

Bench and Bar lunches

By Phil Greenwood SC



‘What was it like in the old days when barristers and judges used to meet and have lunch in the Dining Room?’

This question was asked during a New Barristers’ Committee meeting several years ago. It brought back mixed feelings.

In 1984, Jan was the cook in the kitchen and Dorothy (‘Dot’) was the waitress. Breakfast and lunch was served. Jan was friendly and would take special orders. Dot was a Scot – diminutive and brusque – and did not muck around. The food was basic, but adequate – most of the time. Finding a band-aid in a salad one day was a low point.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. There was a handful of regulars who tended to sit in the same spot each morning.

Lunch was quite different. At 1.00pm the procession of judges and barristers from court would commence. Wigs and gowns would be left in the cloak room. Tables would be filled in turn. It was not done to start a new table whilst a seat was empty at an existing table. Most people knew each other. If not, introductions were curt. Orders were placed immediately. There was not a lot of choice. Meals were served with alacrity (mostly). Conversations ranged widely from current news events to speculation about appointments. It was friendly chatter (mostly). Lunch was consumed efficiently. No-one left the table until the senior person rose.

Tea or coffee would often be taken in the Common Room when the conversation

would tend to move to reminiscences and, depending on the company, be more opinionated.

Murray Gleeson QC, then president of the Bar Association, referred to these occasions as a medium for scandalous information; an occasion of privilege for defamation; and a forum for ideas about the bar.

It was certainly an extraordinary opportunity and privilege to meet and mix with judges and barristers of all seniorities, be treated as an equal (mostly) and hear their opinions and insights on almost any topic.

During the 1990s, the Dining Room went through a number of changes. The caterer changed and despite a number of attempts to re-invigorate the place, slowly but surely patronage declined. Various reasons for this were suggested, including the increased cost of the food, a preference to be above-ground and a desire for variety in both food and company. Eventually the decision was made to close the Dining Room.

In an attempt to revive the positive aspects of the dining room, some members of the bar have been organising occasional ‘cheap and quick’ lunches for barristers and judges for the last couple of years.

The intent is to provide a regular and casual opportunity for judges and barristers to interact and communicate informally.

The lunches seemed to have been well-received. Judges from the High Court, Federal Court, Supreme Court, Land and Environment Court and District Court have been regular supporters. They have commented on the benefits of being able to meet new barristers and catch up with old friends from the bar. Counsel of all seniority have remarked on the positive spirit of camaraderie and community. Each occasion has attracted about 80–90 barristers and judges.

Most lunches have been held at the Hyde Park Barracks Cafe in Macquarie Street. One lunch was held in the Hellenic Club in Elizabeth Street to be closer to the southern legal precinct. A choice of three dishes is offered, including a vegetarian dish, for \$25. People are encouraged to join the next available table, order immediately and eat when served.

But there is the ongoing problem of individual barristers taking financial responsibility for booking a restaurant and then hoping that people attend. A solution remains elusive. All suggestions, on this or any other aspect, are welcomed.

In 2010, five lunches are planned. Each is on a Tuesday in an ‘odd’ month. They will be on:

16 March;
4 May;
20 July;
14 September;
and
16 November.

All current and retired members of the bench and bar are welcome and encouraged to attend. That includes the newest reader. Everyone has something valuable to contribute.

If you wish to book now, find out more or contribute a suggestion, please e-mail: Phil Greenwood SC at pgreenwood@wentworthchambers.com.au, Jeremy Gormly SC at gormly@denmanchambers.com.au, Joshua Knackstredt at knackstredt@12thfloor.com.au or David Mackay at dmackay@sixthfloor.com.au