

Julian Burnside QC Citation

Chancellor, I am honoured to present Julian Burnside QC to you for the title of Honorary Doctor of the University in recognition of the legal, advocacy and community work that he undertakes on behalf of some of the most vulnerable people in the world – asylum seekers and refugees.

Julian Burnside joined the Bar in 1976 and became a QC in 1989. He has acted in many high profile cases: for OK Tedi natives against BHP, for Alan Bond in fraud trials, and for the Maritime Union of Australia in the 1998 waterfront dispute with Patrick Stevedores. He was the Senior Counsel assisting the Australian Broadcasting Commission in the ‘Cash for Comment’ inquiry.

Mr Burnside first came into contact with the issues of refugees and asylum seekers when he appeared *pro bono* in the Federal Court for Liberty Victoria (formerly the Victorian Council of Civil Liberties) on behalf of asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*. Since then he has continued to act for *Tampa* asylum seekers held on Nauru, and has become Australia’s best known legal advocate for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. He has acted *pro bono* for people held in detention at places such as the Woomera and Baxter Immigration Detention Centres, and represented people who escaped from Woomera in a test case that challenged the legality of mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia.

Just as importantly, Julian Burnside has been a tireless advocate for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in public forums. He has spoken at the National Press Club alongside the current Minister for Immigration, the Honourable Amanda Vanstone, in church meetings, at public debates with officials of the Department of Immigration and in schools. Perhaps his most important contribution in such forums has been to point out that asylum seekers arriving in Australia do so legally under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Australia is a signatory.

He is called on regularly for formal speeches, which have included the Sir Ninian Stephen Lecture at Newcastle University, the Don Dunstan Human Rights Oration Inaugural lecture, and the Lionel Murphy and Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lectures. With his wife, he established 'Spare Rooms for Refugees', a project to provide accommodation for asylum seekers. In February 2004 he was elected a Living National Treasure by national popular vote, and in May 2004 he was awarded the title Doctor of Social Science *honoris causa* by RMIT University.

At the core of Mr Burnside's work is a fundamental challenge, made in a scholarly and humane way, to how governments frame and implement social policy and how human lives are inevitably changed by the rule of law. Simplistic presentation of issues such as asylum produces a public discourse that is shaped by prejudices, fears and ignorance rather than reasoned argument. Mr Burnside's practice of law in high profile cases has helped not only the people he seeks to serve, but has brought more informed and compassionate understanding into the public domain.

His contribution to law, community service and public education demonstrates the application of knowledge—an activity which is central to the University of South Australia's conception of education. His comprehension of human rights law, and his communication of this to the wider community, have been of great importance—they have brought benefit to stateless people while simultaneously informing others in our community. His effectiveness in representing those who are unable to represent themselves because they are stateless, do not speak English or are poor, has made a difference in what has been a largely impenetrable field.

Mr Burnside's work in the area of human rights law is, in essence, work for community benefit—benefit to asylum seekers, their families and supporters, benefit to non-government organisations, and more generally benefit to social sciences, mental health and human services. His work has resulted in many community organisations expanding the usefulness of their role through improving their understanding of humanitarian law and the more general principles of honesty and morality in government.

Such community service is serious and demanding—both physically and emotionally. But despite his commitment to community service, and his heavy legal workload, Julian maintains balance in his life. He is well known for his contribution to the arts, which includes being deputy chair of Musica Viva Australia and a council member of the Victoria College of the Arts. He is author of *Matilda and the Dragon*, a children’s book, and writes regular articles on language. He compiled a book of letters written by asylum seekers held in Australia’s detention centres which was published in 2003.

Chancellor, it is my great pleasure, on behalf of the University of South Australia, to present to you, Julian Burnside QC, for the award ‘the honorary degree of Doctor of the University’ in recognition of his distinctive public service in the area of humanitarian law and more generally for his articulation of important principles of human rights, honesty and morality in government, and compassion for others.