

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5739

Tennent, Shan Eve

(1952 -)

Born	19520101, Brisbane Queensland Australia
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Occupation	Barrister, Coroner, Judge, Lawyer, Solicitor
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Summary

The Honourable Justice Shan Tennent was appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court of Tasmania in 2005, making her the first woman to be appointed in the state's (then) 180 year history. She is (in 2016) the second longest serving judge on the jurisdiction after the current Chief Justice The Hon Justice Alan Michael Blow, OAM.

Shan Tennent was interviewed by Nikki Henningham for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

Born in Brisbane in 1952, Justice Tennent was brought up in St Lucia, near the University of Queensland, in Brisbane. The first in her family to attend university, she attended the local state primary school before starting her secondary education at St Aidan's Church of England Girls' School and finishing it at St Peter's Lutheran School, matriculating at the young age of 16 in 1968. Her choice to study law was somewhat accidental; as a student with a preference for humanities, she did not relish the idea of becoming a school teacher, so chose law instead. Enrolling in law in 1969 without the benefit of a scholarship (so fully funded by her parents), as a very young woman in a masculine environment, Tennent admits to being 'overwhelmed' at first. Fortunately, her response to this was to work very hard. She passed first year, while others of her school year didn't. She was rewarded for her tenacity with a Commonwealth Scholarship at the end of her first year.

Almost from the outset of her legal career, Justice Tennent was balancing the demands of work and home life. In second year (1970), she married and in third year, she had a child. She was permitted to complete that year over two years and a supportive family network helped her to manage, so she was able to graduate in 1973. The end of her formal study, however, marked the beginning of her gender trouble, as she applied for articles. One interview experience was particularly deflating. The man across the desk interviewing her waited ten minutes before saying to her 'Look, I'm sorry, there's no point in continuing with this. You'll never remain in the law. It's a waste of my time and effort to train you.' Her self-esteem took a huge battering as she received rejection after rejection, based on the fact that she was a married woman with a child.

She eventually did her two year articles with Alex Freeleagus at Henderson and Lahey, a large Brisbane firm with which she worked for another year after completing articles and being admitted. She started working in matrimonial law, an interesting area at the time, given the introduction of the Family Law Act in 1975. In 1977, Justice Tennent's husband was offered a job in Hobart and so the family moved to Tasmania. Arriving with winter just around the corner was a shock to the system for a woman from Brisbane and without a job, who admits she would have 'quite happily turned around and gone back to Brisbane.' She found work, during school hours initially, doing primarily conveyancing and commercial work. In 1978 she went back to working full time, primarily in the area of family law. She built her practice over the years, working at Hobart firm Page Seagar where she was a partner for 15 years. She was twice president of the Tasmanian Family Law Practitioners Association.

After twenty years in private practice, Justice Tennent became a magistrate and coroner in 1998. She oversaw the high-profile 2001 inquest into prisoner deaths in custody at Risdon Prison, the state's largest prison. The subsequent report resulted in a number of sackings, and ultimately led to the decision to completely rebuild the prison. As a magistrate, she served as vice-president of the State branch of the Association of Australian Magistrates and secretary and treasurer of the Tasmanian Magistrates Association.

In 2005, Justice Tennent was named Tasmania's first female Supreme Court Judge. Said Attorney General Judy Jackson at the time of Justice Tennent's appointment 'Shan Tennent has a striking intellect and an excellent grounding in Tasmanian Law. She will be a justice of the highest order...the first of many women appointed to the bench.' Said Justice Tennent, when asked what sort of judge she thought she might be, 'A fair one. It's a progression in my career and ... I'm sure I will enjoy it.' It's not a bad outcome for someone who was told she wasn't worth training because she would never stay in the law.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

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

Newspaper Article

State's first female judge, Spurgeon, Lucy, 2005,
<http://www.examiner.com.au/story/623137/states-first-female-judge/>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Shan Tennent interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham with Shan Tennent

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Digital resources



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