



## President's Report: Michael Stanton

A lot can happen in a year – from the Djokovic Affair to the federal election and a change of government, to revelations of secret ministerial appointments and the Optus mass data breach, we've certainly had our work cut out for us in 2022. And now the state election is pending!

Over the past year Liberty Victoria has continued to respond to the ever-changing legislative and political landscape with over 50 media appearances, 16 submissions to government, and over a dozen press releases.

Building on the vital work undertaken by our Immediate Past-President Julia Kretzenbacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, our media team has ensured that we can respond swiftly to media requests and have our voice in the public arena.

I am also pleased to report that we have increased our collaboration with civil liberties organisations across Australia. That has included publishing a [joint letter](#) to the new Attorney-General, the Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP, noting issues of particular concern at the federal level to the civil liberties and human rights community. In that letter we addressed, amongst other things, the need for a federal anti-corruption commission and the enshrinement of a First Nations voice to Parliament.

Throughout the pages of this annual report you will read about the important work undertaken by our committee members and other volunteers. The following is just a snapshot.

Our Criminal Justice Working Group has continued to make submissions addressing the largely bipartisan embrace of penal populism. Over the past decade in Victoria we have seen the entrenchment of presumptive and mandatory sentencing, and bail and parole reforms that we know have a disproportionate and deleterious

impact on First Nations Peoples and women. To our great shame, many findings and recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, made over 30 years ago, continue to be ignored, including the need for imprisonment to be a last resort. Tragically, we also know that this can have lethal consequences.

We have made submissions in the criminal justice space on a wide range of issues, including the rights of children affected by parental incarceration, sexual offence reform, criminalising “grossly offensive” public conduct, and expanded police powers. Despite it being clear that higher rates of incarceration only result in higher rates of recidivism, which undermines community safety, both major parties remain under the thrall of short-term political gain over long-term responsible public policy.

Liberty Victoria has also been very concerned about the emergence of far-right extremism in Australia. We made a [submission](#) and gave [evidence](#) to the Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria. We submitted that legislative responses to the real threat of extremism must be careful not to expand censorship and surveillance in a disproportionate manner. Rather, we must take active steps to address the drivers of extremism, including social isolation and economic insecurity, and rebuild faith in our institutions, including government and the media. In that context we were very pleased to be quoted throughout the Committee's [final report](#) and to see Finding 19: “[r]esponses to extremism need to avoid measures that curtail civil liberties in a disproportionate manner”.

As an organisation we have also been deeply troubled by the prosecution of Bernard Collaery, who was the recipient of our Voltaire Empty Chair Human Rights Award in 2020. It is a great relief that the prosecution has now been discontinued. We will continue to advocate for the vital role of whistle-blowers in holding the powerful to account.

Liberty Victoria's Government, Regulation and Equality Working Group continues to advocate for a national Charter of Human Rights. The group was actively involved in reviewing Victoria's pandemic-specific legislation in late 2021 and consulted with the crossbench. The legislation was greatly improved as a result, with better human rights and privacy protections. More recently the Working Group has completed our policy on climate change – noting the disproportionate impact of climate change on younger people and First Nations Peoples. This has been underpinned by the understanding that a clean environment is the foundation for the protection and promotion of civil liberties and other human rights. We also spoke out about the awful treatment of LGBTIQ+ people during the federal election campaign, and in particular how vulnerable young trans and gender-diverse people became political footballs during the religious discrimination debate.

Our Refugees and People Seeking Asylum Working Group was instrumental in advocating against a suite of Bills targeting refugees, people seeking asylum and other migrants who are in immigration detention and/or facing visa cancellation or refusal. Its work included a letter writing campaign which saw some of those Bills being defeated on the eve the federal election, and drafting submissions to parliamentary inquiries.

Our media work on the Djokovic saga saw us reach an international audience, with reports in publications including the Economist and the New York Times. We remain deeply concerned by the Minister for Immigration's unaccountable 'God Powers' – a term that I'm proud to credit to the [Rights Advocacy Project](#) and which demonstrates the impact of that program.

