

## Spotlight on Australian Pro Bono Centre Board: Phillip Cornwell, Chair

*I sat down with Phillip Cornwell, Chair of the Australian Pro Bono Centre, at the Allens office in Sydney. Over coffee, we spoke about his roles, his passions and I discovered his unwavering loyalty.*



Phillip Cornwell has worked at Allens since 1979. He fondly looks back to the days of Roxy Music, although he now prefers Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds. Over coffee, he also shared that he has been going to the same barbershop since 1979 –

*I think he personifies the saying “if it ain't broke, don't fix it”, although I'm sure he could frame this more eloquently!*

Phillip developed an early interest in human rights and social justice at high school. He fondly remembers his French teacher, who was actively involved in Amnesty International. With the support of his school, he marched in the Vietnam moratorium demonstrations and protested against the Springboks tour. This interest developed further with the election of the Whitlam government in his first year of university, with Phillip noting how this dragged Australia into the modern world.

At the same time Phillip started his professional life at Allens in the area of trade practices, he also undertook some pro bono work. In the mid 90's he joined the Allens Pro Bono Committee, eventually becoming chairman. In the early stages of his career, Peter Stapleton (former Chair of the Centre) was a colleague of

Phillip's and they remained in contact. As Phillip was starting to think about stepping down as Partner, Peter phoned Phillip to offer him the role of Chair at the Centre in 2015 – he did not have to think long before deciding to volunteer his time.

Phillip has found his time as Chair of the Centre satisfying. He said one of the great things about the Board is its high quality and diversity, and he has loved interacting with fellow directors. He also highlights that it has been a largely drama-free task, thanks to the experience of John Corker. Phillip enjoyed pushing some initiatives, such as broadening the scope of pro bono, initially with the corporate pro bono campaign and now onto the government lawyers campaign, noting that John was also leading a focus on developing pro bono at small to medium firms. A notable high was securing the last 4 year government funding commitment, which spared the Centre the agony of a funding crisis, but on the other hand there has been no increase in funding for years. His first Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference as Chair was that held in Sydney in 2015, which coincided with the Magna Carta 800 year anniversary. Attending the biennial conference has been a highlight ever since.

Phillip also has a keen interest in the environment, growing up on the edge of then unspoilt bushland. A real turning point was reading *The Future Eaters*, the 1994 book authored by Tim Flannery. This helped Phillip to look at the bush with greater understanding, and gave him an appreciation for the way Australia's First Peoples had managed the landscape sustainably over tens of thousands of years. Phillip was introduced to Bush Heritage Australia (on whose board he now sits) by his colleague and close friend David Robb, who had introduced the organisation to Allens as a major pro bono client.

Discussing his role on the board of Suicide Prevention Australia, Phillip notes that suicide is a tragedy and, given the high rates of Indigenous suicide, a national scandal. Phillip loves the way Bush



*Phillip at the Cime de la Bonette, the highest sealed road in Europe*

Heritage helps Indigenous people to get back to Country, and thinks restoring those cultural connections with the land can only help. It is clear that Phillip is passionate about Indigenous issues. This also goes to Phillip cycling to work every day to assist in caring for the environment. He also notes the positive effect this has on his wellbeing. Although he is also looking forward to taking delivery of a dark blue Tesla 3 in a few weeks' time! Being an active participant of many initiatives and working at Allens, how does Phillip relax? Lots of reading (*Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe is a current favourite), cinema, music, art and of course, family time. What would he have done if it wasn't law? Teaching, which he tried his hand at by lecturing at the University of Sydney for their Master of Laws program. As we wrap up, Phillip gives me a tour of the Allens art collection which is paired with a view of Sydney Harbour. There is a particular calmness to Phillip, but as you peer into his eyes, you witness the same energy belonging to the man who first started his career in 1979. ■

*By Trent Wallace, Project and Policy Officer, Australian Pro Bono Centre (Australian Government Solicitor secondee)*