

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
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Glass, Deborah

Occupation Banker, Lawyer, Ombudsman, Public servant

Summary

The Victorian Ombudsman, Deborah Glass, left Monash University Law School in the early 1980s, never imagining that thirty years later she would be honoured with an OBE for her services to law and order. A law graduate who hasn't practised since 1984, with the benefit of hindsight she nevertheless saw the legal training she received as a valuable foundation for supporting the various twists and turns her career has taken over the last thirty years.

After graduating in 1982, Deborah Glass began her professional career as a lawyer based in Melbourne, but relocated to Switzerland to work for Citicorp, a US Investment Bank. She then transferred into the financial regulation sector, pursuing a career with the Hong Kong Securities and Futures Commission. Returning to Europe, she was appointed Chief Executive of the Investment Management Regulatory Organisation in 1998. Under her stewardship it was successfully subsumed into the London based Financial Services Authority. She also worked as an Independent custody visitor, someone who visits people who are detained in police stations in the United Kingdom to ensure that they are being treated properly, between 1999 and 2005.

Between 2001 and 2004 she was a member of the Police Complaints Authority, and it was from here that she was appointed to the Independent Police Complaints Commission in London. At the IPCC she was responsible, among other things, for many high profile criminal and misconduct investigations and decisions involving the police. These included decisions in relation to the police response to the phone-hacking affair and the decision to launch an independent investigation into the aftermath of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster.

She was awarded an OBE for services to the IPCC in 2012. She left the IPCC in March 2014, having completed a ten year term with the organization and returned to Melbourne to take up the position of Victorian Ombudsman. She is the first woman to ever hold the position

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

Details

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

My initial response to being asked to contribute to a project on women lawyers was to say: I am not a lawyer! I may have studied law, but I haven't practised since 1984. I would get embarrassingly lost in a law library these days. And please don't ask me to cite any cases.

But I was told no, that was the point, the project was also about where women who studied law ended up, and I had ended up as the Victorian Ombudsman, rather to my surprise a member of the 'FW2 Club': First Woman To be in the role. To which my reaction had been amazement that it had taken forty-one years.

So let me reflect on the journey from law student, more interested in the freedom of university life than the interior of the law library, to Victorian Ombudsman.

I did enjoy studying law, despite some periods of inattention, but as a young lawyer on William Street in the early 1980s it felt like you had to be better than a man to get to the same place. Which meant you had to really want to be a lawyer. I am not going to dwell on my brief experience as a practising lawyer as I decided very quickly the law was not for me. Although it proved an invaluable training ground for what I went on to do I didn't realise it at the time, as I left Melbourne on a one-way ticket to Europe with a small pot of savings and dreams of being a great travel writer.

I realised pretty swiftly that was not even going to pay for repairs to my rucksack, so when the money ran out in Switzerland I noticed an advertisement in the local paper for management trainees with an international investment bank. They were

looking for graduates in finance, accounting or law. Although I have never quite understood the relevance of my Australian law degree, rather to my surprise I got the job.

Sometimes you go for things because they are unknown, or because the other options, like waitressing or going back to Australia, seem so much worse.

It was in fact a dynamic time working with many very clever people, and an intense training ground in both financial markets and management. But I found after several years and the same number of promotions that I did not really care enough about corporate profits to be a good banker.

Thus began my long career in the public sector. First, I joined the Hong Kong Securities and Futures Commission at its inception. Knowing how the corporate world worked, but using that knowledge to promote the public interest within a rapidly changing marketplace, was immensely rewarding. Why Hong Kong? It was exciting – a Chinese New York – and the opportunity to join a new statutory agency at the outset and shape its policy-making was unbeatable.

Sometimes you go for things because you just know they will be right for you.

Financial services regulation was my life for the next dozen or so years, and an exhilarating one it was, with periodic scandals and upheavals requiring deft handling and occasionally unique policy responses. In that time I left Hong Kong for London, where I took on the role of Chief Executive of the Investment Management Regulatory Organisation as it was being merged with the new Financial Services Authority.

In London after the merger came one of those mid-career points when it is a good idea to take stock. Whether I was finished with financial services or financial services was finished with me, I knew I needed to do something different. I had no fixed notions about what that might be, other than it was important it involve the public interest. So I applied for, and was appointed to the Police Complaints Authority. Three years later, I became a Commissioner with the newly established Independent Police Complaints Commission, and five years after that, its Deputy Chair with operational responsibility for Commissioners across England and Wales.

Sometimes you go for things because of what they are not. Not corporate, not financial services. But I learned rapidly about the world of police complaints and investigations, allegations ranging from the most serious and substantiated misconduct, to the misplaced or downright vexatious. Dealing with grieving and often angry families bereaved following a death in police custody, which can affect whole communities. Handling hostile and occasionally unco-operative police officers. Responding to a media and political environment at times more interested in headlines than facts. And through all of it, the challenge of independent, robust and proportionate investigation, the importance of evidence-based decision-making, and the sensitive communication of difficult decisions. Decisions are often criticised by both parties to an outcome – such roles will never win a popularity contest.

But it is better to be right than popular, and justice is its own reward – although sometimes, when the brickbats are flying thick and fast, you wonder if it is all worth it. But you stay with it, because it is.

So I came to the end of a 10 year term at the IPCC, and as TS Eliot said:

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

And so after 29 years I am back in Melbourne, knowing the place, and myself, so much better than I did.

This time, I applied for a job because I knew it was right – my ideal job, to deal with complaints about public services in Victoria, not including the police.

So the journey continues – in the current role, I trust, until 2024. As I said to my staff on my first day, you do not start a 10 year term with a plan. You start with a set of values and beliefs – in integrity, fairness, social justice and human rights – and in the way you work. I believe in working with people wherever possible to achieve change – and that the most impactful powers are the ones you don't need to use because everyone knows you have them.

It is a rare and wonderful privilege to be a constitutionally independent officer of Parliament, making decisions in the interests of justice. The opportunities to make a meaningful difference are incalculable.

Sometimes you go on a journey with no destination in mind, but looking back down the road it all makes sense.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Article

Power to the people, Green, Shane, 2014,

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/power-to-the-people-20140617-3abei.html>

Resource Section

Deborah Glass, 2013,

<http://monash.edu.au/alumni/find/profiles/stories/deborahglass.html>

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

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Digital resources



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