

The power of the individual and the group

On more than one occasion of late I have had reason to justify the existence of APLA. I have also had reason to defend APLA as a not-for-profit association, when members of the public don't seem to understand that the words 'lawyer' and 'not-for-profit' can work together in the same sentence.

These occasions have provided an opportunity to reflect on the origins of the organisation - why we formed, how we formed, and why we continue to exist.

(Organisations such as APLA grow from needs that go unfulfilled in the government and business sectors. In fact, they may even stem directly from government or business sector actions that hurt our community.

Ever-changing business and government environments often leave individuals exposed to harm. Individuals must then take stock of the circumstances in which they are suffering and make a decision as to whether or not to rebel. That sort of decision takes courage, particularly for an individual taking on the Big End of Town.

The power of the individual in these circumstances is not to be underestimated. A determined and wronged citizen has a supernatural drive, and often an impassioned message that reaches out to others and creates partnerships. This can trigger informal relationships between friends and

neighbours who share a common goal.

And, of course, there is strength in numbers, and informal relationships often develop in response to wrongs in the community. Important networks can form and the pressure for change then intensifies. One of the strengths of groups formed in this way is that they are often dismissed by the government and business sectors as disorganised groups of disgruntled consumers, who can safely be ignored. It can indeed be useful to have your opposition underestimate your effectiveness.

A great example of individual willpower bringing together likeminded individuals and other non-government organisations in an unprecedented collaborative effort is the work of Jody Williams. Along with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Jody brought together 1,300 different non-government groups in 85 countries to achieve an international treaty banning antipersonnel landmines. For her efforts she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

Her example highlights the importance of individual action, as well as group action. Both are necessary to fight entrenched views, to gain support for an idea that some may view as utopian or unrealistic.

APLA was formed in 1994 by a group of likeminded individuals who saw a need to fight unjust laws affecting individuals in the community. Over the past 10 years it has grown in numbers and in strength. As a group, it is still largely underestimated. In fact, at the end of last year, a member of the New South Wales profession asked me why APLA needed a CEO - didn't they just meet in someone's backyard over a beer?

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In the beginning APLA outsourced its administration. Now it has 10 permanent full-time staff in a Sydney office. The support for the organisation from both its members and the community at large continues to grow.

APLA was formed as a not-for-profit association. This means that no one personally gains a profit from the association's activities. While it raises revenue from its continuing legal education program, advertising in its journal and so on, the purpose of these revenue-raising activities is to maintain the association's existence and finance its policy and lobbying objectives.

APLA will continue to exist as long as the need to fight government and business excesses permeate our society. APLA's success is based largely on the extensive work of a committed and dedicated few, supported by the many. And, just like Jody Williams, APLA is enlisting the support of other groups with similar goals.

The influence of the individual remains vital to motivate and empower the group. So, whether you are one of the individuals who drives us forward, or you are one of the group, you are an important part of something worthwhile... **PL**



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