

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

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Coonan, Helen Lloyd

(1947 -)

Born 29 October, 1947, Wagga Wagga New South Wales Australia

Occupation Barrister, Businesswoman, Feminist, Lawyer, Parliamentarian, Solicitor

Summary

Helen Coonan is a former Australian politician, who was a Liberal member of the Australian Senate representing New South Wales from July 1996 to August 2011. On 26 November 2001, she was appointed Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer in the Howard Government. She was re-elected in 2001 and 2007. From 2004-07, she served as Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.

Since leaving politics in 2011, Coonan has transitioned into the corporate world, and vouches for the seminal importance of the law, including legal training, legal practise and legal experience as a common thread underpinning her capacity to perform across a diverse professional and public landscape for a very long time.

Go to 'Details' below to read a reflective essay written by Helen Coonan for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Helen Coonan and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

I first thought about doing a law degree when I received a telephone call from a reporter on the Wagga Daily Advertiser on an afternoon late December in 1964. He broke the news of my success in the HSC (then the Leaving Certificate). During the course of an ensuing interview for the paper the next day, he asked what I wanted to do with such a splendid result. I said that I wanted to go to University and would probably study Arts. But it was then that I started to think about a combined Arts/Law degree, the only combined law degree then available.

I didn't know much about law. I had read "To Kill a Mockingbird" like just about everyone else had, but no one in my family, friends or acquaintances were lawyers. In fact I had never met one! There were no mentors or role models nor supporters or boosters to turn to for guidance. And yet almost instinctively I knew that this was what I wanted to do.

Even as a young country girl growing up on a property as part of a small rural community, I was intrigued by the notion that people could right wrongs and help those in need. I thought I could recognise injustice where I saw it, especially in point, that of domestic violence and powerlessness and the dreadful consequences for families utterly without redress. A friend of my mothers who suffered horrific domestic violence was eventually forced to leave her home, a family property that had been in the husband's family for generations and flee with her children to live in poverty and dependence on her relatives. I recall thinking "how can that be fair and why couldn't more be done to help her?"

I graduated in 1970 and was admitted to practice in March 1971 at a time when practicing women lawyers were thin on the ground. Challenges came thick and fast and I quickly learnt to find pathways through the thickets with my Plan B strategy that I have honed throughout my career and that has always served me well. I can truly say never be afraid of Plan B if Plan A does not work!

I became an active member of the Women's Electoral Lobby and began to get many women referred as clients, in various levels of distress and need. I was working in a commercial law firm doing general commercial work including, corporate structures, insurance and tax advice with a "big end of town" type of clientele. Soon the waiting room became populated by women in kaftans, children in strollers, sticky lollies and sticky hands next to suited and serious businessmen, with things corporate on their minds!

I was frenetically busy. I represented these women in Court during the day and worked into the small hours to represent the corporate clients at night.

Eventually after several months of this, the senior partner came to my office. He closed the door and we had a pleasant conversation about my prospects until it became clear that the women who did not exactly fit the firm's clientele would need to go elsewhere. I said: "But they have nowhere else to go".

That evening my husband (an early feminist if ever there was one) said to me: "Why don't you just start your own firm and continue what you are doing"?

This was a huge risk. Here I was on track for a partnership and wanting to start a family. Diverting course to start my own firm then was not on the agenda.

But faced with an unpalatable choice, I embarked on Plan B. At the age of 25, full of bravado and self-belief, I set up Coonan & Associates in 1975. I believe it was the first women orientated legal firm of its kind. The lesson learnt is that Plan B can be the best choice if you have the insight to see the possibilities and confidence to take a few risks.

As it happened, that decision set me on a course that led to personal and professional success and public recognition. It freed me up to pursue my passion for advocacy on issues I cared about.

With some other like-minded women, I lobbied government, raised funds and set up the corporate model for the first women's refuge in Sydney – The Elsie Women's Refuge in Glebe – followed by another half dozen dotted around the metropolitan area. I then turned attention to a Women's Health Centre at Leichhardt and Liverpool and a Women's Legal Centre. I embarked on an awareness campaign against what was then blatant discrimination against women in the workplace, in employment and in their relationships. I discovered the power of television and media to help the cause, and even agreed to be a regular panellist on Beauty and the Beast, provided the genuine letters I got could be treated seriously and information provided on air!

