

June Oscar named Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner

Oscar, who has fought for alcohol restrictions and for the preservation of ancient languages, will replace Mick Gooda



June Oscar with George Brandis and Ken Wyatt at Parliament House.

Gareth Hutchens
9 February 2017

June Oscar, a Bunuba woman from Western Australia who has fought successfully for alcohol restrictions in remote communities and for the preservation of ancient languages, is the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner.

She will replace Mick Gooda, who resigned from the position in August to work for the royal commission into youth detention in the Northern Territory.

Oscar has been praised as a tireless and courageous advocate for the rights of Indigenous Australians. In 2007 she was instrumental in the community-led campaign to restrict the sale of full-strength takeaway alcohol in the Fitzroy Valley, where she is from.

In 2009 she and other community leaders invited researchers to the region to study the prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder among the local population.

The study, by the George Institute for Global Health, found one in eight children born in the Fitzroy Valley region of the Kimberley in 2002 and 2003 had the syndrome, which impairs brain development – the highest level recorded in Australia.

It was the first study in Australian history into the prevalence of FASD and Oscar and her community were later applauded for their response to the problem.

Oscar said her appointment was an honour. “What a privilege it is to be the first Aboriginal woman to occupy the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner,” she said on Thursday.

“I come to the position from working in community with people who are challenged with so many issues.

“In this role I believe that with the partnerships with government, and other stakeholders, we can make some serious inroads into the solving and addressing those challenges.”

The attorney general, George Brandis, praised Oscar on Thursday for her determined and pragmatic advocacy. Her appointment will be for five years, beginning on 3 April 2017.

“Her experience in Indigenous policy spans across language revitalisation, native title, health, women’s issues and, most notably, FASD,” Brandis said on Thursday. “Ms Oscar’s appointment demonstrates the fundamental role Indigenous women play in fostering social change, at a community, national and international level.

“She will bring deep knowledge and experience in dealing with the problem of alcohol abuse in Indigenous communities, and strategies to mitigate the effect of that abuse on women and children in particular.

“The government looks forward to working closely with Ms Oscar and the contribution she will make to the work of the commission.”

Oscar is the chief executive of the Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre in Fitzroy Crossing.

She was made an officer of the Order of Australia in 2013 for distinguished service to the Indigenous community of Western Australia, particularly through health and social welfare programs. She was awarded the Menzies School of HealthResearch medallion in 2014 for her work with FASD.