The Refugees and People Seeking Asylum team includes Sister Brigid Arthur who this year was awarded an Order of Australia and the Victorian Civil Justice Award in recognition of her long-standing commitment to social justice and human rights. Congratulations Sister Brigid!

Our Privacy and Private Life Working Group has contributed to a joint submission on the need for reform to Australia's electronic surveillance framework, and has advocated for improvements to the Health Legislation (Information Sharing) Bill 2021 (Vic). We have also been active in the media on privacy issues, including the use by

some retailers of facial recognition technology, and when considering the dangers of DNA collection and retention including on genealogy databases. Recently, we issued a comment on the [Optus mass data breach](#) calling for improved data governance in the digital age.

The Rights Advocacy Project (RAP), which I'm pleased to note is now formally recognised in our Constitution, has continued to make an important impact this year. That includes the launch of its reports "Police Panopticon: Zooming in on the use of body worn cameras by Victoria Police officers" and "A Policy of Equality: Painful Periods as a Workplace Issue". These reports can be found on the [RAP Website](#). Thank you to Rochelle Francis, the RAP Chair, the RAP Steering Committee, those who volunteered to be supervisors, and the RAP advocates who have continued to produce high quality and ground-breaking work.

Over the past two years the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the number of events that we have been able to hold in person. We are very much looking forward to the Voltaire Human Rights Awards dinner which will be held on 18 November 2022. You can read more about the recipients of the 2022 awards in the next section and I encourage you to attend the dinner to celebrate the important work of Brenda Appleton OAM, Sitarah Mohammadi, Sajjad Askary and Mehdi Ali.

We held our second online AGM in November 2021, twenty years after the [Tampa affair](#). We were pleased to have Abbas Nazari as our speaker. Abbas was a child seeking refuge on board the Tampa in 2001 and has since settled in New Zealand. After completing a Fulbright Scholarship he wrote 'After the Tampa' about his experiences. He was an inspiring presenter who spoke powerfully about the consequences of Australia's mistreatment of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Despite the challenges of 'COVID normal', Liberty Victoria remains in a sound financial position due to the donations of members and supporters. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the executive team: our Senior Vice-President Michelle Bennett; our Vice-Presidents Thomas Kane, Jamie Gardiner OAM and Dr Monique Mann; our Treasurer Sam Norton; and our Secretary Hannah Dickinson. Thomas has also, yet again, been vital in the preparation and planning for the Voltaire Awards dinner this year.

I would also like to acknowledge our supporters, especially Michael Drapac, who has continued to generously provide office space and other significant assistance to Liberty Victoria. Michael has also been a great supporter of the Liberty Leadership fund which enables our committee members to engage in professional development. This year the Liberty Leadership Fund was used to provide media training to our media team.

With limited funding, Liberty Victoria has been fortunate to have the voluntary support and expertise of people who assist us in many different ways. Maelor Himbury continues his extraordinary service of providing subscribers with our daily media links. We also thank Sally-Anne Raheer and Jill Ruchel from Red Letter Fundraising who provide expert direction and assistance in the development of our fundraising activities, including the launch of our bequest program.

Thanks to Lindy Smith, our volunteer coordinator, in identifying and guiding volunteers to assist with different projects. This year new volunteers made

significant contributions to research and submission writing.

Thanks also to Adam Pulford for all his assistance and guidance with our media work (including social media), and to Andrew Rawson for his IT and design support. They have both been vital in improving our communications with members, supporters and the broader community.

To our committee members and RAP members – thank you for continuing to dedicate your time and enthusiasm to our work. I am proud to be part of an organisation that continues to punch well above its weight, and remains a trusted voice on civil liberties and human rights.

And a special thank you to Grace Girardi, our executive officer who somehow holds the whole ship together; we simply could not function without her support.

Finally, thank you to our members and other supporters. We hope that this report demonstrates that, on your behalf, we will continue to campaign to protect and promote civil liberties and human rights in a manner that, true to our values, is independent, vigilant and informed.

**Yours faithfully,**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M Stanton', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Michael Stanton**