

**Ceremony for Admission of Lawyers
Speech delivered by Chief Justice Terence Higgins
On 14 December 2007**

I welcome and congratulate each of you who have been admitted - or as some say committed - as lawyers of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal People.

As I am sure you are aware, you are now entitled to hold a practicing certificate and, on obtaining a practicing certificate, to offer your professional skills to the community as a lawyer. This is a fine accomplishment, and I am pleased to see so many of your family and friends here today to celebrate this achievement with you. Completing law school is often a stressful process and I extend my congratulations to you and to those who have supported you.

Usually I am joined by my brethren on the bench to share in admission ceremonies. Recent staffing shortages have altered this trend. However, as you may be aware, on Tuesday, Attorney-General Simon Corbell MLA announced that Mr Richard Refshauge SC and Ms Hilary Penfold PSM QC have been appointed to be new resident judges of this Court. It is reassuring that those appointments have now been made, and that the executive government has chosen to remedy the long-standing gender imbalance – at least since 1933 - of the Supreme Court

bench. Though I hasten to mention that it applies only to Supreme Court resident judges, we have two female additional judges.

It was also on Tuesday that Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard became the first woman since federation to head our nation, as acting Prime Minister for two days. It was not so long ago that it was almost unthinkable to have a female on the ACT Supreme Court bench, 2 females on the High Court bench, and another running the country (albeit temporarily).

Indeed, the greatest – and most obvious – change to the legal profession over the last century has been the growing number of women entering it. In the late 19th century and early 20th century battle lines were drawn in all Australian jurisdictions over the right of women to study law at university and to be admitted to practice. In fact, it was one held that women were not people and therefore could not enter the profession. In NSW, Ada Evans led the charge – she was the first woman to study law at an Australian university, graduating from the University of Sydney in 1902. However, despite Ada's best efforts to persuade the NSW Supreme Court otherwise, it was not until 1921 that the rule precluding women from practice was abrogated by the *Women's Legal Status Act 1918*.

The growing number of female lawyers has necessitated improvements within the profession to create equal opportunity for women, and family friendly workplaces. The fact that 10 major Australian law firms now feature on the 2007 EOWA Employer of Choice for Women List is one such improvement. This trend is commendable, however much more can and should be done. Each of you, as practitioners and members of the profession, have a role in promoting equality in the profession and in the law. And I hope you do so.

Undeniably, the growing diversity of the legal profession strengthens the law and the practice of law. The changing ethnic, religious and social backgrounds of new lawyers such as yourselves is, as a matter of course, bringing new perspectives and experience to our legal system. This bodes well for the future of the law and the profession. So too the fact that almost all of you being admitted today are alumni of the Australian National University – by virtue of your LLB or Legal Workshop. I too completed my law degree at the ANU, as did the Supreme Court's two new judicial appointees, Mr Refshauge and Ms Penfold. You are in good company, if I may say so myself.

As you begin your careers as lawyers, take every opportunity to learn from your colleagues – even those who did not attend the ANU. Mentoring is a great feature of our profession and your colleagues will

be a source of support and counsel throughout your career. There will be times when you are faced with ethical dilemmas, and you are uncertain of what action your professional ethical obligations require you to take. During such times, do not hesitate to seek advice and guidance from your colleagues in the profession whether at the Law Society or the Bar Association. They are there to assist you and will do so.

Whatever path your legal career takes you in – be it advocacy, commercial law, government practice or some more exotic path – ensure that you retain the value of the fundamental principles of our profession. You are now advocates of the rule of law and representatives of the legal profession. Your clients will place their trust, finances and even their liberty in your hands. Do not let the lure of billable hours or work pressure dissuade you from your duties as a lawyer and from striving to uphold the highest ethical standards.

I hope that you will look forward with eager anticipation to your future careers in law and the rewards that await you, whether they be BMWs or not. I congratulate you and your families on your admission as lawyers of this court, and wish you all the best for your future wherever it may take you.