

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY
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**THE LAW SOCIETY
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Address for

Ronan MacSweeney

President, The Law Society of NSW

Opening of Law Term 2026

Date: 05 February 2026

Venue: ILUMINA, 1 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW 2000

Time: concludes approx. 20:00hr

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Welcome and opening

Good evening, Chief Justice, members of the judiciary, and distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, and family. I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting—the Gadigal of the Eora nation—and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I extend my respects and welcome to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us this evening.

What an honour it is to be standing before you tonight, as we open the first Law Term of the second quarter, of the 21st century. I'd like to acknowledge the work of the Chief Justice of NSW—especially for the support you have shown the Law Society of NSW, Chief Justice.

I also congratulate Your Honour on becoming a Companion of the Order of Australia, our highest civil honour, last week. I'm sure I speak for all the profession in saying that this award is a due acknowledgement of Your Honour's enormous contributions to public life.

I'd like to make special acknowledgement of the Attorney General of Ireland, Rossa Fanning SC, for attending tonight's dinner. Your attendance here means so much to the Law Society of NSW, and to me personally.

I would also like to acknowledge the CEO of the Law Society of NSW, Kenneth Tickle, who has been incredibly welcoming in my role as President. He has graciously, *not*, repeatedly mentioned the limits to my Term, unlike several friends, who have kindly, frequently, reminded me that I only have a year. Your discretion, Kenny, is much appreciated. Occupants of the 'friends & family table' please take note.

I also recognise the work of the Council of the Law Society, in particular members of the Executive: Councillors Dawson, Fernandez, and Ball. Each and every one of our Councillors volunteers a huge amount of their time to the Law Society. I am deeply indebted to you all—as is the whole institution that is the Law Society.

And I also want to thank the wonderful staff at the Law Society. Balancing regulation, advocacy, and representation of the profession, and law reform, is no easy task. Like the Council, they do so, every day, bolstering the confidence that the profession and the public places in our institution.

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To my family, friends, colleagues, and former workmates: thank you for being here this evening. Michelle, Rena, Paula and Patrick, have come from Ireland, and I am truly grateful that you would take the time, and expense to do this.

I will try not to disappoint you tonight but if I do, please do me this one favour and put the kindest possible gloss on your reports of this evening to anyone in Ireland who happens to who ask.

Thank you to my partner Bhushan, for your unconditional love, humour, intelligence and unwavering support.

My background

Life takes us in unexpected directions, in ways that we can never predict. The privilege to be President of the Law Society, in NSW, to borrow from poet Clodagh Beresford Dunne:

'ten thousand miles away, in a different hemisphere, in a different season'

is not something I could ever have conceived of as a little boy. Yet it is an honour I hold with deep humility and gratitude. Gratitude, too, that we are so fortunate to live in a country that can be so open and welcoming to people like me—that a relatively new arrival could ascend to such a distinguished office, is profoundly meaningful.

I am mindful too that the terrible events in Bondi have cast a shadow over the pride Australia rightly feels in being an open and welcoming society. As we reflect at the start of another year, let us not lose sight of the larger story: that Australia remains one of the most successful nations in the world at welcoming new arrivals.

My own appointment is, in a small way, simply another chapter in that enduring national story. Despite challenges, we continue to create an open society, that constantly strives to up-hold values of tolerance and the rule of law.

On the threshold of a new beginning, we always tend to look back. I have been thinking about what I am thankful for personally, and as a lawyer.

My late parents Dermot and Tess raised my two older brothers and me on the west coast of Ireland—just outside Galway city, on the shores of Galway Bay.

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It's a place of such natural beauty, that Irish poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, aptly said it could:

“catch the heart off-guard and blow it open”.

And while I am, now, very much a proud Australian citizen, my values, my identity were undoubtedly shaped by my formative years in Ireland. My parents believed in the importance of community, my dad was chair of Galway City's main hurling club for many years after all.

And just so you know, hurling is like hockey, but with far fewer rules and it's a very popular sport throughout Ireland.

Between my parents, the importance of kindness and compassion for neighbours and strangers alike ran deep—I will return to this later. One of my two brothers, Niall, is here tonight, and I would like to thank you and Ciara immensely for being here.

Niall, as kids, we were all bursting with pride at your many and various sporting achievements. Not least when you played schoolboy rugby for Connaught against Japan.

But you'll have to grant me that being the President of a Law Society may arguably come close as an achievement.

To my middle brother, Shane, now a successful solicitor in the west of Ireland, it strikes me had you taken a year off to travel to Australia in 2003, and I stayed at home, I might easily have been running the family practice in Galway, and you delivering this speech tonight.

Such small, almost accidental moments subtly determine the larger shape of our lives. Looking back now, my brothers and I had an idyllic childhood. I know the supportive and loving childhood our parents gave us, and the values they instilled in us, have led me here today. Not everyone is so fortunate.

