

# Discrimination and disadvantage highlighted at 2016 conference

Islamophobia, Indigenous rights and Black Lives Matter were just some of the major human rights topics debated at the Castan Centre's annual conference in July. With over 300 members of the Australian rights community in attendance, it was a day of discussion, learning and inspiration.

Victorian Attorney-General Martin Pakula opened proceedings, announcing his Government's response to the independent review of the state's human rights charter. While a number of recommendations were rejected or deferred, 45 of the 52 were accepted, including the addition of a new right to birth registration (something the Centre has campaigned strongly for) and increased funding for the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and the Department of justice's Human Rights Unit.

Professor Anne Aly, then newly elected to the Australian parliament as a Labor MP, spoke about terrorism and human rights. She noted that "where counter-terrorism involves collective punishment, it fails". Aly also warned against the normalisation of calls to ban immigration, arguing that there is a great need to use both soft and hard tools to combat terrorism and extremism. For her, "building social cohesion is the key to counter terrorism"; this includes "equality of opportunity, trust in government and social inclusion".

Stan Grant then used his quiet eloquence and wisdom to remind us of the intolerable state of Indigenous rights in Australia. "Still today, Australia cannot reconcile with its past", said Grant as he highlighted that Canada and New Zealand have treaties that acknowledge their Indigenous populations, yet we do not. He reminded us that: "for Indigenous people, we have to reconcile not being at home in our own world".

Mariam Veiszadeh was a paragon of strength and dignity as she talked about her personal experiences with Islamophobia, asking us to "bear with me while I pour my heart out". And she did, speaking of how dangerous people such as Pauline Hanson can be, and her own awful experiences at the hands of those who spout anti-Islamic sentiments. Veiszadeh reminded us of the personal and social cost of Islamophobia and hatred in Australia.

Anti-death penalty lawyer Julian McMahon opened the audience's eyes to the reality that governments often use the death for political benefit. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is one such example, waging a



*Tory Russell answers questions after giving his insights into the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.*

popular war against drugs that has inspired a wave of extra-judicial killings. According to McMahon, this hard line policy is designed to increase his approval ratings. Sadly, McMahon's years of experience have taught him that the death penalty is for the poor and the poorly connected, "those without the capital get the punishment", he noted wryly.

The Black Live Matter movement has shone a spotlight on US racism, and the movement's global reach was evident in the attention attracted by Tory Russell, the co-founder and director of Hands-Up United in Missouri, who visited Australia to speak at the conference. "What happened in Ferguson is an international issue", Russell observed, adding that he was shocked to learn how badly Indigenous Australians are treated. He observed that in countries such as Australia and the US, the system isn't broken as many believe, "it's working as designed; to exclude certain people".

Helen Fatouros of Victoria Legal Aid brought the issue of criminal justice reform home, noting that "Indigenous youth stay in the criminal justice system longer" than other Australians. Fatouros highlighted the media's role in creating a narrative that demonises young offenders, saying that media stories "create reactive short term criminal justice policy."

In the day's final session, Professor Mary

Crock shed light on extremely vulnerable asylum seekers with disabilities. Thanks to the extensive research work done by Crock and others in this area, attitudes to displaced peoples with disabilities is changing, although slowly.

Brynn O'Brien of No Business in Abuse spoke about the campaign to bring companies to account for unsatisfactory human rights standards, especially in the area of immigration detention centres. She predicted that extreme labour exploitation will be a big focus of business and human rights in the coming years.

The new Federal Sex-Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, closed the day by outlining her priorities: family violence, economic security for women and increasing the number of women in decision-making roles. She also highlighted the high rate of sexual assault on university campuses and noted that 18-34 year olds have worse attitudes to relationships than the previous generation. Her take on these important issues was a dramatic way to end a dynamic and thought-provoking conference.

***The 2017 Castan Centre Annual Conference will be held on 21 July in the Melbourne CBD. Check the Castan Centre website or social media platforms for announcements in the new year.***