

Opening Address 4th Biennial NCAB Conference, Navigating the Maze

9 April 2010

**Professor, the Hon. Alastair Nicolson AO RFD QC, Former
Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia.**

I first acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land, the Wurundjeri people and the Kurnil Nation, their elders past and present, whose love of children would certainly support the purpose of this gathering.

Shortly you will be hearing from Dr Judith Slocombe, the CEO of the Foundation, who will tell you in more detail of its work. Some of you however, may not be aware of the origins of the Foundation or who Alannah and Madeline were and it is worth me taking a few minutes to tell you about them.

They were two little girls who, together with their mother and many others, were brutally killed by a mass murderer in Port Arthur, Tasmania in April 1996. I was deeply moved by a conversation that I had only two weeks ago with a survivor of that tragedy and I hope that the work we do over the next few days will suitably honour the memory of those lost and bring comfort to the survivors of it that their work in setting up the Foundation has not been in vain.

The Foundation was set up in their memory by their father Walter Mikac and other survivors, supported by many other good people in our community. The then Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, became the first patron of the Foundation and his successor, Kevin Rudd, is the second and the Foundation is chaired by another famous Australian, Mr John Bertrand AM, who captained Australia's successful America's Cup bid in 1983.

The Foundation is dedicated to helping children who are victims of violence and bullying and as part of that process; it was responsible for setting up the National Centre against Bullying (NCAB).

NCAB was founded in 2002. I was pleased and honoured to accept the position of Chair of the new organisation. I was at the time the Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia and through that experience and earlier experience as a Supreme Court Judge and Parole Board Chair, I

was well aware of the detrimental effects of bullying on Australian children and its role in the perpetration of violence in adult life.

NCAB was and is a group of extremely well qualified people with appropriate expertise in the areas of child bullying and the well being of children. It consists of distinguished academic researchers, psychologists with educational experience, teachers, representatives of interested organisations like VicHealth and Catholic Education, people with management expertise and with experience in conducting anti-bullying and school well being programs from many parts of Australia.

This is the fourth conference that has been held by NCAB since 2003 and each has opened up new horizons so far as the control of bullying and the promotion of student well being is concerned. Apart from conferences we have conducted numerous seminars and training programs and have made many submissions to government as well as assisting them in the development of safe school programs.

Our broad aim is to ensure as far as possible that schools are not only safe places to attend and learn but that they also actively promote the well being of their students.

Detailed attention to the problem of bullying is a relatively modern phenomenon, but the evidence shows that it has begun to have real effect and that overall school bullying is in a decline around the world. This is of course no reason for complacency, for what research has also shown is that the ill effects on children of being involved in bullying, whether as perpetrators or subjects of bullying are likely to be much more profound than had previously been thought to be the case.

Tragically, bullying can lead to child suicide in some cases and in many more its effects can be so profound that the child's whole future is permanently damaged. Many children who have been subjected to bullying never fully recover and their lives are blighted as a result. There is also no doubt that children who engage in bullying while at school are over represented in the ranks of those convicted of criminal offences involving violence in later life and frequently adopt the same behaviour in their workplace and towards their family.

NCAB first addressed the problem of cyber bullying in its joint seminar with the Centre for Strategic Education entitled 'Cyberia' at Camberwell Grammar School on 17 May 2007. This was a ground-breaking occasion and one of the first major public events addressing the problem of cyber

bullying in Australia. Many of the participants in that event are also taking part in our present conference.

While it is true to say that the basic problems relating to bullying have not changed, the new technology has certainly widened the opportunities for bullying well beyond the school grounds and has presented problems for parents, teachers, schools and other authorities in determining where responsibility lies for controlling/preventing this behaviour.

It has also highlighted deficiencies in the law relating to bullying which will be the subject of further discussion during the course of this conference.

A heartening development has been the new interest in this area on the part of government and in particular the Federal Government as is evidenced by the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Ms Julia Gillard to open this conference.

Her Department has funded a very important pilot conducted in over 150 schools under the auspices of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation setting up an internet based framework for programs dealing with cyber bullying in schools.

This is truly innovative work which stems from The Alannah and Madeline Foundation, which has been skilfully developed by Dr Judith Slocombe and her staff, NCAB members and many others. These include Professor Helen McGrath and Ms Maree Davidson, both members of NCAB and Ms Sandra Craig, the Manager of NCAB.

It is to be hoped that this initiative will be extended by Government to all Australian schools for the great benefit of Australian children.

The conference would not have been possible without the dedication and contributions of the staff of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation and the members of NCAB.

We have an outstanding array of presenters from Australia and overseas, the overseas countries represented including Canada, Finland, Lithuania, Singapore, UK and Vietnam. This continues a tradition that we have encouraged from the first conference, because bullying is a universal problem that extends to all countries of the world and it is important that we be willing to learn from each other.

The theme of the conference is "Navigating the Maze" and we are particularly addressing cybersafety and well being solutions for schools.

Unlike previous conferences, we are hoping to publish a series of agreed outcomes. A draft set of possible outcomes has been distributed and I would ask you to look at them and we are also asking the chair of each workshop session to advance variations or additional suggested outcomes depending upon what emerges. I will be chairing a small committee which will look at all of these suggestions and hopefully will be in a position to present them to you for your consideration at the closing session. I would ask you where possible to avoid detailed debate in relation to drafting issues but rather to go to the substance of matters proposed.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all sponsors of the NCAB Conference.