

The Real Deal

Eloise McLean

On the evening of June 18, I received a – for a first-year law student – thrilling offer from CLA President Dr Kristine Klugman and CEO Bill Rowlings to be a Hansard Witness in Parliament’s Public Inquiry into the Freedom of Religious Beliefs. To introduce myself, I am 18 and currently in my first year of studying dual Law and International Security Studies at the ANU. Thus, following a first semester focusing on Tortious Law and the Foundations of Australian Law, I was eager to throw myself into the opportunity to test out my studied knowledge and apply it to not only a real life, but a very important issue that CLA was lobbying for.

Advised by Kris to read through as much as I could and be prepared for the hearing, I pictured myself seated in a witness stand being drilled with constitutional questions. However, this was not to be the case, and in fact, I was to learn more than I could have imagined.

Arriving with Kris and Bill at Parliament House on the morning of June 22 I was moved as I entered the monumental building for the first time. However, as the pair confidently powered through the halls, nodding politely at so many people they must have known, and appearing to be comfortable with every in and out, I felt at ease and ready for the experience ahead.

After arriving in the room, I witnessed Kris not only politely greet everyone by name and appear to have already built a connection with most people in the room, but offer CLA bookmarks to the people we were seated across. This small kind act immediately highlighted to me how important respect and reputation was in this business, and how the members of CLA had maintained both.

Seated across from us in the awing room was Dr Ann Aly, chairperson Kevin Andrews, Senator Claire Moore and a Secretary; less people than I had expected but names I had heard and individuals who I knew carried real responsibility and influence. I also made sure to note that Bill

knew not only the names and parties of everyone in the room, but had notes on the political history, area and favour of the people in the room; ‘It’s important to know who you are dealing with to show respect and to help get our way’.

Furthermore, during the discussion, I was extraordinarily impressed by how well Bill knew exactly what he was talking about. By this I mean not only did he remain composed although clearly invested in the issue, strong and clear in his position and ability to answer the questions, but Bill proved to have a wealth of knowledge and evidence on the issues brought up that provided powerful precedent and not only supported CLA’s requests, but I’m sure would have impressed anyone in the room; I was indeed impressed and filled my paper with notes on Bill’s discussion very quickly.

Finally, apart from the thrill of actually being able physically apply my recently acquired skills and understanding of legislative processes and the importance of wording and language when producing legislation, articulating regarding the Charter/Bill being discussed, I found it extraordinary humbling when Senator Moore directly asked of Bill and Kris what they would like to see changed and improved in parliamentary processes, referring to the respected and well-known activities of CLA around Australia.

Ultimately, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to learn and experience more as a witness in this public hearing than in much of my semesters studies, and am honoured to have been invited into the process by your passionate and influential group. Thank you.

