

Samuel Griffith Society Conference 2009

The Samuel Griffith Society Conference was held in August 2008 in North Sydney. The Mannkal Foundation provided support for two Western Australian students to attend – Jessica Aslan and myself, Adrian Rodrigues. This is my account.

The Samuel Griffith Society Conference was certainly very different to my expectations of a constitutional law forum. The conference fostered an open discussion of the virtues of federalism and a study in international federalism models. A panel of leading speakers addressed the conference on a range of issues and topics of interest, and whilst the topics presented and debated covered a wide range, constitutional law was the foundation of the conference – the thread that pulled all the speakers together. The focus of discussion was invariably the politics, rather than the law of the constitution.

The Conference attracted some very high profile attendees and speakers. From senators to High Court judges, and very well respected academics and professors. Meeting these people was the highlight of the program. In particular, the opportunity to sit between High Court judges Justice Heydon and former Justice Callinan at the conference's official dinner was a rare insight into a side of the High Court judges that simply isn't reflected in their legal work. Even though as law students you have certain ideas of how judgments are prepared, it was truly an insight to speak to these High Court judges about their role in legal processes. All I can say is that it was fascinating.

The substantive sessions of the conference focussed on the following topics:

- Undermining Australia's Federalism
- Bills of Rights
- National Sovereignty and International Commitments
- Europe's constitutional models
- The (US) Federalist Society
- Australian Federalism Today

There were some truly passionate presentations of ideas (even if some views seemed provocative), and some very robust and constructive discussion and debate – particularly in areas such as a Bill of Rights and the role of federalism. However, there were also speakers and attendees who presented views that in 21st century Australia, are somewhat outdated. At times the conference seemed to descend into quasi-anarchy as people fiercely debated and stood by their ideals in the face of strong criticism. It highlighted the fact that even within a group of people with supposedly similar values, the range of views is always enough to create tension.

There were less than 6 students attending the conference, which surprised me, since I had expected there to be attendees from each university. The small number of students were therefore greatly outnumbered by their more mature and experienced counterparts, and in some respects I felt that exacerbated the conservative themes that resounded from the forum. It is a shame that more students didn't attend, because it would have injected a real energy into the conference and debates. But there is no doubt that the conference organisers were very supportive of the students attending, and would be only too happy to increase student representation.

Having said all that, attending the conference was certainly a worthwhile experience, and one I am very grateful I had. It was an opportunity to mix in circles I do not generally get the chance to mix with. It was an opportunity to hear views I would not otherwise have been exposed to. Most importantly, it was an opportunity to meet some outstanding individuals with very coherent and robust ideas. I feel it is important that any future attendees are fully prepared for what the conference will be, rather than going in with wildly differing expectations. I also feel that it is important for the Samuel Griffith Society to have student attendees at their conferences.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Samuel Griffith Society for organising the conference, and my sincere thanks to the Mannkal Foundation for enabling this truly eye-opening and unforgettable experience.