

The Devil in Rural Regional Remote Territory

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RURAL AND REMOTE PRACTICE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY - WHAT IS IN IT FOR SENIOR PRACTITIONERS? BARBARA BRADSHAW TAKES UP THE ARGUMENT FOR THE NORTHERN TERRITORY.

A lot of the focus in the RRR initiative has been getting junior practitioners to work in the Northern Territory. Over the many years since I came up to the Territory I have seen many practitioners come and go. Whilst the interest of the work attracts many from Interstate and many who are resident in the Territory take up the law there has, over time, been a leakage of people from the local profession as they move interstate or overseas.

Many people have also obtained positions in the Government where legal qualifications were not a requirement for the performance of their duties.

The issue of people moving out of the legal profession into other careers is a factor nationally. Practitioners feel unhappy with the

lifestyle and adopt the many other career options available or go into business in other fields. Legal training together with some practical



experience can be the basis for what is arguably a more interesting career in other areas.

Many feel a lifetime dealing with challenging clients and the regime of billable hours and budgets is not what they aspire to. Many practitioners in Darwin have taken what is the “middle road” of Government legal practice with senior practitioners also taking this option. This is arguably good for Government as well as the practitioners involved, who stay in the profession, but does create a “brain drain” from private law practices.

Matthew Storey’s President’s report in *Balance* edition 4 of 2010 gives a good analysis of the situation, saying the thesis of his column was there was “causality” between high depression rates and low retention rates.

He noted that 42% of the legal practitioners who responded to the survey did not intend to practice



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law in five years time. Many female practitioners that took maternity leave did not return to practice.

The survey recently completed on RRR issues attracted various comments including some from senior practitioners. I will paraphrase a response from one practitioner (in dot point form)

- That if you practice in one small area you see the same faces all the time. It makes it very difficult to learn anything new; or where there are personality clashes
- Lack of opportunity to learn from watching the very experienced practitioner interstate
- The cost and time involved in going to interstate conferences
- Getting recognition at the national level
- Lack of choice available in local CPDs

One issue for many practitioners is what happens when their children leave school. Some of the children go to University interstate and many are lost to the Territory forever as they follow job opportunities or form relationships with southerners or persons from overseas. Some children of course do return. Some of the kids would prefer also not to see their middle aged parents following them round Australia, as much as they are fond of them.

The care of elderly parents can also be a factor.

Baby boomer practitioners also face some of the same living costs as more junior practitioners and if they did not qualify in the good old days of free university may have HECS bills on top of their other ones. Some are also supporting the university or other educational endeavours of their offspring.



However there are some advantages in remaining in the profession locally.

One is the ability to have interesting and varied careers and to take part on major litigation and be directly involved in resolving difficult social issues. The small size of the territory and its nature means that practitioners can have more direct and personal involvement in some of the major matters.

There is great scope for advancement in the profession including for senior practitioners. This could be in firms or at the bar, or with government. The Solicitor General and Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive of the Department of Justice all completed their law studies locally. Some senior barristers and partners of local law practices all did their law locally. All the current Bench of the Supreme Court came from the local legal profession.

For many the big attraction is lifestyle with many enjoying short travelling times to work, the availability of the markets and good coffee and restaurants. In how many cities is it possible to take your dogs for a walk on a beach a few minutes' walk from the centre of the city? Lawyers are often seen walking their dogs on the Mindil Beach to Sailing Club trail on Sunday mornings. Some of the best fishing in Australia is available around Darwin.

What place in Australia is better than the Casino lawns on the Sunday night of a July jazz concert? Many Alice Springs practitioners love the calming experiences on offer in the McDonnell Ranges

The next few years in the Northern Territory will be interesting, and it is sincerely hoped that a vibrant and skilled legal profession will be part of this growth. ●