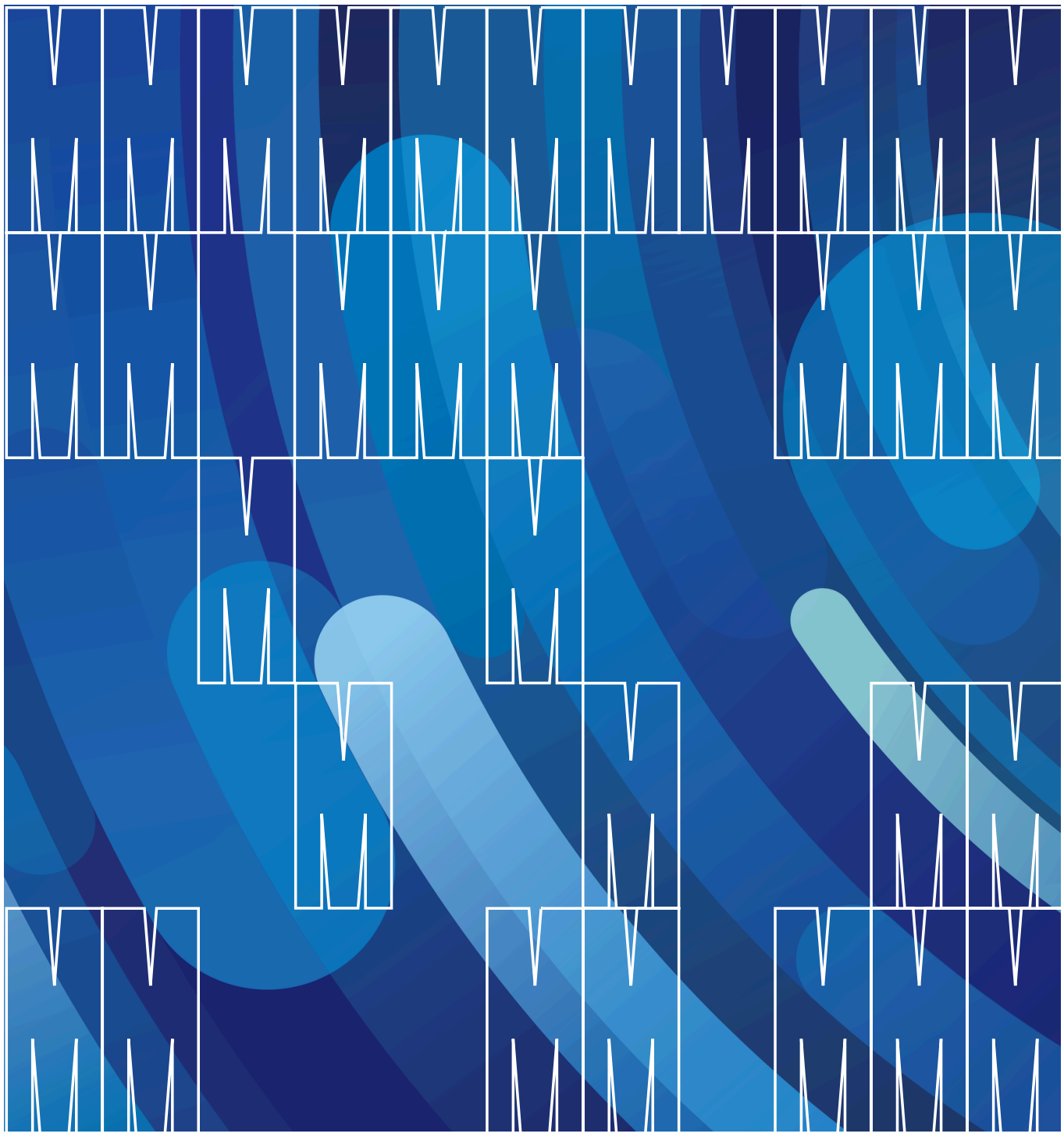
MONASH University

MONASH
CASTAN CENTRE
FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS LAW

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

THE ANNUAL CASTAN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS LAW CONFERENCE

THURSDAY 23 JULY 2026



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Monash University recognises that its Australian campuses are located on the unceded lands of the people of the Kulin Nations, and pays its respects to their Elders, past and present.

