

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2018 AGM OF NEWCASTLE LAW SOCIETY INC

At this AGM there will be some change to the composition of the management committee. Andrew Cairns is definitely unable to re-nominate having been our Senior Vice President for a couple of terms now. Towards the end of last year our secretary Rebecca Nelson resigned in anticipation of the birth of her twins. (Mission accomplished!) Both our Junior Vice President Elise Grist and our Treasurer Katy Mooney have expressed concern as to whether either can continue, at least in an office-bearer position. We will wait and see what tonight brings, but at the outset thanks to all of them for what they have contributed over extended periods.

I repeat that all (repeat all) management committee positions are deemed to be open tonight.

To recap 2017, our Opening of Law Term ceremonies went off well. Although our numbers were reasonably good, once again I thought we solicitors were under-represented specifically at the ecumenical service, both absolutely and as compared to the Bar. I interpolate that 2018 was much worse; it was dismal. As you are undoubtedly aware, we now have 1,000 solicitors practising in our region. As each of the State Courts in Newcastle proper and some of the Federal Courts refrain from sitting for at least the duration of the ecumenical service, and the majority until the conclusion of the ceremonial sitting, it remains a mystery as to why we solicitors were not there in greater numbers.

Justice Helen Wilson of the Supreme Court presided at the ceremonial sitting. Newly-installed NSW Law Society President, Pauline Wright, joined us for the ceremonial sitting. In the evening we hosted the usual cocktail function, this time at at Reserve Wine Bar and with about 60 in attendance. All in all a big success.

I re-iterate that by and large Law Week has “disappeared” as anything other than a couple of ad hoc events principally in the capital cities. Vale the JusticeConnect (formerly PILCH) Walk for Justice.

Our annual trivia night was in July and we raised a little over \$4,000 for Hunter & Central Coast Lifeline. Once again thanks to Peter Cummings (and perhaps his Chambers) and a couple of other firms or individuals who were willing to “bulk up” the result. That result compares with a little under \$3,000 which we raised for Hunter Connect in 2016 so job well done especially by the organisers, not least those who donated or enticed the donation of prizes for the event.

The annual networking function organised jointly between NLS and the University of Newcastle Law Students Association was held at NewSpace (ie the new University premises in Hunter Street) in August, so a little later in the year than usual. It again was well attended. I see no reason to doubt that a similar function will be held in this year. Please consider coming along or giving us your constructive suggestions as to how to promote “breaking the ice” as between students and practitioners, or both. The more the merrier!

As ever, Banter with the Bench was very successful, this year at the Maritime Centre, with 8 judicial officers in attendance and about 65 practitioners. The Local Court Magistrates in particular, but in fact all judicial officers who attend our functions, invariably express their encouragement and their appreciation of our collegiality and conviviality.

The house was also full back at the Newcastle Club for our annual dinner with our guest speaker “Barnsy”. By acclamation those in attendance vigorously endorsed the return. Although there was a hiccup (pun intended) with the red wine, that was sorted out. Greg Barns gave a challenging, stimulating address which so far as I know was well received by almost all. However it seemed that Barnsy scared off all but one judicial officer, so thanks to Judge Steven Middleton for coming along. Remember: it's the first Friday in November.

It was good news that a “replacement” Federal Circuit Court Judge, Jane Costigan was finally appointed. On behalf of us all I appeared before Her Honour fairly soon as she commenced sitting in Newcastle (but before the ceremonial sitting in her honour) to congratulate and welcome her. Once again we wish her well for the future in what is a fraught jurisdiction, and one likely to be subject to further significant change in the foreseeable future. At the risk of conflation, you may or may not be aware that Pauline Wright attended and spoke at Judge Costigan’s ceremonial.

I attended 4 of the 5 meetings of regional Presidents held in Sydney in 2017 and Andrew Cairns attended on our behalf at the other meeting (for which I thank him). I did a couple of radio interviews to air and offered one or two op ed pieces (but to no apparent effect). Our management committee meets each month except for January.

Our CPD program continues to provide topical, professional and value-for-money seminars, wherever possible utilising local speakers. Complaints as to quality are exceptionally rare although topically not entirely unknown. As you would understand, together with membership subscriptions, CPD is the single-biggest source of revenue. Inroads are being

made by various other providers, including presenters of free-of-charge seminars. This has been having a significant impact on our overall revenues and our ability to fund things such as our secretariat, the Coolahan Scholarship, and the modest subsidization of our major social events. Please continue to support NLS' seminars.

Once again, an enormous vote of thanks goes to Colin James, albeit ably assisted by a small team including Felicity Wardhaugh, Rose Laffan and Kate Thomson. We look forward to continued success in 2018. If you're a confident presenter on a topic or you have suggestions for topics or speakers, please let us know through the [secretariat](#).

It has been of significant assistance to us that Sparke Helmore again allowed us the use of their seminar room for the presentation of various of our CPD seminars. We thank them for that and for their hospitality on those occasions. Whilst mentioning that firm, I again congratulate Richard Anicich on his "anointment" as a Member of the Order of Australia "for significant service to the community...and to the law".

In her role as our treasurer over the last couple of years, Katy Mooney (of Sparke Helmore) has done great work in terms of refining a budget and encouraging still further discipline, for which we thank her. Indeed thanks go to all who have contributed whether on the management committee itself or on any sub-committee, or indeed ad hoc. On the social side we have Elsie Grist to thank for most of that organization now also assisted by James Bartley and others. They have all done a wonderful job in 2017.

NLS remains in a reasonably strong financial position. Copies of the [2017 financial report are available here](#) and have been put on our [website](#). Currently we have 311 "full" financial members, and another 56 who have less than 3 years PAE and/or are government lawyers, and a further 20 who are students. Both of those latter groups pay reduced membership subscriptions. With a catchment of 1,000, no doubt we can do better. Please do what you can to encourage your colleagues who are not currently members to join. The management committee will do likewise.

We continue to have as in effect our honorary accountant Jane Beverley of Evolution Business Advisers. We again thank Jane in particular but her firm generally.

Our policy of upping the ticket prices for the major social events continues, and the aim is to try to make each event break even near as damn. The committee remains of the view that we are trading sustainably in the long term.

To the best of my knowledge we remain one of the minority of the 29 regional societies to maintain its own website as opposed to having a dedicated page as part of the website of LSNSW, but our pioneering on that issue all those years ago is being replicated.

The first meeting of regional Presidents for 2018 is not until Friday 23 March. You should not underestimate the influence which that group sometimes can have. That forum is always interested to hear if there are common or systemic problems affecting practitioners, and resolutions of that forum have often generated action by Council or the President or the CEO. You can do so via our secretariat [here](#).

Finally and as ever, we thank Jen Richards for her stoicism in the face of constant “attack” and for her energetic and cheerful approach. Greg Barns for instance gave fulsome praise to her in his dealings with Jen in respect of our annual dinner. We would be lost without her.

Gary Fox.