

Maintaining perspective

By Clara Davies



Perspective in and on life is crucial. When we lose perspective we forget the purpose behind what we do and great achievements become less likely.

A year ago I found myself contesting the election for the position of National President-Elect of the Lawyers Alliance. In the course of that election my older brother died from a heroin overdose. His death and the circumstances surrounding it made me question my desire to pursue the position. I also questioned what had happened to make my brother reach that point – the trials he must have faced in his life. This led me to think about the trials of others and by doing this I regained perspective.

I thought about the young jackaroo from South Australia who had a troubled upbringing and, after converting to Islam and travelling to Afghanistan, ended up detained in Guantanamo Bay and tortured. And the Gold Coast doctor, who was arrested on suspicion of terror-related activities, then detained for 12 days before being charged with baseless offences, and finally had his working visa revoked without proper justification. The Australian resident who refused to reveal her true identity because of her schizophrenic condition and was classified as a suspected illegal immigrant and unlawfully detained for ten months under the government's mandatory detention program.

Children who, after being removed from their families, were placed with strangers whose race and culture were completely alien to them, and then raised in a manner contrary to everything they had previously known.

It is outrageous that people can be treated this way. Given the current lack of protections in this country it can happen to any one of us, our colleagues, friends or family. For this reason the fight for a national charter of rights is vital and will be my main focus during my presidency.

As lawyers, we hold a privileged position. We are informed – we know our rights. But we are a small minority of the Australian public and therefore must accept a significant responsibility. Our responsibility as lawyers, and members of the Alliance, is to protect and promote justice, freedom and the rights of the individual.

Credit and respect should be given to those lawyers and members who acted in these high-profile, public cases. However, we all encounter other examples in our practices every day. These examples put into perspective the plight of our clients, help us recognise our individual responsibilities and above all highlight the importance of the Alliance.

In addition to pursuing a charter of rights, over the next 12 months I aim to lead the Lawyers Alliance on other matters. We need to resist the expansion of Comcare and to work constructively on a national

workers' compensation scheme. We need to keep the pressure on the government to deliver an adequate and transparent inquiry into the Haneef matter. Counter-terrorism laws require ongoing scrutiny. A national compensation scheme for members of the Stolen Generations is essential. Plus, the time is right for tort reform – existing laws across the country must be rolled back. There is work to be done and we each have an important role to play.

Finally, I wish to recognise the achievements of the Alliance's hard-working staff, its dedicated Board and, of course, our immediate past-president Ian Brown. Ian's vigor and achievements over the past 12 months have been inspirational. I have no doubt that a significant burden was placed on Ian's family, with frequent absences and constant distractions from home life. Ian was always highly professional and has served the Alliance proudly. ■

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