



A last line of defence

By Simon Morrison

An 18-year-old kid lives in a small country town and works at the local abattoir. He has a steady income, has his mates around him and is happy and content. Then one day his life changes forever. He climbs into a spiral-shaped bin to shovel waste products into an open auger. He slips, falls into the auger and suffers horrific injuries.

I was a young lawyer at the time. My then boss, Steve Roche, was handling the case and I assisted him on it. This opportunity was to cement my career as a personal injury lawyer.

Justice, freedom and the rights of the individual. Our mantra at the Australian Lawyers Alliance sums up why I do what I do. Attacks on individual rights always take me back to that 18-year-old kid whose life, let alone his rights, was destroyed by the careless, irresponsible and reprehensible acts of his own employer. Then I think of governments that have abandoned injured victims and denied them proper redress.

I joined APLA, as it was then known, over a decade ago. I recall with great excitement my first national conference. One could not help but be inspired by the brave work being done by many of our colleagues: law firms, large and small, were taking on risky litigation, putting their entire livelihoods at stake, to protect the rights of their clients. Trailblazers

included firms taking on BHP for environmental disasters, those protecting victims of sexual abuse, and a sole practitioner from Gunnedah who was haunting chemical companies for ruining farmers' crops.

After my first APLA conference, I wanted a piece of this. I wanted to live and breathe this litigation. I wanted to feel that great sensation of obtaining justice for the client and, hopefully, helping to change the behaviour of wrongdoers.

Fast forward ten years and the landscape has altered significantly.

Governments of all persuasions have slashed individual rights without batting an eyelid. The very people put into office to protect the rights of the individual have turned their backs on them.

Lex Lasry QC, who spoke recently at the Alliance's Victorian Conference in Lorne, reminded us why lawyers get involved in 'rights'-based issues. He pointed out that we are trained to know what people's rights are and are acutely aware of when those rights are being trampled. If people cannot rely on their governments to protect them, who can they rely on? It is critical that we continue to be the first line of defence for those people, and if necessary the last.

In recent times, the Alliance has broadened its base. Traditionally we were an association of predominantly personal injury lawyers. We have now

widened the net to encompass other rights-based areas of practice, including immigration, industrial relations, human rights and criminal law.

By expanding the membership base we aim to strengthen the voice of the individual when dealing with those who threaten our rights. To witness so many lawyers selflessly give up their time to pursue just outcomes for people whose rights have been violated has been inspirational.

We have an enormous opportunity to become a serious voice for ordinary people, and lead the way in winding back the draconian laws that have so brutally decimated individual rights. I am honoured to have been offered the opportunity to lead the organisation for the coming year.

I would like to thank outgoing national president, Richard Faulks, for his tireless work over the past year. Richard has poured more of his personal time into the Alliance than most. I would also like to thank all the other outgoing office-bearers who have served the organisation so well.

The year ahead promises to be a busy one and I look forward to playing an active part in it. ■

Simon Morrison is national president of the Australian Lawyers Alliance and a partner of Shine Lawyers.

PHONE (07) 3006 6000