



VICTORIAN BAR

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## OPENING OF “THE CHANGING FACE OF THE BAR” BY DR MATT COLLINS QC, PRESIDENT OF THE VICTORIAN BAR, ON THURSDAY 6 AUGUST 2018

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also acknowledge the presence here tonight of many distinguished members of the judiciary and the Victorian Bar, as well as so many colleagues and friends—I hope you will forgive me for not singling out any of our distinguished guests for special mention.

The roots of the Victorian Bar trace back to 1839—the earliest days of the colony of Victoria—the time of legends like Sir Redmond Barry.

The Victorian Bar itself was established in 1884. It is, and has always been, a college with a deep sense of history and place. Every one of us has a Bar roll number, forever situating us in the history of our college. My number is 3,312, meaning I am the 3,312th person to have signed the Bar roll. Our most junior member is Nick Modrzewski. His Bar roll number is 5,043. As of today, we have 2,073 practising members, which means that more than 40% of all persons who have ever practised at the Victorian Bar are in practice today.

The public identify us as the interface between the Courts and clients. We are the anonymous figures in our black robes in the daily news captured striding into the Court buildings in William Street. We are the people who stand between the might of the State and those who need our services. We are, in that sense, in the public consciousness, a somewhat abstract monolith.

But we are also a college of individuals. For me, the reason the portrait commission that we launch tonight is so fascinating is that it portrays us simultaneously as individuals, all with our quirks and idiosyncrasies, and in all our marvellous diversity; and as members of a united college sharing a profound common interest, in respect for the rule of law, in access to justice, and in the centrality of fearless and independent advocacy to success of the remarkable society in which we live and which we serve.

When you explore the exhibition that we launch tonight, the first face of the Bar that is revealed is the black and white caricatures from 1937; a formal study of wing-collared members. A heroic looking group comprising 174 practising members, 172 men and 2 women, whose chambers were in Selbourne in Bourke Street.

This was a time before Owen Dixon Chambers was imagined, much less Barristers Chambers Limited, the visionary entity that has enabled this Bar to distinguish itself from the other Bars of the common law world, by ensuring that there are almost no barriers to entry for the men and women who wish to join us.

In what was deemed our centenary year in 1984, the then Bar Council under its then Chairman, Stephen Charles QC, as he then was, commissioned a series of group portraits of the Bar, and the second face of the Bar that emerges in this exhibition comes from those portraits. Our number then totalled 1,112 practising members—1,037 men and 75 women. The photos are, by and large, formal photos of barristers in wigs and gowns. Few, if any, are smiling; it is difficult to discern much of the personalities of those faces captured in time.

Of the 1,112 practising members of the Bar in 1984, 88 are still in active practice today. We are delighted that of that number Peter O’Callaghan QC, whose name graces this gallery, Allan Myers AC QC and Richard Stanley QC, to name but a few are here with us tonight and have participated in this project. I should also mention Peter Jopling QC, Chair of the Arts and Collections Committee, who cannot be here tonight, but who looks as debonair in his 1984 portrait as he does today.



That brings me to today, and the exciting work that BCL commissioned as our first pop-up show in this Gallery. Photographed by Mr Garth Oriander and championed by the Bar's Art and Collections Committee and, in particular, Peter Jopling QC and Stephen Jurica, this suite of works captures 700 of our 2,073 currently practising colleagues—roughly a third of our current membership.

We invited you, the members of the Bar, to “Come as you wanted to be photographed” and the results are here for all to see tonight. Gone are the formal shackles of the past. Abundant are the faces of women and a younger and more diverse membership in general. In 2018, 45% of our membership under the age of 35 are women, as are more than 40% of members under 15 years' call. 9% of our members speak a language other than English at home; 15% were born overseas; 37% had at least one parent born overseas; and 1.2% are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage, more than the corresponding proportion of the State population, which sits at 0.8%.

Some of you came to be photographed, appropriately, in wigs; some in formal court attire, some in jogging clothes, with pets, pregnant, with groups of readers and as groupings of friends. One of you came sporting a six pack; several in your cycling lycra. What Garth captured was a diverse, engaged and proud group of members.

Our Bar is a very different place from the Bar of the 1930s and the 1980s. It is increasingly reflective of the changing face of Victorian society as a whole. The pace of change is accelerating, and it can be unsettling. As the current President of the Bar, I am acutely conscious that our most senior and revered members came here at a time when it was possible to know everyone, and when there was a homogeneity about those who practised here; while for our most junior members, disruption of all kinds is rife and change often cannot come fast enough.

The success of the Victorian Bar resides in the fact that, overwhelmingly, the disparate strands of our membership are united by common purpose. We have a bond to one another, one that is I think unmatched by any other professional association, including other independent Bars.

Many factors conspire to our success. We are all housed near to one another. We have a rich pupillage system. We have an open-door policy that is more than just notional. We have associations and committees that foster professional and personal relationships built around common interests. We have the Essoign Club, our Bar's beating heart. We have a vibrant CPD program. We have an annual dinner. We contribute to a benevolent fund, and this gallery, and the Bar Foundation. We have the Bar News and we have In Brief.

I have barely scratched the surface.

Most of all, though, we fiercely oppose one another in court each day but we return to chambers as respected colleagues and, more often than not, friends. We have a unique college of which we can be justifiably proud.

Could I conclude by paying tribute to just some of the many people who have contributed to putting together this exhibition, starting of course with Garth Oriander, for these marvellous portraits. Thanks to the Art & Collections Committee, led by the indefatigable Peter Jopling QC. Thanks to Stephen Jurica. Thanks to Amanda Utt, the Bar's General Manager, Corporate Services. And thanks to BCL, for commissioning the exhibition.

To open the exhibition, I am delighted that the renowned photographer Bill Henson, the person who captured the Hon Ken Hayne AC QC so brilliantly in the photograph to my right, has agreed to do the honours this evening. Please make him welcome