

# Conference tackles the tough issues

By Caitlin McInnis



**Australia's only human rights conference packed a punch this year with a stellar line up of human rights advocates and experts.**

The Edge auditorium once again provided a stunning backdrop to the day's events as participants live tweeted the speakers, making us the second most popular topic on Twitter in Australia, behind the ALP National Conference.

Proceedings were kicked off by Brett Walker QC, who spoke on Australia's anti-terrorism laws. Walker, who was Australia's first Independent National Security Legislation Monitor, focused on the proposed changes to citizenship laws and the implications such laws have for freedoms in Australia, such as freedom of the press – a theme that was carried on by the next speaker, Peter Greste.

We were fortunate to have Greste in our midst. Recently released from prison in Egypt, the award-winning journalist described the changing landscape of the media and its function in the post-9/11 world of the war on terror. To have such a prominent journalistic voice present was special, and his presence was complemented greatly by Adela Navarro Bello, a Mexican editor who has also become an activist through her journalistic endeavours.

Navarro is also an award-winning journalist and the General Director of Zeta Magazine in Mexico, a publication that reports on corruption and drug cartels, often at its own cost. Her talk carried through the themes of freedom of the press and the importance of transparency in civil society.

The Castan Centre's own Director Sarah Joseph provided an astute criticism and analysis of 'Operation Sovereign Borders', implemented by the Government after the 2013 election and featuring "turn backs" of boats in addition to other tough policies supported by both sides of politics. Joseph took on the "drownings argument", which maintains that tough border protection is necessary to stop refugees from drowning at sea. Joseph focused on a number of fallacies in this argument.

Castan Centre Deputy Director Paula Gerber discussed the need

for informed regulation of surrogacy in Australia. Gerber considered the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and how it can be used to provide guidance on the regulation of surrogacy so that the rights of the child are not forgotten or left unprotected in the surrogacy process. Gerber favours legalisation of surrogacy with stringent regulation and a child-first focus.

With family violence declared a "national disgrace" by Australia's Prime Minister this year, and an inquiry into the issue under way in Victoria, Fiona McCormack's presentation was timely. The CEO of Domestic Violence Victoria discussed the challenges we face in this time of change. McCormack drew important links between women's equality and the prevention of violence against women, focusing on the need for structural change if we are to overcome this pervasive and terrible issue.

Helen Szoke, CEO of Oxfam Australia, carried on the theme of inequality with her discussion of human rights in an age of increasing wealth disparity. She highlighted the gender imbalance that exists and focused on the amassing of wealth by a few at the increasing cost of countless others.

Another prominent national issue this year has been the proposed forced closures of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. Dennis Eggington is the CEO of Aboriginal Legal Services WA and gave a strong talk that explored the little understood implications and nuances of this issue. His talk, that again carried the theme of equality and compliance with human rights, was an apt end to the day's proceedings.

2015 has been a particularly big year for human rights issues in Australia and abroad. The conference was a huge success and provided an integral platform for discussion and a stirring reminder of the importance of human rights.

***The 2016 Castan Centre Annual Conference will be held on 22 July in the Melbourne CBD. Check the Castan Centre website or social media platforms for exciting announcements in the new year.***