

The passionate voice



SELF-BELIEF: Elizabeth O'Shea says responding to adversity is the real test of success for a young lawyer.

ELIZABETH O'SHEA'S STELLAR LEGAL CAREER HAS BEEN BUILT ON HARD WORK, ENTHUSIASM AND PASSION. AND IT'S NOT YET FIVE YEARS OLD.

Elizabeth O'Shea is very lucky, and she's the first to admit it. This young lawyer has a stellar position as head of the social justice practice at Maurice Blackburn, has enjoyed stints working in Geneva, Louisiana and Dublin, and counts American activist Noam Chomsky among her inbox friends.

Lizzie, as she prefers to be called, has a public interest litigator's dream job. She works in a large, well-resourced firm where she can litigate social justice issues while giving a voice to those who cannot use their own.

This articulate young lawyer has a voice and is not afraid to use it. You may have seen her numerous articles on human rights, and the open letter she co-wrote to the PM regarding Julian Assange of WikiLeaks fame (see <http://bit.ly/h2btk0>).

That letter generated unprecedented attention. ABC's website *The Drum*, which published the letter, buckled under the traffic flow. Hundreds joined as signatories to the letter, including the likes of barrister Julian Burnside QC, Senator Bob Brown and author Helen Garner.

Underpinning her good fortune is her consistent hard work, enthusiasm and passion for social justice.

Did you know that you wanted to be a lawyer?

Not always, but I was heavily involved in student activist politics at uni. I knew I wanted to be advocating for people who were disadvantaged and didn't have a voice in society. I always wanted to work

in an area I was passionate about and I'm very lucky to get a job that meets those objectives.

At the end of 2008 you left Maurice Blackburn to intern at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and later at Reprive USA. Did you have anything lined up to come back to?

No, I was unemployed. But I had stayed in contact with some of the senior lawyers of the firm, and an opening for this position had just come up. It was perfect.

What's so challenging about being the head of social justice?

Being a junior lawyer can be hard at times because you can feel like you are being scrutinised and criticised. I think one of the biggest challenges is learning to take that criticism and to take it well, and work out how to make the best of the experience that's on offer.

Describe a typical day

One day I might be in the High Court. Another might be spent speaking to applicants for assistance and working out what the right place is to refer them to if we can't help them.

I do a lot of case work and appearance work in court. I also do a lot of administrative stuff. I manage internally the practice so I have a huge number of lawyers, at least 60–70, who are keen to be involved.

In one matter we are representing Indigenous people who are opposing a nuclear waste dump being built at Muckaty Station in the Northern Territory. Other matters include personal injury and discrimination matters. So there's no such thing as a typical day I suppose.

You have enjoyed significant media exposure in recent times, including writing for *The Drum* website. Why is this so important to you?

I think it's important for lawyers to be vocal about freedom of speech and basic civil rights because in some ways they are the best placed to do it. They understand the ebbs and flows of the system, how it works and know what protection of human rights we have in our society and know its vulnerabilities... that's what underpins the letter about Julian Assange.

There has been an explosion of media attention surrounding the WikiLeaks scandal and the implications for Julian Assange. You co-authored an open letter with Dr Jeff Sparrow (*Overland* editor) to Prime Minister Julia Gillard expressing your concerns. Where did the idea come from?

I saw that the political climate was moving quite rapidly at the end of last year and there was great

concern that Assange would face extradition to the US in circumstances which were extremely concerning for anyone who respects the rule of law or the presumption of innocence.

Jeff and I talked about it and wanted to crystallise that sentiment. I was quite overwhelmed with the response that we got, including an email from Noam Chomsky which I was very excited about. I had to restrain myself from writing a gushing email in return.

There's been a huge response on the web. Given what was going on at the time, it was the right thing to do.

What do you do in your down time?

This is pretty embarrassing but I'm just about to get into season five of *The Wire*. It is an emotional rollercoaster.

The Wire just puts my problems into perspective.

Where do you want to be in five years?

I would like to see this practice going really well. That's where I would like to be. I would like to still be doing the same thing I'm doing and keep contributing to the legal community.

Do you have any advice for young lawyers?

You have to have a bit of faith and confidence in yourself. I've had times in my career where I've had no job at all and something's come up. It's responding to that adversity which is the real test of success.

MICHELLE BATSAS
is co-chair of the Young Lawyers' Section Editorial Committee and a lawyer at Corrs Chambers Westgarth.

Elizabeth O'Shea's Career

Name: Elizabeth O'Shea (prefers Lizzie)

Age: 28

Education: Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Law (University of Melbourne)

Career Highlights:

2007 – Articles at Maurice Blackburn. Completed rotations through industrial relations and medical negligence

2008 – Admitted to practice in the Supreme Court of Victoria. Sent to Dublin with Maurice Blackburn to work on a complex European class action

2009 – Internship at International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva. Internship with Reprieve USA, New Orleans

2010–present – Lawyer and head of the social justice practice at Maurice Blackburn



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Melbourne Law School.

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