

**Address by the Chief Justice at the Law Institute of Victoria's
Legal Sector Dinner**

'Value and Values'

28 August 2025

I start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we gather this evening, the peoples of the Eastern Kulin nation. I pay my respects to elders past and present and all First Nations persons present. The generous Welcome to Country we have received from Murrundindi reminds us all how fortunate we are to live and work on these beautiful lands and in community with rich cultures that have endured in this place for thousands of years.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that our thoughts are with the family, friends and colleagues of Detective Leading Senior Constable Neal Thompson and Senior Constable Vadim de Waart, the police officers who lost their lives, and the officer who was injured this week.

Attorney-General, Ministers, Members of Parliament, and members of the First Peoples' Assembly, my fellow judicial officers, the President and CEO of the Law Institute of Victoria, members of the profession and the wider legal sector, distinguished guests. My thanks to the Law Institute of Victoria, the organisers of tonight's event and to you for your attendance.

I am delighted that the Honourable Mark Dreyfus KC joins us tonight. Mark is an eminent member of the profession as a Silk, and he held the position of Federal Attorney-General with distinction. It was great to have a very able Victorian in that critical role. I am sure he will continue to serve the public in a most commendable way.

About once a month I preside over an admission ceremony in the Banco Court. It is a great privilege to be able to admit new lawyers to our profession and an honour to be the first person to address them as they embark on a new phase in their professional life.

I tell them that they are joining a profession that is critical to the maintenance of the rule of law. That they are agents for the administration of justice and that with the rewards of being a lawyer comes the responsibilities that the role carries. I strongly believe each of those things.

My personal experience, gained from my own admission ceremony, having moved the admission of a number of people over the years, having sat on the Bench at ceremonies as a judge and now presiding as Chief Justice, all confirm in my mind the significance that each admitted person attaches to the day of admission and to the role they take on. The courtroom is filled with a sense of achievement, but more importantly, a sense of opportunity and excitement. Despite the number of admissions – the Court admitted about two thousand practitioners last year – and the familiar pattern that each ceremony follows, I still feel that same sense of excitement each time I enter an admission ceremony in the Banco Court.

Looking across the room tonight, it is pleasing to see the breadth and depth of the legal sector represented. In your work, you realise the opportunity and possibility, which is only in prospect at admission ceremonies. I congratulate you all on the work that you do.

As one gains experience in professional life, it can appear that one's outlook is an ever-decreasing concentric circle. Our depth of understanding and knowledge grows but the line of sight diminishes as we become increasingly focused on and specialised in a particular area or areas of the law. One of

the great privileges of being Chief Justice is the opportunity to broaden my gaze and to meet with people from across the legal sector and to see first-hand the richness and diversity of legal functions.

Victoria has nearly thirty thousand registered legal practitioners. From members of large law firms with thousands of lawyers worldwide, to sole practitioners. Lawyers working in Community Legal Centres and lawyers working for Police. Lawyers working in-house and lawyers working for Victoria Legal Aid. Government Lawyers, barristers, judicial officers. Lawyers in academia and lawyers in Parliament. Lawyers rooted in regional locations, in the suburbs and in the CBD. Those with honed expertise in a specialist area of law to those serving a range of legal needs for whoever walks through the door. Lawyers at the beginning of their careers to lawyers with decades of experience behind them.

What I find most heartening when listening to lawyers talk about the work they do, is not just the pride they take in their own work, but the respect they have for the work of other parts of the legal sector. There is an acknowledgment of how all facets serve the community in important ways. There is a willingness to support each other and come together to achieve better outcomes.

Examples abound. Whether that be a large firm seconding solicitors to a Community Legal Centre or working pro bono through Justice Connect; a barrister appearing as amicus in Court; local law associations sharing knowledge through CPD sessions; the Law Library providing resources to the Courts and profession; the Victorian Legal Services Board providing nearly \$142 million in funding over two years to support access to justice; the Law

Institute of Victoria undertaking research and developing tools to support the sustainability of small practices.

The diversity of functions within the profession and the legal sector is a significant source of strength and foundational to the value it brings. Tonight, I want to talk about two distinct but interrelated concepts: **value** and **values**.

It is important that we recognise and are proud of the **value** of the legal sector. Economists have explored that value in different ways. The business of law, like any industry, operates as part of the economy, generating value. It is an employer, a lessee, a taxpayer. Beyond that, the work of lawyers and the legal sector is an economic enabler. Drafting and advising on agreements that facilitate the operation of commerce, incorporating companies, transferring land, enabling loans and capital raising.

Lawyers are also a critical part of delivering the foundations of our rules-based order. From the creation of our Constitution, to drafting regulations. From prosecuting criminal offences to obtaining legal redress for wrongs resulting in injury.

In its ultimate expression, the rules-based order plays out each day in our Courts and the outcomes reverberate back into the community through stronger adherence to legal obligations. That order has value – economic and social. It reduces injuries, it improves the quality of products, it avoids unproductive costs and increases productivity, it gives companies the confidence to invest. We sometimes take it for granted, because what is visible is the correction of legal wrongs, not the overwhelming adherence to laws that the system exists to ensure.

The **value** that lawyers bring is more than transactional. It is more than information. It is evaluation, analysis, advice, advocacy and judgement. It is assisted by technology but never replaced by it.

Recognising the value of the legal profession both economically and socially is important to its standing in the community.