Welcome

The Annual Castan Centre for Human Rights Law Conference is an excellent opportunity for practitioners and students to deepen their understanding of human rights, and connect with fellow lawyers, advocates, public officials, scholars, and activists.

For over 25 years, the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law has contributed to legal reform and helped bring human rights law into public conversation. Today, we continue to engage with emerging human rights challenges in Australia and around the world, training the next generation of human rights lawyers, policymakers and advocates, and working to ensure that human rights remain central to law, policy and public debate. Since 2001, our Conference has been Australia's leading annual human rights law event, and an important annual meeting place for those committed to advancing the protection of human rights.

Recently, our research has informed submissions on racism and vilification, judicial independence, surrogacy law reform, and disability discrimination, with further contributions underway to parliamentary and international inquiries, including anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes, the rights of Indigenous peoples, and racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Castan Centre is embarking on a new research and advocacy project focused on Victoria's Treaty processes. As an initial step, we recorded a webinar titled Understanding Victoria's Statewide Treaty Bill that was attended by over 400 people.

Our Human Rights Clinic supported public housing residents facing displacement, while our PhD students and researchers continue to earn national recognition for excellence and impact. We extend our sincere thanks to Professor Melissa Castan for her outstanding leadership of the Castan Centre (2021-2026) and congratulate her on being among the first cohort to receive the title of Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Professor at Monash University.

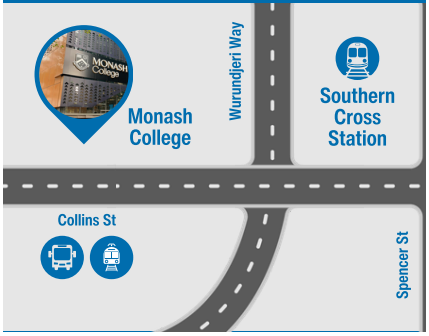
We are delighted to welcome you to The Annual Castan Centre for Human Rights Law Conference and hope you enjoy a day of thoughtful discussion and meaningful engagement across some of the most critical issues in human rights law.

