

# Fighting for the individual

By Eva Scheerlinck

**P**rotecting and promoting justice, freedom and the rights of the individual have been at the core of our mission since February 2004.

In October of that year, the Australian Plaintiff Lawyers Association became the Australian Lawyers Alliance.

Part of this change was to improve our brand; however, the shift from an organisation of plaintiff lawyers to lawyers in general indicated our commitment to protecting and promoting the rights of the individual across all areas of law, and not just in our core area of personal injury.

Throughout this period, the Lawyers Alliance has continued to attract quality members who represent the average person on the street.

In August last year, I attended the Annual General Meeting of the Victorian Criminal Defence Lawyers Association, where a motion for the CDLA to form an alliance with the Lawyers Alliance was put to the meeting, and was passed unanimously.

The CDLA agreed to maintain its identity for a 12-month period, then review its decision to dissolve the CDLA, with its membership becoming part of the Lawyers Alliance.

The CDLA brought a number of valued and prominent members into the Australian Lawyers Alliance, including those who have worked hard, and continue to represent, Jack Thomas, the man dubbed 'Jihad Jack' by the press.

Mr Thomas is an Australian citizen who was accused by the federal government of being a terrorist. Victoria's Court of Appeal quashed his two terrorism-related convictions. However, the federal government has imposed a control order on Mr Thomas, severely limiting his freedom.

Last year, a criminal defence lawyer was elected to the National Council of the Lawyers Alliance for the first time. Tom Percy QC, who is the Director for Western Australia, has a long history of advocating human rights.

Both Tom and another prominent member, Victoria-based barrister, Julian Burnside QC, have worked pro bono on a number of well-known cases representing Australians overseas, including Van Nguyen in Singapore, and the Bali Nine and Schapelle Corby cases in Indonesia.

And both have joined the Lawyers Alliance National President, Simon Morrison, on a committee to monitor the regulations under which David Hicks could eventually face charges and a trial.

Alongside the cases of Hicks, Nguyen, the Bali Nine and Corby, where Australian lawyers have been asked to represent Australians overseas, their advice is also increasingly being sought by immigrants and asylum-seekers about their rights in Australia.

The record of Australia's immigration policy is well-documented. Apart from mandatory detention, other aspects that have received prominent coverage in the press over the last five years or so have included the children overboard



affair, the Tampa stand-off and the so-called Pacific solution, whereby asylum-seekers are moved offshore while their claims are being processed.

Although not everyone wanting to come to Australia faces these challenges, the work of an immigration lawyer in Australia can be a battle for the individual. The Australian Lawyers Alliance has taken this on board, and for the first time we will be offering a CLE/CPD seminar in the immigration law field, to be held in Brisbane in May; and this edition of *Precedent* also contains what we hope will be the first in a regular column looking at immigration law.

The Lawyers Alliance is an organisation that highlights the rights of individuals, and it is a proud moment when we can look around and see so many of our members taking an active stand on behalf of ordinary Australians.

This will be a big year for the Australian Lawyers Alliance, and I look forward to working with our expanded member base throughout 2007. ■

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