

**Opening of the 2026 Legal Year
Chief Justice Michael Grant AO**

Darwin – 4 February 2026

I welcome you all back to what I am sure will be a very busy year for the Northern Territory legal profession.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Attorney-General and thanking her for her attendance this evening. I know that the Attorney has been a strong advocate for additional judicial and legal resourcing, and we have seen that particularly in the additional Local Court positions created during her tenure.

Continuing with the acknowledgements, I congratulate Bernadette Raumteen on her election as President of the Law Society. Bernadette brings with her recent experience as a solicitor in private practice, her current perspective as a practising barrister, and previous experience in the banking sector. She is another example of the Northern Territory's capacity to develop and nurture local talent into leadership positions in the legal profession. Bernadette is a product of the Northern Territory education system at both secondary and tertiary level. I have personal knowledge of this because my wife used to be her Legal Studies teacher in high school. I am sure that Bernadette will be a very effective leader of our peak professional body.

At the same time, I thank Richard Henschke for his leadership of the Law Society over the last few years. We all knew Richard as a very experienced and talented lawyer with fine judgement. They were the qualities that we expected him to bring to the role of President, and he did that. What some of us didn't expect was just how funny he was. Some of Richard's speeches as President have included moments of professional quality stand-up comedy. We will miss all of his skills, but I am happy to see that he is continuing in a mentoring role as Vice-President of the Society.

I also congratulate Aislinn McIntyre on her appointment as Chief Executive Officer of the Law Society. In her previous role, Aislinn was a very effective manager of the Society's regulatory function over many years. I have observed her operate in that capacity, including in a very difficult and long-running matter before the Supreme Court. Aislinn has demonstrated both the ability and sensitivity to run the executive arm of the Society and I wish her well in the role.

Last, but certainly not least, I congratulate Dr Cameron Ford OAM SC on his election as President of the Northern Territory Bar Association. As most of you will know, Cameron is a barrister with an international practice in Australia and Singapore specialising in commercial litigation and arbitration. He has a long association with the Northern Territory and we know that the Bar is in good hands.

As some of you will be aware, a national Australian Legal Convention was held in Canberra in November last year. That involved participation by all peak legal organisations in Australia. The convention was conducted by the Council of Chief Justices as part of the development of a unified Australian legal profession.

The Convention addressed a broad range of issues. There were 270 speakers, facilitators and panellists who spoke during the Convention. Those participants brought a range of perspectives from across the whole spectrum of the Australian legal system.

The Convention gave us a useful snapshot of the sorts of issues the Australian legal profession is dealing with and talking about at the moment. So, this evening I want to touch on the themes which emerged from that Convention and what might come next.

There was at the outset a consensus that public trust in institutions, including the courts, is declining. That is a general trend which derives from an increasing mistrust of politicians and the political system in all Western democracies. That has unfortunately spread by contagion to include the courts. That presents a very large problem because the legitimacy of the courts depends upon public trust.

It falls to us as judicial officers and legal practitioners to address that decline as far as is possible. That is best done by always seeking objective truth in the conduct of legal business. We must ensure that the advice and information we provide is always accurate. Every action we take must be guided by clear and consistent principle. We must always be attuned to the importance of the human element in the conduct of that business to avoid so far as is possible alienation and disaffection in those members of the public who come into contact with the legal system. Every interaction we have with members of the public matters. It is only on a case-by-case basis that we can build and maintain trust.

Access to justice goes hand-in-hand with trust in the courts. That presents no difficulty for the well-resourced or those supported by legal aid and pro bono programs. But there are many in the middle who remain underserved and under-resourced. New solutions are required to enable those people to engage positively with the legal system when necessary. Part of the solution lies in increasing efficiencies through online and digital means, and the adoption of new technologies to allow self-represented litigants to participate more effectively.

As in every sphere of human activity, artificial intelligence will no doubt present both opportunities and challenges to the conduct of legal practice. In particular, our traditional approaches to the receipt of instructions and evidence, and the fact-finding process, will need to adjust to the use of AI. In making that adjustment, it will be essential to ensure that a digital divide is not created between those organisations and individuals able to access such technologies and the many people in our society who cannot.

One particular challenge which goes directly to the continuing viability of the legal profession is to ensure that reliance by law students on artificial intelligence during the course of their studies does not undermine their technical competence and their ability to learn and reason. Our universities must ensure that students deploy those technologies in a way that is consistent with professional and ethical obligations. Otherwise, they will not deploy those technologies ethically once they graduate and enter the legal profession.

That will form part of a larger reform of practical legal education and training. It is likely that in the near future there will be a restructuring of pre-admission training deregulating which bodies and organisations may provide that training and moving the focus away from online courses to workplace-based training. The days of students completing a Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice online are fast coming to an end.

The nurturing and development of junior practitioners will be of primary importance. AI presents very real dangers in that respect. I was speaking to a partner of one of the large Malaysian firms recently, and he gave me examples of legal tasks which would take a junior lawyer a billing day to complete but which large language models undertake in a matter of minutes. This has led to many firms in Southeast Asia significantly reducing the number of junior lawyers they employ. Here in Australia, we cannot allow artificial intelligence to replace the junior ranks of the legal profession, because it is only from that cohort that experienced lawyers develop.

Family and sexual violence remains a matter of great concern throughout Australia. That is so despite a massive program over the past 40 years to reform the way in which family and sexual violence is addressed by law enforcement agencies and the courts. Despite that, more women are being killed by their partners than ever before. We need an evidence-based approach to determine why that is so.

We also need to devise mechanisms to minimise the trauma caused by a system which forces individual victims to navigate the separate civil, criminal and child protection proceedings which family and sexual violence often gives rise. The justice system should not itself become an instrument of further abuse.

It is not just the litigants in the justice system who may be adversely affected. It is now well recognised and documented that a very significant proportion of judicial officers and legal practitioners experience stress, trauma and pressure in their professional lives. That is one consequence of our unpredictable and unrelenting workloads. Thankfully, there is now a greater recognition of that fact and a greater sensitivity in the manner it is dealt with by employers and peers. We must always be alert to the signs that a colleague is struggling, and deal with the issue in a manner which avoids the stigma once associated with the fact that a judge or legal practitioner either needs or seeks help.

First Nations justice was also an issue addressed during the Convention. Of course, that is a mainstream issue and focus in the administration of justice in the Northern Territory. It is not capable of summary that does justice to all the considerations involved. It is also not an issue which the legal profession can effectively address on its own given that the basic building blocks of functionality and well-being involve housing, health, education, law enforcement and intensive social work. What the Convention did expressly recognise is the obvious fact that there is no single solution to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system, and that measures to address that must be multifaceted.

Finally, I would take this opportunity to remind you of an event in May next year which will be of great significance for the Northern Territory. The Commonwealth Lawyers Association has selected the Northern Territory to host its biennial conference in 2027. The conference will be attended by delegates from Africa, the Americas, Australasia and Europe. It will be a great showcase for the Northern Territory and a great opportunity to

meet legal practitioners from across the world. The Association's organising committee is visiting Darwin this month to meet with the Attorney-General and the professional associations, and I would encourage you all to become involved as the conference draws closer.

Once again, I welcome you back and I wish you all well for your endeavours in the coming year.
