

Susan Maree Ryan AO

a speech in presentation of Susan Maree Ryan AO
for the degree of
Doctor of the University of Canberra *honoris causa*
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by Professor Don Aitkin
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Chancellor, I present to you Susan Maree Ryan, an Officer of the Order of Australia, a Bachelor of Arts of the University of Sydney and a Master of Arts of the Australian National University, on whom the University is pleased to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of the University.

Susan Ryan is a political woman, and that is a badge she wears with pride. She is also a representative woman, a woman of education, a business woman, a publisher, a teacher, a researcher, an organiser, a mother, a Minister, a writer, a speaker, a visionary. In this multitude of roles, all carried out with style, courage and aplomb, Susan Ryan has been a splendid example of the capacity of women to lead a full life and to do so in fields traditionally thought to be reserved for men. Along the way, she has made a great contribution to education, not simply as an educator, or as a Minister for Education, but in educating women and men that a woman's place is in the Senate, as well as in the house.

She was born in 1942, her next door neighbour a future Premier of New South Wales, R. J. Heffron. Like many others of her age, she owed her university education to a teachers college scholarship. On graduation she became a diplomatic wife and then a young mother, returning to Canberra just before the Whitlam years, where she served for a year or two as a tutor at the newly created Canberra College of Education — so she is one of us. The political climate of the early 1970s so fascinated her that she became one of the founders of the Women's Electoral Lobby. She was elected to Parliament as a Labor Senator for the ACT in 1975, the year that the Whitlam Government lost office. Two years later she won election to the Labor Party's front bench, and when Labor regained office in 1983 she became a member of Cabinet, the first woman to hold such a position in her party.

Her reforming instinct as Minister for Education and Youth Affairs took her into the fields of Aboriginal education, disadvantaged schools, child care and the balance between private and public in school education. She was the first Federal Minister to set a target for secondary school retention and to aim for truly universal secondary education. In 1988, feeling that she had been moved sideways, she resigned from Parliament and began a new career in business, first in publishing, then as the chief executive of the Plastics Industry Association, then as the head of the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia, a post from which she retired last year. Today she is a visiting professor in the Department of Government at the University of Sydney, where she is writing a book about politics, and a member of the Board of the National Roads and Motorists

Association, where she works alongside another Whitlam, Nicholas, the Chairman of the NRMA.

While recounting this catalogue of achievements I have said nothing of the sheer difficulty involved for a woman who set out to challenge the dominant male cultures of politics and business, or of Susan Ryan's success in doing so. In winning through, she displayed intelligence, good humour and a gift for securing support from men and women alike. Her story, and we wait with eagerness to read her own account of it, is a demonstration that vision and persistence are the keys to success in politics and in life generally. Susan Ryan is a model for young women who wonder whether it is still possible to aim for the highest things, and it is in particular for that contribution to education that we honour her today.

Chancellor, I present to you Susan Maree Ryan, whose contributions to Australian life amply warrant the award of the degree of Doctor of the University, *honoris causa*.