

31st Australasian and Pacific Ombudsman Region Conference

The Ombudsman's Role in Human Rights Protection

Taipei, Taiwan, 25-27 September 2019

Closing Address

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I am absolutely delighted to provide a closing address to our 31st APOR conference. Can I acknowledge, and thank, Vice President Sun for his closing address.

Today we have explored a number of themes relevant to the Ombudsman's role in human rights protection. As delegates know, in its role of providing the basic human right of access to justice, and more broadly mediating the relationship between the power of the state and the individual citizen, the Ombudsman has been a human rights institution for more than 200 years. But as delegates also know, great societal shifts have occurred over those two centuries that have seen the institution of the Ombudsman spread around the world, as too has its mandate grown. This has been particularly observable since the post second world war compact of universal human rights and even more so again in the last few decades. My office, for example, had 26 employees when I commenced in office and is likely to have over 100 employees this time next year. This sort of change in the role of the Ombudsman, particularly due to an increase in human rights functions, can be seen right around the world. Successive governments and Parliaments have identified an increasing need for our offices to undertake human rights work, coupled with a strong desire by Ombudsmen to do more, and more innovatively, to protect the basic and fundamental rights of citizens. It is now the case that many Ombudsman undertake the role of National Human Rights Institutions and also as National Preventative Mechanisms under OPCAT.

The IOI is particularly aware of the criticality of this human rights work. As many of you may know, building upon previous UN Resolutions on Ombudsmen and the World Forum of Human Rights in Marrakech in November 2014 and the Marrakech Declaration, the IOI has been undertaking considerable work to further our human rights commitments, including developing our relationship with the United Nations and other supranational bodies. In April 2018, I and IOI colleagues, including Regional President Boshier, attended the UN in New York for an event celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the

Institute hosted by Ambassador Jan Kickert, Permanent Representative of Austria to the UN and Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the UN, followed by a reception at the Austrian Ambassador's residence, attended by a number of Permanent Representatives, including Ambassador Gillian Bird, Permanent Representative of Australia to the UN. Subsequent to this, the Executive Committee of the IOI World Board, at its meeting held in October last year in Brussels, established a UN Working Group to develop a draft strategy for UN engagement. Both Peter and Deborah as IOI Directors from our region are represented on this working group. This working group has been very active and its important work is expected to lead to further development of the UN Resolution on the Ombudsman.

More recently in July this year, as part of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York, the Permanent Missions of Austria and Malaysia to the United Nations in New York hosted a side event on the topic of "Protecting the Rule of Law and Human Rights and Advancing Access to Justice" with high-level representation of the IOI.

A further proposal in this regard is to write to each of the Permanent Missions to the UN to continue to forge a closer working relationship with the UN.

Also during this year's Alpbach Forum, the IOI and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights examined the all too real and very serious issue of the pressure faced by Ombudsmen and human rights defenders, as well as the role that Ombudsmen and National Human Rights Institutions play in strengthening democracy and the rule of law.

As many will also know, our European colleagues have, utilizing the Paris Principles, developed the Venice Principles that further enumerate and enshrine the role of the Ombudsman, including in protecting human rights. It is expected that the Venice Principles will be proposed for the endorsement of the General Assembly of the IOI at our World Conference in May next year. It is further proposed that the General Assembly consider adopting a suitably-framed Dublin Declaration in relation to the Ombudsman.

I can say with certainty that the whole of the IOI Board is deeply committed to the further development of the Ombudsman's human rights mandate as one of our highest priorities over the coming years.

Can I conclude by expressing my appreciation to our Regional President and the Control Yuan. Peter, a great friend and colleague, has done an exceptional job as our Regional President, in fact, as a holder of that role myself in the past, I can think of no one who has done more to develop our region and its relationships than Peter.

Finally, to my valued friends President Dr Chang and the Control Yuan, thank you for organizing this conference, and indeed all of the events during our time in Taipei. As you know, the Control Yuan last hosted our APOR meeting in 2011 and I had the privilege of attending and speaking on that occasion. What a pleasure it is to be in this great city again in 2019.

As we turn to 2020, and the 12th IOI World Conference to be held in Dublin, we approach new exciting opportunities for the IOI and the role of the Ombudsman. I look forward enormously to this exciting time ahead and working with my wonderful colleagues here today to advance one of the great modern institutions of human rights, the rule of law and integrity in governance – the Ombudsman.

Thank you.