

Opening Statement

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Welcoming the new Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Rosemary Kayess, and paying tribute to the outgoing Social Justice Commissioner, June Oscar AO

Chair, it is time to speak of 'exits and entrances'. I will do so in reverse order.

On 29 January, the Australian Human Rights Commission welcomed our new Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Rosemary Kayess. Commissioner Kayess is a leading disability and human rights lawyer who has been extremely influential in her work in international human rights law for people with disability. She brings to the Commission a distinguished career in international human rights law and disability rights. Commissioner Kayess is deeply respected by the disability community. She is also the first woman with lived experience to hold the office. I commend Commissioner Kayess to this Committee.

With respect to 'exits', on 2 April we say farewell to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, June Oscar AO, after seven years in this role.

It is a great honour and a privilege to be able to provide a few reflections for the record on what has been a remarkable achievement over a tumultuous period in Australia and around the world.

As the first woman in the role, Commissioner Oscar has felt a keen sense of duty to use her term to elevate the voices of First Nations women and girls around Australia: to make heard those who have gone unheard, and to make seen those who have been invisible. Through her landmark *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* (Women's Voices) Project, she has met this goal in spades.

June is an example to us all. There is no one quite like her—a powerful speaker and staunch advocate, her words are abundant in reason, kindness and empathy, and are grounded in her own experiences as a family matriarch and community leader endeavouring to leverage her people's many strengths in the face of dispossession, disenfranchisement and cycles of poverty and trauma.

Rather than drawing the focus to herself, June has used her place on the national stage to provide a platform for others and, in doing so, she has created something far greater than any one person—she has inspired a powerful movement for change.

Forever a uniter, June has known from the outset that in the pursuit of human rights, it can never be other people who are the enemy. With an ability to work together with a diverse array of people and organisations, she has called on all Australians to set their sights on the powerful structures that shape how we think and act. She has challenged each of us to take an active role in the transformation that must happen within ourselves and within our institutions if human rights in Australia are to be enjoyed equally by all—not only in name, but in practice.

As we mark the end of an era, I would also like to acknowledge new beginnings. On 19 March this year, The Wiyi Yani U Thangani First Nations Gender Justice Institute will be launched at the Australian National University, taking forward the legacy of this vitally important work. I and my fellow Commissioners and all Commission staff wish June every success and look forward to working with her on shared goals into the future.