Indeed. *The Troubles* as they are known, were background noise to my youth—as they were to everyone in Ireland, then. One aspect of *The Troubles* that is often overlooked is how well the relatively nascent Irish democratic institutions held up in the face of paramilitary threats. And that is partly why today, I value public service and the rule of law so much.

Education

As Councillor Tyrrell mentioned, I completed degrees in law, economics and English at the University of Galway.

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While at university, I immensely enjoyed debating. I was also runner-up in the national intervarsity final—The *Irish Times* Debates. Debating also opened a pathway for a career in law. Indeed, our guest this evening, the Irish Attorney General, and I first met through intervarsity debating.

He is, of course, a former winner of the *Irish Times* Debates—though I should add, for the record, that I did not compete in the year he won, thereby arguably clearing a rather generous path to victory for him.

Early career

While completing my Masters at Edinburgh University, I was fortunate to be offered a traineeship at one of Ireland's most respected firms, McCann FitzGerald. McCanns was a firm whose service extended well beyond its commercial clients, and into the life of the Irish State itself.

One of the firm's founding partners, helped shape Irish constitutional thinking in the decades after the Constitution's adoption. To this day, it reminds me that some of the best traditions of the solicitor's profession have always included public service, respect for constitutional norms, and a deep commitment to the rule of law that underpins democracy, whether in Ireland, or here in Australia.

Once qualified, I then settled as a junior solicitor in the firm's infrastructure team.

After three further years the firm kindly agreed to give me a year's leave of absence to travel to Australia in 2003.

Australia

For me, and honestly I can't believe I am saying this, but it all started to get serious at the 2003 Melbourne Cup. I didn't win big on the horses that day ... but as luck would have it, someone introduced me to a legal recruiter who suggested that rather than just travelling for my year out, Australian law firms would be interested in my experience. I hoped, but wasn't so sure.

A few weeks later, I was walking up a mountain somewhere in Tasmania. I was barely within mobile phone range. But I got a call. 48 hours later, I was borrowing a suit from a friend in Melbourne, and then flying to Sydney for an interview with Minter Ellison.

Standing here tonight, you know what I remember: the self-doubt. If you've never had that, good luck to you. But I remember thinking, "They will have so much clever talent to draw from, why would they hire me, fresh from Ireland, and in an ill-fitting suit?"

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Well, after laying on the Irish charm, which, I reasoned might be a point of competitive advantage, to my great surprise, I kick-started the greatest exposure to the Australian solicitor profession I could possibly have hoped for.

I remember Minters in the early noughties as a place full of smart, energetic, friendly lawyers. I got to work with blue chip clients and on amazing projects.

I also had the great fortune to be sent on secondment to the old Roads & Traffic Authority of NSW; my first exposure to the public service. Ten years later, I would end up back there as Deputy General Counsel for infrastructure, in what by then was Roads and Maritime Services, at a time of unprecedented transport infrastructure development and delivery.

In the intervening years I loved my time at Piper Alderman, and Stockland. I should add, being totally impartial, that Pipers had the best cohort of stylish, good-looking lawyers I ever worked with. Incidentally, I know there are some of them here tonight!

Most recently I served as General Counsel and Company Secretary of BaptistCare, at a time of incredible organisational growth and expansion, in the wake of the Aged Care Royal Commission reforms.

At BaptistCare I never lost sight of the fact that the work served a higher public purpose, providing vital support to some of the most vulnerable Australians.

I want to acknowledge, here, some of the solicitors that I have worked with in my career, especially those who have mentored me. Were it not for the guidance of so many ably minded people, I know I would not be standing here tonight.

I cannot name everyone, but I do want to mention Christine Lithgow, who I think was one of the best lawyers I've ever worked with. Her passion for the law and for public service was contagious. She was the General Counsel at Roads & Maritime Services and subsequently Transport for NSW in my time as Deputy at both agencies.

On the day I started, she said to me, "*Listen, I did ask around the legal department if anyone remembered you from your time on secondment 10 years ago.*"

And I thought ...

Always remember the power of civility.

Thankfully for me, Christine said people remembered good things.

Law Society involvement

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When I meet new arrivals to Australia, I like to remind them that moving to a new country means leaving behind not only friends and family but also broader networks—classmates, colleagues, and more. Much more.

And the advice I always give is to join a club or community organisation, to start to build a network and become truly part of the Australian community. For me, Tamarama Surf Lifesaving Club, just south of the more famous Bondi, filled that gap. It's a small club but it packs a mighty punch. Not without merit, Tama claims to be one of the most inclusive surf clubs in Australia.

