

# Conference sells out again

By Henrietta Champion de Crespigny



*Professor Tim Flannery draws the connection between human rights and global warming.*



*Melissa and Steven Castan speak to Professor Gareth Evans.*



*Tunisian blogger Sami Ben Gharbia talks about the power of social media.*

A sell out again, the 2012 annual Castan Centre Conference brought together members of Australia's human rights community and prominent guest speakers on a variety of contemporary human rights and development issues including global warming, obesity and the Responsibility to Protect in the wake of the UN intervention in Libya and the current crisis in Syria.

Professor Tim Flannery, one of Australia's leading thinkers, writers and scientists, opened the conference with an informative session about the effects global warming is having on basic human rights such as the right to food, water, nationality and protection from damaging rates of change. His presentation of convincing data and research emphasised the scientific evidence of human-induced climate change. This highlighted the devastating effects that global warming is already having on socially, politically and economically disadvantaged people.

After a short tea and coffee break, the audience returned to the second session with Susan Ryan AO, Commonwealth Age Discrimination Commissioner. She argued that the gaps in the Age Discrimination Act 2004 (Cth) and other laws and policies continue to affect older workers' access to employment, career guidance, training and pensions. Following the Commissioner, Professor Kerry Arabena, Director of Indigenous Health at Monash University, provided an overview of the need for inclusion of our First Peoples in the body of the Constitution and to remove the racial power that allows discrimination on that basis.

Appropriately placed before the lunch break, senior research fellow at the Department of Marketing at Monash University, Dr Samantha Thomas, drew attention to the unintended consequences of the persistent public promotion of optimal weight in combating the obesity epidemic. She argued that attention needs to be placed not solely on individuals 'controlling themselves' but on corporate responsibility by the food industry and their advertising agents.

Following a (slightly guilty!) light lunch break, the conference expanded to an international discussion of post-conflict resolutions and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Professor the Honourable Gareth Evans AO, QC provided an insight into the birth of R2P. According to Professor Evans, the Security Council's resolutions

invoking R2P early last year in Libya were a "textbook example" of the doctrine. Optimistic in his conclusion, Evans doubted that the struggle to implement R2P in Syria would result in a relapse to the "bad old days of Rwanda, Srebrenica and Kosovo".

A refreshing approach to civil unrest was put to the audience by Tunisian blogger Sami Ben Gharbia who spoke about the role of social media in the Tunisian revolution. Co founder of the blog Nawaat.org, he encouraged Tunisian citizens to unite against the regime by connecting them online and highlighting corrupt governmental activity, such as the "official" trips taken by the Tunisian presidential plane – which included shopping trips to Europe for the dictator's wife.

Returning to a national stage, Allen Asher, former Commonwealth Ombudsman, gave a fitting insight into his role monitoring "the compassionate and tolerant treatment of asylum seekers". Mr Asher provided a chilling insight into some of the huge shortcomings in governmental support for his former office. To conclude the conference's events on a more positive note, The Hon Mr Ron Merkel QC drew the audience's attention to the last two decades of constitutional interpretation which might have given the old "horse and buggy... a few jet engines". Mr Merkel argued that the document, which ensures the three tiers of government remain separate governing bodies, has recently been interpreted by the High Court of Australia to ensure that rights are now a greater part of the court's consideration.

Once again, the conference was a resounding success – not only for the attendees but also for those following along on social media. Throughout the day, the conference trended on Twitter, meaning that the conference – and therefore human rights – were amongst the most discussed topics across the country. With such keen interest in the conference we'll finally be moving on to a bigger stage next year at the BMW Edge auditorium in Federation Square.

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