

An Update on the Accountability Project

In a bid to use its expertise to improve legal protections, particularly for vulnerable Australians, the Centre launched its Accountability Project in August last year. The project uses policy work and public engagement to highlight weaknesses in Australia's protection of human rights. Since then, Accountability Project Manager Adam Fletcher has been busy with the wide variety of tasks required to keep various state, territory and federal governments accountable. As Adam puts it, "The Accountability Project is a unique hybrid of policy and academic work; a challenging role which I have enjoyed immensely over the last 10 months. The Project is an interface between the Centre and policy-makers, external experts and the general public."

The most public aspect of the project has been Adam's regular posts for the Centre's blog. With seventeen posts since he took on the position, Adam has been posting every few weeks on topics as diverse as asylum seekers, the consolidation of federal anti-discrimination law, the need for better privacy protection in Australia and independent oversight of detention conditions. One blog post, on changes to extradition and mutual assistance changes, was the first piece of public commentary on new legislation that passed unnoticed in a week that saw the infamous Labor leadership spill between Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd. The post has gone on to be our most popular ever. An offline version can be read on pg. 7.

Another core activity of the Accountability Project has involved making submissions to various government inquiries. The Centre's submissions so far in 2012 have included in-depth research papers for the Federal Attorney-General's Department on consolidating anti-discrimination laws and on the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and for parliamentary committees on the Government's proposal to become a signatory to the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture; and on mandatory and minimum sentences for people smugglers. The latter submission saw one of the Centre's recommendations directly adopted by the Senate Committee in its final report.

At the moment, the Centre's biggest policy project is the drafting of a report on rates of imprisonment, focusing on vulnerable groups including Indigenous Australians, youth and those with a cognitive disability, and current analysis of utilisation of alternative sentencing options. The report has been commissioned by the Commonwealth Government as part of its Human Rights Action Plan. It will be delivered to the Government in June and will influence policy in this area.

When not working on the report, Adam is keeping his eyes on the issues of the day. As he says, "New issues worthy of comment crop up every day, and the Centre

can't cover them all in depth, but through the Project we aim to give as much air as possible to the human rights law perspective in debates on these issues."

The Accountability Project also engages with the human rights debate through the mainstream media. Since taking on the role, Adam has written for the ABC's "The Drum", new academic journalism site "The Conversation", and been interviewed for "New Matilda". This work adds to the Centre's growing engagement with the media which saw media mentions and appearances double in 2011.

With all this work to do, Adam has been ably assisted by the Centre's in-house interns, who he also manages. Currently, the bulk of his time is taken up working on the Alternative Sentencing for Vulnerable Offenders project which is being funded by the Attorney-General's Department through the Grants to Australian Organisations Program. This research project is due to report in June.

The Accountability Project is partly funded by the Helen and Bori Liberman family.

Check out the Castan Centre Blog at castancentre.com.

Castan Centre submissions can be found at www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/publications/submissions.html

Big names headline this year's conference

Global warming, the 'war' on obesity and social media in the Tunisian revolution are just some of the areas that will be explored during Human Rights 2012, the Castan Centre's annual conference. The conference, to be held on 20 July 2012 at the Spring Street Conference Centre, is sure to provide an engaging dialogue on human rights, while ruffling a few feathers along the way.

Tim Flannery, Professor at Macquarie University and 2007 Australian of the Year, will launch the day by discussing the intermingling nature of human rights and global warming. As a topic of continued debate within the political community, especially amidst the introduction of the carbon tax in Australia, this will provide an insightful look into the future.

The second session will focus on age

discrimination with Ms Susan Ryan AO, the Commonwealth Age Discrimination Commissioner discussing equality before the law in light of age bars in Commonwealth laws and policies. This will be tied in with her current inquiry for the Australian Law Reform Commission into barriers to work for older persons. Dr Kerry Arabena, Professor and Director of Indigenous Health at Monash University, will explore the topical issue of the recognition of Indigenous people in the Australian Constitution and Dr Samantha Thomas, Senior Research Fellow at Monash University, will address the highly topical problem of obesity facing young Australians. The focus of the session will highlight the myths surrounding obesity and its links to human rights.

Mr Gareth Evans AO QC, former Australian

Foreign Minister and CEO of the International Crisis Group, will kick off the afternoon session with an in-depth analysis of the Responsibility to Protect after the recent uprisings in Libya and Syria. Sami Ben Gharbia, Tunisian blogger and Advocacy Director of Global Voices, will follow this up with a contemporary discussion on the role of social media in the Tunisian revolution, in the context of the Arab Spring.

The day will close with Mr Allan Asher, former Commonwealth Ombudsman, exploring the energetically debated rights of asylum seekers, and Mr Ron Merkel QC, barrister and former Judge of the Federal Court of Australia, addressing the historical changes in the current constitution. All in all, it promises to be an enthralling day of human rights discussion and debate.