

60 Second Interview

SECTION ONE: Biography

Susan Ryan, Chair, Human Rights Act for Australia Campaign Inc



Susan Ryan was the first female Labor Cabinet Minister in Australian History. She was appointed the first Labor Senator for the ACT in 1975, where she became the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women (1983-88) and the Minister for Education (1984-87). She pioneered extensive anti discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, including the landmark Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act 1986. Susan was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 1990 for services to the Australian Parliament.

Susan is a frequent media commentator on superannuation, politics, education and women's employment and income. She is currently campaigning for a Human Rights Act for Australia.

SECTION TWO: Question & Answer

Question 1: You were a pioneer for women in politics, being the first woman Cabinet Minister in a Federal Labor government, how different is political life today for woman compare to when you started your career?

The world has changed since I started in politics, we have a female PM. When I was starting even having a female Senator was seen as a radical and risky thing, there were only 6 of us in Parliament. No women in House of Representatives and only 6 in the Senate. Now we have a female PM, female State Premiers we have a number of senior Ministers in both Government and opposition. I think we have broken through all of those prejudices against women in politics.

Question 2: During your time as a Labor MP in Canberra you had a significant impact on legislation for women, what would you say was your most memorable achievement?

I think the landmark was the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984, before that it was legal to sack someone because she was a woman, to sack someone because they were pregnant, to refuse to hire someone because they were married. The Sex Discrimination Act changed behaviour, once they realised they couldn't sack women on these grounds employers had to think things through and it opened up a wide range of opportunities for woman in the workforce. Now you see women in all areas of the workforce, There is also no longer any discrimination in banking and finance like you used to see, woman can now

get a mortgage in their own right and buy a house. In 1984 they couldn't do that so the act changed the way women were treated in the workplace as well as other areas.

The other thing I am very proud of is when I was Education Minister in 1983 there were only one third of students finishing high school, two thirds were dropping out and at that time that meant dropping out straight onto the dole. There were also more boys going through to yr 12 than girls. We changed that, during my time as Minister, to two thirds of students staying on, and now we see more girls doing the HSC, there are more girls going into the medical faculty and the law faculty, girls are now achieving higher marks. What we saw was a transformation of girls educational opportunities, the reform was for all students and it worked for all students but I was aware of the additional benefit for girls education.

Question 3: You are currently the Chair for the Australian Human Rights Group, campaigning for a Human rights Act in Australia. The Government recently announced that it would not be creating the act despite the recommendations of it's own commission. What impact do you think this decision will have on the wider Australian population?

It was a very disappointing decision. Most Australians feel, quite rightly, that their basic human rights are protected however there is a group of people who tend to fall through the cracks they would include homeless people, unemployed people, people suffering from mental illness, refugees, people from minority ethnic groups and of course, indigenous Australians. It is time Australia followed all other advanced democracies and had an umbrella guarantee and a process for making sure basic rights are protected. So while the general Australian public may not feel it is going to make much difference to them, where they will notice a difference is if they have a disabled child or if someone becomes disabled through an accident and they suddenly find all sorts of things they thought were available to them are not available at all. So I am retaining the view we will get it eventually but I must admit it was a disappointing result. We did have over 36,000 put in submissions to the enquiry most of those understood the need for a Human Rights Act. It is something for the future and I won't give up.

Question 4: In 1990, you were awarded an Order of Australia, what impact has this award had on both a personal and professional level?

The Order of Australia... this award was for "services to the Australian parliament". I was overcome at first with a feeling of not deserving it, but then realized it gave great pleasure to my former staff and those parliamentary colleagues who had supported me and especially to my family who had suffered quite a bit of neglect from me during those hectic years.

I believe that parliamentary service is an honour and most of us carry it out with honour, so it was pleasing though rare, to have this aspect of being a parliamentarian recognized.

The award does evoke interest and respect in business and community circles so it is a good ice breaker when I attend a function for the first time.

Question 5: What drives you professionally?

I have always been driven by the conviction that if I come across a bad situation, especially unfairness or discrimination, it is my responsibility to act to try to improve it.

Question 6: What's the best advice you have ever been given?

I was once advised by an old Senator, when I was a new and very young Senator, that I should accept thanks when it is given. My tendency before then was to try to give the credit to someone else. But he pointed out that in politics I would often be blamed for what I hadn't done, that thanks would be rare, so I should accept with grace.

Question 7: Who has been your greatest inspiration in your life?

The greatest inspiration for my political work has been Gough Whitlam. In 1972 he inspired me to believe that parliament could greatly improve the lives of Australians. In the many decades since he, and later I, left politics I have remained impressed by his generous support for so many causes and his tenacious adherence to big and important objectives like justice for Indigenous Australians.

And one for good luck... If you could talk to one person from history, who would it be and what question would you ask them?

The person from Irish history I would like to meet is Michael Collins. He was a great strategic leader at such a young age. I would like to talk to him about the final achievement of peace in Northern Ireland, and where the island of Ireland will be in another 100 years.