



Speech at the Launch of the AALA Mentoring Program 21 February 2019

The Hon Justice A Philippides Court of Appeal

I am delighted to be present at the launch of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association's Mentoring Program in Brisbane. First, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to elders, past, present and emerging. And in doing so, I acknowledge the central significance of Indigenous culture in Australian society.

We know that Australia is a country of great cultural diversity.¹ We see achievement at the highest levels by those of culturally different backgrounds, but we must acknowledge that we are not seeing that achievement in sufficient numbers at the highest echelons in the legal profession, particularly in relation to those of Asian background. Yet, when sitting on the bench at admissions ceremonies over many years, I have noted not only the increased proportion of female admittees, but also the significant number who are becoming legal practitioners who share a non-Anglo Saxon background.

¹ George Megalogenis, 'Australasia rising: who we are becoming', *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, 25 January 2019) available at <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/australasia-rising-who-we-are-becoming-20190122-p50ssx.html>>.



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Organisations directed to promoting diversity and ensuring that diversity is achieved, such as the Asian Australian Lawyers Association, are important and, I would say essential, to changing the legal landscape.

So much has been written about why diversity promotes productivity, innovation, better perspectives and better solutions and a lot more will, no doubt, be written and said about that topic. But what we need are those who put words into action. This is what this mentorship program is about.

The Association is right to concentrate on the role of mentoring and, in particular, the setting up of the excellent program that is being launched tonight. The Association's mentoring program operates on a national level, including in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. It has clear objectives and a vision of implementation that will make a difference. This year's intake of some 90 mentees is an impressive achievement. Those mentees are part of a new generation empowered to take every opportunity of advancement, understanding the critical role that their presence and voice brings to creating a more inclusive and a therefore better legal framework for our society. Traversing different cultural terrains, as Asian Australian lawyers do, brings experience of different insights, different nuances and different perspectives.

Mentorship is an ancient concept. The word mentor actually derives from the name of a character in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus, before leaving Ithaca to join in the Trojan War, appointed a man named Mentor to be a trusted advisor, teacher and friend to his son, Telemachus. The central concept of mentorship is that experience and



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knowledge are powerful tools of learning. It is well known that strong mentorship provides a huge advantage to career advancement. The mentorship program, launched tonight, highlights the importance of cultural diversity and this brings a new dimension to the old concept of mentoring. The mentors that are part of this program believe that diversity is strength. They recognise that diversity brings to the table another point of view. A point of view that also challenges and questions. We know that the best legal solutions are developed through that process.

I commend the 10 Brisbane based mentors who have volunteered for the program for their commitment to being part of a movement for change. You have put your hand up to be part of a new framework that embeds diversity. I know the mentees taking up this tremendous opportunity are very grateful. I applaud the Asian Australian Lawyers Association for all the hard work that has gone into this ground breaking initiative which is reflected in the Association's Mentoring Guide. It will serve as a template for others and has an excellent bibliography that shows that the benefits of diversity are evidence based. I also commend Herbert Smith Freehills for hosting and sponsoring this wonderful event. It is what the legal profession needs – setting the right direction to achieving diversity in the law and breaking stereotypes of what leaders look like.

To build on the adage that “you cannot be what you cannot see”, which was mentioned tonight as a catalyst for establishing the mentorship program, I add that “it is when there are others, such as mentors, for you to see, that you realise you can be”.