

## **A note from the Bar's Indigenous Justice Committee**

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bar's formal support for a pathway to the Bar for Indigenous lawyers and students.

In 1999 the Bar established the "Aboriginal Law Students Mentoring Committee" to administer a mentoring system for Indigenous law students. In 2006, the Bar's Annual Report noted that the Bar had not had an Indigenous practising member for over 20 years, and celebrated the fact that the Bar had just welcomed its second ever Indigenous practising member, Linda Lovett. In 2012, the Bar became the first Bar in Australia to adopt a Reconciliation Action Plan.

In 2016 the committee's name was changed to the Indigenous Justice Committee (**IJC**). The IJC's [charter](#), formalised in 2017, currently commences with the following overview:

"The Committee was established to advise and assist in relation to supporting Indigenous barristers to develop and maintain successful careers at the Victorian Bar (**VicBar**), for attracting Indigenous lawyers and law students to the Bar, for generally implementing VicBar's vision for reconciliation (as set out in its Reconciliation Action Plan adopted from time to time (**RAP**)) and for undertaking the functions and responsibilities that have been assigned to it, or to particular members of it, under the RAP."

At the core of these responsibilities is the aim of ensuring the Bar is a culturally safe space for Indigenous people.

The IJC is proud of the fact that the Bar's most recent Annual Report notes that, "There are currently eight First Nations practising members of our Bar, three of whom are members of the Committee." These numbers are testament to the hard work and skills of those barristers. Informal feedback received in recent years confirms the support of colleagues is an essential part of these barristers having rewarding and successful careers at the Bar, as it is for all members of the Bar.

The IJC is delighted at the increase in the numbers of practising First Nations members, which has more than doubled since 2018. This growth has been nurtured via formal programs delivered over many years by dozens of volunteers on the IJC, other members of the Bar and the judiciary. This includes the highly successful mentoring program and the clerkship programs. It has been underpinned by a web of formal and informal connections developed between the Bar and various peak bodies and institutions over the decades, such as Tarwirri (a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal professionals and law students), Victoria Legal Aid, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and Djirra.

The IJC reminds members of the Bar that statements that individual members make, whether in social or traditional media, can have significant impacts and can reflect

negatively on the Bar as a whole. To this end, the IJC is extremely disappointed regarding the posts on social media platform X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn and negative commentary regarding the Bar Council opening its meetings with an Acknowledgement to Country. Based on feedback received by IJC members, these recent events have damaged the Bar's reputation and the positive outcomes it achieves through its mentoring, clerkships and other activities designed to encourage First Nations people to come to, and remain at, the Bar.

Commencing meetings with an Acknowledgement to Country is entirely consistent with the Bar's obligations under its RAP, of which the Bar President is the RAP champion. The Acknowledgement shows respect for Traditional Owners and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

Including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at events, meetings and the like contributes to ending the exclusion that has negatively impacted First Nations people in Australia and which lies at the heart of the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians today. Importantly, it acknowledges the depth of connection to Country, which is something all Australians can be proud of.

The IJC urges all members of the Bar to include an Acknowledgement to Country at their meetings and conferences.

Members of the Bar who are interested in mentoring First Nations law students and lawyers (at dates suitable for the mentor) or participating in the IJC clerkship (during February-March each year) are encouraged to register their interest with the IJC.