

SMASHING THE BAMBOO CEILING

A new legal association for Asian Australian Lawyers promotes cultural diversity in the senior ranks of the profession.

Greater diversity in the legal profession took a step forward on 22 October when the Asian Australian Lawyers Association (AALA) was launched at the Victorian Supreme Court Library.

The AALA is an initiative of LIV president Reynah Tang and members of the Victorian Bar, with support from members of the judiciary and the legal profession. It is the first association in Australia to focus on the growing number of Asian Australian lawyers, as well as other lawyers with an interest in Asia, and aims to:

- provide advocacy and support to members;
- develop links with Asian legal associations to facilitate and promote access for members to Asian legal markets;
- improve the capability and reputation of members in the legal profession by raising public awareness and providing education; and
- promote and facilitate Asian cultural diversity in the senior ranks of the profession, and promote a mutual understanding of Australian and Asian legal systems.

About 100 people attended the launch, with Supreme Court judge Emiliios Kyrou introducing the new association which he described as “momentous” and one that reflected the importance of Asian Australian lawyers.

LIV president Reynah Tang said while it was encouraging that this year for the first time, three of Australia’s law societies (Victoria, NT and ACT) were led by presidents with an Asian background, there is a long way to go. There are few partners in law firms, few barristers (about a dozen of 1800 in Victoria), even fewer senior counsel and virtually no judicial officers with an Asian background in Australia.

Apart from the Federal Court’s Justice Darryl Rangiiah, whose parents are Indian, and the County Court’s Judge Philip Misso, whose father was born in Sri Lanka, it is believed there are no Asian Australians serving as judges in superior or intermediate courts. Deputy chief magistrate Robert Kumar was born in Fiji of Indian parents and Justice Paul Coghlan of the Supreme Court has Chinese heritage.

Mr Tang said: “We need to smash the bamboo ceiling, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense. We are already firmly ensconced in the Asian Century and the legal profession needs to act now if we are to capitalise on the growth potential that lies outside our borders.

“We must realise the importance of collaboration and diversity in our profession if we are to support those best placed to lead us in securing our place in the Asian market.”

AALA founding committee members include Zubair Mian, Cam Truong, Jim Lim, Karin Clark, William Lye, Daniel Nguyen and Victor Tse.

William Lye, one of the most senior barristers in Australia from a Chinese background and a driving force behind the AALA, said he was proud to be part of the “historic” launch.

Mr Lye said there needed to be more mentoring and sponsorship of Asian Australian lawyers, with pathways to senior positions. Only then would there be role models to encourage future generations of Asian Australians to study law and aim high.

“We have now got some traction but the proof is in the pudding . . . when future generations can see they can all climb this ladder and reach their destination.”

Barrister Cam Truong, who emigrated to Australia from Vietnam in 1978, said the lack of senior Asian lawyers and judges in Australia was in contrast to the US where ethnic diversity in the judiciary was increasing.

“There is a lack of [Asian] people at that [senior] level. There are no Chinese judges in Victoria and probably Australia. In contrast, in America there is a growing number of Chinese and south-east Asian judges. We are trying to right that wrong and make the judiciary more reflective of society,” Mr Truong said.

“There is not the pool to select from here. There are no Chinese QCs. There is only a handful of Asian-Chinese barristers. Without the pool you don’t have the foundation for future appointments. This is a great initiative and I am glad I am part of it.”

Other LIV initiatives aimed at encouraging ties between Australia and Asia include a Memorandum of Understanding with the Beijing Lawyers Association, which includes a lawyer exchange program and internship opportunities. ●



PROUD TO BE PART OF HISTORIC LAUNCH: Barristers Willam Lye and Cam Truong.

CAROLYN FORD