

Campaigning for justice

By Eva Scheerlinck



Traditionally, the Australian Lawyers Alliance has held CLE/CPD events such as conferences, seminars and workshops. We have not been involved in putting on public lectures. Until now, that is.

Part of the Lawyers Alliance's mandate is:

- to promote expeditious access to justice;
- to encourage informed debate in the community concerning individual rights;
- to affiliate, collaborate and liaise with other organisations that share similar goals;
- to promote, protect and enhance the rights and freedom of individuals; and
- to promote and preserve the right to the presumption of innocence and the right to silence of accused persons.¹

As a rights-based organisation, it is important that we take as active a role as we possibly can in any opportunities that arise to highlight injustices in the Australian policy framework. The Australian Lawyers Alliance was therefore very proud to hold five public lectures in November and December across the country on human rights topics concerning the continued detention of David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay and on Australia's position with regard to the death penalty.

In early November, we hosted the speaking engagements of Major Michael D Mori, the US Marine defence lawyer for David Hicks, in Brisbane, Perth and Sydney. And on 1 December, Julian Burnside QC spoke on the death penalty in Melbourne and Tom Percy QC in Perth.

9 December marked the fifth anniversary of David Hicks' incarceration in Guantanamo Bay. Major Mori's visit to Australia attempted to highlight the injustice that David has suffered in terms of the legal and political processes that lie at the heart of his detention, and the conditions and treatment that he has had to endure. Major Mori spoke with political leaders on his trip but was also very keen to speak to as many members of the public as possible in order to publicise David's plight and to dispel many popularly held (and media-fuelled) misconceptions about his case. All those who attended his lectures, I'm sure, left more aware of David's predicament, as well as frustrated by our government's inaction in demanding that basic human rights be afforded to this Australian citizen.

2 December marked the first anniversary of Van Ngyuen's execution in Singapore. An Australian citizen, convicted of drug charges, was killed by a foreign government. Meanwhile, others face similar fates in other parts of the world. Australia finally abandoned capital punishment for

its citizens in 1984.² The Australian government needs to be consistent in its opposition to the death penalty for all convicted persons. The government's inconsistent policy diminishes the credibility of its efforts when it intervenes on behalf of Australians facing the death penalty overseas. Leadership in this area is urgently needed, and debate on the issue represents a vital component of any significant policy shift.

The Lawyers Alliance continues to develop its profile as an important contributor to public policy debates. We will continue to be vocal in our opposition to human rights violations and to invite the community to participate in debates such as these.

I take this opportunity to wish our members and other readers of *Precedent* a safe and happy holiday period and a peaceful 2007. ■

Notes: **1** Australian Lawyers Alliance Constitution, chapter 1. **2** Although the last execution took place in 1967.

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