ROBYN LAYTON AO
SEAN FEWSTER

ROBYN Layton personifies the Australia Day ideal, having spent her life working on behalf of the nation’s first, newest and youngest residents.

She is also a symbol of our unorthodox approach to life – in her five years as a Supreme Court judge she took her own transcript, kept running notes on a laptop and streaked her hair with a variety of colours.

Today, her years of advocacy for the Aboriginal and migrant communities, as well as children, will be recognised when she is appointed an Officer in the Order of Australia.

It is, the former judge says, a great responsibility.

“It’s no good accepting something like this if you don’t also accept the responsibility to do what I can to assist with reconciliation, to improving child protection, to helping migrant communities.

“I want to work to help Australians generally appreciate the benefits of diversity.”

Since her admission to the bar in 1968, Justice Layton’s career has been extremely diverse.

She spent seven years on the bench of the Industrial Court and ran a Geneva-based inquiry into forced child labour.

She drafted the landmark review of the SA child protection system, resulting in sweeping changes and the employment of 180 social and youth workers.

And she was a “travelling solicitor” for the Rolling Stones during one of their Australian tours.

Her focus now is not only improving life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but ensuring their successes receive public attention.

“In 2011, 84 per cent of Aboriginal students completed Year 12 ... an increase of 5.8 per cent on the previous year,” she said.

“This leads to employment and self-reliance, and it’s those things which create the role models for young people to come.

“It helps them know that, even if they come from a dysfunctional family, they don’t have to let that be their outcome.”

In November, she was named South Australian of the year for 2012.

She said her accolade celebrated Australia’s diversity.

“ There are many other achievements that people make other than through sport and I think sometimes it’s hard for people to realise what wonderful people we have living in our community that are being so generous,” she said.