



GOVERNMENT HOUSE
SYDNEY

**Women Lawyers Association of NSW
70th Anniversary Gala Dinner**

Keynote Address - for distribution

Friday, 11 March 2022

Sheraton Grand Hyde Park, Sydney

Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC
Governor of New South Wales

Thank you, Councillor Weldon, for your Welcome to Country and thank you, Your Honour (*The Hon Justice Virginia Bell*), for your kind introduction. I pay my respects to the Gadigal people, the Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather and to Elders past, present and emerging.

I am honoured to be here to celebrate the Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales' 70th anniversary and to have been asked to give a little of the story of this wonderful organisation. Although the celebration is belated due to COVID and lockdowns, having the party in International Women's Day Week is itself a statement of what can only be described as a perfect pitch.

The 70th anniversary of the Association is an immense cause for celebration for the legal profession in our State, and on a night like tonight, for the women lawyers of our State and beyond. Strictly it is an 80th anniversary as the origins of the Association are traced back to 1941, some eleven years before the Association was formally constituted. It is a trite observation that at the time there were few women in the law and minimal opportunities for those few women to share their knowledge and experiences with each other and to provide and receive the encouragement, camaraderie and collegiality that comes from interacting with one's professional peers.¹

This catalysed a number of those few women lawyers to arrange informal, but regular, occasions to meet. Amongst them was Veronica Pike, a solicitor from Sydney and, later, President of the Women Lawyers Association in 1960, who

¹ Joan M. O'Brien, 'A History of Women in the Legal Profession in New South Wales' (Thesis, The University of Sydney, 1986) 60.

had been admitted as a lawyer only a year before on 20 May 1940.² Veronica entered into partnership with her brother, Vincent, at the law firm Pike & Pike, becoming a highly sought-after solicitor in tenancy, conveyancing and property law.

The first meetings were held quarterly in Veronica's home and then subsequently at the Feminist Club³ at 77 King Street, which now houses Rebel Sports and Affinity Diamonds, about which we could draw a number of analogies. This was no mere social club. Rather, those who attended '*share[d] legal problems, ...[had] guest speakers, and ... discussions pertinent to the legal issues of the time*'.⁴ In 1943, the women received permission from the Incorporated Law Institute of New South Wales (the Law Society of NSW's predecessor), to use the Institute's address '*for the purpose of establishing a permanent mailing address*'.⁵

By 1951, an auspicious year in the legal calendar being our Patron's year of birth, who celebrated her 70 plus one 4 days ago. I do need to stress that I am still waiting for mine because I am younger than our Patron – 138 days younger to be exact. But I digress.

It had become clear that these informal meetings were inadequate to represent the interests of women in the profession who, by 1951, had increased in number to 74, including a tiny cohort of four who had been admitted to the Bar.

² Rosslyn Finn, 'Pike, Veronica (1900-1986)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University* <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pike-veronica-15462>>.

³ 'Timeline', *First 100 Years* <<https://first100years.com.au/about-us/timeline/>>.

⁴ O'Brien (n 1) 60.

⁵ *Ibid* 67.

The Commonwealth Legal Convention was held that same year.⁶ A number of women attended, including Dame Roma Mitchell and her colleague, Sesca Ross Anderson. Both had paid their conference fees, including for the gala dinner, but were refused entry.

A third of a century after women had won that hard fought battle to be admitted as lawyers with the passage of the *Women's Legal Status Act 1918*, it was well past the time for them 'to be in the room where it happens'. Undaunted and resourceful, as every good lawyer is, Dame Roma and Sesca Ross Anderson simply went around the back, found a way into the room and, more importantly, took their place at the table.⁷

Other women were galvanised, including Sydney barrister Beatrice Bateman who, in November 1951, wrote to women lawyers in Sydney suggesting they meet to discuss the creation of a formal Women Lawyers Association.⁸

Beatrice was admitted to the Bar in 1942, the fourth female barrister following Sybil Morrison (1924), Nerida Cohen (1935) and Ann Bernard (1941).⁹ A quarter of a century later, Beatrice's daughter, Beatrice Gray, was the 16th barrister to be admitted, in 1968, joined in that same year by Jenny Blackman, WLANSW President in 1973, Mary Gaudron, who needs no introduction, and Joan Palfreyman.¹⁰ A year later, the Hon Jane Mathews AO, the first Patron of the Association, was admitted.

⁶ 'Timeline', *First 100 Years* < <https://first100years.com.au/about-us/timeline/>>.

⁷ Elizabeth Olsson, 'Three Brilliant Adelaide Girls' (20 October 2017) *Law Society of South Australia* <https://www.lawsocietysa.asn.au/LSSA/Media/Three_brilliant_Adelaide_girls.aspx>.

⁸ O'Brien (n 1) 68.

⁹ 'Pioneering Women 1921-1975', *New South Wales Bar Association* <https://nswbar.asn.au/the-bar-association/bar-history/pioneering-women#>.

¹⁰ Jenny Chambers, 'The first women to clear the bar in New South Wales' (Summer 2010-2011) *New South Wales Bar Association News* 99.

