

“FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW”

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CAXTON LEGAL CENTRE – 30TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

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Let me preface this speech by paraphrasing Bob Dylan “the times they [truly] are a changing”. I am leaving this august gathering at 8pm to drive across town and perform in a folk club. Although there are a couple of Judges I’ve spotted at folk festivals, I’m probably still the only truly “folkie” Judge, and I am keen to retain that appellation.

The title of my speech is “from little things, big things grow”. I have, of course, appropriated the title from the wonderful song by two legendary Australian songwriters, Kev Carmody & Paul Kelly, originally written as a tribute to Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people of the Northern Territory, but just as applicable, in my view, to the wonderful organization we honour and celebrate tonight.

Let me make some other acknowledgments at the same time:

- The traditional owners of the country on which we meet tonight.
- All the wonderful staff and volunteers I’ve met and worked with over my many years involvement with the Caxton Legal Centre. This speech is not intended to be a roll call of those people and all the other dedicated contributors over Caxton’s history, although I’m told many of the names will be mentioned during the evening.

There are, however, some specific people I need to acknowledge:

- Di Fingleton’s detailed and comprehensive 20th anniversary speech;
- Des Galligan’s monograph on the History of the Caxton Street Hall;
- Current Caxton director Scott McDougall’s helpful dot points.

Let me put you in a time machine as we look back 30 years to 1976.

World events:

- In a post Vietnam War era, the USA was celebrating the 200th anniversary of Independence. Jimmy Carter became President, ousting the hapless Gerald Ford.
- Apple Computers introduced the Apple II, the first serious home computer.

Australia

- In a post Whitlam Australia, Malcom Fraser's Liberal/National Party coalition dominated federal politics while Joh Bjelke-Petersen had been Premier for 10 years heading a National/Liberal Party coalition that had then already been in power for 19 years.
- In music, Abba dominated the Australian music charts, while in the UK the Sex Pistols unleashed punk rock on the world and Bono and three other young Irishmen in Dublin founded a group which became U2.
- In popular culture, Norman Gunston won a Gold Logie, and the Young Doctors and The Sullivans were launched onto Australian TV. Towering Inferno was number 1 at the movies.
- The free university education reforms of the Whitlam era saw a new generation of students on campus. I was one of them, having started in 1974. The Vietnam War, the Springbok Tour of 1971 and the dismissal of the Whitlam government in controversial circumstances, all contributed to a significant rise in activism on university campuses. Of course, the anti-march legislation of 1977 was about to increase the activism level of campuses even higher.

It was in this environment that Noel Nunan, then the coordinator of the University of Queensland Union Student's Legal Service and Lorenzo Boccabella, then a journalist working for the Australian Financial Times, commenced the Barooka Legal Service at the Barooka ALP branch hall at 17 Caxton Street, Petrie Terrace. With a desk and a

filing cabinet in the corner of the foyer, and volunteers providing advice in the hall for 2 hours each Monday night, these were the little things from which big things were to grow.

What was the legal environment into which this volunteer-staffed community legal service emerged?

The Queensland Law Society had a legal advice referral service, and the federal Whitlam government had established the Australian Legal Aid Office which had been retained by the subsequent Fraser Government.

There was clearly, however, an enormous need (in Brisbane and elsewhere) for a generalist legal centre, based on the neighborhood law office movement in the USA, and drawing on the experience of the Fitzroy Legal Centre, established in Melbourne in 1972.

Caxton's guiding principles, as set out in the Baroona ALP Branch's newsletter of August 1976, were these:

- “ (a) to provide legal assistance to people in neighboring suburbs outside of conventional working hours on a friendly and informal level;
- (b) to eventually function as a centre for developing a local awareness of legal rights, to forestall legal problems by practicing “preventative” law and to provide legal education;
- (c) to provide an efficient referral service to government and profession founded legal aid schemes where appropriate;
- (d) to remove the mystery from the legal process by encouraging applicant “self-help” and participation wherever possible.”