Conference website and tickets

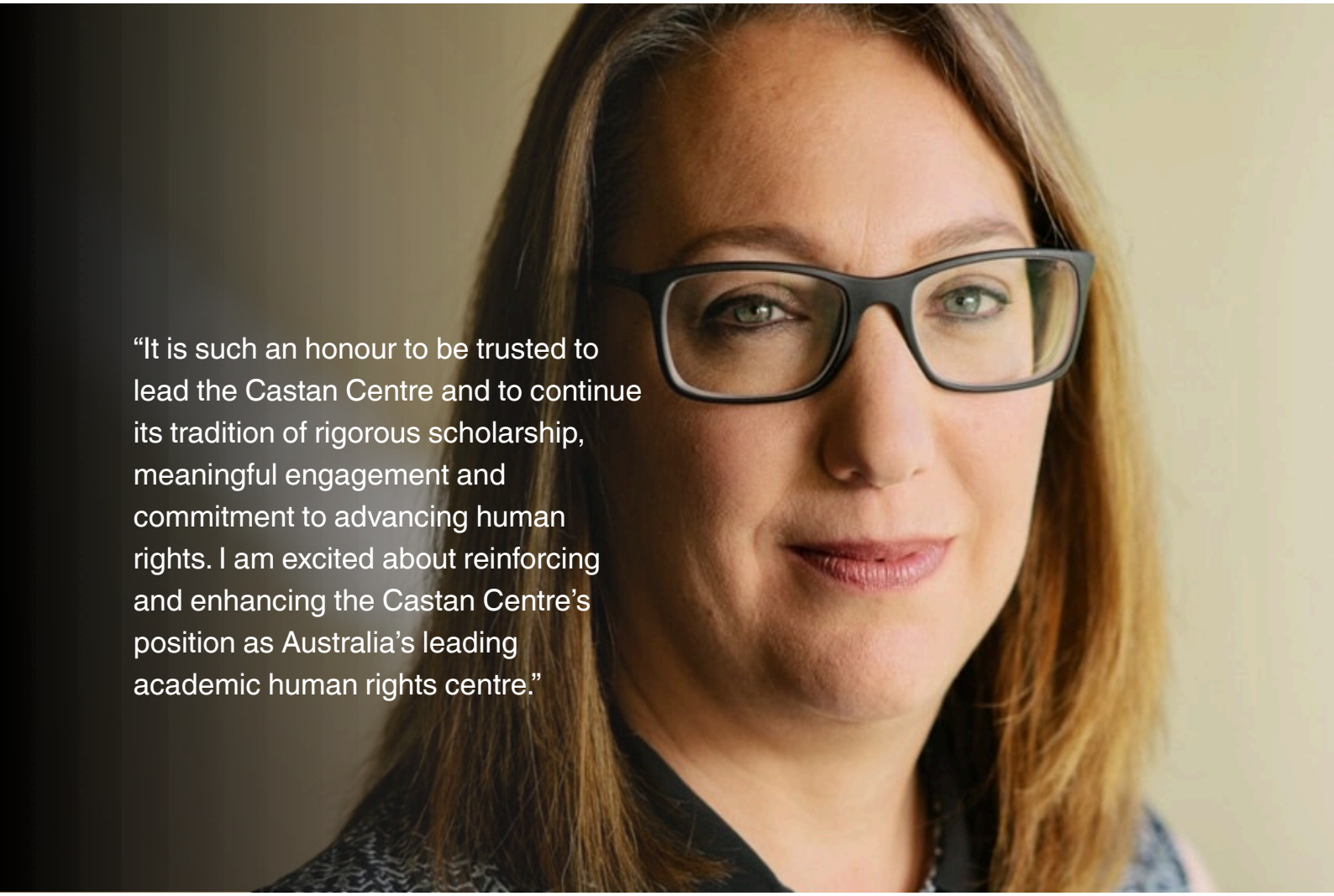
Monash College 750 Collins Street, Melbourne

Monash College is a 4 minute walk (300 meters) from Southern Cross Station. Bus routes 232, 235, and 237, as well as Free Tram Zone routes 11 and 48, stop directly outside. Plan your journey using the PTV website.

Paid parking is available within nearby car parks. It is recommended to book parking in advance or arrive early.



Leading the Next Chapter in Human Rights



Associate Professor Ronli Sifris appointed Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law

Ronli Sifris will take on the role of Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law from 1 August, marking a significant new chapter.

Ronli has played a central role in the Castan Centre’s growth over many years, serving as Deputy Director since 2017 and Acting Director many times. Her leadership has spanned strategic planning, governance, research development, student programs and partnerships, as well as the day-to-day life of the Centre. For Ronli, the appointment reflects a longstanding connection to the Centre and its mission.

“I have benefitted from the wisdom and mentorship of the Centre's Director, Distinguished Professor Melissa Castan. She has shown that leadership can and should be kind and generous; and that the best leaders pull others up,” Ronli said. **Read more**.

Order of Proceedings

8.30am
Registration, Tea and Coffee

9am
Opening and Welcome

Professor Steven Vaughan
Executive Dean, Monash Law

Associate Professor Ronli Sifris
Director, Castan Centre for Human Rights Law

Keynote Address

Sue-Anne Hunter
National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People

10.30am
Morning Tea

11am
20th Anniversary of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities

Dr Farinaz Zamani
Manager, Human Rights Education, Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission

Dan Nicholson
Victorian Ombudsman's Office

Caitlin Reiger
Human Rights Law Centre

Professor Julie Debeljak (Chair)
Monash University

12.15pm
Lunch

1.15pm
The Experience of Australian Judges on International Courts

The Hon. Lex Lasry AM KC
Acting Justice, Supreme Court of the Northern Territory

Kevin Yam
Former Hong Kong Lawyer

Associate Professor Rebecca Ananian-Welsh
University of Queensland

Sara Kowal (Chair)
Director of Eleos Justice, Monash University

2.30pm
Afternoon Tea

3pm
Emerging Treaty Law in Victoria

Meriki Onus
Co-Chair, Gellung Warl

The Hon. Kenneth Hayne AC KC

Bridgid Cowling
Special Counsel, Gellung Warl

Karri Walker
Principal Lawyer - Treaty, Gellung Warl

Professor Melissa Castan (Chair)
Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Professor, Monash University

