

Challenges and opportunities in 2012

By Greg Barns

2012 provides a number of opportunities for the ALA to involve itself in the political process. Queenslanders go to the polls, as do Northern Territorians and the voters of the ACT. Late this year, or early next year, Western Australia will hold its elections. At the federal level, the fluid situation created by minority government ensures that every policy is open to influence from groups like the ALA.

Elections are important for the ALA because legal issues generally have a role to play in each of the parties' platforms. Law and order unfortunately has become an auction in most jurisdictions and, during elections, parties ramp up their rhetoric to attract conservative voters and column inches in the tabloid media. But on the plus side, even occupational health and safety and personal injuries issues often get a look in, as can general human rights issues. In fact, it is fair to say that state and territory governments affect the human rights landscape and the legal avenues available to individuals more frequently than the Commonwealth government does, because they are the 'coalface' tier of government.

Given all this, it's vital for ALA state and territory committees to stay abreast of what political parties are proposing and saying about the issues that affect lawyers and the law. Staying actively engaged is important for two reasons. First – and I say this as someone who worked in politics for the best part of a decade – political parties, ministers and shadow ministers all tend to be more responsive to interest groups around election time. So it's a useful time to

get their attention and ensure that the ALA's views are heard and heeded. Secondly, the media looks for interest group responses to election policy announcements. This means that the ALA also has an opportunity to be the voice for legal issues during election campaigns.

One interesting initiative is to rate each of the parties on law and justice issues and release a table towards the end of the election campaign. For example, in Queensland the ALA could rate the ALP, the LNP and Bob Katter's new outfit on fairness in sentencing, or on how they protect human rights. In the ACT, the issue of accident and workers' compensation has been a live one recently, and the ALA could rate the three parties in the Assembly there on those issues.

ALA branches and members should also take the opportunity to alert our team at head office or our National Committee to any policy issues that require a national response. If policy is proposed that is demonstrably unfair, or which threatens to seriously undermine human rights, I, as National President, and my colleagues on the National Committee will be more than happy to weigh in on the issue.

Speaking of the head office, this year the policy and media team of Emily Price and Mandy Wyrer will be focusing on Indigenous issues, where the federal government's proposed *Stronger Futures* legislation threatens to take Australia back to a paternalist model of dealing with the problems of Indigenous disadvantage. In late February, the ALA, along with a number of other groups, hosted a screening at Parliament House in Canberra of a powerful film about



the Howard/Rudd and Gillard governments' Intervention.

The ALA will also, this year, be undertaking a major membership-recruitment drive, particularly among criminal law firms. We will also focus on building strength in the Northern Territory and in Western Australia. With firms merging and the rise of larger criminal law firms, now is an ideal time for the ALA to speak for criminal lawyers in Australia in a way that has not been done before at a national level.

One of our aims for 2012 will be to host criminal law seminars for lawyers around Australia. The seminar model that the ALA has developed for personal injuries lawyers over the years is a very successful one, which can readily be translated to the criminal law sphere.

I look forward to working with ALA members over the course of 2012, as we work to build the organisation's capacities and profile among lawyers around the nation. ■

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