

The legal profession and the next millennium

Catherine Dunlop

This millennium will be remembered for a number of reasons - it has the age of discovery, the age of enlightenment and a time when oppressed people have risen up and taken their place in society. Maybe in the next millennium we can dream that another group of oppressed people will overcome their obstacles and take up their place in society. Which group of oppressed people? The young lawyer. Yes, perhaps even the young lawyer might stop being the object of derision and poverty and become a person of some, albeit limited, worth.

Let me put this in context. The young lawyer starts his or her career with dreams of being a cross between Atticus Finch and Arnie Becker. However before long they realise that little has changed since 1837 when Dickens said of legal offices that they were "fine places of slow torture". So given this, can we expect change in the future? How realistic is this? How do we measure it?

Well, in January 1947 Franklin D. Roosevelt talked of a new vision for society. He said that his vision was "not a vision of a distant millennium" but was an attainable goal of a world with four essential human freedoms. These were the freedom of speech, the freedom to worship a god, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear. Will the young lawyer achieve these goals in the future? We'll look at them one by one.

Firstly, the freedom of speech. This is obviously a reference to the right of solicitors to appear in court. This move seems inevitable, particularly given the increasing appearance of solicitors in tribunals and minor courts and the popularity of university mooting competitions. It is also becoming easier for a solicitor to spend days in court with improvements in computers and the increasing benevolence of judges, in particular County Court judges who write helpful articles on court etiquette in the Law Institute Journal and support Young Lawyers Speaking Competitions. In conclusion it would seem that anything that gets a young lawyer out of the office has to be a good thing so it is likely that we will all achieve freedom of speech.

Next, the right to be free to worship a god. It would not be unrealistic to say that many a young lawyer heading into the next millennium already worships a god and indeed many have shrines to the god or gods of their choice - Mr Arthur Robinson, Mr Freehills, or Mr Blakes. We are a race of people who are required to show lavish devotion to one set of gods - our partners - and we worship them from Monday to Friday, and in most cases Saturday and Sunday. Apart from a brief reprieve on Friday nights where we worship other things at the Mitre or other such establishments, we are free, nay, required to worship gods. So this is not so much a good thing, but a necessity and shows no sign of waning into the next millennium.

Thirdly, we need freedom from want. We require two things to be free from want. Firstly we need plenty of work. With the Millennium bug, the Asian economic crisis and the self sacrifice of a dedicated Melbourne lawyer Mr Max Green, there seems to be no lack of work going into the Year 2001. However we also need to be paid for it. As Horace Rumpole said "I will stand up in court for an underprivileged person - provided that they have Legal Aid". This is where we come unstuck as with the decline in Legal Aid, the young lawyer may not be free from want for many a year to come.

Lastly we have freedom from fear. The young lawyer has much to fear. Between the realisation that since we graduated only 3 or 4 years ago the entire law of negligence seems to have changed, and the terror of not knowing what we are doing, we are often terrified. It is almost certain that we will still have no idea what we are doing in the year 2001 and beyond. Unfortunately a young lawyer will always be fearful but then that is the job.

So, whilst we may have the freedom of speech and the right to worship our dubious gods, we will still be poor and fearful. It seems that the young lawyer will be oppressed well into the next millennium!