Fiat Justitia: **'Let justice be done'- A new legal service for multicultural people in Toowoomba and the Darling Downs**

By Ramli Salehkon

"The motto of our legal service is Fiat Justitia (Let Justice be Done), a Latin legal phrase of respectable vintage."

Meeting to incorporate the Toowoomba Multicultural Legal Service on 15 April 2023 at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba Campus.

On Saturday 15 April 2023, a group of multicultural people held a meeting in one of the many classrooms on the grounds of the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba. They came from diverse backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities and held various jobs and responsibilities in our famous garden city of Australia. All had made Toowoomba their homes. All agreed that there was a need for a free or low-cost legal service for the growing number of multicultural residents in the Darling Downs. All would support the creation of a legal service to help multicultural people with legal problems, especially the vulnerable and the disadvantaged. A draft Constitution was presented, issues were discussed and debated, office holders for the Management Committee were proposed and seconded, and the first Principal Legal Officer, Ramli Salehkon, was elected into office. The Toowoomba Multicultural Legal Service came into being. On 11 July 2023, the legal service was incorporated by the Queensland Department of Fair Trading.

Who are the 'multicultural people' of Toowoomba and the Darling Downs?

Rule 1 of our Constitution defines multicultural people as 'people who are culturally, religiously, racially and linguistically diverse and it includes the Indigenous people of Australia'.

"Our multicultural clients are mostly refugees, migrants, new citizens or residents. In the first eight months we have advised and represented a lot of clients for free (including referrals to other legal services and agencies) in a variety of cases ranging from employment law, workplace bullying, criminal law, family law, domestic and family violence, human rights, criminal victim's rights, wills and estates, regulatory matters, animal management, personal injury and WorkCover, Ombudsman, migration and visa matters."

FIAT JUSTITIA

What do we do and why we do it?

Rule 3 of our Constitution says:

The objects of the association are—

(1) to provide legal advice and representation to multicultural people who live, study or work in Toowoomba and the regions of the Darling Downs especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community whose inability to access the justice system further aggravates or perpetuates their social and economic disadvantages and to such other persons in need as the association may identify from time to time;

(2) to initiate and encourage the reform of unjust laws and inequitable legal structures and processes in the justice system affecting vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the multicultural community;

(3) to protect and strengthen the human rights of multicultural people;

(4) to provide community legal education; and

(5) to establish a resource centre for multicultural community legal projects.

Although our legal service was set up in 2023, it has its beginnings in 2014 when two barristers practising in Toowoomba, Mr Ramli Salehkon and Reverend Peter Richards, came up with the idea of a free legal service to help vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Toowoomba and the Darling Downs. Another barrister, Dr Taiji Watanabe, who was also an academic from the University of Southern Queensland, was to be included in the project but he sadly passed away in 2022.

The motto of our legal service is *Fiat Justitia* (Let Justice be Done), a Latin legal phrase of respectable vintage. Lord Denning of Whitchurch, one of England's greatest judges, adopted it as his coat of arms. A poster was designed especially for our Saturday legal clinic featuring Themis, the Greek Goddess of Law and Justice.

For our legal service we were looking for a quote by Lord Macnaghten of Runkerry, a law lord famous for his elegant prose, which best describes the work we are doing for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged. Many of his judgments in the House of Lords are legal masterpieces and models of clarity, precision and elegance. We settled on his quote in the defamation case of *Jenoure v Delmege* [1891] AC 73 at 77 where he said that a defence of qualified privilege was available to a justice of the peace who made a police report about a doctor's misconduct which led to a woman's death: ***'To protect those who are not able to protect themselves is a duty which everyone owes to society'.*** This quote goes well with our motto.

Our corporate office is at Water Street, South Toowoomba. For day-to-day legal work, Senior Pastor Ross Savill and Pastor Jason Higlett from HumeRidge Church of 461 Hume Street have generously allowed us to set up an office at their church premises. Professional liability insurance is provided by the Australian Pro Bono Centre via their National Pro Bono Professional Indemnity Insurance Scheme. Centre staff gave us much needed assistance, advice and guidance on the policy and procedures of liability insurance for community legal projects.

Our legal service has been in full operation since December 2023. Our multicultural clients are mostly refugees, migrants, new citizens or residents. In the first eight months we have advised

and represented a lot of clients for free (including referrals to other legal services and agencies) in a variety of cases ranging from employment law, workplace bullying, criminal law, family law, domestic and family violence, human rights, criminal victim's rights, wills and estates, regulatory matters, animal management, personal injury and WorkCover, Ombudsman, migration and visa matters.

"The good work of our management committee and its members will continue with or without funding for the benefit of all multicultural people of Toowoomba and the Darling Downs, especially the poor and those who are not able to protect themselves. Fiat Justitia - Let Justice Be Done."

To provide some examples: We helped a client resolve a dispute with his employers with a significant severance payment. We resolved a consumer dispute for our client at the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal resulting in a refund of money from a service provider. We helped a client avoid a possible lawsuit from a potential employer for his breach of an employment contract. We represented a client in a criminal case for stalking which is going for hearing on a not guilty plea. We represented the same client when her mobile phone was seized by police who said there was evidence on it – we got it back by court order. We represented a client arrested for alleged drink-driving. The client was tasered and charged with several serious matters (including assaulting police). Later, all charges were withdrawn and struck out.

Our legal service is presently not funded by any local, state or federal government, organisations or institutions. We are presently preparing to submit a grant application to the Department of Justice and Attorney-General in Queensland. With a lot of community legal services crying out for funding and our legal service being 'a new kid on the block', we are not too hopeful that we will get much funding or at all. But we will press on. The good work of our management committee and its members will continue with or without funding for the benefit of all multicultural people of Toowoomba and the Darling Downs, especially the poor and those who are not able to protect themselves. Fiat Justitia - Let Justice Be Done. ■

Ramli Salehkon was first called to the English Bar of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple in the United Kingdom in 1995. He was also called to the Singapore and Queensland Bars. He was in practice as an Advocate and Solicitor in Singapore for many years before moving to Queensland in 2005 to practise as a barrister. He is now the Principal Legal Officer of the Toowoomba Multicultural Legal Service Inc.

If you would like to find out more about the National Pro Bono Professional Indemnity Insurance Scheme please visit the Centre's website.

BACK TO COVER