Following the Cronulla Riots in 2005, Tama started a program to get kids from Muslim backgrounds involved in surf lifesaving. The club also ran a program 'Holly Days' to teach surf awareness to indigenous kids. And as recently as 2024 the club won a major award for a campaign celebrating the contribution of women to surf lifesaving.

Yet despite its reputation, I still was met with a degree of bemusement and disbelief when I decided, along with another clubbie, that we were going to organise the inaugural entry of surf lifesavers into the Mardi Gras parade in 2007.

I still recall the speech that Glen O'Connor, the staff partner at Minters, gave the Monday after the Parade. He said:

We thought we should congratulate you on your efforts over the weekend. Of course, it's not the first time that someone from Minters has been interviewed on the main evening news ... but I'd be prepared to wager that it is the first time anyone from Minters has done so wearing nothing but their swimmers.

Some years later I joined the Law Society's inaugural Diversity & Inclusion Committee, reasoning that my experience in promoting a more inclusive culture within surf lifesaving would enable me to bring valuable insights.

The Committee's first chair was Juliana Warner; Juliana is an impressive lawyer, but what impressed me equally was her belief that an inclusive and diverse profession is a better profession. Clearly, I share that belief.

It was Juliana who also encouraged me to run for Council, and I was elected in 2018. I won't regale you with how many committees I have served on, but my time at the Law Society has been deeply rewarding. It is a privilege to work with practitioners who so freely contribute their expertise for the public good.

Whenever I can, I recommend solicitors join a Law Society Committee. It is one of the most fulfilling ways to contribute to the profession and grow within it.

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PRIORITIES

But this evening really gives us an opportunity to consider what the Law Society will focus on in the year ahead.

We are, as a state and a nation, among the most successful legal jurisdictions in the world, and I want to build on the outstanding work of Council, management, staff, and our past Presidents. With that in mind, I have four priorities for 2026.

My first priority is to support the profession to meet its regulatory obligations, including compliance with the Anti-money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing reforms.

We will continue supporting our members who are experiencing regulatory changes.

This year, the Anti-money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing (or AML/CTF) tranche 2 reforms come into effect. Legal practices that provide a '**designated service**' will become '**reporting entities**' to AUSTRAC, and have new obligations starting 1 July 2026.

The Law Society has been doing a huge amount of work for many years on this. We will continue to collaborate closely with AUSTRAC so our profession has the right resources and support as we go live.

This is just one form of legislative change that we must continue to assist law firms – and smaller firms – with.

Many sole-principal practices, which make up a huge part of our membership, need our help. I have no doubt that the steps we are taking will do this.

My second priority is to empower the profession to protect the rule of law, and defend the integrity of the justice system.

We all see that the rule of law is being eroded in many jurisdictions through:

- the unprecedented attacks on the rule of law in the US and elsewhere; and
- the erosion of norms in respect of international law

Indeed, close to home, The Law Society of New Zealand, in a recent report, identified significant concerns about understanding of the rule of law in New Zealand, and how it is being gradually undermined.

Now, active threats to the rule of law in Australia are currently not comparable to what we have seen overseas.

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However, we have seen the emergence of sovereign citizens and other populist movements here.

And while Australia sits very near the top-10 for rule of law globally, we, in this room, shouldn't take the rule of law for granted.

There is an old saying in Gaelic: *Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb.*

Or, "*The day of the big wind is not the day to fix your roof.*"

It would be prudent to reflect on what we as a profession, as guardians of the rule of law here, can do to safeguard potential threats in this country, lest the storm approaches.

When we look back in Australian history, many lawyers have met the moment. One such guiding light for me is John Hubert Plunkett. Born in 1802 in the west of Ireland, he would eventually become the Attorney-General of NSW.

Facing opposition from much of the colony, he brought prosecutions in the Supreme Court in 1838 for the Myall Creek massacre. The first and only instance of Europeans being convicted and executed for the mass killing of indigenous people.

His determination to seek justice in the face of dogged opposition reinforced the primacy of the rule of law in this State at that time.

Now we do not live overseas ... or in the past. But I ask, how would we face such challenges in our times?

I want the Law Society to play a role in educating the public about the rule of law. Data in NSW shows that the public, have a very high regard for their **local** solicitors. So perhaps, part of the answer is for lawyers to be empowered to discuss the rule of law and why it matters within their communities.

The Law Society can support this with toolkits and resources for solicitors—with key legal concepts presented in clear, digestible language. These materials could be used by solicitors to speak to students in local schools for example.

Conversations about:

- Why an independent judiciary and legal profession are vital to protecting our system of government; and
- Why the integrity of our justice system is central to our way of life and prosperity.

And this is but one measure that we can employ.

We have one of the best justice systems in the world, and it must not go undefended.

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My third priority this year will be to improve access to justice for all, through advocacy for enhanced physical and digital court and tribunal infrastructure.

