The Castan Centre for Human Rights Law altered Australia’s human rights landscape in its first decade. In its second, it looks set to be even more influential.

“T he Castan Centre for Human Rights Law is a jewel in the crown of Australian law in my opinion.” High praise, indeed, coming as it does from Australia’s foremost authority on human rights law – Michael Kirby AC CMG.

October marked the tenth anniversary of the Castan Centre and the former Justice of the High Court of Australia is fulsome in his praise of the centre at Monash University Law School that he helped open a decade ago. He is now its patron, with Governor-General Quentin Bryce its patron-in-chief.

“In a country which unfortunately doesn’t have a lot to boast of in the formal protection of human rights – although Victoria is an exception – it stands out,” Mr Kirby said.

“It fills a very important gap in our legal framework.”

“Australia has its human rights blind spots – Asian-Australians, gays, women, refugees, prisoners. This is an organisation to shine the light of human rights on those blind spots.”

“It does exceptional research and produces wonderful books which are of world standard. It conducts a wide range of conferences, bringing people to Australia from overseas, and encourages the participation of students in international human rights institutions.”

“Like-minded: The late Ron Castan QC with the Dalai Lama, one of a number of high-profile speakers to have addressed public events at the Castan Centre.

“It is right at the cutting edge, making numerous submissions to numerous enquiries. It is carrying on the legacy of Ron Castan in a way which would make him very proud.”

The Castan Centre, which Monash University had the foresight to support from its inception in 2000, is named after the late Ron Castan AM QC (1939-1999), the highly-regarded barrister and human rights activist, in recognition of his life’s work.

“Ruthless on behalf of justice, Mr Castan led the Mabo litigation. Many say that without his intellectual vigour and personal and professional commitment, the successful resolution of native title might never have occurred.”

“He should have been trembling like a leaf, worrying about his opening sentence. We all had a laugh. We sent a note back saying . . . wear the wig,” Mr Kirby said.

“Nobody else would have had the self-confidence to do that. He had a self-confidence born of a moral conviction. He is remembered.”

The Castan Centre, which has about 2500 members, works towards protecting and promoting human rights. It works in seven broad areas – public education, research, teaching, student programs, Indigenous programs, training and policy – and over the past decade has established a stellar reputation for bringing an innovative theoretical and practical approach to human rights law. Mr Kirby praises it for being “an outstanding and very visible human rights body”.

“It is not content with doing fine scholarship, which it does. It also reaches out to ordinary citizens and brings many topics to public attention. It is very much engaged with society, just as Ron Castan was,” he said.

“It is not a group of fusty law professors. It has very good classically trained lawyers who are experts in their field. They have big hearts and big minds.”

The Castan Centre’s achievements are many and varied. It has forced changes to terrorism laws; its advocacy has led to refugees no longer being invoiced for their stays in detention centres; it teamed with Oxford University Press to create a groundbreaking database of case notes on every human rights complaint decided by a UN committee.

It runs human rights training courses for government officials from Australia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kosovo and Myanmar, produces plain English books for torture victims seeking redress and has sent more than 30 students on internships with Indigenous human rights organisations.

Over the years, the centre has made dozens of submissions to government and hosted public events with speakers as varied as Nobel Peace Prize winners Jose Ramos Horta and the Dalai Lama, Cherie Booth QC and AFL boss Andrew Demetriou. Most of these events are free.

Castan Centre director Professor Sarah Joseph said the centre was proud of its
achieved but recognised it still had a long way to go.

“I think Ron Castan would be very proud of us; we are very proud of our 10 years of work,” she said.

“There is still a great deal to be done. The issue of Indigenous rights has gone off the radar. When it comes to electoral politics, human rights is at the bottom of the pile. There is work to be done on asylum seekers, Indigenous groups, gang laws, anti-terrorism issues and Internet filters.

“There is a lot of complacency. We want to be influential and dynamic. We want the next 10 years to be even bigger and better.”

Getting its message out to all Australians is a focus of the centre as it goes into its second decade. It is working hard to use social media, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, to assist with public education.

Professor Joseph said it was important to preach beyond the converted, to go beyond the core audience of lawyers and academics and attract new supporters as well.

Professor Joseph believes the higher – although not high – profile that human rights enjoys in Australia, thanks in large part to the Castan Centre’s efforts, is inspiring more law students to study human rights.

“The majority of law students now take a human rights elective. More lawyers have a basic training in human rights. This should mean that the future, human rights will be more a part of legal thinking generally than in the past,” she said.

“It may be subtle but I would be surprised if there was no change in the legal culture.

“There is a much greater appreciation of human rights in legal circles and the challenge is to keep that going and to increase the understanding of human rights in the general community.”

At the time of writing, the Castan Centre was planning an anniversary dinner for 20 October, with 2010 Australian of the Year Professor Patrick McGorry as the keynote speaker. Mr Kirby was also due to speak on the centre’s crucial role in the pursuit of a stronger human rights culture for Australia.

In the audience was to be Ron Castan’s undoubtedly proud daughter Melissa Castan, a co-deputy director of the centre (along with Julie Debeljak). As well as teaching, researching and writing on human rights, Ms Castan is involved in community and philanthropic work.

She has worked at the centre from day one and emphasises the “tremendous” support of Monash University and its law faculty.

“I am really proud that my father’s memory is being carried on through the good work of so many people,” Ms Castan said.

“I think one of the centre’s greatest achievements is the encouragement of so many law students to become involved in human rights law. Our students have gone out and worked in human rights and government and industry. It has had an impact that way. It has generated more interest in human rights.”

For more information about the Castan Centre go to www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre. For those interested in supporting and joining the Castan Centre, details are on the website. Membership is free. ●