

# PIAC looks to the future of social justice

By CORALIE KENNY



*Coralie Kenny is a Councillor of the Law Society of New South Wales and is the Council's nominated*

*director to the board of PIAC. PIAC wishes to thank the Law Society for its generosity in providing both the venue and the refreshments for the relaunch of its approach to social justice.*

THE PROUD HISTORY OF the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) was given centre stage at an event held on 20 September 2011 at the Law Society of NSW to re-launch PIAC's approach to social justice with a view to seeking support from a broader community.

The event was attended by a number of distinguished members of the legal profession, business and community sectors, including the Hon Elizabeth Evatt AC, the Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG, Age Discrimination Commissioner the Hon Susan Ryan AO, the Hon Justice Virginia Bell of the High Court of Australia, the Hon Michael McHugh AC QC, the Hon Judge Kevin O'Connor AM of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, NSW Minister for Finance and Services the Hon Greg Pearce, Legal Services Commissioner Steve Mark, and NSW Law Society President Stuart Westgarth. Guests were welcomed by PIAC Chairman, Dr Peter Cashman, who has been associated with PIAC from its beginnings in the early 1980s.

The keynote speech was given by the NSW Attorney General, the Hon Greg Smith, on "The Future of Social

Justice". As a former public prosecutor, Mr Smith recognised particularly the need for improved support for persons in detention, this being an issue that PIAC is actively involved in. He also recognised matters that PIAC had been active in over the years that demonstrated the value PIAC provides in supporting social justice issues.

In particular, the Attorney General discussed the Work and Development Order scheme, which the NSW government recently made permanent. The scheme allows disadvantaged people to work off their unpaid fines in a variety of ways, including by addressing mental health or addiction problems, thereby enhancing their prospects for rehabilitation and reducing the likelihood that they will go to prison. PIAC was one of the key organisations that helped establish this very successful scheme.

Justice Bell then spoke of her involvement with PIAC from when it was established with a goal of fostering a fair, just and democratic society and provided inspiring insight into PIAC's activities over many years. Her presentation was delivered with warmth, humour and recognition of the valuable and highly regarded contribution PIAC has made and continues to make to social justice issues in Australia.

PIAC's Chief Executive Officer, Edward Santow, launched PIAC's new strategic

**"There are places where a diverse collection of people such as this wouldn't dare to gather to discuss the weather, let alone a subject as sensitive as social justice. We can come together this evening because we live in a vibrant, confident democracy."**

**ED SANTOW, CEO,**  
Public Interest Advocacy Centre



plan. The plan looks to PIAC leading change and building capacity in four major program areas, being social justice (homelessness, prisons and detention), equality (Indigenous justice, discrimination), government and democracy (access to information, accountable government) and consumer rights (health care, energy and water). These program areas are supported by PIAC's core strategies of public interest litigation, policy development and campaigning, and education and training.

**New requirements to ensure wheelchair accessibility in taxis now apply in NSW as a result of a recent PIAC case involving Greg Killeen (pictured).**

PHOTO: ELENOR TEDENBORG/NEWS LTD

As a pertinent example of PIAC's conduct of public interest litigation, Mr Santow noted the presence of Greg Killeen, whose recent case dealt with the large proportion of supposedly wheelchair-accessible taxis in NSW that cannot actually accommodate wheelchair

users. New requirements now apply in NSW as a result of the case.

For those present who were not members of the legal profession, the evening provided an opportunity to find out what PIAC does, from its public interest social justice advocacy activities through to its work to help disadvantaged people, such as the mentally ill, homeless, people suffering discrimination or Indigenous people, to achieve justice. PIAC's work is deeply grounded in the experiences of the people it serves.

As Ed Santow said, "We're fortunate that our community almost unanimously supports

NSW Public Purpose Fund and the Commonwealth/State Community Legal Services Programs, administered by Legal Aid NSW, and on grants for specific programs such as from the NSW Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services for its Energy + Water Consumer Advocacy Program. Additional generous support is also provided from Allens Arthur Robinson for PIAC's Indigenous Justice Program, and from a few individual donors, charitable foundations and other organisations.

PIAC has also always worked closely with law firms and barristers acting pro bono, as

well as with other community organisations, most notably the Public Interest Legal Clearing House (PILCH), which was established by PIAC to broker pro bono resources from a range of large law firms for public interest issues. More recently, PIAC has engaged with Mallesons Stephen Jaques for a regular secondment program of young lawyers to PIAC, and is pursuing a new joint venture opportunity with Sydney University Law School.

Looking to the future, PIAC recognises that its funding base and resourcing opportunities must be expanded beyond the traditional areas of government and from within the legal community if PIAC is to continue to provide its services and achieve its goals.

The event held on 20 September was the first step in PIAC's new approach in reaching out to members of the broader community who may be able to fund by giving or facilitating giving to PIAC, or who may be able to work with PIAC to provide resourcing be it pro bono or through alternative innovation.

Support for PIAC is vital for PIAC's ongoing success. PIAC invites you to make a donation at [www.piac.asn.au](http://www.piac.asn.au) or by contacting PIAC on 8898 6500. □



**PIAC chief executive Ed Santow (top) and Attorney General Greg Smith speak at the re-launch of the Centre's social justice approach.**

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social justice. Often the real challenge is to agree on how we should address social disadvantage, and what resources can be deployed to do so."

PIAC has historically been primarily dependent for its funding on grants from the