

Professor Lowitja (Lois) O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG

AC CBE DSG, Hon LLD ANU & Notre Dame DUniv Flinders & University of South Australia and Honorary Doctorate QUT – a Pitjantjatjara woman and one of the most prominent members of the stolen generation, Lowitja O'Donoghue has worked for Aboriginal organisations and in Indigenous affairs for the last 30 years. She was the first Aboriginal nurse in South Australia, the first Aboriginal woman to be awarded an Order of Australia, was made Australian of the Year in 1984 in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the welfare of Aboriginal people and was named a National Living Treasure in 1998. In her retirement she continues her commitment in the areas of Aboriginal health, welfare and human rights and is a Visiting Fellow at Flinders University of South Australia.

Honorary Doctor of Laws

Conferring ceremony: 5.00pm, 1 November 2014.

Citation

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present Dr Lowitja (Lois) O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) in absentia.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, AC CBE DSG, was born in 1932 at Indulkana, in the remote northwest corner of South Australia, to a Pitjantjatjara mother and an Irish father. When she was just two years old, she and two of her sisters were taken away from their mother by missionaries on behalf of South Australia's Aboriginal Protection Board. Her Aboriginal name, Lowitja, was changed to 'Lois'. She and her sisters grew up at Colebrook Children's Home and did not see their mother again for more than 30 years. They weren't allowed to speak their own language or to ask questions about their origins or even about their parents.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue attended Unley General Technical High School in Adelaide and set her sights on becoming a nurse. But, after initial training, she was refused entry to the Royal Adelaide Hospital to continue her studies because she was Aboriginal. She fought the decision – thus beginning her lifelong advocacy for Aboriginal rights – and in 1954 became the first Aboriginal trainee nurse at the hospital. She graduated and became a charge sister at the hospital, where she stayed for ten years.

In the mid-1960s she went to Assam in India to work with the Baptist Overseas Mission, later returning to Australia to continue nursing. However, following the 1967 referendum that for the first time recognised Aboriginal people as full and equal citizens, she decided to join the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. She accepted a position in the remote South Australian town of Coober Pedy. It was here, in a local supermarket, that she was recognised by an aunt and uncle who noticed a family resemblance. Through this chance meeting she was finally reunited with her mother, Lily, who by this time was living in the nearby town of Oodnadatta.

From 1970 to 1972, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue was a member of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, and later became regional director of the Adelaide Department of Aboriginal Affairs. In 1976, she became the first Aboriginal woman to be awarded an Order of Australia, and a year later was appointed the foundation chair of the National Aboriginal Conference and chair of the Aboriginal Development Commission.

She was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1983 and Australian of the Year in 1984, during which time she became the first Aboriginal person to address the United Nations General Assembly.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue has received numerous awards and accolades for her work. She won the Advance Australia award in 1982, was named a National Living Treasure in 1998, and became a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1999, and received a Papal Award, Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great in 2005.

In March 1990, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue was appointed the founding chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and, during this time, played a key role in drafting the Native Title legislation that arose from the High Court's historic Mabo decision. When she stepped down from this role, she became the inaugural chair of the newly established Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, from 1996 to 2003, which led on directly to the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (from 2003 to 2009). In 2010, Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research was named in her honour.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue is an inspiration to Australians of all races and political persuasions because of her longstanding involvement in Indigenous health, welfare and human rights more generally.

Chancellor, I present Dr Lowitja (Lois) O'Donoghue to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa), and I invite you to confer the degree upon her in absentia