

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2020 AGM OF NEWCASTLE LAW SOCIETY INC

This year it looks like there will be no change to the composition of the management committee, in the sense that all 8 current members have indicated a willingness to go around again. Both on your behalf and for myself, I thank those 7 colleagues. 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.

Notwithstanding the above, I reiterate that all (repeat all) management committee positions are deemed to be open tonight.

Our 2019 followed its traditional pattern. Except for a hiccup with the late arrival of the printed orders of service, our Opening of Law Term ceremonies went off smoothly. With all due respect and bearing in mind that there are now 1,000 solicitors practising in our region, I thought that once more our attendance at the ecumenical service in particular was rather disappointing. Digressing momentarily, I thought 2020 was but little better. The numbers at the ceremonial sitting both in 2019 and this year were quite reasonable. Acknowledging the repetition, 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 are not there in greater numbers. Both the clergy at the ecumenical service and the Judge presiding at the ceremonial clearly put in a significant amount of time to compose the homily or remarks. Respectfully I say again that it borders on the embarrassing for we as a profession to then display relatively little interest. At the risk of preaching, at the 2020 OLT, both Bishop Peter (at the cathedral) and Justice Campbell (at the ceremonial) spoke of the importance of taking this annual opportunity to reflect upon what we are all about. Mere words?

For the Opening of Law Term in 2019, we hosted the evening cocktail function at Sprout Dining with a roll-up of only about 50. We appreciate that Monday or Tuesday evenings may be difficult for some to manage. As against that, we need to consider that Newcastle Chambers' function is traditionally held on the Friday of that week and in addition there is the need to be conscious of visiting Judges often wanting to "get back home". At least the approximate date for the OLT functions is known fairly well in advance, so please do consider.

Our annual trivia night was on 3 May at South Leagues and was a huge success. We had about 230 in attendance and we raised about \$8,000 for the Cancer Council, expressly in memory of our colleagues Frank Maher and Kim Monnox. We are conscious that there was some unhappiness at the concept of buying points, but our aim was to maximise the sum raised. O'Brien Winter were champions. Thanks again to the organisers and those who

donated or enticed the donation of prizes for the event, and to all those firms or individuals who were willing to “bulk up” the result one way or another.

On 30 August the annual networking function organised jointly between NLS and the University of Newcastle Law Students Association was again held at NewSpace and again was well attended. I anticipate that a similar function will be held in this year so please consider coming along to help “break the ice” as between students and practitioners. You might find your next employee.

Banter with the Bench on 28 September at the Commonwealth Hotel was a huge success, with Judges Tim Gartelmann and Bob Sutherland, Magistrates Barnett and Stone, and Federal Circuit Court Judge Terry Betts in attendance, and also something of a cameo appearance by the Honourable Megan Latham, together with about 75 practitioners. Also attending was Professor Tania Sourdin, Dean of the Law School. In my experience, all judicial officers who attend our functions invariably express their encouragement and their appreciation of our collegiality and conviviality.

We had about 110 at the Newcastle Club for our annual dinner, including Justices Stewart Austin, Margaret Cleary and Mark Ierace, and Magistrate Rob Stone. As ever, a very good time appeared to be had by all, both at the Club and after. It's easy to remember the date: it's the first Friday in November so please note your diary now.

Our guest speaker (and then President of the Law Council of Australia) Arthur Moses SC gave a challenging address in regard to the state of family law in Australia in which he referenced the lack of resourcing, the myriad reports both old and current, and the conflicting views of “stakeholders” as to the nature and scope of change required. We await both the Commonwealth Government's response to the Australian Law Reform Commission Report (now more than 9 months old) and now the report from the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee. Topically in Newcastle, we look forward soon to the completion of extensions to the Family Law Courts premises in Bolton Street which will provide better accommodation overall, and accommodation for at least one more Judge. Representations in the latter regard are ongoing.

Coolahan Drinks were held at The Clarendon on 12 December 2019 in honour and memory of the beloved Ralph, with the usual good numbers in attendance. However, the more the merrier!

Sadly during 2019 we lost our colleagues Frank Maher, Kim Monnox (as already mentioned), and Max Mantach, Laurie Adam and Michael McDonald. I also believe that

Ashleigh Powter (formerly of Braye Cragg) passed away during the year. Most recently and in tragic circumstances we lost Ongami Amacha who had been with Bale Boshev. We extended timely condolences to the families. Do take care.

On a brighter note, colleagues Peter Evans and Graham Wall each clocked up 50 years in practice. Again congratulations to them.

Our management committee meets on the 3rd Tuesday of each month except for January. I attended all of the 4 meetings of regional Presidents held in Sydney in 2019, and I did 1 or 2 radio interviews to air.

As hopefully you have observed, and as previously foreshadowed, our CPD program has been in something of a state of flux, chiefly on account of the retirement from the committee of Colin James. The most significant change has been the concentration of seminars in the months leading up to the end of the CPD year. Our aim remains to provide topical, professional and value-for-money seminars, wherever possible utilising local speakers. However these seminars are time-consuming and sometimes difficult to organise, 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 subsidisation our major social events. Please continue to support NLS' seminars.

I again thank all who have contributed their time and ideas to NLS, 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 2019 and we should be grateful that each is re-nominating.

NLS remains in a strong financial position, including in terms of reserves. Copies of the 2019 financial report should be available on our website this afternoon but in any event soon. The committee remains of the view that we are trading sustainably in the long term. Currently, we have 405 financial members, being 322 "full" financial members, another 64 who have less

than 3 years PAE and/or are government lawyers, and a further 18 who are students. Those solicitor numbers are a little down on last year. With a catchment of 1,000, presumably 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. Maybe you can refer some work her way?

In November 2019, our website had 3,566 unique page views. We are now on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the moderator for which is Karlo Tychsen.

On Friday 21 February 2020, 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. I believe that the 5 ceremonies will be 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 2020 is on Friday 28 February. 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 identify any such issues via our secretariat.

Last but not least, we thank Jen Richards for her cheerfulness, energy, patience and diligence. In particular, the judicial officers (especially but not only visitors) and their staff who deal with Jen speak highly of her courtesy and efficiency. Truly we would struggle without her.

Gary Fox.