4.15pm
Conference Closing

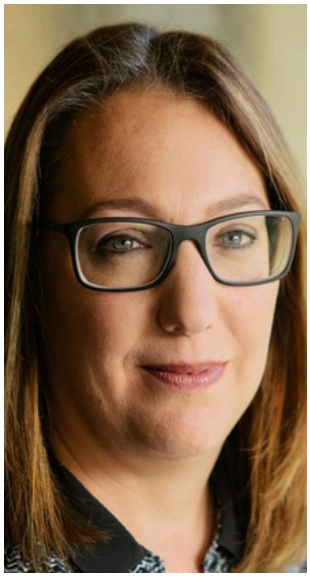
A day of engaging discussions and thought-provoking panels on some of the most critical issues in human rights law.

Official Opening and Welcome

Speakers

Professor Steven Vaughan
Executive Dean, Monash Law

Steven Vaughan is the Dean of the Faculty of Law. Steven is an internationally renowned legal educator, scholar and author with 20 years' experience spanning industry, higher education and several non-executive director roles. A values-driven leader, Steven is committed to equity, diversity and inclusion and has spent much of his career developing teaching approaches that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn. Steven joined Monash University on 2 January 2025, having previously worked at University College London (UCL), where he was Professor of Law and Professional Ethics. He has had extensive leadership experience at UCL Laws, having previously served as Vice Dean (Strategy), Deputy Dean/Head of Department, and (COVID) Chair of the Faculty Education Team. Over the course of his career, Steven has made significant contributions to the legal field both in the UK and abroad.



Associate Professor Ronli Sifris
Director, Castan Centre for Human Rights Law

Ronli Sifris is an internationally recognised scholar who has expertise in health law and human rights law, gender and human rights, and matters that engage all three of these areas. She returns to Monash following work at the Australian Law Reform Commission, where she has been serving as Assistant Commissioner leading the review of Australia's surrogacy laws. Her leadership of the review comes after more than a decade of research in surrogacy, reproductive rights and the intersection of law and lived experience. It has also offered her the opportunity to contribute directly to law reform at a federal level. Connecting research, law reform and real-world impact, Ronli is the author of multiple books, including *Towards Reproductive Justice* (2024). She has contributed book chapters to major international handbooks, and has published around 30 peer reviewed journal articles in leading publications. Her research has been cited by the High Court of Australia and the UK Supreme Court, reflecting the authority of her work in shaping human rights discourse.

National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People

Keynote address

Sue-Anne Hunter is the inaugural National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, and a Wurundjeri and Ngurai Illum Wurrung woman. She is known for her work as Deputy Chair and Commissioner in Victoria's Yoorrook Justice Commission, Australia's first formal First Peoples truth-telling inquiry. Sue-Anne is also a member of the National Centre for Reconciliation, Truth, and Justice Advisory Board, an Adjunct Professor of Global Engagement at Federation University and a PhD candidate at Monash University.

With a background in child and family services practice, Sue-Anne has over two decades' clinical experience responding to developmental, transgenerational and community trauma. She is widely recognised for developing rights-based, transformative practice responses that empower Aboriginal people to heal from the continuing effects and processes of colonisation.

20th Anniversary of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities

The Victorian Charter: A Celebration of 20 years of Human Rights Protections in Victoria

This session will focus on the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic) (*Charter*) to mark its 20th anniversary. Speakers will explore the strengths and achievements of the *Charter* in its first 20 years, and may canvass its limitations and priorities for reform.

Each speaker has extensive knowledge of, and experience engaging with, the *Charter* – whether as statutory authorities with responsibilities under the *Charter* itself, as for the VEOHRC and the Victorian Ombudsman Office, or as the leading law centre engaging with the *Charter*, as for HRLC.

The insights of our speakers regarding the first 20 years will help navigate the next 20 years of human rights protection in Victoria.

