

Let's talk about rights

by Eva Scheerlinck

As you are no doubt all aware by now, the federal government, on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 2008, announced a national public consultation into human rights protections in Australia.

This consultation is a significant event for the Australian Lawyers Alliance, but also, more broadly, for the Australian public.

In 2007, the Australian Lawyers Alliance identified a human rights charter for Australia as its ten-year goal. To have the opportunity to consider this in the first term of the federal Labor government has given us the opportunity to realise this goal earlier than we first anticipated.

The Australian Lawyers Alliance sees the debate on human rights protections in Australia as a very important dialogue for the Australian people to engage in. Many commentators and human rights experts in Australia predict this to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enshrine human rights protections.

As part of our commitment to a human rights charter, we are also determined to inform the broader public about human rights and the importance of their participation in a process that can define the rights and responsibilities they care about. As part of that commitment, an external education campaign has been implemented, headed by NSW branch president of the Lawyers Alliance, Anthony Scarcella.

The Lawyers Alliance has

co-ordinated representatives to attend events in the ACT, NSW, the NT, Qld, Vic and SA. This has included universities, Rotary clubs, Probus clubs and even libraries. These events have been very successful in introducing the consultation to the attendees, as well as providing the opportunity to engage local communities in human rights discussions and, hopefully, to encourage them to have their say in this process.

At a recent presentation I gave to business leaders in Sydney, I was surprised at the positive response I received on the subject of enshrined human rights protections in our country. There was also outrage at the fact that they had to hear about the consultation from me. They were unaware that the consultation was taking place, or that they could have input into what was being considered in terms of human rights protections. One person referred to the current government campaign against obesity, the 'measure up' campaign featured in television and print advertising. Another referred to the national security campaign. Both these campaigns are costing millions of taxpayer dollars, and yet the national human rights consultation has a minimal budget and almost no awareness penetration in the community. They felt that this was disproportionate to what they regarded to be the importance of the issue.

This consultation is Australia's biggest so far, with more than 10,000 submissions received to date, due largely to the co-ordinated efforts of the Australian Human Rights Group



members, including large membership organisations such as Amnesty International Australia and Get Up! The Australian Lawyers Alliance is a member of the AHRG (see: www.humanrightsact.com.au/ahrg/) and though our sphere of influence is much smaller than that of AIA or Get Up!, our expertise exerts particular influence in certain sectors of the community.

The number of submissions made to the consultation committee is important. The content is, of course, also important. And while the Lawyers Alliance will be making a detailed submission to the consultation, you may wish to do so as well. You may choose to do this as an individual with certain knowledge about the law, or you may choose to do so as a concerned citizen or parent, and perhaps even do it together with family members.

Information about the consultation can be found at www.humanrightsconsultation.gov.au and also our website, www.lawyersalliance.com.au.

Whatever your take is on human rights protections in Australia, don't miss your opportunity to participate in this consultation. Make a submission by 15 June 2009. ■

Eva Scheerlinck is the Australian Lawyers Alliance's Chief Executive Officer.

PHONE (02) 9258 7700

EMAIL eva@lawyersalliance.com.au