

Chairman's address to the 50th annual general meeting of Counsel's Chambers, 18 November 2003

By *Steven Rares SC*

When this company was founded 50 years ago its incorporators, Sir Garfield Barwick QC, Ken Manning QC and Paul Toose had a vision. Their first directors' meeting was held on 17 April 1953. By the time of the first annual general meeting of the company on 26 August 1954 in Court No 1 of the Supreme Court Building in King Street, Sir Garfield Barwick reported:

This is, in a very real sense, an historic occasion. It marks the completion of the first stage of the efforts which have been made for many years to secure for the Bar a permanent home. But it is really something much more significant and far-reaching. We have now laid the foundation stone, not merely of a building, but of an institution. The Bar of New South has suffered to an extent in the past from a lack of cohesion. It has been handicapped in its efforts to achieve that unity of purpose and spirit so desirable if it is to retain to the full its important and indeed essential role as a vital element in the administration of justice.

The vision included setting aside a substantial area in the basement for the communal use of the Bar. Sir Garfield referred to the then proposed restaurant facilities to be installed and mentioned that there would be a dining room, a lounge and library facilities which he said were to be 'combined on a liberal, if not lavish, scale'. I am not sure that the present members of the Bar would regard the facilities as 'lavish' although they are very substantial for the important work which the Bar Association performs for us all. That special relationship between the Bar Association and this company has been at the forefront of our company's history and is present today. The vision of which Sir Garfield spoke included a hope that there would be provided, through the Bar Association, practical and immediate assistance to new members of the Bar and that Bar Council would organise tuition and discussion groups, expand library facilities and make all such other provisions would enable the provision of facilities similar to those extended by the English Inns of Court.

The company has been conscious to provide assistance co-operatively with the Bar Association in the ongoing provision of those facilities. Over the most recent vacation we organised a refurbishment of the basement at the request of the Bar Association to permit more space to be devoted to those activities following Bar Council's decision to close, permanently, the dining room and takeaway facilities which it had operated there for many years. At the same time the Bar Association took a new lease for three years with a term which commenced in May 2003.

It is also timely to reflect upon the fragmentation which has subsequently occurred over the last 25 years of the life of the New South Wales Bar. The original vision of housing substantially all of the Bar in Wentworth and Selborne Chambers gave way, as the Bar grew, to sets of chambers developing in surrounding buildings. In 1962 there were 434

members of the Bar. By 1975 that had grown to 670 but the Bar today numbers over 2,000 and the facilities and buildings owned by Counsel's Chambers Limited can now no longer provide accommodation for them all.

The early years of Counsel's Chambers were occupied in constructing these buildings. They were solidly built, a matter which has occupied the Board for many years since including our current major project of upgrading the buildings to comply with the fire standards for the Building Code of Australia. We must also recognize that a past board made an investment in what is now the National Disputes Centre. That decision turned out to be financially very disadvantageous for it lumbered us with a huge debt. That debt has been reduced by about \$1 million per annum for the past few years – but it is still a millstone round the company's neck. However, that building now houses a substantial number of barristers once again and provides services in the alternative dispute resolution sector.

The company has moved into the modern age, establishing a subsidiary which provides high speed and good quality internet services to almost all of our members.

We are also keeping under review the possibility of redeveloping our buildings, although this cannot be done without the participation of a substantial partner because of cost constraints.

None of what has been achieved over the years in the provision and maintenance of accommodation and services for the Bar, the Bar Association and the courts could have been achieved without the dedication of first, the Registrars of the Bar Association who were the executive officers of the company, and later the full time staff of the company after it separated, formally, its internal arrangements from the Bar Association in June 1980 under the chairmanship of Terry Cole QC.

I would like to thank the staff past and present including the general manager, Linda Bean, who has served with the company now for over 20 years.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the former members of the Board too many to name individually but a number of whom we are pleased could join us to celebrate today. Those members served the company in a voluntary capacity carrying large responsibilities and work loads for the only reward of a satisfaction that a job was being done competently and diligently by them. Without the dedication of the volunteers who serve in these offices in keeping with the tradition of voluntary service that is so much a part of the New South Wales Bar, the company could not function.

Your directors have not lost sight of the original vision and aspirations of the company's founders. However, with the changed circumstances generated by the passage of years we have sought to adapt while keeping our eyes on the future.