Speakers

Dr Farinaz Zamani
Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

Farinaz Zamani is the Manager of the Human Rights Education team at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), where she leads the Charter Education Program. The program works with Victorian government departments and agencies to build capability in understanding and applying the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) and to strengthen a culture of human rights across the public sector. Farinaz is a solicitor with experience across government, academia and the private legal sector. She holds a Master of Laws in Human Rights from University College London (UCL) and a PhD in Human Rights Law from Monash University, with both qualifications specialising in human rights law. In addition to her work at VEOHRC, she is a lecturer at Monash Law, where she teaches Criminal Law and International Human Rights Law. Born in Iran and now based in Melbourne, Farinaz's experiences growing up in Iran and migrating to Australia have shaped her longstanding commitment to human rights, equality and social justice. Farinaz is a recipient of a 2025 Churchill Fellowship and will travel to Canada, South Africa, Switzerland, France, Finland and Norway in late 2026 to examine how governments build human rights capability and embed human rights into public sector decision-making, with the aim of strengthening human rights practice across Australia.

Dan Nicholson
Victorian Ombudsman's Office

Dan Nicholson is the Deputy Victorian Ombudsman Operations, responsible for the VO's complaints, investigations and legal divisions. Dan worked with VLA from 2012 to 2024 in a range of roles, including as the Executive Director, Criminal Law and Executive Director, Civil Justice, Access and Equity.

Dan previously managed the Human Rights Unit at the Victorian Department of Justice, was Associate to Justice Maxwell, President of the Court of Appeal and worked at Fitzroy Legal Service. He has worked on a range of human rights issues in Cambodia and Timor-Leste. Dan was a Director of the Sentencing Advisory Council from 2021 to 2024 and has been a Commissioner of the Victorian Law Reform Commission since 2018.

Caitlin Reiger
Human Rights Law Centre

Caitlin Reiger is CEO of the Human Rights Law Centre and a human rights lawyer. She has spent the past 25 years working globally on transitional justice for mass human rights violations, international criminal law, and justice system reform. Since returning to Australia, Caitlin supported the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria in the design and establishment of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. Caitlin's work has included the interplay between truth-telling, reparations, criminal justice and institutional reform efforts, including in Timor-Leste, Sierra Leone, Cambodia and Colombia. She headed the European Union's flagship access to justice programme in Myanmar, MyJustice, which used arts, culture and social media platforms to improve public awareness of fundamental rights, and supported recognition of traditional/informal justice systems as part of peace negotiations.

Professor Julie Debeljak (Chair)
Monash University

Julie Debeljak's career at Monash University spans nearly three decades, grounded in a sustained commitment to human rights scholarship and practice. Currently Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and Deputy Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, her work has shaped conversations around international, national and comparative human rights law, constitutional law, and public law. Her research primarily explores how human rights obligations are implemented domestically, including through instruments such as the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. She has contributed extensively to scholarship on issues ranging from trafficking in persons to human rights in closed environments, to the rights scrutiny obligations of governments and parliaments in policy and law making, alongside authoring books, chapters, and policy submissions. Her leadership also extends beyond academia. Julie has been closely involved in human rights capacity-building across government, the judiciary, and the broader community.

The Experience of Australian Judges on International Courts

A panel on the opportunities, constraints, and ethical terrain of international judicial service for Australian judges.

Justice Without Borders — and Its Limits

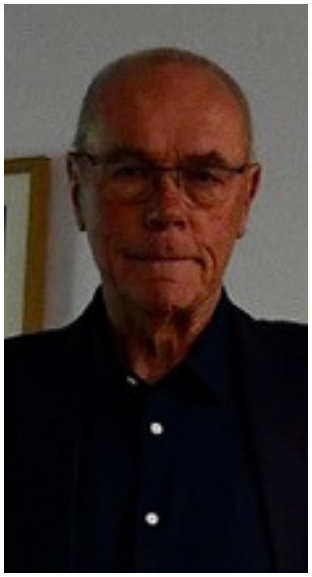
When Australian judges step onto international benches, they bring the values and traditions of Australia's legal system and human rights framework. But international judicial service is not without its tensions.

What obligations does an Australian judge carry beyond their own jurisdiction?