After a quarter of a century as an infrastructure lawyer, I believe we can improve access to justice, by advocating for more investment in the physical and digital infrastructure of our courts and tribunals.

As former Co-Chair of the Court User Group on Accessibility, I am acutely aware that inadequate investment in our justice infrastructure disproportionately impacts people with disabilities. This also raises wider access to justice issues which threaten to undermine the rule of law.

Targeted investment in modern buildings and systems will ease the burden for all court and tribunal users and benefit not only our membership, but the wider public.

It is important to acknowledge the engagement we have received from Department of Communities and Justice already. I especially want to thank the leadership of DCJ for consulting with the User Group on the Disability Audit of Parramatta Court and the impressive upgrade to the Downing Centre following the flooding incident last year. These works have greatly improved accessibility and useability of these facilities.

During my time at Transport, I witnessed the incredible transformation of the State's transport infrastructure over a decade-long period. Projects like Sydney Metro, Westconnex, and the Pacific Highway Upgrade and many more have been utterly transformational in how the people of NSW traverse our great State.

That transformation took blue-sky thinking, long-term planning, and vision. Imagine what would be possible if we applied that same vision to create best-in-class justice infrastructure.

Targeted investment in justice infrastructure would deliver benefits for all court users, including many solicitors, particularly in some rural, regional or remote areas where investment is badly needed. Where it can be used, it is important that the technology is of a quality and reliability that befits the foundational role our courts and tribunals play in our society.

I know this will not be easy. That investment in this sector must compete with many other priorities. However, it falls to the Law Society among others to make the case for why this investment is so vital, and I want this to be a focus in 2026.

Which brings me to my final priority - ***to promote NSW as a legal jurisdiction of choice within the Asia-Pacific region.***

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In terms of exported legal services there are a number of jurisdictions internationally that generate significant revenue through their international reputation as a jurisdiction of choice. Clearly London is a global behemoth for this. Closer to home Singapore wears the crown in the APAC region.

However, if we consider the factors that contribute to a jurisdiction having a reputation to attract this work, NSW already ticks many boxes. The Supreme Court has developed a reputation as the most efficient commercial court in Australia.

The Australian Financial Review recently reported that over the last decade, the Supreme Court dealt with matters on average 33% faster, while handling a volume three times as large as the next comparable domestic court.

Aside from this, we also possess other factors that commercial organisations would consider important when determining where to locate a transaction or dispute; these include:

- A strong rule of law
- Large clusters of firms capable of servicing complex legal work
- And, globally Sydney ranks 24th for hosting headquarters of the world's largest companies //

Just five years ago called Ireland began an initiative '*Ireland for Law*' to attract this type of work. A report last October from KPMG has identified that exported legal services now represents nearly AUD\$2.3BN to the Irish economy. More than the international sales of Jameson Irish Whiskey and Guinness combined.

Of course, our situation is not directly analogous to that of Ireland or indeed Singapore. However, this year I want the Law Society to:

- look at what jurisdictions do this well overseas,
- identify where NSW's competitive advantage might lie, and
- have conversations with key stakeholders about the way forward.

Yes, this is long-term thinking, and the benefits of this work may not be reaped for many years, but our state government's investment strategy is a 10-year plan.

My role, and the role of the Law Society, is to look not just at risks, but also opportunities. We can benefit our members - and the people of NSW even more, if we get this right. That is going to really drive long-term value. At least that's my vision.

Charity

Finally, tonight, I want to introduce my Presidential charity for 2026.

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I mentioned earlier that my parents were kind and compassionate people. Because we lived in a beautiful part of Ireland just outside Galway we used to get lots of passersby:

- German and French cyclists used to ask if they could camp in our garden and they were welcomed;
- Motorists used to pull in and ask to use our phone (in the pre-mobile age) and they were welcomed; and
- Homeless people, too, would often call to the door and they were welcomed.

In this last instance I recall my mum would sometimes prepare lunch or give them a shower and fresh clothes. When they were leaving, she'd say, *'you are welcome to visit again but I don't want to see you for another six months'*. She knew how to set boundaries.

That we as a family were fortunate, then, was not lost on me. I first came across the work of the Justice and Equity Centre's Homeless Persons Legal Service when I was a senior associate in Minter Ellison, and lawyers in my team volunteered their time.

And it always struck me as so important that our profession never loses sight of the value of social justice; using our skills to help those less fortunate than we are.

The Service was established in 2004, to provide free, accessible and practical legal help to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. From the outset, it has offered trauma-informed legal services to its clients helping to address the causes perpetuating homelessness.

It is my privilege then, to introduce a short video about the Justice and Equity Centre's Homeless Persons Legal Service – and introduce Jonathan Hunyor who will speak to the work they do in NSW.