

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5733

Withnall, Nerolie

Occupation Chairperson, Director, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Nerolie Withnall is a leading company director overseeing the direction and transformation of large Australian companies and institutions. She was the former Director of ALS, Alchemia Limited, PanAust and Computershare Communication Services Limited. A former Partner at Minter Ellison she was Chairman, Board of Queensland Museum and a member of the Council of the Australian National Maritime Museum and Board of the Australian Rugby Union. Withnall was also a long-term Member of the Takeovers Panel. Withnall made legal history becoming the first woman President of a Law Society in Australia.

Nerolie Withnall was interviewed by Kim Rubenstein for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

Encouraged by her father, a primary school teacher and headmaster, Nerolie Withnall studied for a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws at the University of Sydney. Soon after graduation Withnall married John Withnall and relocated to Darwin where she began working in the Crown Law Department. Withnall moved into private practice as a solicitor joining the family firm, R J Withnall and went on to have two children. She was also instrumental in establishing the Northern Territory Law Society. Working on cattle property transactions gave her the opportunity to travel to remote areas of the Northern Territory.

In 1974 Withnall survived the devastation unleashed by Cyclone Tracy on the city of Darwin. Evacuated from Darwin, Withnall was undeterred and, in an indication of her future corporate persistence, she returned to her Darwin house, working amid the rubble for the next year to rebuild her legal practice [McCulloch].

Withnall made legal history in 1979 becoming the President of the Northern Territory Law Society and the first woman to become President of a Law Society in Australia [McCulloch]. In 1981 Withnall relocated to Brisbane and, with the support of colleagues Tony Atkinson and Elizabeth Nosworthy, she began working as a solicitor at the law firm Minters, also consulting for the firm's newly opened Darwin office. [McCulloch].

Withnall's transition from corporate lawyer to company director began in the mid 1990s when she joined the Board of Campbell Bros, which went on to transform itself into ALS, one of the world's largest and most diversified testing services providers with sites located around the world [McCulloch]. Withnall went on to become Non-Executive Director at ALS in 1994 and Chairman and Independent Non-Executive Director in 2012; serving as the only woman on the Board [ALS Global]. In 1996 Withnall was appointed Non-Executive Director at PanAust a copper and gold producer in Southeast Asia and continued in this role until 2015. In 1999 Withnall was appointed as a Board Member of the Brisbane Institute and was later appointed Chairman of QM Technologies Limited (later acquired by Computershare Communication Services Limited).

At the same time as Withnall was enjoying success from her career as a company director and board member she developed a successful practice in commercial law at Minter Ellison. Withnall became a Partner specialising in corporate and commercial law, with specialist skills in the areas of corporate advice, capital raisings, securities and corporate trusts [Proctor]. Withnall retired from Minter Ellison in 2000.

From 1999 until 2010, as a Member of the Takeovers Panel, Withnall's corporate legal and company advisory experience was in demand, participating in many proceedings before the Panel. This experience was also invaluable when she was appointed in 2001 as the Convenor of the Legal Sub-Committee, Member of the Companies and Markets Advisory Committee [Ministers].

Withnall held two Board positions with significant benefit to the cultural and environmental development of her local Queensland community – Chairman, Board of Queensland Museum and a member of the Council of the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Until 2013 Withnall was the Director of Alchemia Limited an Australian drug discovery and development company and from 2008 until 2015 was the Non-Executive Director of Computershare Communication Services Limited.

In 2013, in recognition of her enormous contribution to corporate leadership, Withnall was awarded the Australian Institute of Company Directors Gold Medal [Courier Mail]. That same year Withnall was appointed to the Board of the Australian Rugby Union resigning in 2015. In 2015 Withnall resigned as Director at PanAust. In 2016 Withnall retired from her role as Non-Executive Chairman of ALS having overseen the company's transformation from a predominantly domestic manufacturing operation into a globally renowned technical testing services company [ASX].

Withnall was the Director of the Brisbane Festival; Brisbane Transport and Director of the National Seniors Foundation and Redcape Property Fund Limited. She has also been a Board Member of Darling Downs Bacon Cooperative; is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and a Member of the Committee of Brisbane and Economic Development Committee.

Withnall has occupied positions of corporate strategic leadership; with roles as Chairman and Director of many significant Australian companies and institutions during a time when female representation in such organisations has been described as “dire” [Crikey]. Withnall's enormous contribution to and influence over the direction of many leading Australian companies and institutions is considerable. Withnall is a leading influence as a trailblazing woman in corporate Australia proving how important it is to achieve diversity on corporate boards. Withnall demonstrates that the skills of corporate law can be used to lead and transform companies and create opportunities for communities across Australia.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Nerolie Withnall interviewed by Kim Rubenstein in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project](#)

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Digital resources



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