

A time to reflect

By Clara Davies



The 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December gave many of us pause for thought about the current state of human rights both in Australia and the world at large – especially given the context of recent international events, such as the terror attacks in Mumbai and the political turmoil in Bangkok. Others may be more preoccupied by the current economic crisis and its implications. All of this, coupled with the chaotic nature of the run-up to Christmas can be so all-consuming that we don't have a moment to reflect.

But if ever there was a time for reflection, it is now.

In the past, when I have thought about the importance of human rights, I have often done so with reference to the high-profile, obvious examples of rights abuses. These cases tend to attract significant media attention because they are so extreme and so outrageous that it is almost impossible to ignore them. The names of the individuals involved are now very familiar to us – David Hicks, Dr Mohamed Haneef, Cornelia Rau... Their treatment was so completely unjust that it is easy to justify the need to advocate for them.

But, with Christmas upon us, we should also reflect on the human rights abuses that occur in our society every day and that often pass without

notice or comment. It is often the most disadvantaged members of our community who are unable to fend for themselves who suffer most.

This New Year, young, pregnant mothers with children face eviction from their rental accommodation because of tough economic times. The right to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing, should be fundamental. We should all have access to decent housing that enables us to live with dignity and security. Children with physical or intellectual disabilities are meanwhile being denied access to education. Without appropriate transport and facilities, they cannot attend school and are denied the benefits of an education. Those with disabilities should not be treated any less favourably than those who do not suffer a disability. There should be a guaranteed provision of support services to assist with access to accommodation, education, employment and community participation for everyone.

I could go on. The examples are numerous, but the stories are not 'sexy', particularly when compared to those of Dr Haneef and the like. But for this very reason, these individuals are the ones whose plight is in most in need of recognition and who need our assistance most. Their rights are no less important just because their problems are commonplace, or

because they are not celebrity cases.

I ask myself, how would I feel if this were a story about my parents, other members of my family, a neighbour or a close friend? I would be outraged.

I believe that the same can be said for each and every one of us. The festive season inevitably focuses our attention on family and friends, perhaps more so than at any other time of the year.

But it's appropriate to reflect more broadly at this time. Take a moment to think about how important these matters are – and how they reflect the need for better human rights protection for us all. ■

Clara Davies is National President of the Australian Lawyers Alliance and a partner at Burt & Davies in Victoria.

PHONE (03) 9605 3111

EMAIL davies@burtdavies.com.au