

The good fight

By Mark Blumer

This is my first President's Page. There is a lot to say, but I won't try and do it all here. I would love to hear from every member at least once during my year in office. You can email me at mark@blumers.com.au, or ring me on 02 6208 2608 or 0408 687098. Tell me what you think, even if you believe it is not what I will want to hear.

When this organisation was founded about 15 years ago, the personal injury landscape was very different. The idea that a person who is injured because of someone else's negligence is entitled to compensation was then well accepted, although with minor restrictions.

As the representatives of injured people, Lawyers for the People, we were in our comfort zone, but our founders felt the cold wind of change coming. So, we began.

Now, in every state and territory in the Commonwealth, the right to compensation is severely limited by thresholds and caps and many other restrictions. Access to legal representation for injured people is fogged by advertising bans and hemmed in by punitive costs regulations. The aim of all this is to protect the profits of the insurance industry. In this, they have been enormously successful. Who paid for the last economic downturn and for

bad business decisions by insurance companies? Our clients paid and they continue to do so.

The Alliance has been mostly unsuccessful in preventing that stripping-away of the rights of individuals. It has not been for want of trying. If our predecessors and the staff of the organisation had not worked long and hard and smart, our clients and our members would have been in a much worse position. On your behalf, I thank them sincerely for that work.

Now we need to find a way of being more effective in telling the story of and restoring the trampled rights of our present and future clients.

Our human rights focus goes hand in hand with that. It is entirely natural for us to be concerned with the wider issue of executive government impinging upon our natural freedoms. When we go to government or the press, we go now with a complete human rights story. Our own self-interest, while present, is further in the background, which is as it should be. What has happened to the rights of injured people is not very different, for example, to the effect on the rights of ordinary citizens of anti-terrorism laws and laws that allow non-citizens under immigration laws to be held in unlimited detention without trial or charge.



In these hard economic times the people need us now, more than ever. After more than a decade of extreme conservatism, we have a part to play in making sure we emerge as a freer and fairer society for the individual.

The recent restructure in ALA is about readying ourselves for the next stage of the ongoing battle for rights.

The call will soon go out to our members to step up once more, to employ our very considerable talents and experience, and our courage, in the good fight. Whatever you may think about the directors' recent decisions, I ask you to accept that they were taken to make ALA a more effective and engaging organisation. Let's get on with the job we set ourselves 15 years ago.

That job is not going away and neither are we. ■

Mark Blumer is National President of the Australian Lawyers Alliance and partner at Blumers Personal Injury Lawyers in Canberra.

PHONE (02) 6208 2608 or 0408 687098

EMAIL mark@blumers.com.au