What frameworks govern their conduct when the institutional cultures, political pressures, or procedural norms they encounter are radically different?

This panel interrogates the considerations, ethical responsibilities, and limits on Australian judges who accept appointments on international judicial bodies.

Speakers



The Hon. Lex Lasry AM KC

Former Acting Justice, Supreme Court of the Northern Territory

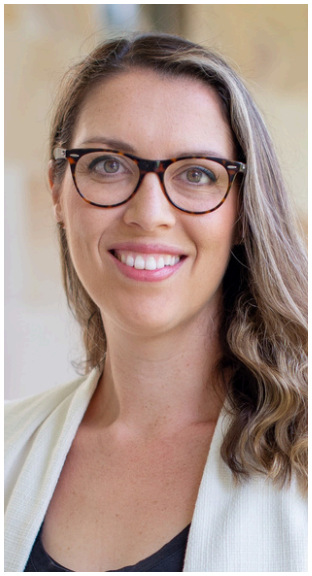
Lex Lasry is a highly experienced Australian barrister and judge with a long career in criminal law. Admitted in Victoria in 1973, he practised at the Victorian Bar, appeared in major criminal trials and appeals, and served as counsel in significant royal commissions, inquests, and high-profile cases.

He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1990 and later became a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria in 2007, where he served in the Criminal Division and as Principal Judge before retiring in 2018.

He continued in acting judicial roles until 2026, including with the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, and now co-hosts "Law the Podcast" with Greg Barns SC.

Kevin Yam
Former Hong Kong Lawyer

Kevin Yam is currently a PhD Candidate and Part-Time Lecturer at Melbourne Law School. He spent nearly two decades in Hong Kong as a solicitor, with over eight years of which as a partner at an international law firm, specialising in financial regulatory and white collar crime defence as well as large-scale commercial litigation. Kevin has also been and continues to be a Hong Kong democracy and rule of law activist, which resulted in the Hong Kong Government placing a bounty over his head in 2023. He was subsequently disbarred as a Hong Kong solicitor, which led to statements in his support from legal bodies including the Law Council of Australia, the Law Society of England and Wales, the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales, the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, Lawyers for Lawyers, The Rights Practice, the Asian Lawyers Network and Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada.



Associate Professor Rebecca Ananian-Welsh
University of Queensland

Rebecca Ananian-Welsh is an Associate Professor of public law at the University of Queensland where her teaching and research focus on courts, security and democracy. In addition to scholarly work, Rebecca provides regular submissions and evidence to public inquiries and has served on: the Australian Association of Constitutional Law National Council, the Australian Judicial Officers' Association Standing Committee on Judicial Independence, the Law Council of Australia National Security Law Working Group, and the Centre for Public Integrity. Rebecca's research has been cited by the High Court of Australia, recognised in awards from Australian Academy of Social Sciences and UQ, and shortlisted for an Australian Legal Research Award and a Queensland Literary Award. Before commencing her academic career, Rebecca held positions with DLA Piper Sydney and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.

Sara Kowal (Chair)
Director of Eleos Justice, Monash University

Sara Kowal is Director of Eleos Justice, Monash Law as well as Vice-President of the Capital Punishment Justice Project. She has practised exclusively in criminal law since 2003 and has extensive experience in defending complex prosecutions.

In 2018, Sara was appointed to establish the Eleos Anti-Death Penalty Clinic at Monash. In November 2019, Sara joined the Executive of the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) and is currently the Deputy Co-Convenor.

She sits on a number of working groups of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty (WCADP). Sara also sits on the Advisory Board of the Australians Against Wrongful and Arbitrary Detention Alliance (AWAADA).

Emerging Treaty Law in Victoria

A panel on the legal architecture, opportunities, and challenges emerging from Victoria's statewide treaty process.

Victoria's commitment to a treaty framework marks a significant moment in Australian public law and human rights law, reshaping the relationship between the state and First Peoples.

The treaty process raises foundational questions about proper legal relations, legal authority, and the recognition of Indigenous rights within existing constitutional structures. What does it mean to negotiate treaties within the Victorian legal system?

