



Over 60 years ago, as a disenchanted law student wondering whether I had made the right choice, I took comfort from the conviction with which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes had answered a question he imputed to his audience of Harvard undergraduates in 1886. The question was: *how can the laborious study of a dry and technical system, the greedy watch for clients and practice of shopkeepers' arts, the mannerless conflicts over often sordid interests, make out a life?* – and he answered it with the ringing declaration that he could say—and say no longer with any doubt—that *a man may live greatly in the law as well as elsewhere.*

Holmes spoke in an age when the masculine by definition included the feminine, but in practice excluded it. One hundred and twenty years later I can say with equal conviction and a great deal more evidence, that a woman or man may live greatly in the law as elsewhere. Holmes had recently published his great work of scholarship *The Common Law*, and could not have known that he had 45 years as a judge ahead of him, so it is not surprising that he went on to emphasise the opportunities the law provided for the thinker. However, to me a great charm of the law as a vocation lies in the varieties and combinations of ways it offers to men and women to live greatly – as thinkers, as scholars, as teachers, as counsellors and advisers, as advocates, as judges, as arbitrators and fact-finders, as people who take their legal training with its skills and values into journalism, politics, business, administration, literature or service of the international community, to name but some of the spheres where we find men and women recognisable as lawyers.



displaced today by dictated responses to recently discovered emergencies.

Here in Australia we have seen revolutions in immigration policy and indigenous policy enacted with barely enough time to read, let alone debate the legislation; and the fundamental assumptions of federalism dismantled in a series of off-the-cuff executive decisions in marginal electorates. These local examples illustrate the degree to which decision-making on the basis of rational debate, even by legislators, let alone the public, is being leached out of supposedly democratic societies.

I like to hope that in some small way this eponymous and ultimately posthumous series of lectures may help to keep alive in the law the tradition of rational public debate by giving voice, as it did last year and again tonight, to some of those who understand what it means to live greatly in the law, whatever their role or rank, race or gender.