of arenas, including at the Law School, University of Adelaide, where she is Adjunct Professor, and at Melbourne's Human Rights Law Centre, of which she is Director.

In addition to being a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law, Branson is a member of the Council of the University of Adelaide; a Board member of Cancer Council SA; a member of the Advisory Board, Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law; patron, NeuroSurgical Research Foundation and the Palya Fund; chair, South Australian Selection Panel, General Sir John Monash Scholarships; and a member of the Advisory Board, Public Law and Policy Research Unit, Adelaide Law School.

In 2012 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Laws by Flinders University in recognition of her 'long and esteemed career in the law' and in 2014 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Macquarie University for her services as a passionate advocate and supporter of human rights [Macquarie].

Branson has been quoted as advocating for a visionary society which "allows individuals the freedom to live responsible and fulfilling lives irrespective of gender" [Kenny]. She has been, and will continue to be, an inspiration to many in our society.

Catherine Branson was interviewed in 2014 and 2015 by Kim Rubenstein for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

Catherine Branson interviewed by Kim Rubenstein in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project

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Digital resources



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