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MEDIA LAW CENTRE LAUNCHED

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The new Centre for Media and Telecommunications Law and Policy was launched at University House Melbourne University on 30 October 1993 by Justice Michael Kirby. Justice Kirby is President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal and Chancellor of Macquarie University in Sydney. According to the Director of the Centre, Professor Mark Armstrong, Justice Kirby has a long standing interest in media law and policy because of his work on international bodies, as foundation chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission, and as a judge. The launch took place in the presence of some of the leading lawyers and industry personnel associated with the Australian media.

Justice Kirby in his launch said that the fundamental problem for media law and policy in Australia was the extremely rapid change in media technology. The speed of these changes contrasted with the applicable laws, many of which derived from concepts established early in the 20th Century and even in the 19th Century. Justice Kirby referred to the technologies which had accompanied satellites, multimedia, digitalisation compression, facsimile and computers linked to telecommunications. He acknowledged recent Federal legislation on broadcasting and radiotelegraphy. But he pointed out that it was 17 years since the Australian Law Reform Commission had urged reforms of the law of defamation, not yet implemented. He urged new attention to reform of defamation procedures to replace the "pot of gold" mentality with legal procedures allowing people with grievances against the media to secure prompt rights of correction and rights of reply more apt to their complaints than a damages verdict years later.

Justice Kirby congratulated the new Centre, and the Melbourne University Law School which supported it. He said that he hoped that the Centre would draw upon the talents of the Australia media and be supported by the industry, whilst keeping itself independent of the commercial pressures which inevitably influence a very competitive business. He also hoped that the Centre would adopt an international and regional perspective to the legal and policy issues, in harmony with the international character of the technology in use. Professor Armstrong said that the Centre did intend to focus in the future on the Asia/Pacific region.

Professor Michael Crommelin, the Dean of the Faculty of Law, emphasised the support of the Faculty for the new Centre. That support was signalled by the attendance at the launch of many members of the Faculty, and of the legal profession in Melbourne.

The launch coincided with a three-day seminar organised by the Centre on three media related subjects: Australian content, litigation involving journalists, and access to the spectrum under new Federal legislation. At the end of the second day, Professor Sally Walker, newly-appointed Hearn Professor of Law within the University of Melbourne, delivered her inaugural professorial lecture to an enthusiastic audience.