

THE INTERNS & THE LAW FIRM

# Students to march on Russell McVeagh



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University students in Wellington will today march to the office of law firm Russell McVeagh to demand workplaces are free of sexual violence.

Rally organisers – a partnership made up of the Victoria University of Wellington's Students' Association, Law Students' Society and Feminist Law Society – are calling for the Government to suspend any further Crown legal work with Russell McVeagh until an external review the firm has commissioned into allegations of sexual assaults and harassment during a summer clerk programme has been completed. The march will call for law firms to adopt a zero tolerance approach to sexual violence.

Two hundred and ninety eight people have registered on an official event page on Facebook and hundreds more have indicated interest in attending the march from the Victoria University law faculty on campus to Midland Park, outside Russell McVeagh's office in downtown Wellington.

Five summer clerks who were part of the 2015-2016 summer internship programme at Russell McVeagh, made allegations ranging from sexual assault to rape. Involved were two Russell McVeagh lawyers. These two lawyers have now left the firm. One continues to hold a practising certificate, the other has left the country.

Russell McVeagh announced its external review into "sexual harassment" last week, terminology which was received poorly among women closely to the case.

Dame Margaret Bazley – known for her inquiry into legal aid and the sexual assaults by police against Rotorua woman Louise Nicholas – was appointed to head the inquiry with a female lawyer who is yet to be named.

The Victoria law students association president Fletcher Boswell told *Newsroom* Russell McVeagh's response had "been disappointing, the fact that it has taken two years for an external investigation to begin appears reactionary".

"VUWLSS hopes that Russell McVeagh will actively consult with students throughout the investigative process and looks forward to seeing the substance of the subsequent response to the report. We believe that students and employees deserve better."

The wider student association's welfare vice president Bethany Paterson said Russell McVeagh "are not the only perpetrators of this problem, but they are a glaring example of what an abuse of power looks like".

"The power of the big firms can be seen just by the fact that it took two years for the incidents of assault at Russell McVeagh to come public. This is the kind of influence these firms have."

Some of those planning to march today told *Newsroom* they feared speaking out, which Paterson confirmed.

"No one is for sexual violence in the workplace, but still there is an eerie silence from people in this community about this issue.

"This protest started as calling out an imperfect response to sexual assault allegations, but has brought up an even bigger issue in the professional services which is students and graduates are expecting a negative backlash from their future employers if they publicly speak out against sexual violence in the workplace," she said.

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Justice Minister Andrew Little said he did not know of the allegations before [Newsroom broke the story a month ago](#), but the legal fraternity was known for its “alpha male culture”.

“[Dame Margaret Bazley] is nobody’s puppet. There wouldn’t be many people who could confront the police force and their culture 20 years ago. If anyone underestimates her ability to effect change they need to look at her history,” Little said.

While Bazley had a history of dealing with public law organisations, private entities such as Russell McVeagh wouldn’t be equally legally required to “clean up their act”.

He said the Government should serve as an exemplar “but in the end the Government needs the best possible advice. If we want to make good laws and we don’t have the technical expertise we go to external providers”.

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“[Suspending Russell McVeagh work] would mean various pieces of work across various Government departments would just stop for six months...The [clerks] need to feel supported and I’m not sure cutting legal advice will change the behaviour of Russell McVeagh or give justice to them.”

It was a case for the various ministries and government organisations involved to decide, he said.

“If I put my Minister of Justice hat on, [sexual violence in the legal profession] is a cultural thing that we need to address as a nation. We’ve got to get off the idea of stripping down people and punishing them. That’s what’s wrong with the criminal justice system. The answer to Russell McVeagh is that they’ve got to change their culture. A review had to happen.”

*Newsroom* also understands the rally will also focus on holding the Law Society to account. The society did not receive a complaint from Russell McVeagh lawyers about the assaults but also failed to launch an own-motion inquiry on its own initiative.

That was an entirely different matter altogether, Little said.

“[It] said it was going to conduct its own review of the profession. If I think in my capacity as Minister of Justice that the Law Society is conflicted or compromised then I will conduct my own inquiry into the safety of practitioners and other staff.”

All six law schools around the country have cut sponsorship ties with the firm while the review takes place. Victoria University Vice Chancellor Grant Guilford plans to talk to students before today’s rally, but he will not march, a university spokesperson said.

The rally also follows an event held last Wednesday, International Women’s Day, to celebrate the book launch of *Feminist Judgments of Aotearoa New Zealand: Te Rino: A Two-Stranded Rope*. It was moved from Russell McVeagh’s premises to the Court of Appeal at short notice. The event was not organised by the university, but authors were law faculty members.

*Newsroom* understands the university provided support to a member of the audience who became distressed by a speech from Russell McVeagh partner Andrew Butler, speaking on behalf of the Law Foundation.

Law Foundation Director Lynda Hagen said Butler was there in his capacity as the Law Foundation chair, not the firm.

“[Butler] did allude to the current issues, but [he] did so in a non-specific and very sensitive manner.”

\* Organisers of the Women in Governance Awards have cancelled Russell McVeagh’s sponsorship of the Inspirational Excellence Award for a May awards event.

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