

Welcome and introduction to Australian Constitution Centre

High Court of Australia Building

9 April 2018

The Hon Susan Kiefel AC Chief Justice of Australia

On behalf of the Justices of the High Court may I add our welcome to you all to the Court and to the Australian Constitution Centre which is now housed here. The Governor-General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, has expressed encouragement and support for the Centre. His Excellency and Lady Cosgrove had hoped to be here for the opening today but have commitments with respect to the Commonwealth Games in Queensland.

The opening of the Centre coincides with the meeting of the Council of Chief Justices of Australia and New Zealand here in Canberra today. Joining us for this opening are the Chief Justice of New Zealand, the Right Honourable Dame Sian Elias, and the Chief Justices of each of the States and Territories of Australia.

We are also joined by the Chairman of the Constitution Education Fund Australia ("the CEFA"), Major General the Honourable Michael Jeffrey AC, and its Chief Executive Officer, Ms Kerry Jones. You would be aware that the CEFA has been an active, driving force in the promotion of civic education in Australia, particularly education about our Constitution.

In May 2016 the CEFA approached this Court with an exciting idea. It had been conceived of by Ms Kerry Jones a few years before. The idea was to create a permanent exhibition of materials and memorabilia relating to our constitutional history, both pre- and post-dating the Constitution, which would be as interesting as it would be educational. What was needed was a place to house the exhibition, a place which itself had a strong connection with the Constitution and was available to the public. This Court building was an obvious contender.

The Court was delighted to be able to offer space in this building for the project and to join with the CEFA in this worthy enterprise. The Court itself has for some time undertaken a role of informing the public, school children in particular, about the role of the Court under the Constitution. Over the years it has made materials available to schools and, through its Court guides program, spoken to many of the 35,000 school children who visit the Court annually. Its Information Committee, which is chaired by my colleague Justice Virginia Bell, meets regularly to discuss how the role and the work of the Court might be further communicated to the public.

The Court has funded the works necessary to be undertaken to house the exhibition. The Commonwealth Government has provided funding for the exhibition itself. Other institutions have delved into their collections and given or loaned materials, some of which I understand have never been exhibited before.

The Court, for its part, has provided the desk which was used by the first Chief Justice of Australia, Sir Samuel Griffith, and many Chief Justices after him. You will see that it is displayed in a setting which seeks to recreate his chambers. School children will be encouraged to imagine Sir Samuel and the early judges writing their first judgments about the new Constitution.

The Australian Constitution Centre seeks to illuminate some central aspects of our Constitution, such as nationhood, democracy, federalism, the separation of powers and the rule of law. It seeks to illustrate key constitutional principles by describing some of the major constitutional cases starting with the Wheat Case in 1915, and including the Engineers Case, the Communist Party Case and some more recent decisions of the Court.

The Centre is directed principally at upper primary school students who presently form the largest cohort of visitors to the Court. It is of course hoped that the Centre will prove to be of great interest to all visitors to the Court. It is anticipated that our Court guides, who are largely responsible for the Court's current Trip Advisor status, will provide services to the Centre.

The Court's former Chief Executive and Principal Registrar, Mr Andrew Phelan, is here today. He was involved in all the early discussions with Ms Kerry Jones and the CEFA which got this project off the ground. All those who have worked towards this day are to be commended for their not inconsiderable efforts. It need hardly be said that the Australian Constitutional Centre will be an important resource for the community and will promote a better understanding of our Constitution and of the role our courts play in our system of government.

It is a great pleasure to declare the Australian Constitution Centre open.