

The Honourable Justice Virginia Bell AC

The honorary degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred upon Virginia Bell by the Chancellor, Ms Belinda Hutchinson AM, at a special honorary award ceremony in celebration of women's leadership at 5.00pm on 1 November 2014.

Citation

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present the Honourable Justice Virginia Bell AC to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa).

Justice Virginia Bell has made an outstanding contribution to Australian law, in particular through leadership in criminal law reform and public policy development, and as an advocate for social justice. Her contribution has been recognised by leaders in government, the judiciary and the legal system.

In 2012, she was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia, Australia's highest civic honour, for "eminent service to the judiciary and to the law through leadership in criminal law reform and public policy development, to judicial administration, and as an advocate for the economically and socially disadvantaged."

In 2009, she was appointed to the High Court of Australia. Prior to this she served as judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales from 1999. Justice Virginia Bell has, throughout her career, dedicated herself to defending the rights of the disadvantaged, including the rights of those on the 'wrong' side of the criminal justice system. She is known as a champion and defender of the underdog.

After her admission as a solicitor in 1977, she applied for a position with the Redfern Legal Centre. This organisation, the only community legal centre in New South Wales at the time, had only recently been established and could not afford to hire her. She volunteered her time and soon enough became a member of staff, serving the community for seven years. During this period she assisted with the establishment of the Prisoners' Legal Service, providing legal advice and representation to prisoners, and worked on landmark civil liberties cases including representing those charged for participating in the first gay Mardi Gras in Sydney in 1978.

Justice Virginia Bell was admitted to the New South Wales Bar in 1984 and was appointed senior counsel in 1997. She served as a public defender from 1986 to 89 and was a counsel assisting the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, from 1994 to 1997. She served as a part-time commissioner of the New South Wales Law Reform Commission from 1998 until her appointment to the bench of the Supreme Court in 1999. From 2006 to 2008, she served as president of the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration.

Since her appointment to the High Court, Justice Virginia Bell has continued to demonstrate her commitment to those who are economically and socially disadvantaged. In 2013, she was the guest speaker at a fundraiser for the Jessie Street Trust, which raises funds to support the rights of women, Indigenous people, peace and disarmament, and the elimination of discrimination. In 2013, these funds went to Women's Legal Services New South Wales, the government centre responsible for providing free legal service to all women in the community.

Justice Virginia Bell has made an outstanding contribution to the legal profession and has contributed to significant change and reform in both the practice and letter of the law and the thinking of Australian jurists and criminal justice practitioners.

Chancellor, I present the Honourable Justice Virginia Bell to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa), and I invite you to confer the degree upon her.