

Mahla Pearlman Oration 2021 – 10th Anniversary Introductory Remarks

1. The Hon Mahla Pearlman AO (1937-2011)

After graduating from Sydney University in 1960 with an arts degree and an honours degree in law, the late the Hon Mahla Pearlman AO practised as a solicitor rising to partnership in a series of established Sydney law firms, until she was elevated to the bench as the Chief Judge of the Land and Environment Court of NSW in April 1992.

Her appointment marked another achievement in an already distinguished career as a lawyer and as a prominent member of the 'first to' club. Mahla was the first woman to be appointed as the President of the Law Society of NSW (1981-1982); the first female President of the Law Council of Australia (1988-1990); the first female Chairperson of the Board of Governors of the NSW College of Law (1982-1987); and the first woman to be appointed as a head of jurisdiction to a superior court of record. There were other appointments, many at the highest level, but they are too many to mention in the time available today.

Suffice it to say, that her exemplary service to the legal profession and to the administration of justice was recognised, first, when she was named a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1985 for services to the legal profession, second, when she was awarded the Centenary Medal for service to the law in 2003, third, by her conferral of the Order of Australia (AO) for services to the law, the judiciary and the community in 2004. And finally, in 2008, when Mahla was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws from the University of Newcastle.

In addition to her tireless work in the law, Mahla was also an outstanding horsewoman, competing in dressage into her 50s. She was also an active cattle grazier, who held a life-long passion for the bush and for rural and regional Australia.

2. Creation of the Mahla Pearlman Oration

It was therefore both easy and appropriate to propose, after her death in 2011, that an occasion be created to celebrate her life and to honour her significant contribution to the law in a manner that was commensurate with her stature.

After consultation with the then the Hon Justice Terry Sheahan AO, and the then president of the Environment and Planning Law Association of NSW (“EPLA”), Phillip Clay SC, the Oration was conceived: an annual lecture to be delivered by an eminent Australian legal scholar on a topic concerning environment and planning law. Soon after the Oration’s inception (its second year), the Law Council of Australia offered its considerable assistance in the organisation of the event. Both it and EPLA have remained partners in their support for the Oration ever since.

Thus, on 29 March 2012, Emeritus Prof Ben Boer delivered the inaugural Mahla Pearlman Oration. Since then, orations have been delivered by the Hon Paul Stein AM QC, Adjunct Prof Rob Fowler, Prof Jan McDonald, Prof Jacqueline Peel, Prof Jane McAdam, the Hon Robert French AC and Prof Megan Davis.

That the Oration has endured and grown - the event now includes the award of the Australian Young Lawyer of the Year - even through a global pandemic, is a testament to the high regard in which Mahla was held throughout the legal community and beyond.

As is only fitting by way of tribute, the Oration is now recognised as one of the leading, if not the leading, annual lectures in environment and planning law in Australia.

Of course, without the support of people such as the Hon Terry Sheahan AO, EPLA - especially Michele Kearns, and the Law Council of Australia - especially Maureen Peatman, the Oration would neither have existed nor endured.

The Oration also acknowledges and expresses its gratitude to Chief Justice Allsop AO of the Federal Court of Australia for the generous use of the ceremonial courtroom in which (in pre-pandemic times) is used to hold the event.