

## President's Report to Members for 2017

At the start of the year, Civil Liberties Australia asked the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and then Attorney-General Senator George Brandis to hold a long-term national inquiry into the state of justice and the legal system in Australia. The plea was contained in CLA's Australia Day letter for 2017. We received no meaningful response.

By contrast, but also at the end of the year: two victories for sanity: marriage equality entrenched nationally and voluntary euthanasia legislated in Victoria, both of which we have campaigned strongly for in support of mainstream organisations fighting those battles. See politicians, you can introduce positive change to liberties and rights, if only you put your heart into it.

At the end of the year, the CLA Board reviewed the strategic plan, considered new marketing measures, and a review of promotional material. The need for a major revamp of CLA's database and member register system is becoming urgent, as an unacceptable number of errors are occurring. As well, technical changes mean we must update the design of the CLA website.

Our 10-year Better Justice project campaign saw one of the 10 aims realised when the Australian government ratified OPCAT (the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture). This one stroke of the pen effectively opens all prisons and detention centres within Australia to regular public inspection, including by international inspectors. Another CLA success occurred with tabling, at a Miscarriages of Justice academic conference in Adelaide, of a new chart indicating the likely rate of wrongful convictions in Australia.

Sometimes we overlook how hard it is to just keep things ticking over well. The board continued to meet quarterly, with interstate directors coming in by Skype from Perth and Hobart, and we held our electronic (and paper) AGM between February and March. Two standout successes for 2017 were the CLA groups in Tasmania and Western Australia, both of which achieved great things, and are poised for more successes. Their accomplishments demonstrate the fundamental importance of having the 'right' people to motivate and expand local groups. Allied to this point: ill health of the president during the year affected her capability and reemphasised the growing need for generational change in the executive.

The West's exciting new developments were CLA and Margaret Howkins, now Director WA, finding each other, along with a new state government elected in March with a policy platform far more promising for civil liberties and human rights. A two-week working visit to Perth by the president and CEO in April/May achieved a series of successful meetings with state and federal members of parliament (see website report). WA is promised a new Independent Police Complaints Commission, when funds allow, and the state will also get a convictions review mechanism ('right to appeal' a second time with new evidence) as exists in SA and Tasmania, if the ruling party's state conference decisions in August 2017 are honoured. Former ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope called for a similar right to appeal system in the ACT in July 2017.



The Tasmanian CLA group is actively leading a push for a state bill of rights. "A human rights act would guarantee all Tasmanians had access to the basic building blocks of life, such as the right to health care, the right to education and the right to housing," Director Richard Griggs said. "Current rights protection in Tasmania is partial, fragmented and inaccessible and a human rights Act would bring much needed clarity to this critical area." CLA Hobart director Rajan Venkataraman capably manages the CLA submission processes, and is building national links with like-minded bodies and innovative university projects.

*Left: function organised by Amnesty, with CLA Director Richard Griggs as one of the key speakers.*

In Tasmania, the Sue Neill-Fraser miscarriage of justice case continues, with police acting in an unprecedented way to pressure witnesses. In December, Sue had been in Risdon Prison more than eight years for a murder CLA believes she did not commit. Watch *CLArion* for developments

in Sue's case in 2018, when her "right to appeal" (which CLA was instrumental in securing in Tasmania) will hopefully be exercised.

Director Jennifer Ashton has analysed the full membership database of CLA, with a view to attracting more like-minded people and to expanding the opportunities for two-way communications by and to members. Her excellent report was noted by the Board, with thanks for such detailed work. She will allocate "categories" of issues to be used as 'buttons' on join-renew web pages, so as to allocate members into "keep advised" lists for automatic updating and involvement so they can share more fully in areas of liberties and rights which interest them most. Further development work is contingent on the capabilities of the new computer/database system for CLA.

The continuing importance of networking and making personal contact with decision makers in parliaments and bureaucracies is time consuming but generally rewarding over time. The federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – Non Government Organisation (DFAT-NGO) meetings in 2017 were attended by the President and by Director Ashton: we were able to communicate CLA's viewpoint directly to Ministers' human rights advisers. We also maintained close contacts with kindred groups such as voluntary euthanasia, drug law reform and retired unionists, who generally share CLA's concerns for securing and expanding justice in the areas of liberties and rights for the individual and for groups. When an issue is being covered by well-resourced groups (in terms of money or people), we normally adopt a supportive role rather than being prominent: pushing for justice for refugees on Manus and Nauru is a case in point.

CLA in 2017 had three potential law students Internships through the Australian National University. One, on defamation, to have been supervised by former CLA member and ACT magistrate, Dr Bernadette Boss, fell through at the last moment.

The others, Jyoti Haikerwal (genes issues, supervised by CLA Vice-President Tim Vines) and Kelly Chan (Australian Citizenship: rights and responsibilities with supervisor Dr Emma Larking of RegNet at ANU) produced



excellent essays. Photo: Student Jyoti Haikerwal attended a Board meeting, and is seen with Jennifer Ashton, CEO/Secretary Bill Rowlings, Frank Cassidy, Treasurer Sam Tierney and President Dr Kristine Klugman.

CLA's Facebook page is a good source of news and analysis on emerging issues relevant to civil liberties and human rights. There are links to submissions made by CLA to parliamentary and other inquiries, articles written by CLA members, relevant events happening around the country and news items from Australia and around the world..and it is a good way for members to engage in conversation and share the work of CLA with friends and colleagues. Please check it out and recommend it to any friends with an interest in civil liberties:

<https://www.facebook.com/CivilLibertiesAus/>

While continuing to fight against the long term trend of repression, we hope to make some further gains in civil liberties and human rights in 2018. The aims for 2018 are contained in the annual report for 2017: one of them is to complete a history of civil liberties groups in Australia, of which CLA holds an influential, central position.

– President Kristine Klugman