

JOAN KIRNER

VICTORIA'S FIRST FEMALE PREMIER JOAN KIRNER DIES AGED 76

By Aisha Dow, The Age, 2 June 2015

Prime ministers and premiers have paid tribute to Victoria's first and only female premier, Joan Kirner, who has died after a battle with oesophageal cancer.

Joan Kirner dead at 76

Victoria's first and only female premier, Joan Kirner, has died after a two-year battle with cancer.

The death of the former Labor politician was announced early on Monday evening, after reports the 76-year-old's health had declined rapidly over the preceding days. Politicians from both sides of the political divide praised Mrs Kirner's trailblazing work for gender equality and social justice. Leading the tributes were Daniel Andrews, Steve Bracks, John Cain and Bill Shorten and Tony Abbott.

But perhaps the most heartfelt praise came from Australia's first and only female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, who said Mrs Kirner was "one of the dominant influences" in her life. She said she was grateful to have the opportunity to say goodbye to her "truest of friends" during a final visit last Friday.

"For a generation of Labor women, including me, she was an inspiration and a mentor. We admired her stoicism. We celebrated her policy achievements. We were guided by her wisdom," Ms Gillard said. "After her time as Premier, Joan could have chosen a quieter and easier life. But that simply would not have been Joan. Instead, her generosity of spirit and capacity for hard work meant her formidable energy went into ensuring more Labor women entered parliament."

Mrs Kirner was first elected to Parliament in 1982 as a member for Melbourne West and then in the Legislative Assembly seat of Williamstown in 1988. She became the state's first female premier in 1990 after John Cain resigned and held office for two years before Jeff Kennett's landslide win at the 1992 election. After her retirement from politics the following year, she went on to help establish EMILY's List Australia – an organisation independent of the ALP that supports the election of progressive women.

Since 1996, the group has supported more than 400 women to campaign for office, with more than 210 elected. Mrs Kirner was unpaid coordinator for the first seven years of EMILY's List's existence.

On Monday night, Premier Daniel Andrews paid tribute to a woman he said achieved so much, both in and out of office.

“Joan implemented one of the biggest reforms of the era: the Victorian Certificate of Education. It standardised the curriculum and judged students on their skills. Ultimately, it made schools fairer,” Mr Andrews said. “Through her decades of advocacy for gender equality, she fundamentally changed our party and our society. In the process, she raised a generation of Victorian Labor women – one of whom became Prime Minister.”

Victoria's 42nd Premier was originally trained as a teacher. After graduating from the University of Melbourne, she went on to work at Ballarat Technical School. However when she married her husband Ron two years later in 1960, she became automatically ineligible for a permanent teaching contract.

Federal Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said “It was an act of unfairness she never forgot and a marker of the inequality she dedicated her life to overturning. Joan looked at politics and refused to accept the status quo”.

