

**NSW Society of Labor Lawyers
President's Report
December 2014**

I fully intended to be at the AGM on October 27th, but my little boy at other plans. He was born early that morning!

My thanks to James Mack for chairing the AGM in my absence and for everything he has done this year to help Labor Lawyers function smoothly. He is a terrific secretary of the Society – and I thank him for his many, many hours of work behind the scenes.

In 2014, the NSW Society of Labor Lawyers has grown stronger in terms of numbers, profile and impact.

Growing membership

Our number of financial members grew by almost 25 per cent in 2014 (taking us to 237). I attribute this to a terrific program of events that enabled us to connect with a broad range of people from the profession. There is wide diversity of experience within our membership, though more work needs to be done to ensure that this experience is properly utilised. If an issue arises that you have a particular interest in, please let us know so we can get your input and involve you in our advocacy work.

In addition to our financial members, we have several hundred more people on our mailing list. The majority of these “associates” have connected with us by attending one of our events, or by contributing to our Legal Tweaks publication. We would love to see more associates converted to financial members in 2015, so that we can expand our program of events and activities. (A reminder to those current members reading this report: make sure you have renewed your financial membership through to June 2015!)

Growing profile

As well as connecting with a wider range of people within the legal profession, in 2014 we have also made ourselves better known to members of the Labor Party (both in parliament and out of it). Our event at the NSW State Conference was a roaring success, and more Labor people are reading our articles and publications and taking an interest in our work.

At a time when many local Labor branches are struggling, Labor Lawyers represents a different organisational model: a vocation-based group, with members who are broadly supportive of Labor and who want to use their vocational skills and experience to contribute (in a policy sense) to the work of the Labor Party. NSW Labor Lawyers is an example of how professional communities can challenge, inspire and add depth to the Labor movement.

It is particularly important that the relationship between the legal community and the Labor Party is fostered. I say that because legislating is core business in politics and lawyers are well equipped to assist with this task. Legal training helps with the interpretation of legislation. Vocational experience in the law shows how the law works in practice – exposing the gaps, grey areas and niggly clauses that have unfortunate results. Most significantly, the experience of applying the law gives lawyers an acute

understanding of its power. Lawyers recognise the gap that often exists between law and justice.

As Labor Lawyers, we want to encourage the Labor Party to invest in law reform. And not just any law reform, but *progressive* law reform that unlocks disadvantage and discrimination. This is, after all, the sort of profound and lasting change that the Labor Party exists to deliver.

Over the past year we have promoted progressive law reform in our submissions to inquiries, in our meetings with MPs, and through events like the Frank Walker Memorial Lecture.

Over the past three years, we have also promoted progressive law reform through our flagship publication, "Legal Tweaks". Legal Tweaks is a collection of ideas from the legal community about how the law can be changed in small ways (tweaked), for the benefit of the community. This year's edition was bigger and better than ever. I give my thanks and congratulations to Bibhu Aggarwal for his excellent work in bringing it all together.

Growing impact

In addition to Legal Tweaks and our public submissions, we have engaged in other advocacy work behind the scenes. Over the course of the year, we met with various Labor MPs in Canberra and Macquarie St to discuss issues such as bail law reform, 'Zoe's law' and refugee policy. These meetings have been deeply constructive – largely because we have been able to talk privately and confidentially with MPs, rather than grandstanding. We value the relationships that have been developing with Labor MPs at the state and federal level.

In 2014, we also began mobilising Sydney barristers and solicitors to run FOI cases in the AAT on behalf of federal Labor members. Hundreds of applications for information have been refused in the first year of the Abbott Government, including applications for types of information that were previously released without question. Our team of lawyers have begun acting in cases where there is a clear public interest argument for why the information should be released. It has taken longer than expected for cases to flow through to Labor Lawyers, but now that the Information Commissioner position has been abolished, we expect that the process will speed up and we will be able to involve more interested barristers in the work of challenging departmental decisions.

Looking ahead

I have had the privilege of working with a terrific executive team over the course of 2014. To James Mack, Darren Jenkins, Lee Corbett, Tom Kelly, Kate Harrison, Kirk McKenzie, Kylie Nomchong, David Rowe and Kelly Xiao – thanks for bringing your passion, ideas and insight to the table each month.

Many of this year's executive are continuing on next year. I look forward to continuing our work together, with added input from our new committee members Chris Parkin and Janai Tabbernor.

- Hannah Quadrio