

Entry type: Resource
Entry ID: AWH001542

Interview with Mary Helen Newport [sound recording] Interviewer: Peter Donovan

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Reference [OH 593/2](#)

Date Range 1-Jun-01 - 1-Jun-01

Formats Sound recording (cassette) analogue

Access No access until 1 January 2022

Finding Aid Full transcript available (55 pages)

Details

2 hours 55 minutes?? Mary Helen Newport was interviewed as one of the Honoured Women Oral History Project. She was born and did her primary and secondary education in Adelaide. Mary won scholarships to St. Aloysius College and Chartres Business College. She had the ability to go to university but the economic pressure (because her mother had died after a long battle with cancer when Mary was 12 years old) to work as great. When Mary Newport was old enough, she joined the Commonwealth Public Service, first in the Taxation Office in Adelaide and then in Canberra. During her Long Service Leave in 1959, Mary worked at Australia House in London and the Australian Embassy in London. She describes in detail the adventure of taking a friend's letter to his parents in Czechoslovakia when it was behind the Iron Curtain. On her return to Australia, Mary Newport was invited to work with the Press Secretary of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. Although, Mary was writing many of the Prime Minister's statements, her salary was so minimal that the Government had to pay a subsidy to the boarding house where most public servants lived. When Sir Robert Menzies retired, the press team of Tony Eggleton and Mary Newport continued in the Prime Minister's Department, first for Harold Holt, then Sir John McEwan, John Gorton and Sir William McMahon. She describes in great detail her work, the achievements and personalities of these Prime Ministers as well the working conditions for journalists and the social life in Canberra at that time. During this time Mary Newport completed a degree by part-time study at the Australian National University. She noted that the importunate demands of her work affected personal relationships. When the Australian Labor Party came into Government in 1975, Mary Newport returned to work in various Commonwealth Departments and assisted with various Commissions of Inquiries. From these investigations, Mary learnt a great deal about working conditions of public servants and the criminal activities within the Painters and Dockers Union. In 1988, Mary Newport resigned from the Commonwealth Public Service to become the first national media officer for the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. Religion as well as interesting work was important for Mary Newport. Again she describes in detail her work, the reluctance of many bishops to become involved with the media and the challenges of being a pioneer, a mark of her working life. For example, she convinced the ABC to televise the Pope's Midnight Mass at Christmas. She worked there until 1995. Throughout her interview Mary Newport acknowledges the difficulty of being a woman in what was effectively a man's world of work. Mary Newport was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia and is a Dame of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. She acknowledged that there was some prejudice against Catholics in her workplaces.

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Created 4 May 2004
Last modified 28 December 2017