How do public law principles adapt to accommodate self-determination and Indigenous governance?

This panel examines the frameworks underpinning Victoria's treaty process, the institutions established to support negotiation, and the legal questions that follow. It explores the intersections between public law doctrine and Indigenous rights, including issues of representation, legitimacy, and enforceability.

Bringing together perspectives on law, policy, and practice, the discussion will consider both the transformative potential and the structural limits of treaty-making at the state level

Co-Chair of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and proud Gunditjmara man Rueben Berg presenting the keynote address 'Voice, Treaty, Truth - What's Next?' at the 2024 Conference.

Speakers

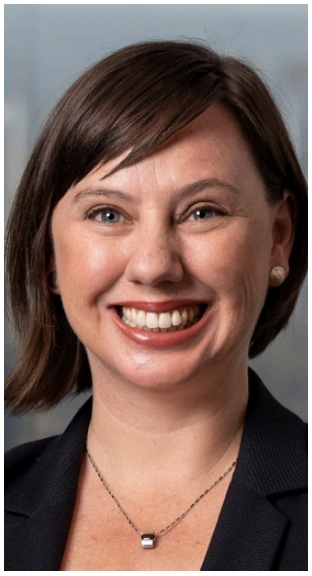
Meriki Onus
Co-Chair, Gellung Warl

Meriki Onus (Gunnai and Gunditjmara) is a Member for the Metro region and Co-Chair of Gellung Warl, living on Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Country.

Their work champions Indigenous ways of doing and being to create equitable outcomes. They have a master's degree in social change leadership from Melbourne University and is a global fellow of the Atlantic Institute, a fellowship focused on social justice.

The Hon. Kenneth Hayne AC KC
Former Justice of the High Court

Until June 2015, **Kenneth Hayne** was a Justice of the High Court of Australia, having been appointed to that Court in September 1997. At the time of his appointment he was a judge of the Court of Appeal of Victoria having been appointed one of the foundation judges of the Court in 1995. He graduated in Arts and Law from the University of Melbourne and as a Bachelor of Civil Law from the University of Oxford. He was elected Rhodes Scholar for Victoria in 1969. He joined the Victorian Bar in 1971 and was appointed Queen's Counsel for Victoria in 1984. He practised in State and Federal courts principally in commercial, constitutional and general civil matters. Kenneth was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria in 1992. Since late 2015, he has been a judge of the Abu Dhabi Global Market Courts. Between December 2017 and February 2019, he conducted the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry. Kenneth was appointed a Companion in the General Division of the Order of Australia in 2002. He is an Honorary Fellow of Exeter College Oxford and an Honorary Professorial Fellow at Melbourne Law School in the University of Melbourne. In 2016 he was admitted to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) in the University of Melbourne.



Bridgid Cowling
Special Counsel, Gellung Warl

Bridgid Cowling joined Gellung Warl in December 2025 from law firm Arnold Bloch Leibler where she was special counsel in the native title and public interest team. Bridgid's early career was in native title and land rights at the Northern Land Council and Cape York Land Council. While continuing this practice focus, she has developed expertise in charity law and governance and is a recognised expert in that area.

Bridgid is a member of the Law Council of Australia's Charities and Not-for-profits Committee and the Charity Law Association of Australia and New Zealand through which she contributes to law reform efforts and legal education. Bridgid is also a director of the environmental charity Country Needs People.

Karri Walker
Principal Lawyer - Treaty, Gellung Warl

Karri Walker is a proud Nyiyaparli woman and a Principal Lawyer at Gellung Warl, Karri is helping to advance Australia's first Treaty process, working to secure ground-breaking reform that strengthens self-determination.

Alongside her work at Gellung Warl, Karri contributes to justice more broadly through her roles on the Board of Fitzroy Legal Service and the Advisory Council of the Indigenous Law and Justice Hub at Melbourne Law School.

As a John Monash Scholar, Karri completed a Master of Laws at Harvard University. Her goal is to pursue structural reform which gives First Peoples the power and authority to make decisions on issues that affect the First Peoples community.

