

Consumer rights in Australia

The Ruby Hutchison story

In Australia, a conference called the National Consumer Congress is held each year to celebrate World Consumer Rights Day. Consumer groups, community organisations and government bodies attend the conference to discuss key issues impacting consumers and businesses and develop strategies to improve consumer justice and welfare.

On the eve of the National Consumer Congress is a special event known as the Ruby Hutchinson Memorial Lecture, an address designed to 'keep the spirit of Ruby alive in Australian consumer affairs'.²

Ruby Hutchison was Australia's leading lady of consumer advocacy. Like President Kennedy, she had a passion for consumer rights.

Born on 15 February 1892 in Footscray, Melbourne, Ruby was the third of ten children. When she was four years old the family moved to the Western Australian goldfields, settling first at Cue, then Day Dawn and finally at Meekatharra. It was in this remote mid-west region of Western Australia that Ruby Hutchison's political interests took root.

Ruby married miner Daniel Buckley at age 17 and the couple had seven children before their marriage dissolved in 1928. A single mother amidst the grip of the 1930s Great Depression, Ruby supported her children by dressmaking and running a boarding house.

It was these difficult years of experiencing first-hand the hardships of simply 'making ends meet', followed by the uncertainty of World War II that cultivated her passion in politics, women's rights and social justice.

In 1938 she married labourer Alexander Hutchison. With her children grown up, Ruby attended Stott's Business College in Perth and the University of Western Australia's summer schools in 1941 where she studied public administration, public speaking, psychology and languages. She pursued her political ambitions and in 1954, became the first woman Member of the Legislative Council of Western Australia and the state's fourth woman parliamentarian. World War II was over and Australia was in an economic and population post-war boom.

Despite the prosperous times, consumers had almost no protection and Ruby started receiving many complaints from her constituents about the poor quality of goods. This inspired Ruby. She had heard of overseas consumer organisations such as the US Consumer Research and the British Consumers' Association and thought something similar should be established in Australia.

In 1959 Ruby travelled to Sydney and discussed her idea with a group of like-minded citizens. After several discussions at the Sydney Town Hall, they decided to create a group to produce a magazine informing consumers about their rights and about the value and safety of different products. This group was called the Australasian Consumers' Association (ACA) (renamed the Australian Consumers' Association in 1963).

The ACA's first magazine launched in April 1960 and was distributed to a modest 500 subscribers. However its popularity and membership grew quickly. Fiercely protective of its integrity, the ACA would not accept any funding from government or outside bodies, or allow any advertising in its magazine. The group wanted to ensure its independence and impartiality. Ruby herself insisted any products to be tested were to be purchased anonymously, the same as any other consumer.

Today this highly respected organisation is better known as CHOICE. It has over 160 000 members and continues to publish consumer information, conduct rigorous and scientific product reviews and provide advice across a range of goods and services.

Ruby's passion for protecting people in a post-war Australia brought about an enormous change for Australian consumers. Not only was her drive and determination responsible for the development of CHOICE, one of the country's consumer advocate organisations, but she brought consumer protection issues to the fore of political and social consciousnesses. We enjoy a fair and safe marketplace today thanks to the hard work and dedication of people like Ruby, Australia's own leading lady of consumer advocacy.



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Years 7–9: Questions and discussion points

- Why do you think Ruby Hutchison wanted to protect consumers?
- Explain what might happen if we did not have consumer laws from the perspective of consumers and the perspective of businesses?
- Explain what is meant by a 'shrinking global market'?

Years 10–12: Questions and discussion points

- Explain what is meant by a 'shrinking global market'?
- Explain how the Australian Consumer Law (ACL) embodies the first set of basic consumer rights?
- Consumer rights became a prominent political issue in the 1950s and 1960s. What world events do you think prompted this interest and why?

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2 Ruby Hutchison, *The Memorial Lecture*, 2013.