

Launch of "Clayton Utz Brisbane, Firm Foundations A Century of
Legal Practice Partnering Queensland 1892-1999"

Thursday 10 February 2000

5.30pm Eber Lane Room GPO 261 Queen Street

The Hon Paul de Jersey

Chief Justice of Queensland

Dr Keays, who is a well respected historian, has succeeded in what we are told most people would these days regard as an impossibility: writing in complimentary terms about a group of solicitors. I said complimentary, by the way, not flattering: there is nothing fawning here.

In my foreword to the book, I suggest that the clear success of the firm may in large part be due to the fact that it comprises people who have, and have had, the considerable advantage of getting on well together. I am privileged to know many of them personally. I have therefore particularly relished the opportunity this evening, in launching this excellent book, concurrently to pay warm tribute to a truly great Queensland firm, if not institution.

We are in fact seven years late in celebrating the centenary of the firm. Are our hosts by nature self effacing? The book was in fact inspired not by the anniversary, however, but by the firm's justified pride in reaching, in 1997, the top level in legal practice management standards as assessed by the independent body, Quality In Law Inc. The Queensland community is undoubtedly much the richer for 100 years of sterling service from this unmistakably professional firm and its predecessors; and also, if at a slightly more utilitarian level, for now having available, in written down form, this fascinating history.

What I found especially diverting about the book, and therefore the story of the firm, was the interweaving of what I saw as three themes: the saga of the firms as such; more broadly the saga of a number of great Queensland families which have led it to the firm's current eminence; and even more broadly, the firm's progressive substantial contribution to the development of our overall Queensland community.

As to the last matter, I suppose lawyer readers, by nature cynical, might approach the subtitle, "Partnering Queensland 1892-1999" in at least a circumspect way: it does involve a prima facie bold claim. But the author makes it good.

A mere three decades after the proclamation of the State, Thomas Bouchard effectively began the firm we see today: the following 108 years have witnessed not simply growth in size, but many important transitions, reflecting, or more often anticipating, societal development: probably most recently the enthusiastic embracing of cutting edge technology. In many ways the firm has contributed to State development, not just in the work done for many highly prominent clients, but also through the philanthropy of the partners illustrated in fairly modern times for example by the Clayton Utz Chair of Commercial Law at the Queensland University of Technology; and there has been further contribution through willingness to participate actively in the promotion of desirable legal and other social change. Illustrations of that abound, and I will confine myself, merely to exemplify, and going back somewhat in time, to Len Vann's chairmanship of the Auctioneers and Agents Committee, and Sir Leon Trout's leading the push for the abolition of death duties.

And so, in an additionally interesting sense, this is a mini history of the City of Brisbane and the State of Queensland: floods and famines, booms and busts, wartime note the wonderful and more significantly, generous interaction between those imbued with the experience of war - in some cases as we know drastically - the "mature motivated and hardworking" returned servicemen, and the entertainingly styled "flippant boys straight from school". It is a history which traces developing social attitudes I noted with pleasure the progressive welcome of women into the firm, rather more progressive apparently than the attitude the author attributes to "most Chief Justices (who) (she claims) tended to be far from impressed with the idea of female lawyers" (p.65). I should say that I hope her account is in that respect historically inaccurate.

I personally find it significant, and reassuring, that the rightly revered consultants Alex Freeleague and George Deeb still participate actively in the collegial management of the firm. It is reassuring because it means that clients and partners are not denied their immense collective wisdom and experience. It is significant as illustrating what I have discerned as a great strength of the firm, a feature which emerges strongly from the text: Clayton Utz with its predecessor firms in this State has over more than a century retained a distinctively "family" character, and as I suggest in the foreword, that is a large part of its great current strength. It helps draw the firm back from brutal commercialism, which no one wants. It gives the firm an image of dependability, an image which I am confident reflects its substance. And I note in conclusion the enduring "shared values" to which Ross Perrett refers absolute integrity, respect for others, equity, hard work, flexibility, and the right of all staff "to be treated fairly and with respect".

I warmly congratulate a firm which is not only a leading progressive firm steeped in expertise and experience, but is also an historically significant and currently fascinating major Queensland institution. I congratulate an author who has produced a most interesting account. It belies by the way the caution of Oscar Wilde that "the one duty we owe history is to rewrite it": experience of this history, plainly authentic, should enrich us all; and I am sure clients who read the book will readily accept it as complimentary in the sense I indicated at the outset. I congratulate Dr Keays. I congratulate Clayton Utz. As with great pleasure I launch this book, ladies and gentlemen, will you join me in drinking to the honour of) "the author and the firm".