I fought for changes through political advocacy and legal representation on issues as diverse as tax deductibility for child care to recognition of property and inheritance rights for de facto and same sex relationships. I was appointed Chair of the Law Foundation and in that role embarked on a strategy to save the Public Interest Advocacy Centre that was facing an uncertain future. I worked with others on the NSW anti-discrimination legislation and advocated for reform of the divorce law. After the passage of the Family Law Act it needed to be monitored for unintended consequences. One issue that concerned me was the inability of the Court to deal appropriately with superannuation assets. It was a source of great satisfaction to me that years later as the Assistant Treasurer, I was able to get this reformed so that now superannuation assets belonging to one spouse can be treated as matrimonial property subject to the courts powers to divide these assets on divorce. It was an area where I had developed expertise. I was recently interviewed for the ABC Four Corners 50th anniversary program and

was shown old footage of me talking about the need for women to look beyond marriage for their economic security. I realised just how long I have been banging on about the feminization of poverty and it is still relevant today.

Even though it would take another 15 or so years to get there, I knew that my heart was in politics and my destiny would be in Parliament. I also knew that my legal training and knowledge was a key plank in my toolkit to get there.

But I had a young son and so much still to achieve in the law. In 1983 my firm which had morphed into Coonan & Hughes, with the addition of a partner John Hughes and several employed solicitors merged with a larger commercial firm, Gadens. I became a partner there and it was an opportunity to hone my commercial skills with different legal work and a different client base.

During this partnership I accepted a secondment to work in a large business law firm in New York and was admitted to the New York Bar. In legal practice, advocacy is my passion and on returning to Australia I resigned my partnership and was admitted to the Bar in July 1986. I was fortunate to be invited to join the Eleventh Floor Wentworth Chambers in Phillip Street and to enjoy the professional guidance and friendship of legendary clerk Paul Daley. I also enjoyed the collegiality and friendships (which last to this day) of male colleagues who were the members of these chambers. For most of my time on the Eleventh Floor I was the only woman in a Chamber set of 20 or so men. It was probably the best chambers in Sydney with able and capable barristers who were generous with their time and advice. Getting a room in these Chambers was a critical component of my success at the Bar.

I do recognise, however that many if not most women at the Bar do it tough. It can be difficult to get suitable chambers and to get work that demonstrates what you are capable of. As a minister tasking work for the Commonwealth, as a rule I would look out for women juniors to make sure they would get exposure and experience with important briefs. I hope getting good women advocates is now a matter of course.

I spent 10 rewarding years as a barrister handling complex commercial cases, corporate collapses and building construction cases. Included in my case list was acting as counsel for the liquidator of Spedley Securities. Getting to grips with the anatomy of a deposit taking bank that had been artificially propped up by shareholders for years together with the investigation, litigation and recovery of creditors money was a rewarding and informative experience. I have always liked David and Goliath type contests and another memorable win was acting for around 800 Tooheys hoteliers whose "goodwill" in their hotels had been cancelled by the acquisition of the Tooheys business by Austotel, an entity associated with Mr Alan Bond. It was this background in these types of commercial disputes that prepared me to later have the experience and capacity as a Minister to work on solutions to major and complex national problems such as the government's response to the insurance crisis following the collapse of HIH.

My next strategic career decision cropped up rather suddenly with an opportunity to put myself forward as a candidate for preselection for the Liberal Party. At the time I had just concluded a long construction case involving contract overruns for security installations in six power stations in NSW. It was financially rewarding but a rather formulaic dispute that had lasted almost for one year. It also coincided with my son completing his HSC. Psychologically I was probably ready for the next stage of my evolving career. I had a week to decide whether to nominate or whether to continue my career at the Bar, and work towards being appointed silk and eventually the possibility of judicial appointment. That was the conventional career path and I was well along that track. If I won the preselection, it would mean largely abandoning the momentum I had worked so hard to build as a barrister; it would mean an atmospheric drop in income and it would mean huge disruption and loss of privacy for my family. On the other hand was the lure of a new direction at the highest level of politics – the chance to leverage my skills and experience and make a real difference to the lives of Australians. It was the itch I had to scratch and I was determined not to die wondering! Once again, I chose Plan B but this was an enormous risk.

I transitioned from being a barrister to full time politics on election to the Senate in 1996. It was a huge adjustment. Politics is not for the faint hearted or the thin skinned! Early on, I was often asked if I missed the law. My answer was: "At times yes I do, compared to politics; the law is such a gentle profession!"

However, fortune favoured me as I made my way in the Senate and I have my fair share of firsts as a woman in politics.

