

**Australia and New Zealand Ombudsman Association (ANZOA) Annual  
“Meeting of the Minds” Conference**

**“The evolution of the Ombudsman Institution in Australia and New Zealand”**

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**Introduction**

It is such a pleasure to join you for the 2023 ANZOA Meeting of the Minds, a meeting made all the more special because we are celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ANZOA. I thank Cynthia for being so kind to invite me to speak to you today and thank her for her outstanding work as Chair.

I particularly acknowledge my fellow panelists, Colin and John, both of whom have been wonderful mentors, colleagues and friends of mine over two decades. Indeed, in Colin’s case, going back nearly three decades now. Both Colin and John were exceptional Ombudsman, who continue to contribute at the highest level to this day. They are great leaders of the Ombudsman institution and it is honour to share this session with them.

I am very sorry that I cannot be there in person, particularly to participate in the facilitated Q & A session with Cynthia, Colin and John, but as you are meeting, I am currently flying back to Australia from Thailand, where I have been attending the Annual Asia Region meeting of the International Ombudsman Institute.

**Evolution**

As you know, the topic of this session is the evolution of the Ombudsman institution in Australian and New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand have a very proud record of contribution to the Ombudsman institution, and our Ombudsman institutions are among the oldest in the world; 60 years in the case of the Parliamentary Ombudsman of New Zealand and 50 years in the case of the Parliamentary Ombudsman of Australia. We have also been leaders in the creation of industry Ombudsman. Far from just being among the oldest, our

offices are large by global standards and have, in my view, very clearly evolved and been significant contributors to better governance, improved public and private services and more fair and caring societies at a sub-national, national and international level.

Be it measured against the Benchmarks, the Venice Principles or the United Nations Resolution, *The role of Ombudsman and mediator institutions in the promotion and protection of human rights, good governance and the rule of law*, Ombudsman in Australia and New Zealand perform exceptionally well.

In terms of sub-national and national contributions, there are innumerable examples of both industry and Parliamentary Ombudsman enhancing access to justice, facilitating fairer public administration, improving privately-provided essential services, strengthening the rule of law and promoting and protecting fundamental human rights. The evolution of the Ombudsman institution in Australia and New Zealand is demonstrable in at least three easily measurable ways. First the obvious growth of the number of Ombudsman institutions over the last 60 years. Second, the growth of individual institutions as they have been asked to take on new functions. Third, the extent to which the individual institutions, and the new functions they are asked to undertake, are so distinctly directed to areas of the most profound human rights concerns. This clearly reflects the confidence that Parliaments, Governments and citizens have in the Ombudsman institution in our two countries.

## **IOI**

In terms of international contribution, we only need to remember as just one example that New Zealand has contributed three Presidents during the International Ombudsman Institute's 45-year history, more than any other country. While it is not a recent evolution of Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman to be involved in the International Ombudsman Institute, or IOI. Indeed, Australian and New Zealand Ombudsman have played a role in the IOI since its inception.

Nonetheless, I think there has been an evolution of sorts that has occurred in the IOI and its work in the past few years and we have seen significant contributions from first Bruce Barbour, and then more latterly Colin, Deborah Glass and Peter Boshier have all played important roles. These roles have been key to the IOI's structure and its focus on human rights.

## **ANZOA**

I do want to take this opportunity I have been given to make special mention of the importance of ANZOA. I have been a member of ANZOA for sixteen years and I consider membership to

be an essential component of my role. Indeed, while there are numerous examples of Ombudsman associations dedicated to Parliamentary Ombudsman only, or industry Ombudsman only, there are only a few examples of Ombudsman associations that successfully straddle both Parliamentary Ombudsman and industry Ombudsman. One of course is ANZOA. Another very good example is the United Kingdom Ombudsman Association.

You will all have a view about why ANZOA is particularly important, and so worthy of celebration on this occasion of its anniversary. For me, just one very recent example, very fresh in my mind, is the privilege I had to host my ANZEWON friends and colleagues in Perth. As you know ANZEWON combines Ombudsman who are industry Ombudsman with Ombudsman who have both Parliamentary Ombudsman and Industry Ombudsman roles (and, of course, we are all members of ANZOA). Following our recent two-day meeting, it was overwhelmingly reinforced in my mind again, the extraordinary commonality of our work.

Both Parliamentary Ombudsman and Industry Ombudsman not only resolve complaints from citizens about essential services (both public and private), but also focus a very large amount of their work on systemic investigation and reports directed to protecting and promoting the interests of the most the most vulnerable members of our society.

It is why I think all Ombudsman in Australia should be a member of ANZOA, as it simply provides an ideal forum for the exchange of best practices about issues that we share the deepest of commitment.

Perhaps even more importantly in my mind, like the IOI and a number of regional Ombudsman associations globally, I see ANZOA as a custodian and champion of the integrity of the Ombudsman institution. The Ombudsman institution is one about which we should always be vigilant and never take for granted. Internationally, I am afraid, it is too regularly the case that we see Ombudsman under threat. Even in Australia, the profligate use of the word Ombudsman for offices that clearly are no such thing, is a form of threat to the Ombudsman institution. ANZOA is one of the bulwarks against these threats and its existence all the more important because of this role.

Finally, but certainly not the least, ANZOA has always been for me a source of warmth, friendship and support over many, many years. The role of Ombudsman is an extraordinary and humbling privilege for which we are grateful every day. But that does not mean that it is necessarily always easy. There are times when certain things we do, particularly early in our terms, where the seeking of the wisdom and judgement of our peers is, if not essential, very

highly desirable. This collegiate support is yet another reason why ANZOA is so valued by me, and all of us here today. This collegiality, learning and support across offices is also, of course, reflected in the number of Interest Groups which are such a feature of ANZOA's work.

Over the next few years, along with possible consideration of the return of the ANZOA conference, there will no doubt be further opportunities for ANZOA to expand its collegiality and networks with its international counterparts such as the United Kingdom Ombudsman Association.

The imprimatur for this collegiality, if such imprimatur was even required, is very helpfully contained in the latest iteration of the UN Resolution, which states, and here I quote:

[e]ncourages Ombudsman and mediator institutions... [t]o engage with the International Ombudsman Institute, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and other regional networks and associations, with a view to exchanging experiences, lessons learned and best practices

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, as President of the International Ombudsman Institute, I take this opportunity to congratulate ANZOA on its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This is a milestone achievement and one very worthy of a pause to reflect on all that has been achieved, to celebrate these achievements and also to plan for the exciting years ahead. As Western Australian Ombudsman, I am very proud to be a member of ANZOA.

The role of the Ombudsman is continuing to grow in importance. Whether it is the unlawful invasion of Ukraine, the crisis in Haiti, to the severe cost of living problems unfolding before us, that will take the most vulnerable Australians to breaking point, our work has never been more important. The institution of the Ombudsman is a champion of the rule of law and human rights, woven into the fabric of over 100 countries, well-placed for leadership in the challenges we face as nations and I strongly believe that the role of the Ombudsman will continue to grow in importance over the coming years. And with this role we play, and its importance, Ombudsman working together has never been more needed. It is for this reason that ANZOA has never been more vital to the citizens we have the privilege to serve.

Thank you.