



Delegates and sponsors at the National Museum of Australia.

ACT State Conference

24 June 2005 By Bill Andrews

This was the inaugural ACT conference, and by every assessment it was a great success. Everyone now asks, 'Why didn't we do it before?'. One long time sceptic of a prospective conference said 'Mate, I was wrong'.

The season was Canberra's winter, and the venue the National Museum – Canberra is fortunate to have a number of under-utilised monuments available at this time of year.

The program was divided into two parts. The morning dealt with the 'nuts and bolts' of ACT practice. There were sessions by mainly local, expert practitioners on a range of practical issues affecting personal injury lawyers, including a review of workers' compensation in the ACT; assessing the personal injury claimant; a doctor's view and the *Civil Law (Wrongs) Act* in practice. Sessions were chaired by members of the ACT Branch Committee and the questions from the floor demonstrated a keen interest by participants in all the topics.

The keynote address by Chief Justice Higgins of the ACT Supreme Court on the topic: 'Wrongful Life: Tricky Stuff, But Someone Has To Do It' commented on an issue to be dealt with by the High Court in coming months – certainly tricky stuff, which left us all thinking about some of the complex social, religious and legal issues ahead.

In the balance of the afternoon an eminent panel debated the question: 'Torts Law – What's the Point?'. A highlight was a paper presented by his Honour Justice Connolly of the ACT Supreme Court, which analysed the fallacy of the so-called 'insurance crisis' and the alleged need for tort reform. His paper and the conference comments drew wide publicity in national and local media.

The program was designed to address two important issues. Firstly, that litigation practice in the ACT is becoming



Delegate Faye Higgins chats with Tom Glover of King Financial

more unique compared with other jurisdictions, particularly the surrounding NSW procedures, and as a relatively small profession we have to provide our own education. Secondly, that the so-called tort reform process has to be continually addressed. We need to work within the debate and not stand apart from it – if the tide turns, we must be ready to row. The ACT has been relatively 'unravaged' by inequitable tort reform; however, the ACT branch regards it as part of our challenge to contribute to the national debate.

The formal program was followed by a dinner sponsored by Evidex where new colleagues were introduced, friends and mates shared tales, and our valued conference sponsors, King Financial, Careers Unlimited, LawMaster and DG Thompson Driscoll + Matters, mingled with delegates.

Did it work? We believe so... About 80 people attended. Of the returned evaluations, 41% were strongly positive, 49% were positive, 9% were neutral and 1% negative. Five new members resulted from the conference. Publicity was gained for the tort reform question, with two articles in the *Canberra Times* and one in *The Australian*. The atmosphere on the day was very positive – people were focussed on the sessions and there was lively discussion. The sponsors were happy with the level of inquiry. The speakers felt they were contributing to something useful.

The consensus was that this inaugural conference was a success, that we should start planning the next one – a little bigger but not too much – and we should focus once again on a strong program of education, public comment and debate. ■

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