The model on which Caxton was established followed that pioneered by the Fitzroy Legal Centre, which in turn was followed by generalist inner-city legal centers throughout Australia.

The key points of the model were these:

- Full-time lawyers, social workers and administrative staff supporting rostered volunteers providing:
 - (a) Free legal advice and assistance to low income clients, assisting where possible and referring on to members of the private profession and legal aid officers, where appropriate;
 - (b) Community legal education to assist persons to initiate their own solutions to their legal problems, where possible; and
 - (c) Law reform activities based on the chosen target areas of each centre and growing out of the needs of clients.

So from that model, and with its sights set high, this fledgling legal service progressed from an entirely volunteer run organization, with volunteer lawyers providing advice one night per week in the Baroona Hall, to the current Caxton Legal Centre, transmogrified geographically from Petrie Terrace to New Farm, losing the word “street” from its name, and now employing some 14 professional and support staff, operating out of purpose-adapted premises at 28 Heal St, New Farm.

So where are we now? In federal politics we (again) have a dominant Liberal/National coalition, while at a state level Peter Beattie (a one-time Caxton volunteer) has just lead the Labor Party to its fourth successive election victory. The so-called “war on terrorism” dominates Australian and world politics, with enormous flow-on effects on individual rights and liberties. Campus life and student activism have been significantly dampened by the introduction of fees, the economic imperatives of holding down full or part-time employment while studying, and a collective anxiety about employment prospects post-graduation.

In all of this, we have increasing prison populations, civil liberties under threat, an increasing emphasis on responsibilities balanced with rights, and a never ending need for the community to understand the law as it affects them.

A key measure of the changing world in which we live are the ever increasing numbers of ex-Caxton employees and volunteers now in positions of authority in legal, political and judicial life. What was once a fringe activity in the legal world now sits fair and square in the mainstream.

So how has Caxton changed with the times?

- It has demonstrated dramatically increased professionalism and accountability;
- It has a (relatively) large paid workforce;
- It has, over the years, auspiced various specialist services including the Tenants Union, Prisoner's Legal Service and the Financial Counselling Service.

What has not changed at Caxton?

- The overwhelming need for access to legal advice (5,782 initial client activities and 7,515 telephone information services provided in 2004/2005)
- An holistic self-help approach to legal problems (including an extensive publications program over many years)
- Legal support for protesters
- The need for an alternative voice on law reform;
- The dedication of volunteer lawyers and students.

Recent activities of which the staff and committee at Caxton are justifiably proud include:

- Working with the Rights in Public Spaces Action Group to address the impacts of public order policing on marginalized users of public space
- Lobbying for reform of the guardianship regime in Queensland
- Lobbying for the establishment of an older persons legal service

- Successful disability discrimination litigation on behalf of deaf school children

Caxton currently provides legal and social work services via full time staff and volunteers including:

- (1) Legal advice and referral sessions
- (2) Casework and legal representation
- (3) Social work assistance
- (4) Carer Parent Child Maintenance Program
- (5) Liable Parent Child Support Program
- (6) Senior's Advocacy, Information and Legal Service
- (7) Community Legal Education
- (8) Clinical Legal Education in partnership with Griffith University Law School
- (9) Law Reform
- (10) Publications

In short, from the seed of an idea 30 years ago, through the hard work, dedication, devotion and vision of a wide range of people, the current incarnation of Caxton Legal Centre celebrates its 30 years which now see it as a mature, stable and integral participant in the Queensland legal landscape.

Let me conclude then, with yet another musical reference, from one of my favourite African-American civil rights songs. I'm not going to sing it here, but it will be the first song in my bracket at the Madass Folk Club at 8:30 tonight.

“Justice is a constant struggle,
 Justice is a constant struggle,
 Justice is a constant struggle,
 I'm struggling on
 We are all struggling on”