

Peter Comans (1953 - 2002)

A funeral oration delivered by the Hon Justice J D Heydon on 29 April 2002.

Peter Comans graduated from The Australian National University in economics (with distinction) and law (with honours). He was Sir Anthony Mason's associate for a year; he obtained a Masters degree in law from the University of Virginia and worked for eight years in the Attorney-General's Department, including two years at the Trade Practices Commission.

When Peter came to the Bar in early 1986 he speedily built up a practice ranging over the whole of federal administrative and trade practices law. For the Trade Practices Commission and for the Australian Government Solicitor, he soon became one of a tiny handful of juniors of first preference. He did an immense amount of important advisory work for them and for private clients. Prominent Queen's counsel frequently sought his aid. He appeared before the Federal Court and the Trade Practices Tribunal in many heavy cases of social or legal significance. He developed an Australia-wide reputation.

To the fulfillment of his professional duties he brought several characteristic skills. He had a wide knowledge of the law. He could perceive and focus on the goals of clients. He was able to master and simplify complex factual material. He had acute analytical powers. He was willing to work intensely hard for long periods. He had tremendous will to win a case or solve a problem.

He devoted much time gratuitously to the affairs of the Bar. At that time the Bar was under almost constant investigation and attack from government agencies. He drafted many forceful letters and submissions in resistance to their tactics.

Throughout his years at the Bar he was a cheerful and genial companion. The members of his floor habitually met at about 5pm to take mild refreshment after their strenuous daily labours. At these gatherings he loved hearing and telling anecdotes about events in court and the characters of Phillip Street.

He also had the charm of mild eccentricity. Alec Leopold gives the following examples:

- He could concentrate so hard on his own thoughts while walking in the street that he would fail to notice friends passing by inches away.
- Jenni often had to ring his mobile number to find out which taxi he had left it in, together with numerous other valuables.
- He established a record among High Court associates by being the first to fall down a gully and into a patch of thorns after being the victim of what would now be called road rage. His arrival at work the next day with his face swathed in bandages must have been an alarming experience for Sir Anthony Mason.

Peter had one other rare attribute: a high degree of physical courage. He suffered chronic back trouble, which occasionally flared up severely. Sometimes he could not sit or move without agony. But he rarely showed it.

Peter would have adorned the inner Bar. He would have been an admirable Federal Court judge. But the Bar can make too many demands. Perhaps he gave to his clients too generously of himself and thereby wore out some vital inner spring.

A look back over his professional life may be obscured by fog and darkness in the immediate foreground, but further back in the past the land is bright. It affords a vision of a man in the vigorous prime of life, a man who practised a profession to which his skills were ideally suited, a man who did so much good, a man who had so much love for his family, and a man who brought so much happiness to all his many friends. That is the vision which will dominate the memories of his many professional colleagues: a vision of a fine advocate, a fine lawyer, a fine friend, a fine man.

Penny Wines (1968 – 2002)

Bar News records with great sadness the death in February this year of Penny Wines who was called to the New South Wales Bar in February 1995, following a number of years at Mallesons Stephen Jaques.

She read with Richard White SC and was associated with both 7 Wentworth and the 6 Wentworth/Selborne. She rapidly built up a large junior commercial practice, notably being involved in the Super League litigation in its various manifestations.

Penny was a dynamic and thoroughly engaging person, extremely articulate and with a sharp wit. She had been a champion school debater and went on to debate for both Sydney University and the Women's College. She was also an avid cricket follower. In this, she was perhaps something of an iconoclast, apparently having Geoffrey Boycott as her cricketing idol.

Although Penny had not practised at the Bar for the last couple of years, and her overall career at the Bar was short, the very significant representation of the Bar at her funeral at St David's Church, Lindfield, was testament to the impact she made on those with whom she had professional contact in that short period. The funeral was a moving occasion for all concerned. Her premature passing was tragic. She is fondly remembered and will be greatly missed.