In considering the value of the sector, we must also acknowledge the **values** that it seeks to advance and protect. The practice of the law is not an extractive industry. The rule of law, with its foundational concepts of equality, access, independence and transparency, is crucial to our way of life. Giving content to these values requires the system to work as a whole. It requires a broad legal profession, and it requires strong, independent and impartial courts. It depends on the institutional strength of the judicial system.

For the legal sector to thrive, to realise its value consistently with the underlying values, there must be investment in people and institutions.

Investment in people

The strength of the legal sector comes from the people within it. We strengthen the sector by attracting and retaining the best people. I know this is something every employer in the room is conscious of. It is something that people frequently raise with me. It is a challenge for many, particularly in areas of law where the subject matter can be challenging. It is also challenging in the regions where less than 12% of our profession practice,¹ but where nearly twice that percentage of our population is located.

¹ Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, [Annual Report 2024](#) (Report, 2024) 32.

One of the things that we have done well is to recognise the value of diversity within the workplace. Certainly, there has been enormous improvement in the participation of women in the profession at all levels. This has brought tremendous positive change. Diversity in ethnic and cultural background remains an area for significant improvement and we must also be conscious of the socio-economic divide that exists and find ways to bridge it.

How do we retain our young professionals, when there are so many competing career opportunities?

It is worth thinking about what draws us to law as a profession and what keeps us there. There is intellectual engagement and there is remuneration, but longer term it is the value we see in the work we do that sustains a legal career. It is the values that we live and how we interact with each other that makes the legal sector rewarding and enjoyable, even when the work is hard, the clients difficult or the subject matter confronting.

So how does the law attract and retain great people? We do it by:

- being a profession where integrity is not just expected but supported and rewarded alongside technical excellence;
- being a profession which is respectful, empathetic and committed to the wellbeing of our members;
- being a profession where there are opportunities for lawyers to progress and to explore diverse and fulfilling careers; and
- investing our time to mentor more junior lawyers and help them to grow throughout their careers.

Research on Lawyer Wellbeing, Workplace Experience and Ethics tells us the first five years in particular are crucial for retention.² The importance of fostering the development of lawyers is widely recognised. A 2024 survey of supervisors of early career lawyers found that 40% cited securing a pipeline of talent as the primary reason for hiring supervised lawyers³ and 86% enjoyed helping their supervisee realise their talent.⁴ But the same survey and its companion survey of supervised lawyers identified the need for more support for this process.⁵

We also attract and retain great people by embracing positive change as a key part of pursuing excellence, while retaining our values.

Investment in institutions

Investment in buildings and technology is an aspect of positive change.

The new Court buildings at Shepparton, Bendigo and Wyndham show some of the very best features of a modern court building. They are an investment in change and respond thoughtfully to the needs of different court users, creating an atmosphere of calm, comfort and safety.

It is also important that we invest in technology. Artificial Intelligence ('AI') presents opportunity. How its value can be harnessed consistently with the values that underpin the Courts is an ongoing challenge but one that we can and will surmount. There are opportunities at various levels. I can foresee

² Vivien Holmes, Julian Webb, Stephen Tang, Susan Ainsworth and Tony Foley, '[Lawyer Wellbeing, Workplace Experiences and Ethics: A Research Report](#)' (Research Report, Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, the Law Society of New South Wales and the Legal Practice Board of Western Australia, 2025) 7, 41.

³ Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, '[Supervisors' experiences of supervising early career lawyers](#)' (Survey, 2024) Figure 3.

⁴ Ibid Figure 10.

⁵ Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, '[Early career lawyers' experiences of supervised legal practice](#)' (Survey, 2023).

that with proper investment AI can assist in low-value, high-volume claims. There will also be a role to play in making more complex litigation more efficient and hopefully more affordable.

As vital as these things are, we must also recognise that Courts are not buildings but are institutions, representing the third branch of government, and there must be investment in the institutions themselves.

In talking of investment, I am not just talking about the amount of money spent, as important as that it is. It is also investment in community engagement so that the community understands and can therefore appreciate the importance of strong institutions, including the Courts, to our security and prosperity. There is enormous opportunity to improve the understanding of civics.

The Courts do not control the sword or the purse and depend on government funding, but through reasonable and open decision-making they can play a critical role in this investment equation.

An important part of our role is leadership. We must hold your respect and the respect of the community through sound decision-making, integrity and respectful interactions. Trust and confidence are earned through consistent delivery. It is also important that we demonstrate leadership in engagement, understanding and innovation. I am constantly learning as I engage with the different facets of the legal sector. From deeper understanding comes new ideas for how we can improve.

There is much to be proud of in a judicial system that is strong, independent, impartial and conscientious.

Despite some outward appearances to the contrary, the Courts do not stand still. The pace of change is not linear, nor as fast as we might always wish, but it is demonstrable, thoughtful and ongoing. The obvious example is our adoption of technology, and a built environment that is responsive to the needs of court users. Beyond that, the approach to the management of cases, the culture in our courtrooms, and the understanding of issues beyond the courtroom have come a long way. I say this not in complacency or self-satisfaction, but as reassurance that the Courts remain ambitious for and committed to progress.

The investment of which I speak will pay for itself many times over. The consequences of neglect and depletion of our institutions will be generational.

I encourage you all to think about how we can collectively draw on the strength that a diverse legal sector provides. To bring value to those you represent and advise, and to maintain the values at the heart of the profession. To ensure that the next generations of lawyers can see the value in the work they do and provide the opportunities that promote excellence and retain value. I encourage you to continue in the work that you do to support the Courts, and to let the Courts know how we can support you to serve the community.

We deliver the greatest value when we work together.

Thank you.