

Inaugural Australian Women Lawyers Conference

Sydney, Sheraton on the Park, 29 – 30 September 2006

By Catherine Parry

The title of the first ever Australian Women Lawyers conference held in Sydney on 29 and 30 September 2006 was 'Celebrating Excellence' and, indeed, that was an understatement. In attendance was a glittering array of speakers and delegates drawn from the ranks of the judiciary, the Bar, government and private practice who travelled near and far from around the country, their presence and commitment a testament to the national pull of the organisation. As one would expect from the title of the proceedings, it was an all female affair, with the exception of one or two brave male souls spotted in the seminar audience from time to time, including Slattery QC, who is always an enthusiastic supporter of such events.

The theme of the conference was human rights, which was addressed in plenary sessions, together with a three-stream programme of litigation, corporate governance and property and finance. The conference was held over two days, and the sessions were interspersed with numerous networking opportunities for speakers and delegates alike over endless cups of tea, coffee, wicked Danish pastries and gourmet buffet-style luncheons. The bell ringer kept things on track, an old fashioned but effective way of keeping control of the delegates. Overall the ambience of the conference was efficient professionalism, but with an air of relaxed informality, a difficult but ideal combination.

The benchmark has now been set for future national AWL conferences and was a credit to the organisers.

The Hon JJ Spigelman AC, Chief Justice of New South Wales, opened the conference with customary style at a cocktail party held at the conference venue, the Sheraton on the Park, at which local Sydney delegates greeted and met our interstate colleagues. The work of the conference began the next morning, with two days of thought provoking, informative sessions, presented by a cast of outstanding speakers who included Justice Margaret Beazley AO, Justice Ruth McColl AO, Justice Catherine Branson, Chief Justice Diana Bryant, Chief Justice Marilyn Warren AC, Justice Margaret McMurdo, Justice Robyn Layton, Justice Narelle Johnson, Judge Felicity Hampel, Anna Katzmann SC, Chris Ronalds AM SC, Chrissa Loukas (fresh from The Hague), Nicola Roxon MP, Federal Shadow Attorney-General and from the Victorian Bar came Kate McMillan SC, Jennifer Batrouney SC and Dr Sue McNicol.

The highlight of the conference was the address given by keynote speaker, The Hon Mary Gaudron QC, who spoke on the topic 'Equality: the Guarantee of Excellence', and warmed to the theme that true equality allows for individual talents through recognition of differences, be it race, religion or gender, which of itself advances the pursuit of excellence. Gaudron noted that since the launch of AWL 10 years ago, whilst the position could not be described as ideal, there had been 'significant improvement' in the position of women lawyers within the legal profession and judiciary by the growing number of women in professional organisations and a 'noticeable presence' of women in important commercial litigation in all states.

Perhaps the speaker whose speech sparked the most controversy, was the shadow attorney-general, Nicola Roxon. Her speech has already been well documented in the press (including the front page of *Lawyers Weekly*: 'AWB lawyers are part of a broken system'). Ms Roxon expressed the view that the profession's reputation is tarnished in the eyes of the public, and she used AWB's claim of legal professional privilege as an example to test the issue. Barristers and payment of tax was also aired by Ms Roxon. Roxon called for reform to fix the profession's 'PR issue'.

The business of the conference culminated in a gala dinner held at the Sheraton on the Park on Saturday 30 September. Some partners of delegates and speakers attended, but it would be fair to say that it was a mainly female turn out, particularly amongst the interstate guests. The after dinner speech fell to the president of the Law Society, Ms June McPhie, who told her now infamous 'Bat bites solicitor and dies' story which, for those of us at the Bar, had a certain ring to it. There followed a floor show and dancing, with the Northern Territory contingent notably present, particularly on the dance floor. Yes, unlike the Bench & Bar Dinner, there was a dance floor, and it was populated almost entirely by women plus two or three rather smug looking men.

Frankly, one had to be there and if one wasn't, one should make a point to attend the next AWL conference, wherever that may be.



'Celebrating Excellence' at the Sheraton on the Park.



Alexandra Richards QC (Victorian Bar); Chrissa Loukas (NSW Bar); Justice Robyn Layton (SA Sup Ct); Caroline Kirton (President, AWL, Victorian Bar).