

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0022

Couchman, Elizabeth May Ramsay

(1876 - 1982)

Nationality Australian

Born 19 April, 1876, Geelong Victoria Australia

Died 18 November, 1982, MelbourneMelbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Politician

Summary

Elizabeth Couchman, widowed after ten years of marriage, and without children, devoted her life to working in the public sphere. She was president of the Australian Women's National League from 1927 until 1945, when it merged to form the Liberal Party of Australia. She made three unsuccessful attempts to be pre-selected for the Senate. She eventually gained Liberal Party pre-selection for the safe Labor seat of Melbourne in the 1943 election, but was unsuccessful. She worked in the Liberal Party organisation as a member of the state executive and state council and served as Victorian vice-president of the party from 1949-1955. Her major contribution lay in providing a political base for women and increasing their role and effectiveness in political life. She was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire on 31 December 1960 for public and patriotic services.

Details

Elizabeth Couchman was the daughter of Elizabeth Mary (née Ramsay), and Archibald Tannock, Confectioner. She grew up in Geelong, and was educated to matriculation level at the Girls' High School. She matriculated in 1895. After a period of teaching at the Methodist Ladies' College and Tintern, another independent girls' school, she moved to Perth in 1916 to complete a BA at the University of Western Australia, which offered free education. Her major interests were political science, constitutional law and economics.

In 1917, at the age of forty-one, she married businessman Claude Couchman, but had no children. He died ten years later. On his death she decided to devote the rest of her life to the pursuit of public interests, which included voluntary work and the duties of a Justice of the Peace.

Her major focus however, was the Australian Women's National League (AWNL), a conservative women's organisation established in 1904 to support the monarchy and empire, to combat socialism, educate women in politics and safeguard the interests of the home, women and children. During the inter-war years it claimed 40,000 members and was the largest continuing non-labour organisation, but those numbers dwindled to approximately 12,000 by 1944.

Couchman was elected president in 1927 as an acknowledgement of her political astuteness, knowledge and administrative skills. She was the first female to be appointed to the Australian Broadcasting Commission from 1932-1940, and was a member of the Australian delegation to the League of Nations in 1934.

Couchman was influential in the formation of the Liberal Party of Australia in 1944, as the AWNL merged with the old United Australia Party to form the new organisation. She insisted on structural equality for women in the Liberal Party; in particular equal representation of women and men at all levels of the Victorian division, and was involved in establishing the branch structure of the party. She was a member of the state executive and state council and Victorian vice-president from 1949-1955.

Like many politically active women of her generation, she was denied the opportunity to gain a safe seat in the national parliament. She sought pre-selection for the Senate on three occasions, but was unsuccessful. She eventually gained pre-selection to stand in the safe Labor seat of Melbourne in the 1943 election, but lost. Nonetheless, she mentored others such as Margaret Guilfoyle, who came after her and who was elected to the Senate in 1970. Couchman wanted women to be able to participate fully in the political process; to run for office and to do much more than the 'political housework'.

She was appointed as Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire on 31 December 1960 for public and patriotic services.

Dame Elizabeth Couchman died in Melbourne on 18 November 1982 at the age of 106.

Published resources

Book Section

Couchman, Dame Elizabeth May Ramsay, DBE, 1974

Elizabeth Couchman, Sawyer, Marian, 1988

Australian Women's National League, Smart, Judith, 1998

Book

A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia, Sawyer, Marian and Simms, Marian, 1993

Out of the doll's house; women in the public sphere, Encel, Sol and Campbell, Dorothy, 1991

Women of influence: the first fifty years of women in the Liberal Party, Sydenham, Diane, 1996

Liberal women : Federation to 1949, Fitzherbert, Margaret, 2004

So Many Firsts: Liberal Women from Enid Lyons to the Turnbull Era, Fitzherbert, Margaret, 2009

Edited Book

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988

Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Resource Section

Couchman, Dame Elizabeth May Ramsay (1876 - 1982), Smart, Judith, 2006,

<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A170252b.htm>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Dame Elizabeth May Ramsay Couchman, 1913-1970 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers on various Australian women \[19--\] \[manuscript\]](#)

National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Dame Elizabeth Couchman, former first vice-president of the Liberal Party, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

State Library of Victoria

[Papers and history, 1920-1969 \[manuscript\].](#)

Author Details

Rosemary Francis

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