

Advancing Indigenous Rights

Melissa Castan, an Associate Director of the Castan Centre, was invited to participate in a forum on Indigenous Australian Human Rights at the Aborigines Advancement League in August. The Forum was convened in response to the Victorian State Government's Discussion Paper *Have your say about human rights in Victoria*, which has created considerable interest in the indigenous community. The paper is part of a broader inquiry into the possibility of enacting a Bill of Rights in Victoria similar to that enacted last year in the ACT, and the Government has convened the Independent Human Rights Consultation Committee (IHRCC) to lead the process.

The forum was the first opportunity for many representatives of indigenous organisations in Melbourne to meet and discuss the issue and its likely impact on indigenous people. Melissa discussed the role of self-determination and the prohibition on racial discrimination in both international and Australian law. Melissa explored the point made by the Castan Centre Associate Director, Julie Debeljak, in her submission to the IHRCC – that any bill of rights in Victoria must include the right to self-determination, as well as all the civil and political rights captured in the ICCPR, and the full suite

of economic, social and cultural rights. A similar recommendation on self-determination was rejected by the ACT Government, however many advocates of indigenous rights contend that the protection of these rights is key to improving the lives of indigenous Australians. There was a vigorous discussion about the issue at the forum, with several participants voicing the opinion that self-determination was an essential human right the government had to deal with, whether enshrined in a bill of rights or not.

Professor George Williams, Chairperson of the IHRCC was in attendance at the forum. Joining Melissa to make formal presentations were Frank Guivarra of the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd, Muriel Bamblett of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, former Chief Justice of the Children's Court, Alistair Nicholson QC, and Larissa Behrendt. Larissa was a member of the ACT Bill of Rights Consultative Committee and is Professor of Law and Indigenous Studies and Director of the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney.

To view the Castan Centre's submissions to the IHRCC, click on "submissions and reports" at www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre.

New: Online Donations

In response to requests from our members, the Castan Centre has now set up an online donation facility, making it quick and convenient to support the centre's work.

The centre is consolidating its existing programs and planning to introduce new ones over the course of 2005-06. The recently-introduced Global Internship Program and the LLM (Human Rights) are the first new projects to commence. The centre also hopes to increase its commitment to public education by offering scholarships, introducing human rights education programs at primary and secondary schools and increasing its commitment to bringing out high-profile speakers. In the past, such speakers have included Jose Ramos Horta, David Weissbrot and Cherie Booth.

If you would like more information about the Castan Centre's programs, or would like to receive a brochure, please contact Kay Magnani on 9905 3327 or castan.centre@law.monash.edu.au.

To donate, or to sign up for free as a Castan Centre member, please visit www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre and follow the links.

Vietnamese Delegation visits Castan Centre

The gradual opening up of Vietnam's centrally planned economy to the outside world has been accompanied by a growing interest within Vietnam in international human rights. In recent years, Vietnam has signed a number of international human rights instruments, however study of the discipline is a relatively new academic field in Vietnam: courses in human rights law are few and the teaching capacity is limited. Indeed, none of Vietnam's universities incorporate human rights subjects in their international law courses.

In a bid to change the landscape and improve human rights education in

Vietnam, representatives of the Vietnam Research Centre for Human Rights (VRCHR) recently visited Australia and Malaysia on a study tour. The purpose of the tour was to improve participants' substantive knowledge of human rights and how they are taught; and to improve understanding of the organisational methods used by human rights institutions.

As part of the tour, the representatives met with the Director of the Castan Centre, Sarah Joseph, at Monash University. The Castan Centre has considerable expertise in building human rights capacity in the Asia-Pacific, having conducted comprehen-

sive human rights courses for officials in the region, including Indonesia, Myanmar and Australia. Sarah said that the meeting was fruitful, focusing mainly on the role the Castan Centre plays in improving the human rights discourse in Australia, and on its organisational setup.

The VRCHR was founded in 1994 to conduct research and provide training on human rights issues. It is charged with increasing awareness of human rights law among law enforcement officials and policy makers and assists the government to translate international treaties into domestic legislation and to implement these new laws.