The then Prime Minister, John Howard, gave me a great vote of confidence when he promoted me straight from the back bench to the key portfolio of Assistant Treasurer in 2002. I was at the time the only woman in the history of Federation to hold a Treasury portfolio. It was the gateway to handling major economic reforms in tax, superannuation, insurance and financial literacy. I had responsibility for the Australian Tax Office and for the prudential regulator of financial institutions, APRA. It enabled me to sit on the Expenditure Review Committee with the Treasurer and Finance Minister and to play a key part in formulating the Federal Budget.

For all of these tasks a good working knowledge of legal principle and practical experience proved invaluable. An example is the role I was to play in delivering the Government's response to the major national insurance crisis in 2003 that gripped the nation after the collapse of HIH. My portfolio responsibilities included oversight of the Australia Prudential Regulatory Authority (APRA) and much work was required to reform regulation of financial institutions to ensure capital adequacy and valuation of assets to prevent similar collapses in the future. It was this work that set up Australian financial institutions to be better able to deal with the head winds from the Global Financial Crisis.

But prudential reforms were only one side of the aftermath of the HIH collapse which saw liability classes of insurance become either unavailable or unaffordable whether you were running a pony club, an architect's office or delivering a baby! It

was a national problem and together with the co-operation of the State Treasurers I was able to convene a Ministerial meeting that comprehensively reviewed and reformed tort law in each State, set up professional standards schemes in return for capped liability for professionals and embarked on a major rescue of medical indemnity that has lasted to this day. I don't believe I could have delivered and implemented a comprehensive solution to this crisis without having a sound practical grasp of the legal framework that would underpin national reform of insurance.

Fortune smiled on me again in 2004 when I was promoted to Cabinet as the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts which remain a major passion to this day. It was a large and complex portfolio that required handling telecommunications, the privatization of Telstra and media reform. I became the shareholder Minister for both Telstra and for Australia Post. My career was further boosted by promotion to Deputy Leader of the Senate with the immense privilege of participating in the daily leadership meeting with the PM, Treasurer and Senate Leader to discuss the political landscape and tactics of the day. And of course sitting at the Cabinet table was much like having a seat on the top Board in the country.

During my time in politics, I was able to see first-hand the real and positive difference women in politics can and do make – it is a different and essential voice to the proper representation of all Australians. I am proud to have been the most senior woman Minister in that Government, to have been given responsibility for large economic portfolios and to learn the inner workings of Government. I believed that I had been an effective leader and made the most of this opportunity.

I have now transitioned into challenging new roles in the corporate world, and I can vouch for the seminal importance of the law, including legal training, legal practise and legal experience as a common thread underpinning my capacity to perform across a diverse professional and public landscape for a very long time. Having spent 15 years as a solicitor, 10 years at the Bar and 15 years in Parliament including many years where I had the Ministerial carriage of major reforms for the benefit of all Australians, I am grateful that I took that leap of faith as a 17 year old to grasp the opportunities that the law can deliver! The general information (below) has been sourced from publicly available resources.

Country born and bred, Coonan moved to Sydney to complete a combined Arts/Law degree at Sydney University. After graduating she started the first women-orientated legal firm in 1975. The firm later merged with a business law firm of which she became a partner.

During a secondment to the United States in 1985, Coonan was admitted to practice as an Attorney in the Supreme Court of New York. The following year she returned to Sydney and specialised as a commercial barrister at the Sydney Bar. The Chief Justice appointed her as a Supreme Court Mediator in 1992.

Before entering Federal Parliament Coonan was a Member of the Convocation of the Senate, University of Sydney from 1983 to 1984; a part-time Member of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal in 1987; Trustee of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW from 1988 to 1992 and Chair from 1992 to 1995; Chair of the Board of Governors of the Law Foundation of NSW from 1991 to 1992; and Director and Fellow of the Royal Hospital for Women Foundation from 1995 to 1996.

In parliament, Coonan was a member of several Senate Standing Committees; Senate Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committees; Senate Select Committees; Joint Statutory Committees; Joint Standing Committees and Joint Select Committees; as well as Deputy Government Whip in the Senate from 10 November 1998.

Published resources

Resource Section

The Hon. Helen Coonan, Senator for New South Wales, Australian Parliament House,
<http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/senators/homepages/senators.asp?id=2M6>

Senator Helen Coonan, Liberal Party of Australia, New South Wales Division,
<http://www.nsw.liberal.org.au/parliament/senate/coonan.cfm>

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 2002, Herd, Margaret, 2002

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book

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

Site Exhibition

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

Author Details

Helen Coonan (with Nikki Henningham)

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Digital resources



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