

## By Vanessa Lesnie

**O**n 10 December we celebrated the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Universal Declaration was the first time in the world's history that all nations agreed that, no matter what the circumstances, we should commit to protecting the freedom, dignity and equality of all people.

Many Australians think that human rights principles really impact only on people in developing countries. Others think that human rights are really relevant only to disadvantaged or minority groups within Australia – that is, to someone else. This edition of *Precedent* demonstrates that human rights are a very live issue for us all.

You may be a member of, or you may be representing someone belonging to, the groups that are vulnerable to human rights abuses discussed in this edition – an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, a refugee, a person of Muslim faith. You may be representing a person accused under counter-terrorism laws. You may have a relative who is suffering a long and painful illness and would just like it to end. You will most definitely be someone who is impacted by climate change. And even if you do not fall into any of those groups, if you agree with Martin Luther King's famous statement – *injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere* – then human rights are relevant to you.

It is true that Australia is a lucky country. We live in one of the better-functioning democracies in the world and this provides a strong – and necessary – foundation for the protection of human rights. But democracy is imperfect. It does not, in itself, guarantee the protection of the human rights of all people. In fact, a democratic election structurally favours the interests of the majority over the minority. So it requires a special act to make sure that human rights protections are in place for all people, whether they are in the majority or the minority. A democracy is well placed to create these protections, but Australia is the only western democracy in the world that has not done so. We do not have a national human rights law to protect and promote human rights for all people in Australia.

The federal government has recently announced a national consultation process to consider the merits of introducing laws to protect human rights in Australia. The issues discussed in this edition show why we should all take part in that consultation. Make sure you have your say. ■

**Vanessa Lesnie** is the Director of Strategic Projects at the Australian Human Rights Commission. The views expressed in this editorial are her own.

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This issue of *Precedent* is cited as (2008) 89 PRECEDENT. ISSN 1449-7719 © 2008 Australian Lawyers Alliance, ABN 96 086 880 499  
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