

A contentious and elusive concept

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The papers given at the Public Interest Summit were inspiring, provocative and challenging. It is impossible to do justice to the detail and full import of the contributions of the speakers and panel members except to say that all were substantial and constructive contributions to the debates about what is 'the public interest', and what should drive public interest advocacy.

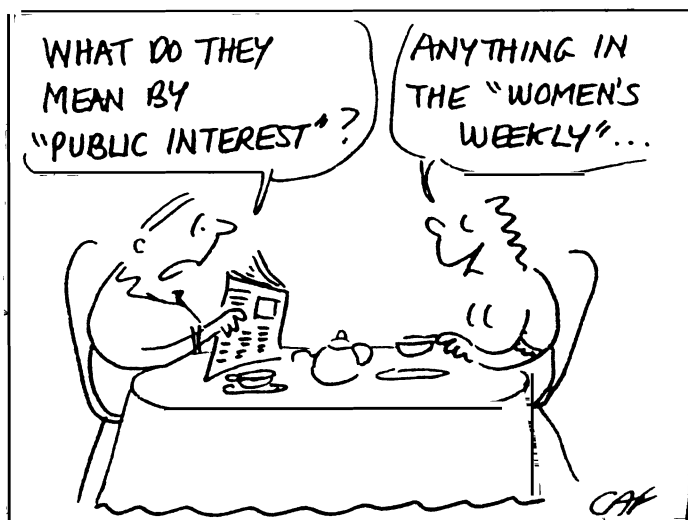
The purpose of the Summit was primarily to bring together people who are involved or interested in public interest work – public and private lawyers, academics, bureaucrats, students, community workers and members of the public – to renew and redefine our principles, our ideas and our agendas.

These remarks do not attempt to summarise all that was said at the Summit. Rather, they highlight the themes and lessons echoed in the various contributions which may be summed up in half a dozen broad points:

- the 'public interest' will remain a contentious and elusive concept. Those who are committed to social and economic justice must continually endeavour to define and drive debates about 'the public interest'. We must continually revisit the issue to determine what it means in the particular economic, social and political contexts with which we are concerned;
- we must do more to ensure the full and fair consideration of public interest issues in legal processes — in parliaments, courts and tribunals, regulatory agencies and bureaucra-

cies – and inform them about the interests of our constituencies and clients. We must do so with vigour and with professionalism;

- we must do more to encourage a 'public interest movement' amongst advocates and activists. It must be an inclusive movement accommodating diverse perspectives and diverse agendas, but at the same time we must give more attention to what we have in common. We have much to gain in identifying ourselves as part



of a dynamic, influential and supportive movement;

- public interest advocates must be responsive to and must serve social movements by engaging with the community and consumer organisations devoted to the interests of the disempowered. We must run with the major economic, social and environmental justice issues of the 1990s;

- public interest advocates must maintain a radical agenda, challenging the orthodoxies, alliances, deals and other barriers that inhibit social and economic justice, especially the inadequacies of the legal system such as standing, secrecy clauses, FoI, fees, taxation distortions and reliance on adversarial processes;
- public interest advocates must unify human rights and public interest concepts, and actively use them domestically and internationally. We must

consider what opportunities and responsibilities there are for us in Australia's engagement with Asia.

The talks and dialogue at the Public Interest Summit presented enormous challenges to all concerned with public interest work. PIAC benefited greatly from the opportunity to bring such people together, and we will endeavour to ensure it is not too long before

it happens again. We trust that these papers will provide a useful resource for those who could not attend the first Summit, and a compelling reason to come to the next.

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