

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE5717

## Irwin, Rebecca

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**Occupation** Lawyer, Legal officer, Solicitor

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### Summary

Rebecca Irwin holds the position of Senior Manager Government Relations and Public Policy at the global resources company BHP Billiton. An experienced leader and negotiator, she has served in the upper echelons of Australian government, including the Attorney-General's Department and as a Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister, since graduating with first-class honours in Law from the University of Sydney in 1995. In May 2000, Ms Irwin made history when she became the first Australian woman lawyer to address an international tribunal, in her capacity as counsel for Australia in the Southern Bluefin Tuna Case against Japan. She has been a first assistant secretary in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and in the Department of Agriculture; she has also been a senior executive working on national security and law enforcement policy with the Australian Federal Police and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Canberra. A former associate to the Hon. Justice Margaret Beazley (later AO) of the Federal Court of Australia, Sydney, Ms Irwin practised as a solicitor at the law firm Mallesons Stephen Jaques. The recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, she has a Master of Laws from Harvard Law School in the United States.

Rebecca Irwin 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

Rebecca Irwin graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Arts in 1993 and a Bachelor of Laws (First-class Honours) in 1995. Awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and a Lionel Murphy Scholarship for 1996-7, she declined the latter in favour of the former, going on to attend Harvard Law School, where she graduated with a Master of Laws and won the Laylin Prize for best thesis in international law.

After returning to Australia, Ms Irwin became associate to the Hon. Justice Margaret Beazley (now AO) of the Federal Court of Australia in Sydney. Admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and the High Court of Australia in 1997, she practised as a solicitor at Mallesons Stephen Jaques in Sydney, advising on competition law and trade practices.

In 1998, Ms Irwin changed direction, taking up a role as principal legal officer in the Office of International Law, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra. There, Ms Irwin advised on the consistency of government policy with international law across a range of matters and also on the implementation of international law in Australia and treaty negotiations.

In 2000, Ms Irwin created legal history in her capacity as counsel for Australia in the Southern Bluefin Tuna Arbitration Case against Japan. The countries were in dispute over whether southern bluefin tuna, a valuable migratory species of tuna which ranges over southern seas near the Antarctic and is prized in Japan for sashimi, was recovering from a state of severe over-fishing. The case was heard before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, Hamburg, Germany, and an arbitration hearing on jurisdiction in Washington DC, USA. Ms Irwin was the first woman to have a speaking part, in presenting material, to the Tribunal – thus making her the first Australian woman lawyer to address an international tribunal. That year, Ms Irwin was awarded an Australia Day Achievement Award by the Attorney-General's Department.

In 2001, Ms Irwin was seconded to the Office of the Attorney-General as a departmental liaison officer. During this time she was closely involved in the Government response to 9/11, increasingly advising the Attorney on national security issues. She then returned to the Office of International Law in the Attorney-General's Department as assistant secretary. Ms Irwin led delegations on multilateral treaty negotiations which concerned the Timor Sea treaty, Indonesian maritime boundary, United Nations (on the independence of East Timor), and commercial negotiations with the international oil and gas industry. Continuing her public international law litigation work, she also appeared as junior counsel in the PetroTimor litigation in the Federal Court of Australia.

From 2005 until early 2008, Ms Irwin worked as assistant secretary responsible for domestic security, in the National

Security Division, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra. She built and led a branch responsible for counter terrorism and law enforcement; transport and border security; critical infrastructure and emergency management; and the National Counter Terrorism Committee Secretariat.

During this period, Ms Irwin was panel chair at the American Society of International Law Conference, and participated in bilateral homeland security briefings in Washington DC. She was also a member of the Australian delegation to Indonesian Regional Counter Terrorism Conference. Ms Irwin was presented with the Australia Day Achievement Award in 2006 by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

In early 2008, Ms Irwin took up the role of senior adviser in the office of the then prime minister, The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP. Ms Irwin was the lead adviser for four portfolios: Attorney-General and Home Affairs, Immigration, Special Minister of State, and the Status of Women.

From 2009 until June 2010, Ms Irwin was employed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship as first assistant secretary. In this role she drove research and analysis on medium to longer term policy issues across all areas of immigration policy and operations, including skilled migration, population, refugees and irregular maritime arrivals, border protection, citizenship and multicultural affairs, and service delivery. The result was the establishment of a research program to build policy capability within the Department.

Once more demonstrating her capacity to bring exceptional leadership, policy knowledge and relationship-building to bear on a new environment, Ms Irwin became national manager policy and governance in the Australian Federal Police in Canberra. Ms Irwin again managed a new division within the Australian Federal Police, developing strategic policy on law enforcement, policing and national security.

From 2012 to November 2014, Ms Irwin was employed by the Department of Agriculture as first assistant secretary in the Live Animal Division. Given the task of building a new division to manage live animal export matters, Ms Irwin led and managed a national team while working closely with Australia's agricultural counsellors at overseas posts.

Since 2014, Ms Irwin, in her role as Senior Manager Government Relations and Public Policy at BHP Billiton, has guided the company's engagement with the Australian Government in Canberra across a broad range of matters concerned with the economic, industry, environment and international policy. As part of BHP Billiton's global public policy team, Rebecca also works with her counterparts in the United States, United Kingdom and Asia on key policy matters which affect the company's operations.

Ms Irwin also works with a number of think tanks and policy analysts on emerging policy and political trends. She is a member of the Institute of Public Administration.

Leadership and strategic policy development in the public sector, advocacy in international tribunals and lead knowledge on agriculture, immigration, international law and national security have enabled Ms Irwin to foster the important relationship between the public sector and business in Australia. Ms Irwin is an inspiring woman who drives innovation and change and has made a significant contribution to Australia's key public and commercial institutions.

## 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

[Rebecca Irwin interviewed by Kim Rubenstein in the Trailblazing women and the law pilot oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

### Author Details

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