Professor Melissa Castan (Chair)
Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Professor, Monash University

Melissa Castan is the former Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. She has over 25 years experience teaching, researching and publishing in Australian Public Law, Constitutional law, Human Rights Law, Indigenous Legal Issues, and Legal Education. Melissa's most recent book is *Time to Listen: an Indigenous Voice to Parliament*, co-authored with Distinguished Professor Lynette Russell AM. Melissa is National Convenor of the Alternative Law Journal, a Board Member of the Victorian Law Foundation since 2015, and has hosted legal interest podcasts 'Law Radio' and 'Just Cases'. Her newest podcast is 'Case in Point'. Melissa has previously held a number of leadership roles in the Faculty of Law, as Associate Dean (Staffing) 2020-2023, Associate Dean (Education) 2019, and Member of Academic Board 2020-2023. In 2026, Professor Melissa Castan became one of Monash University's inaugural Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Professors.

The leading human rights conference in Australia, providing a vital health check on the state of human rights in Australia and overseas.

Your feedback is invaluable in helping us shape future conferences and events that drive impactful research, informed reform, and meaningful change.

After the Conference on Thursday 23 July, we invite you to take just two minutes to complete our short audience feedback survey, available via the QR code.

The feedback survey will be open for two weeks after the Conference, until Friday 7 August.

Your experience

Continuing Professional Development Obligations (CPD)

All delegates who attend The Annual Castan Centre for Human Rights Law Conference, whether in person or online, are able to request a digital Certificate of Attendance as part of their registration, to be issued in the week following the Conference.

Conference attendance may be credited towards CPD requirements. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a legal requirement to ensure lawyers are maintaining and enhancing their skills and knowledge as a legal practitioner.

See the Law Institute of Victoria website for essential information and tips on how to stay compliant with your CPD requirements.

Hugh de Kretser, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, presenting the Keynote Address at the 2025 Conference.

Advancing Law. Protecting Rights. Inspiring Change.

The Monash Master of Laws (LLM) offers the specialisation pathways you need to make a tangible impact.

True progress requires sophisticated legal expertise.

If you are passionate about driving systemic change, defending human rights, or navigating complex international frameworks, the Global Society and Human Rights specialisation equips you with theoretical and practical knowledge in the laws governing human and civil rights.

It aims to expand your expertise, and gives you the opportunity to pursue emerging areas of study or explore existing knowledge at a deeper level.

- Study advanced modules in Human Rights, International Law, and Governance.
- Connect with the world-renowned Castan Centre for Human Rights Law and legal experts.
- Flexible study options to suit practicing professionals.

Suitable for graduates interested in developing or enhancing a career in the government or development sectors, or in a human rights-focused organisation.

The LLM also suits law graduates interested in developing or enhancing a specialist career as a human rights lawyer.

Castan Centre Human Rights Clinic

The Castan Centre Human Rights Clinic offers Monash law students with an interest in human rights the opportunity to conduct policy and advocacy work on behalf of a client organisation with support and guidance from Castan Centre staff.

The Clinic provides an opportunity for students to conduct research with real impact on the work of the organisations involved and gives students professional experience in the human rights field. It forms part of the 6 credit unit LAW4811 ('In-House Placement') and will run once a week for a period of 12 weeks. Applications for 2027 clinical periods are expected to open in late 2026.

Your support matters

The Castan Centre was founded in memory of Ron Castan AM QC, whose work on the *Mabo* case helped achieve recognition of native title in Australian law.

The landmark High Court case - one of the most significant decisions in our nation's legal history - transformed Australian law by recognising native title, and is a powerful reminder of how human rights advocacy by ordinary people can create extraordinary change.

We're proud to be named in Ron's honour and to continue this legacy through our work in research, education and advocacy.

The Castan Centre raises most of its income outside Monash University, and continuing this work is sustained in large part through the support of our community of human rights champions.

This year, we're aiming to raise AUD$55,000 in our annual appeal to fund our research and activities.

If you believe in the importance of human rights, please consider donating to the Castan Centre, via our website or by using the QR code. Donations of $2 or more are tax-deductible and all funds raised go directly to the Castan Centre's important work.

To learn more about philanthropic partnerships with the Castan Centre, please contact:

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MONASH University

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