

## CLA Presidents Report 2011

Posterity gained a symbol of liberty in the form of a tree, we battled through another year of increasingly repressive legislation, and we emerged strong as an organisation from a difficult economic climate during a year when many people cut back on discretionary spending, affecting a lot of community groups including CLA.

Planting Australia's Liberty Tree on Human Rights Day, 10 December, by former ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope was a major achievement of CLA this year. The 3m Kurrajong (*brachychiton populneus*) stands proudly in an area reserved for VIP plantings at the new National Arboretum in Canberra. (*Mr Stanhope and I are pictured, at right, with the commemorative plaque*).

Seven-year-old Charli (Charlotte) Withers helped plant the tree. She was born on the day the first Human Rights Act in Australia came into operation on 1 July 2004 under the ACT's Stanhope government. She has never lived a day not protected by a human rights Act. (If only all Australians enjoyed similar protection, but all we have is the "Human Rights Framework", a poor substitute with more holes than substance).

You can see video of the tree-planting on the CLA website, courtesy of CLA member Graham Macafee. Subsequently, I posted Kurrajong seeds to some CLA members around Australia, with reports of successful striking emerging early in 2012. Maybe we will sprout a Liberty Tree-led 'revolution' of a return to rights across Australia, countering excessive, knee-jerk, anti-terrorism restrictions?

Mr Stanhope also delivered a significant lecture organised by CLA as part of the Senate Occasional Lecture series on the topic: *Who's afraid of Human Rights?* We hope to make it an annual CLA-inspired event.



Our Australia Day letter in 2011 concentrated on Julian Assange and FOI. We defended whistleblowers, and asked the Australian Government to support an Australian citizen against nations which would or could ignore his human rights. The Australian Government has remained silent over Assange and his rights.

Mid-year in Darwin, along with the CEO, I had 24 meetings in 10 days with a wide range of people. A full report is on the CLA website. Many well-known local people joined CLA and formed the basis of a potentially influential group. CLA's visit coincided with renewed interest in a lawyers for human rights group and in a human rights education council based on Charles Darwin University, which we welcome.

In 2011, CLA introduced a new system for electronic handling of membership applications and renewals, which should streamline the procedure. We are indebted to the hard work of our webmaster Lance Williamson, who is also Vice-President in charge of ACT matters, and Treasurer Phil Schubert in bedding down the new system. For some members, the change to an online system was difficult, and we apologise to those who ran into strife. We

are more than happy to accept cheques, or cash, from people who dislike online processes.

I must thank Kevin Popple for his four-year stewardship of CLA's finances, during which he pulled them firmly into shape and helped prepare them for an electronic age. I also thank him for acting as honorary auditor for the 2011 accounts. "New" Treasurer Phil Schubert has done a remarkable job in adapting to both the older and newer electronic systems.

While the difficult year financially in the community saw total numbers reduce, our finances stayed strong. Economic times continue tough though, so that I urge all members to secure one or two new members for CLA during 2012. Please let us know if you think someone could be approached: we're happy to do the approaching, with or without mentioning your name.

Darren Churchill joined the Board in February but left in July owing to other obligations. The Board and I thank him for his contributions to CLA over a number of years.

Our media presence is ably managed by Director and national media spokesperson Tim Vines and I thank him and other committed Board members for their contributions. Our quarterly Board meetings cover a huge range of issues and policy decisions, and are completed in two enjoyable hours because of the cooperative spirit which imbues the Board.

During 2012, we recorded one major success: the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Attorney-General's Department, will report to parliament annually on what happens to people whom Australia extradites. This six-year battle to achieve this outcome began when CLA first alerted the Treaties Committee to the extraordinary oversight that as a nation we renew treaties without knowing whether or how countries have abided by them in the past. In future, we will know what has happened to the people we have previously sent back in Pontius Pilate fashion to their fate.

Main issues worked on during 2011 were:

- Model Litigant Rules, which some government departments and agencies pay scant attention to;
- Anzac project for 2015, to cut jingoism and avoid the *Anzac! Anzac! Anzac! Oi Oi Oi* approach prospectively being engineered by parts of the federal government;
- Campaign against 'law and order' auction elections in NSW, Qld, NT and ACT.
- The inherently anti-democratic process of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and offshoots, like 'SLUDGE' (the Standing Committee on Law and Justice, SCLJ, or "sludge", which replaced SCAG, the SC of Attorneys-General, in 2011);
- Juvenile justice and prison issues;
- FOI legislation and implementation;
- Collaboration with the Australian Privacy Foundation on a range of privacy issues, such as e-health records and bullying/harassment by the Australian Bureau of Statistics; and
- about 40 submissions to government committees and hearings, mostly trying to combat repressive legislation, with only limited success...but persevere we must.

For 2012, we continue to work on most of the above, and have also introduced a new focus on the Australian Tax Office, which appears to engage in bullying and may be ignoring the Model Litigant Rules.

As well, we intend to do more public speaking, issue more media releases, and put our own thoughts on the public agenda. To enable this, the Board has endorsed a plan to streamline the way we do submissions to government committees and inquiries. Simplifying submissions will free us to concentrate more on principles than black letter legal words, and to promote CLA's comments as much into the public arena as into the closeted recesses of parliamentary committees and the noisome pit of the self-absorbed parliament itself.

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