

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE0025

## Ryan, Susan

(1942 - 2020)

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**Born** 10 October, 1942, Maroubra, Sydney New South Wales Australia

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**Died** 27 September, 2020, Randwick New South Wales Australia

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**Occupation** Educator, Parliamentarian, Senator

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### Summary

Susan Ryan was appointed the first Labor Senator for the Australian Capital Territory, in 1975. In the Federal Parliament she was the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister Bob Hawke on the Status of Women 1983-88 and the Minister for Education, 1984-87. She presided over the passage of the federal government's *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunities in Employment) Act 1986*. She later worked in the plastics industry, and in superannuation.

From July 2011 to 2016 she held the newly created position of Age Discrimination Commissioner with the Australian Human Rights Commission. She was also the Disability Discrimination Commissioner from July 2014 to 2016.

Susan Ryan passed away on 27 September, 2020. She was a woman of many firsts; a trailblazer for Labor women in parliament. As former prime minister, Julia Gillard, observed, 'Every Australian's life has been improved by her leadership on gender equality.'

## Details

Susan Ryan was awarded her BA from the University of Sydney in 1962, and MA in English Literature from the Australian National University in 1972. She worked as a school teacher in 1963 and then tutor in English Literature at ANU between 1970-72.

Ryan was a founding member of the Belconnen Branch of the ALP in 1969, and was later Vice-President of the Branch. She was delegate to the ALP ACT Branch Council between 1973-76. She was also a founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby, ACT Branch. Ryan attended the World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 and the United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen in 1980. She was a member of the ALP Federal Policy Committee on Women and Education Officer of the International Women's Year Secretariat.

Elected as one of the first of two Senators for the ACT and the first Labor Senator for the ACT in 1975, Ryan served on a number of parliamentary committees between 1975-83. She was a member of the Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies 1981-83; member of the Opposition Shadow Ministry, Dec 1977-March 1983; Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Hawke Labor Government, 1983; Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, 1983-88; Minister for Education, Dec 1984; and Special Minister of State including responsibilities for the bicentenary, the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse and the implementation of the Australia Card program. She advocated for the Senate to pass the *Sex Discrimination Bill 1982* and enact the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination*, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunities in Employment) Act 1986*. Ryan resigned as Minister and Senator in January 1988. She was awarded the Order of Australia in 1990.

Following her resignation she worked as Publishing Editor of Penguin Books in 1988, Executive Director of the Plastics Industry Association Inc in 1989 and CEO of the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia from 1993 to 1997. She was also the Independent Chair of the IAG and NRMA Superannuation Plan, President of the Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees from 2000 to 2007 and a member of the ASX Corporate Governance Council from 2003 to 2007. She also held a number of positions at the University of New South Wales. She was Pro-Chancellor and Council member from 1998, Chair of the UNSW Risk Committee from 2002 and Chair of the Arts and Social Sciences Advisory Council from 2010.

After retirement from politics, Ryan also remained involved in progressive causes, including as deputy chair of the Australian Republican Movement from 2000 to 2003, and as an advocate of an Australian bill of rights. She remained committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination, returning to the public sphere in 2011 to do so when she was appointed the inaugural Age Discrimination Commissioner. She expanded her remit to include the responsibilities of the Disability Discrimination Commissioner when the two roles were merged in 2014.

Susan Ryan passed away on 27 September 2020. In later life, when reflecting upon her role as the architect of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, which outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status, and pregnancy, she observed that it was "probably the most useful thing I've done in my life".

## Published resources

### Conference Paper

Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy: The Task of Opposition. Catching the Waves: Susan Ryan at the Hawke Institute, Ryan, Susan, 1999

### Resource Section

Person Description - CP 435 - Susan Maree Ryan Law,  
<http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/SearchOld.asp?Number=CP+435>

A long wave still rolling, Bilney, Gordon, 1999,  
<http://www.alp.org.au/laborherald/june99/wave.html>

### Book

Catching the Waves, Ryan, Susan, 1999

Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism, Lake, Marilyn, 1999

No ordinary lives: pioneering women in Australian politics, Jenkins, Cathy, 2008

### Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

## Archival resources

### National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Susan Ryan, author and politician, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

### National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Susan Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse \[sound recording\]](#)

### Fryer Library, The University of Queensland

[Mass media regulation, 1980 Jul by Senator Susan Ryan.](#)

### National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Julia Ryan, 1947-1982 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Peter Ryan, 1927-2010 \(bulk 1962-1996\) \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers Kathleen Abbott, 1964-1990 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Correspondence, 1967-1983, including letters by Thomas Shapcott, Geoffrey Blainey, Michael Costigan, Senator Susan Ryan, Les Hiatt, Mary Tully, Beau Riel, Colin Scrimgeour, Austin Byrne.](#)

[Papers of Craig McGregor, 1961-2005 \[manuscript\]](#)

### University of South Australia, Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library Archival Collections

[Statement by Bob Hawke on ministerial arrangements](#)

### Australian National University Archives

[Sound recordings](#)

### State Library of Western Australia

[Perth PEN Centre records](#)

### Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection

[Pat Richardson scrapbooks relating to the Women's Electoral Lobby and women's events, 1977-2002](#)

**Author Details**

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