Thirty women attended the meeting organised by Beatrice Bateman, held at the Pickwick Club, where it was resolved that a 'provisional Association' be established with Joan O'Hara (O'Brien), a practicing solicitor, being appointed as provisional President.¹¹

On 6 March 1952, the Association's inaugural meeting was held, attended by 23 women, and the Association was formally constituted. The Objects of the Constitution of the Association were, and remain, to:

- (a) provide a common meeting ground for women lawyers;
- (b) foster growth of a collegiate spirit among women lawyers;
- (c) make suggestions and work for the reform of the law and the administration of the law particularly as it affects women;
- (d) assist with such movements [and] for the advancement of women in the legal profession as the Association may from time to time determine;
- (e) participate as a representative body in matters of interest to the legal profession; and
- (f) such other objectives as the Association determine time to time by Special Resolution.¹²

Nerida Goodman (née Cohen) was elected the first President of the Association and served from 1952-1953. Other presidents over the years include, amongst others:

- Ann Kirby (née Plotke) (1967-1968), a solicitor in the firm EJ Kirby where Chief Justice Bathurst did articles and worked until he went to the Bar;
- Daphne Kok (1969-1970), appointed a Magistrate in 1991 and whose extensive work in student and other bodies at the University of Sydney

¹¹ O'Brien (n 1) 68.

¹² 'Constitution' *Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales Incorporated* (23 November 2021) 1 <<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/WLANSW-Constitution-2021.pdf>>.

saw her elected as a Fellow of the University Senate, on which she served for 25 years;

- Kaye Loder (1971-1972), later Chair of the Women's Advisory Council;
- The Hon Ruth McColl AO (1996-1997), first woman President of the NSW Bar Association, Senior Counsel and Judge of Appeal; and
- Dominique Hogan-Doran SC (1999-2000), a leading Senior Counsel in NSW.¹³

The newly formed association invited the 74 women in the profession at the time to join.¹⁴ 42 new members signed up, becoming the inaugural members of this now large and vibrant Association.

The Association's profile grew rapidly. In 1953, the Association was invited by the Incorporated Law Institute of New South Wales to submit a paragraph about the Association's activities for inclusion in the Institute's Annual Report, published in the Institute's Journal.¹⁵ By 1954, Sydney Law School allowed the Association to use its 'Senate Room' as a central venue for committee and general meetings.¹⁶

In 1959, the Association affiliated with the International Federation of Women Lawyers, enabling members to expand their international contacts and networks. It hosted distinguished international women lawyers and law academics, giving our local lawyers insights into legal thinking overseas.¹⁷

¹³ 'Our History' *The Women Lawyers Association of NSW* <<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/about-us/our-history/>>.

¹⁴ O'Brien (n 1) 69.

¹⁵ Ibid 70-71.

¹⁶ Ibid 71.

¹⁷ The Association had hosted visitors since its early days, including Professor Moran, a lawyer from Dublin University, in 1953; Ms Viola Smith, an American lawyer who had worked in the American Diplomatic Service and Trade Commission for the US in China, in 1957; Ms Fumi Suzaki, a lawyer in Japan who provided insight into the Japanese Family Court System; and many more. See O'Brien (n 1) 71-72.

By the 1960s, the work of the Association and its Research Committee in particular was so well recognised and respected that public authorities sought the Association's advice when considering legislative changes in respect of women and children.¹⁸

Today, the Association is consulted by the Government, the Courts and other sections of the communities on issues that affect women and children and which thus impact on society generally. The Association continues its research work, makes submissions and publishes Reports on matters that so stubbornly remain issues including discrimination, the status of women in the legal profession, workplace gender equality, equal pay.

The Association's 2020/2021 Report found that the leadership of law firms continues to be dominated by men. The position is improving, but oh so slowly: female CEOs of firms increased from six to eleven and the percentage of female directors increased from 24% to 26.5%.¹⁹

In 2015, the Association released its Career Intentions Survey Final Report, containing findings from a survey conducted between 2013-2015.²⁰ The project was instigated by then-Patron, the Hon Jane Mathews. It *'is the first study in Australia with the capacity to measure and address the effectiveness of initiatives targeting diversity, retention of talent, and leadership in the legal profession'*.²¹

¹⁸ O'Brien (n 1) 73.

¹⁹ Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales, *2020/21 Law Firm Comparison Project* (Final Report, 25 October 2021) 10-11 <<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2020-21-WLANSW-Law-Firm-Comparison-Project-Report.pdf>>.

²⁰ Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales, *Career Intentions Survey 2013-2015* (Final Report, 17 June 2015).

²¹ 'Career Intentions Survey' *Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales* <<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/resources/career-intentions-survey/>>.

Of the many important things that came out of the survey, the 1,403 law student respondents reflect the emerging demographic of the profession: 67% of the respondents were female – not surprising as that reflects the position for nearly a decade now; 29% were born overseas; 34% primarily spoke a language other than English at home; 54% were between the ages 22 and 25; and 37% had completed previous degrees.²²

Of the key findings of the Report, one was that female students were more likely to choose a practice area due to flexibility/good work-life balance and personal interest in social justice and advocacy.²³ The perception of barriers to going to the Bar was that it was male-dominated, intimidating and not family-friendly.

The reality of the profession needs to be different from these perceptions of these young students. It is up to the profession to adapt and accommodate the needs of its members and not continue, at a functional level, to exclude women from all available areas of practice. We must be a profession where all lawyers do ‘the good work’ and all lawyers have professional non-discriminatory earnings.

The impact of research such as this by the Association cannot be understated. I have been saying for years that we need solid data to demonstrate where inequality remains and where improvements must be made. The work of the Association in this respect has been of huge significance.

²² Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales, *Career Intentions Survey 2013-2015* (Final Report, 17 June 2015) 5-6.

²³ *Ibid* iii.

As the Women Lawyers Association has proven, they are in it for the long haul. So today, 70 years plus one, there is much to celebrate. The numbers in the room tonight tell us that is so. The work of the Association and the talents and successes of its individual members have placed the Association at the centre of legal influence and respect.

The Women Lawyers Association is the institutional story of the contribution that women lawyers have made to the legal profession and to the society which the profession is committed to serve.