Justice Kiefel, Your Honours, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It was a little over 11 years ago, shortly after 6.00 pm on Friday, 3rd June 2005 that I was at my desk, finalising work for the week, and contemplating the weekend ahead. My phone rang. It was Jim Raptis, calling with the sad news that Alex Freeleagus had passed away that afternoon.

Alex had been with ambassadorial colleagues, on a boat off Heron Island on the Barrier Reef. Earlier that day, he had taken a helicopter flight, and so spent his last day engaged with friends, flying and boating - three of his great loves.

I commenced phoning my partners - with a lump in my throat, and my voice catching as I spoke with them. It was difficult to contemplate that this larger than life and vital man was no longer with us. But Alex, at 76, was not a young man. Why was it that his passing had this impact?

We are delighted with the presence this evening of Alex's sister, Mrs Rene Nicolaides OAM, his niece Jan Psaltis, nephew John Nicolaides, and other members of his extended family. They of course knew Alex very well, as did some of you. But there are also those here this evening who know little of him. Who was he, and why is it that the Hellenic Lawyers Association honours Alex with this oration in his name?

I have but a few minutes to paint a picture. The facts are impressive and speak for themselves:

- 40 years as a partner of Clayton Utz and its predecessors in Brisbane, 20 of those, until his retirement in 1993 as senior partner;
- 48 years, from 1957, when he succeeded his father, until his death, the Honorary Consul for Greece in Queensland, Greece's longest serving consul anywhere;
- an accomplished pilot, active in the RAAF and RAAF Legal Reserve, rising to the rank of Wing Commander, and briefly involved in service in Vietnam - Alex's military service spanned 40 years;
- multiple honours from both the Greek and Australian governments for his military and community service;
- influential in iconic Queensland events and institutions, including the 1982 Commonwealth Games, Expo 88, establishing the Griffith University School of Law in 1992, founding the annual Queensland Law Society Symposium in 1961 which he then chaired for 20 years, the Greek Paniyiri Festival, the Brisbane Biennial of Music and so the list goes on.

Alex was also prominent in the law, particularly aviation law and oil & gas.

He acted for Ansett from the mid-1950s in everything from airline crashes, developing Barrier Reef islands to applying for the Channel O television licence.

Following the discovery of oil at Moonie in 1961 Alex became closely involved in the development of that industry, representing Phillips Petroleum in Australia, and for many years was a director of Oil Company of Australia, the company which we know today as Australia Pacific LNG.

Alex was also involved in the prominent constitutional case of Uebergang v the Australian Wheat Board, heard in the High Court in 1979/80, a matter in which, as I understand, Your Honour Justice Kiefel was one of the junior counsel retained to represent Alex's client, Mr Uebergang, led by Mr Tony Fitzgerald QC.
He was a giant of a man in so many ways.

This was the man I came to know from my commencement as an articled clerk in January 1979. But there was another Alex. The Alex who had an immeasurable impact on a young lawyer seeking to make his way.

Alex, like many of us, was influenced greatly by his upbringing. His mother, Ariadne came to Australia as a refugee from Greek occupied Smyrna, in Turkey, shortly after the first World War. His father, Christy, had migrated to Australia from Kythera as a 14 year old, shortly before Federation. Christy impressed upon Alex, as a young Vice-Consul, that when people come to you for help, think of me, as a lonely 14 year old coming to a strange country.

And this was the creed by which Alex lived his life. Regardless of status, he treated everyone equally, from the cleaners, whom he sometimes mistook for young lawyers, and right throughout the office.

He made time for people, he was interested in people, he knew their names, he listened, he cared and he helped people. He was quietly spoken, and rarely showed anger. Only once did I experience this - I was confronted at knifepoint while overseas taking a statement from a witness in the Bahamas. I resisted the would be thief and fled from the scene. On learning of this encounter Alex was furious, and gave me a dressing-down for foolishly putting myself in that position, and for the consequences that it could have had for my family.

Alex was immensely proud of his Hellenic heritage, and of the Greek community, but was an equally proud Australian. He would call us "cobber", and in return was affectionately known as "Big Cobber".

This man, so worldly, had such a common touch. For a man so active, he was rarely rushed. If you were running around frantically, Alex would slow you down. I recall him once saying:

"Cobber, most lawyers are strange people, they are only really happy when they are so busy that they are miserable."

In his annual presentation to the new trainees, which continued well past his retirement as a partner, Alex would impress that there were three fundamentals to success in the law - integrity, integrity and integrity, and would advise those young lawyers that the two most important expressions in their kit bag were:

* I don't know but I'll find out; and
* I think I've made a mistake.

Alex said that if you were honest about these things there was always somebody to help.

A wise counsellor, I have often recounted to my partners over more recent years, post-GFC, a comment that Alex made to me when work dried up in the recession of the early 1990s. He prophesised:

"Cobber, remember the tide always comes in, and now is the time to be working hard to prepare for that."

How right he was.

The practice of law is ever evolving, but these values, impressed upon me as a young lawyer, are timeless, as relevant to the lawyers of today as they have always been.

Because the thing is, that we can represent the best clients, act in the best matters, rub shoulders with important people, be involved in great events, and these are all significant things, and we are right to feel good about them, but in many ways, they are transitory. When the clients and the important people and the great events have moved on, as they do, what we are left with is our impact on others, the way we
have treated people, those we have helped, the generosity we have shown and the respect we have earned. These are the characteristics that endure, and they are the reasons for the lump in my throat on being told of the passing of this warm and generous man.

In an interview given only months before his death Alex said "I could never be this lucky again". But it is the many of us who had the opportunity to learn from Alex who are the lucky ones.

Ladies and Gentleman, I thank you for your attention. I hope that in these few minutes I have succeeded in painting a worthy picture of the exceptional gentleman for whom this evening's oration is named.