

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2019 AGM OF NEWCASTLE LAW SOCIETY INC

Once again this year there will be some change to the composition of the management committee. Specifically and as you might hopefully have read in a recent email, both Dr Colin James and Ms Elise Grist have indicated an intention to retire from the management committee as of this AGM. I have sung the praises of both Colin and Elise many times over the years. Each has made a very significant contribution to the operation and viability of Newcastle Law Society, and I thank each of them most sincerely for that.

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

By and large, our year followed its traditional pattern. Our Opening of Law Term ceremonies went off smoothly if not well in terms of solicitor attendance. With all due respect and bearing in mind that there are now 1,000 solicitors practising in our region, our attendance at the ecumenical service and the ceremonial sitting was dismal. I interpolate that if anything 2019 was worse. The numbers at the ceremonial sitting looked healthy, but they were "inflated" by the attendance of quite a number of JPs and university staff. You might be interested to know that the CEO of the Law Society of NSW who attended our 2019 ceremonies remarked to me that even Sydney does not have the integrated sequence of the 3 events all on the one day to mark the Opening of Law Term which we do. Both Father Andrew Doohan at the ecumenical service and Judge Ellis at both that service and the ceremonial clearly put in a significant amount of time to compose his homily or remarks. It seems to me to border on the embarrassing for us as a profession to then display such little interest. I repeat, 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.

Reverting to Opening of Law Term in 2018, we hosted the evening cocktail function, at Sprout Dining, with a roll-up of about 60. The approximate date for these functions is known fairly well in advance, so please do consider.

Our annual trivia night was in July and we raised a little over \$3,000 for Rankin Park Rehabilitation Hospital. Once again thanks to all those firms or individuals who were willing to "bulk up" the result. That result compares with about \$4,000 which we raised for Lifeline in 2017. Thanks again to the organisers and 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 again held at NewSpace and was again well attended. I anticipate that a similar function will be held this year so please consider coming along to help “break the ice” as between students and practitioners.

Banter with the Bench was reasonably successful, this year at Sprout Dining, with Judges Roy Ellis and Mark Buscombe, and Magistrates Franklin, Skinner and Stone in attendance and about 60 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.

We had a fairly full house (in all respects) at the Newcastle Club for our annual dinner, with our guest speaker Anthony Morgan being a generally popular departure from the ilk of recent lawyerly speakers. As I surveyed the room the overwhelming majority were splitting their sides. Quite a few kicked on at other venues afterwards. It's easy to remember: it's the first Friday in November so please note your diary now.

The appointment of another “replacement” Federal Circuit Court Judge, Terry Betts was well received, taking us back to an establishment of 3. On behalf of us all I attended upon His Honour fairly soon as he commenced sitting to congratulate and welcome him. On the down side from Newcastle’s point of view, we have now largely “lost” Justice Stewart Austin to the appeal division of the Family Court, but for some occasional first instance work here. Change appears set to continue in the family law field as we await both the Australian Law Reform Commission Report and one from the Senate.

The Court of Appeal sat for the very first time in Newcastle in June 2018. I attended a morning ceremony and spoke in welcome, and we entertained their Honours Justices Basten, Ward and Steele at an evening function.

During 2018 we also saw a local bows ceremony for Lee Carr of Senior Counsel, but also a farewell to John Fitzgerald as Public Defender. I spoke at both ceremonies on your behalf. Lizzie McLaughlin was appointed to replace John. Former Fair Work Commissioner Tony Saunders was appointed a Deputy President of that Commission.

Sadly and tragically we lost our colleague Kim Monnox. I also believe that Ashleigh Powter (formerly of Braye Cragg) passed away during the year. There is likely to be more sad news in coming days.

Our management committee meets each month except for January. I attended all of the 5 meetings of regional Presidents held in Sydney in 2018, and I did 1 or 2 radio interviews to air.

Quite probably our CPD program will now be in something of a state of flux, chiefly on account of the retirement from committee of Colin James. Our hope is to continue to provide topical, professional and value-for-money seminars, wherever possible utilising local speakers. However these seminars are time-consuming and sometimes difficult to organize, and we have often been surprised that such-and-such seminar does not attract the interest which had been expected, indeed to the extent of some having to be cancelled. If you are a confident presenter on a topic or you have suggestions for topics or speakers, please let us know through the secretariat.

As previously mentioned, together with membership subscriptions, CPD has been 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 subsidisation our major social events. Please continue to support NLS' seminars.

Having thanked our retiring committee members, I now also thank all who have contributed whether on the management committee itself or on any sub-committee, or indeed ad hoc. Special mention goes to our Treasurer Sally Davies and our Secretary Rose Laffan. With all the committee and sub-committees they did a wonderful job in 2018.

NLS remains in quite a strong financial position. Copies of the 2018 financial report are available here and will soon be on our website. The committee remains of the view that we are trading sustainably in the long term. Currently we have 415 financial members, being 321 "full" financial members, another 74 who have less than 3 years PAE and/or are government lawyers, and a further 17 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 are still lucky to have as in effect our honorary accountant Jane Beverley of Evolution Business Advisers. We again thank Jane in particular but her firm generally.

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. In January 2019 our website had 2,394 unique page views.

On Friday 22 February 2019 there will occur the annual Newcastle admissions ceremonies. We would appreciate some volunteers to attend outside the Courtroom towards the end of the 5 discrete ceremonies to hand out pamphlets which provide newly admitted practitioners with information about the role and function of regional law societies and how to join. From experience I can tell you that it is quite invigorating to see the mixture of relief and enthusiasm on the faces of those admitted. The 5 ceremonies are at 10.15, 11.00, 11.45, 12.30 and 2.00, so you can see that you will not be kept long. Please let us know if you can help.

The first Sydney meeting of regional Presidents for 2019 is on Friday 1 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 by email to secretariat@newcastlelawsociety.asn.au.

Finally and as ever, we thank Jen Richards for her diligence, patience, energy and good cheer. In particular the judicial officers who deal with Jen speak highly of her courtesy and efficiency. We would struggle without her.

Gary Fox.