

Lawyers Beyond Borders launch speech – Sydney Law School May 20 Attorney – General The Hon. Robert McClelland

“Launching Lawyers Beyond Borders”

First, may I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on – and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

Thank you Justice Refshauge.

- The Hon Michael Kirby AC, Lawyers Beyond Borders patron;
- The Hon Elizabeth Evatt AO, Lawyers Beyond Borders patron;
- The Hon Margaret Reid AO, Australian Council for International Development;
- Ms Margaret Jackson, Council President, Australian Volunteers International;
- Ms Dimity Fifer, CEO, Australian Volunteers International
- Ms Catherine Scerri, AVI returned volunteer;
- Ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to be here this evening.

Lawyers Beyond Borders is a great initiative and I'm heartened by the support it has received from the legal community.

At the outset, I want to commend Australian Volunteers International for establishing Lawyers Beyond Borders.

In particular, I want to thank Dimity Fifer, the CEO of Australian Volunteers International for her drive and determination in bringing this project to reality.

Thanks also to Catherine Scerri, for reminding us how rewarding volunteering overseas can be both for the local communities which benefit and for the volunteers involved.

I think it's clear that Lawyers Beyond Borders will help provide great opportunities for the lawyers involved.

And more broadly, Lawyers Beyond Borders and the volunteers will contribute to a vitally important goal: strengthening the rule of law overseas.

This is important work, and I'll say a bit more about this later.

But first I want to reflect briefly on the value of pro bono work more generally.

The Value of Pro Bono Work

Australian lawyers should rightly be proud of the public contribution they make through pro bono work.

This work gives some of the marginalised in society a stronger voice in the justice system.

As Attorney-General, I've been particularly keen to recognise and promote the pro bono work being done by Australian lawyers.

Among other matters, I've amended the Legal Services Directions to require Commonwealth agencies, when outsourcing legal services, to consider the amount of pro bono and community work being done by law firms submitting tenders.

The amendments reflect that Australian lawyers don't do pro bono because they have to, but because they think it's the right thing to do.

Since becoming Attorney, I have become more aware and impressed by the desire of many lawyers to use their legal skills to give back to the community.

At the same time as helping people in their local communities, Australian lawyers are also showing increasing interest in international pro bono work.

Currently, for example, the Law Council of Australia is doing some great work through the South Pacific Bars to strengthen law societies in the South Pacific.

And there is a growing interest to do more.

In light of this, I think the challenge for us is to encourage this work and to ensure it's as effective as it can be. This is why Lawyers Beyond Borders has such an important role to play.

Role of Lawyers Beyond Borders

Australian Volunteers International already does a great job in giving Australian professionals the opportunity to share their skills, knowledge and experiences with local communities overseas.

In fact, for over 50 years AVI has placed more than 6,000 Australians in overseas volunteering opportunities.

This has provided great benefits for the local communities involved as well as for the volunteers themselves.

Lawyers Beyond Borders will continue this great work, providing a targeted and focussed body specifically tasked to encourage and facilitate volunteering by Australian lawyers.

It hardly needs saying that the Government has a vital interest in encouraging international pro bono work.

Accordingly, I am proud to announce that my Department is joining others as one of the founding donors for Lawyers Beyond Borders.

Facilitating International Pro Bono Work

The Government also has an important role to play here.

One of the reasons I'm keen to promote international pro bono work is because it can help strengthen the rule of law in our region.

This is an important goal in its own right. And it underpins social and economic structures and cultures.

It is something I've discussed with my Commonwealth colleagues, including at the most recent Commonwealth Law Minister's meeting in Edinburgh last year.

Through the leadership of the Right Honourable Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC, the Attorney-General for England and Wales, Ministers not only recognised the importance of pro bono but agreed to apply their own personal leadership to promote pro bono services.

Since then, I've asked my Department to undertake a stocktake of the law and justice development work already being undertaken by the Australian Government.

The stocktake has revealed that a significant amount of law and justice development work (over \$90m each year excluding the significant amount devoted to policing assistance) is being done by different Commonwealth agencies.

My Department and AusAID are now working with other Commonwealth agencies to develop a whole-of-government law and justice framework within Australia's development program.

The framework will enable better coordination of the Government's different law and justice development activities, and better link them to the Government's overall development objectives.

We appreciate that we can add significant value to our effort by partnering with the private sector.

In that context, I want to announce the establishment of an International Pro Bono Advisory Group, modelled along the lines of that now operating successfully in the United Kingdom.

This was first discussed in February, when I co-hosted an International Pro Bono Roundtable with Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC.

Baroness Scotland described how the UK has established an 'international pro bono committee' to facilitate, encourage and better coordinate international pro bono activity.

The international pro bono advisory group being established by me will have a similar role in respect of international pro bono work being undertaken by Australian lawyers.

In summary, the Advisory Group will help coordinate international pro bono work with the development activities being undertaken by Government.

It will also help forge relationships with other countries and professional associations interested in the area.

This is something I've already discussed with colleagues in the UK and New Zealand, among others.

We intend to consult further with different stakeholders about the Group's composition and functions.

In particular, I'm keen to strengthen our partnership with you – the legal fraternity and organisations like Lawyers Beyond Borders – in supporting international pro bono work.

The bottom line is that the public, private and non-government sectors can achieve a great deal by working together.

I see the establishment of Lawyers Beyond Borders as a particularly welcome development.

Conclusion

Australian lawyers can make a great contribution to strengthening the rule of law in the region.

I hope that Lawyers Beyond Borders, in partnership with the government, law firms and others, can help unlock this capacity.

Clearly, much of our legal fraternity wants to engage in meaningful pro bono work.

Lawyers Beyond Borders will help give them the opportunity to lend their expertise in parts of the world where it's needed most.

I encourage you all to contribute to this fantastic initiative.

I wish Lawyers Beyond Borders and its supporters all the very best.

It is now my great pleasure to officially launch Lawyers Beyond Borders.

Thank you.