



## **Queensland Young Lawyers' Pro Bono Information Evening** **Thursday, 17 May 2007, 6pm** **Clayton Utz, Level 28, Riparian Plaza, 71 Eagle Street, Brisbane**

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### **The Hon Paul de Jersey AC** **Chief Justice of Queensland**

There are two features of this evening which make it very pleasantly distinctive.

The first is the composition of the group: young lawyers. I have spoken a lot on recent occasions about the need for balance in our professional lives. I believe the firms are increasingly attentive to the genuine wishes of younger practitioners especially, not to be enveloped by some sort of 24 hour firm culture, where you work until 1am, dream about the firm until 6am, and then talk about work through all meal breaks.

You should through associations, like Queensland Young Lawyers, continue to apply pressure for balance between professional commitment and the rest of your lives: the best lawyer is the contented lawyer, and contentment never follows from a blinkered view of life. In my youth, the Articled Clerks Association was heavily into rates of pay, though as I recall not with great success. I think ears are these days more receptive to the voices of young lawyers. Use them for the betterment of us all.

In my 36 years in the law, I have witnessed many very sad consequences of obsessional devotion to practice, especially through fractured and destroyed relationships. Depression, too, is the illness of our contemporary profession. Getting out of the office and helping others, retaining a bit of community focus and perspective, can only help with this I think.

The second distinctive feature of this evening is that you meet here because of your interest in the pro bono thrust. I talk repeatedly about this, as an expression of the public service which distinguishes our profession.

I think it is very interesting by the way, that in some larger firms which expose young practitioners to the prospect of burnout through overwork, the juniors especially, embrace pro bono work: as being more diverse, refreshing I suppose for there being no need to



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complete timesheets, and for the chance to meet real people, rather than forever review endless swathes of documentation.

I have been distressed in recent years to hear of young lawyers forsaking the profession through disillusionment. Now you are not primarily inclined the pro bono way to preserve your professional sanity, or I certainly hope not. But if it injects more inspiration into the daily grind, then that provides added attraction.

There can be a great deal of fulfilment in helping people who, if it weren't for you, would be without legal assistance. Pro bono work gives you some perspective, and raises awareness of the advantages we have and the things we take for granted. Little things, like the ability to fill in forms. I'm sure many young lawyers become quite expert, especially through their articles or traineeship, in the gentle art of filling in forms. Consider though the struggle experienced by someone with learning difficulties, with mental health problems, or limited literacy and numeracy, faced with a bewildering array of Court or government forms, and how easy it is for you to help them, and put things in terms the client will understand. You're not arguing constitutional law before the full bench of the High Court here, but little things can really make a big difference.

The many issues confronting pro bono clients can be daunting. I am thinking in particular of the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, part of QPILCH, where clients are often not only having problems with the law, but also with finding somewhere to live, regular meals, often dealing with mental health problems, and sometimes drug and alcohol abuse problems. These multiple disadvantages are linked and intermingled in complex ways. You as lawyers may not be able to solve all of these problems. But your contribution is worthwhile, and you can make a very real difference in your client's lives. I commend you all for coming here tonight to find out more about these very worthwhile pro bono programs, where your special skills can be utilised for others' benefit.

Overall, my message to you tonight is not to let the pressure of practice erode the fresh enthusiasm you presently exhibit, and to give that fresh enthusiasm and altruism



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expression, through helping your fellow beings, in the most commendable way possible for a lawyer, and that is doing it both well, and for no or limited financial return.

There is a prevailing view that people my age find generation "Y" incomprehensible. Not so. You may take longer to "hook up", but your attitudes – good attitudes, are I think promoting a re-think of issues once perceived as of cardinal importance in our profession: such as, when the big case comes around, working through the night; being seen not to take a luncheon break; and firmly believing that not being appointed as an associate partner is irretrievably the kiss of death to any prospect of professional fulfilment.

Our profession is popularly regarded as resistant to change. Our change is I suppose gradual, but probably more acceptable in the end on that account. You are positive agents for change, now I believe more than ever, and the change you are promoting is plainly very beneficial, in that it works towards a more balanced, altruistically inclined profession. Thank you.